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Drawing the Primetime Color Line: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Interracial Marriages in Television Sitcoms

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Drawing the Primetime Color Line:
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A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
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Jodi Lynn Rightler-McDaniels
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to anyone who has ever been ostracized because of who they love.

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I have been blessed with the love and support of so many wonderful people – anyone who has completed graduate work understands the necessity of having a strong support system. First and foremost, I would like to thank my two biggest supporters, my dad and my husband. Dad – you have given up so much for me to achieve this dream. Words cannot express how much you mean to me. I am so lucky to have you as my role model and best friend. I love you more. Will – thank you for believing in me, even when I had trouble believing in myself. You make me remember everyday how lucky I am to have you in my life. I am so excited to start the next chapter of our lives together.

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Abstract

Changes throughout history, particularly those surrounding race relations in the U.S., frequently have a direct effect on personal social experience and the current structure of society. Although public discourse often emphasizes the rhetoric of racial progression, subtle racism abounds – both in society and in media – masked under the façade of equality. This is especially true when examining race relations between Blacks and Whites, particularly those involved in intimate heterosexual interracial relationships, as they have traditionally been viewed as negative, dangerous, and threatening to the status quo.

Television representations are often socially and culturally rooted with real issues, hence their mass appeal. Critical television studies involving race (and gender, class, and power) situate questions about these representations and struggles within the context of American entertainment media. By engaging the text together with context, in line with cultural studies, meanings can be deduced from media discourse.

As such, this study explores and traces Black/White interracial intimate relationship portrayals on exemplary American network television sitcoms representing the 1970 and 2010 decades. Building on the intersection of existing mass communication and cultural studies research about both intimate interracial pairings in American society and in mainstream television, this dissertation focuses exclusively on the first season of two situational comedies featuring a heterosexual Black/White interracial couple that were broadcast during primetime hours on major commercial networks – *The Jeffersons* (CBS/1975) and *Happy Endings* (ABC/2011). Using critical race theory, this critical discourse analysis systematically examines the U.S. television industry-created sitcoms' depictions of interracial marriages between Black and White individuals.

Although important social, legal, and political events pertaining to race relations took place during the study's chosen time frame of 1975-2011, little variation existed in the thematic representations of Black/White interracial couples. Furthermore, consistencies in themes between each sitcom existed.

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Color-coded Love

Interracial marriages are unbiblical and immoral. God created different races of people

and placed them amongst themselves…There is nothing for [W]hite Americans to gain

by mixing their blood with blood of other peoples. There will only be irreversible

damage for us. (Written in a letter to the editor in response to a newspaper photograph of

Black and White youths dancing together, as quoted in Mathabane & Mathabane, 1992,

p. 186)

Introduction

The topic of mixed race can bring out the worst in people. From the vicious harassment

of couples in mixed relationships to the hatred expressed on supremacist websites, few

subjects have the same capacity as racial mixture to reveal deep-seated fears and

resentments. (Parker & Song, 2001, p. 1)

The United States has a rich history of hostility towards the romantic mixing of races

(e.g., Knox, Zusman, Buffington & Hemphill, 2000; Qian, 1997; Romano, 2003). Perry and

Sutton (2006) describe this hostility as "ultimately grounded in the essentialist understanding of

racial difference" (p. 889). According to Perry and Sutton (2006), individuals are placed in racial

categories and boundaries are created around these categories. Hence, heterosexual interracial

relationships are viewed as "not only unnatural but threatening to the rigid hierarchies that have

been built around these presumed differences" (Perry & Sutton, 2006, p. 889). Intimate

interracial relationships have traditionally been viewed as negative, dangerous, and threatening

to the status quo (for example, see Beeman, 2007; Chito Childs, 2005; Christopher & Kelly, 2004; Craig-Henderson, 2006; Gaines & Leaver, 2002; Herek, 2000; Keen, 2006; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006; Luther & Rightler-McDaniels, 2013; McPhail, 1996; Moe, Nacoste & Insko, 1981; Nagel, 2003; Paulin, 1997; Perry & Sutton, 2006; Spickard, 1989; Zebroski, 1999). On nearly every social distance scale sociologists use to measure the aversion of one race to another, the relationship that triggers the strongest ethnocentrism is marriage (Shipler, 1997).

Rockquemore and Brunsma (2001) remind that relationships between Blacks and Whites ultimately uphold the continuance of a racially stratified society (Lewis & Yancey, 1994-1995) because they "continue to be the two groups with the greatest social distance, the most spatial separation, and the strongest taboos against interracial marriage" (p. ix). Porterfield (1982) echoed this sentiment and concluded that in the U.S., "no other mixture touches off such widespread condemnation as [B]lack-White mixing" (p. 17). Other studies (e.g., Chito Childs, 2005; Lewis & Yancey, 1995; Spickard, 1989) also found that Black/White couples are the most infrequent interracial pairing, but are subjected to the most criticism. Black males with White females elicit the highest level of interracial discrimination (Davidson, 1992; Scott, 1987; Walker, 2005).

A 2012 Pew Research Center report found that 15.1 percent of all new marriages in the U.S. in 2010 were between spouses of a different race,[1] raising the overall share of all current U.S. marriages involving interracial partners to an all-time high of 8.4 percent (Taylor, Wang, Parker, Passel, Patten & Motel, 2012). Social scientists (e.g., Chito Childs, 2005; 2009; Qian, 1997; Romano, 2003) conclude that there has been a general decline in overall racist attitudes, both at the societal and personal levels. The same Pew study found American public opinion

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[1] This percentage is more than double the 6.7 percent figure from 1980 (Taylor et al., 2012).

regarding interracial intimacies to be more accepting, with 43 percent of respondents expressing how interracial marriages have "been a change for the better in our society," and only 11 percent saying they have "been a change for the worse" (Taylor et al., 2012, p. 7). Personal attitudes reverberate these findings: 63 percent of respondents said they "would be fine" if a family member were to marry outside their own racial or ethnic group,[2] 35 percent reported having an immediate family member or close relative who married someone of a different race, and 33 percent viewed intermarriage as "acceptable for everyone" (Taylor et al., 2012, p. 7). Over one-third of respondents, however, expressed reservation to interracial mixing – 37 percent said "this may be acceptable for others, but not for themselves" (Taylor et al., 2012, p. 7). Although these figures suggest weakening overall racist attitudes, there remains strong opposition to interracial intimacies, especially those between Blacks and Whites.

Although seven in 10 new intermarriages in the U.S. involve a White spouse, marriages between Blacks and Whites pale in comparison to other types of interracial unions (Taylor et al., 2012). Only 11.9 percent of all interracial marriages were between Black and White individuals – the lowest percentage of all intermarriages (Taylor et al., 2012). By comparison, Whites and Hispanics make up 43.4 percent of intermarriages and Whites and Asians constitute 14.4 percent (Taylor et al., 2012). Similar findings have been reported in other studies (see Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Rosenblatt, Karis & Powell, 1995; Taylor, Funk & Craighill, 2006; Taylor, Morin & Wang, 2011; Taylor, Passel, Wang, Kiley, Velasco & Dockterman, 2010; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1990). It can be said, then, that those in Black/White interracial marriages are asserting the power of personal affection over societal convention.

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[2] This percentage is more than double when compared to 28 percent found in 1986.

Communication professor Victoria Orrego Dunleavy (2004) views the low percentages of Black/White interracial couples as a byproduct of "engender[ed] problems associated with racist attitudes and perceived relational inappropriateness" (p. 22). Perhaps, as research (e.g., Beeman, 2007; Chito Childs, 2005; Craig-Henderson, 2006; Keen, 2006; Luther & Rightler-McDaniels, 2013; Perry & Sutton, 2006) has shown, this can be attributed to Black/White intimate relationships being shown by media as overwhelmingly "problematic," when shown at all. They are especially likely to evoke hostility when

> racialized depictions of sexual purity, dangerousness, appetites, desirability, perversion
> are part of the performative construction of sexual respectability and disreputability,
> normalcy and deviance. Ethnosexual frontiers are exotic, but volatile social spaces, fertile
> sites for the eruption of violence. Racial, ethnic, or nationalist defense and enforcement
> of in-group sexual honor and purity strengthens ethnic boundaries and subjugates
> members enclosed inside ethnic borders…Negative images or accusations about the
> sexuality of ethnic Others contribute to the creation of disreputable and toxic out groups
> and can be used to justify their exclusion, repression, or extermination. (Nagel, 2003, p.
> 55)

Media are seen as playing vital roles in reminding Blacks and Whites that "thou shalt not" cross the borders of sexuality that have been in place since slavery (Perry & Sutton, 2006). Moreover, interracial couples are underrepresented in media and do not accurately reflect the actual rates of interracial marriages in the U.S. There is a prevailing trend in the U.S. to either deny that interracial couples exist by rendering them invisible in mainstream media (Balnaves, Donald & Shoesmith, 2009) or when they are portrayed, to show them as problematic and unnatural (Perry & Sutton, 2006).

Hence, if one perceives a lack of societal support for interracial unions by these "problematic" cultural depictions, he/she might be dissuaded from entering into such unions and have an overall negative view of such couples. Recently, copious examples for the latter have peppered local and national news coverage surrounding race relations:

- February 16, 2014 – Donny Reagan, a pastor from the Happy Valley Church of Jesus Christ in Johnson City, Tennessee, was dubbed the "most racist pastor in America" because of his railings against Black/White interracial marriage during a 2013 sermon.[3] During the sermon, Reagan asserted he was not a racist while asking his congregation,

  > What business would a beautiful, young, intelligent colored girl want to marry a [W]hite man for, and have mulatto children? What would a fine, intelligent colored girl want to do a thing like that for? I can't understand. And what would a [W]hite woman want to marry a colored man, with mulatto children? Why don't you stay the way God made you?

- February 11, 2014 – An investigation by the Indiana Civil Rights Commission revealed that a White female bartender was terminated from her position at the Lebanon Moose Lodge (Lebanon, Indiana), in part, because she was engaged to a Black man. The Moose Lodge informed her that they did not want her to work there because some members may be offended that she has a Black fiancé.

- May 21, 2013 – In Virginia, a Wal-Mart customer called police on a White man she suspected of kidnapping three children, who turned out to be his (mixed-race) biological daughters with his Black wife. The customer told police she became concerned because she saw the children with the man and "didn't think that they fit."

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[3] The exact date of the recorded sermon is unknown, but it was filmed in 2013.

- April 27, 2013 – Seniors at Georgia's Wilcox County High School held their first racially integrated prom. Prior to this, Blacks could only attend "Black" dances and Whites could only attend "White" dances.

- November 27, 2011 – Congregation members at the Gulnare Free Will Baptist Church in Kentucky voted to bar interracial couples from becoming church members or participating in worship services in any way.[4]

- June 13, 2011 – A Turtleton, Tennessee, couple, Ellis (Black) and Jennifer (White) Weatherspoon, received a death threat because of their relationship. Someone threw a cinderblock through the Weatherspoon's window with a note attached that read, "Get out of town n***** or u (sic) die."

- January 14, 2011 – Five White males, self-identified as Neo-Nazi skinheads, firebombed the home of an interracial couple in Hardy, Arkansas. The couple, a Black man and a White woman, safely fled their burning home. During the trial, one of the suspects admitted the motivation for the firebombing was racial hatred of Black/White interracial pairings.

- March 18, 2010 – Keith Bardwell, justice of the peace in Tangipahoa Parish, New Orleans, Louisiana, refused to issue a marriage license to Beth Humphrey (White) and Terence McKay (Black) because he did not "believe in mixing the races that way."

- October 3, 2009 – Travis Ricci and Aaron Schmidt shot and killed 39-year-old Kelley Jaeger, a White woman, for being seen in a Phoenix, Arizona, public park with her Black male friend, Jeffrey Wellmaker. Ricci and Schmidt were members of the Vinlanders Social Club, one of the most violent racist skinhead organizations in America.

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[4] The vote prompted worldwide publicity and a storm of social media backlash. Within one week, the church reversed its policy.

- July 31, 2008 – Edward and Cyndie Rutherford, a Black/White interracial married couple, had five of their cars spray-painted with racial epitaphs in Oroville, California. The couple disclosed they experience racial discrimination regularly and admitted their marriage is "like a pink elephant that's in the room, but everyone acts like it's not there, and everyone says, 'Don't talk about it,' but it needs to be talked about."

Given that "the corridors of [American] history [are]… lined with countless instances of racial injustice" (Higginbothan, 1977),[5] media representations of interracial intimacies should be explored against the backdrop of their historical contexts. Changes throughout history, particularly those surrounding race relations in the U.S., frequently have a direct effect on personal social experience and the current structure of society (Schiller & Koch, 2006). Although public discourse often emphasizes the rhetoric of racial progression,[6] subtle racism abounds – both in society and in media – masked under the façade of equality. This is especially true when examining race relations between Blacks and Whites. Beeman (2007) points out that "African Americans have been the most rejected racialized group with regard to all forms of interracial integration and intimacy" (p. 688). A 1996 study conducted by Bobo and Zubrinsky shared this sentiment and found that African-Americans are the most rejected racial minority in the U.S.,

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[5] Opinion of Federal Judge Leon Higginbothan in Commonwealth of Pennsylvania et al. v. Local Union 542, International Union of Operating Engineers, 1977.

[6] A 2013 NBC News and *Wall Street Journal* poll shows that public attitudes about race relations have plummeted and have ultimately changed for the worse since the first Black president, Barack Obama, took office in 2008. According to the poll, only 52 percent of Whites and 38 percent of Blacks have a favorable opinion of race relations in the U.S., a sharp decline from the beginning of Obama's first term, when 79 percent of Whites and 63 percent of Blacks held a favorable view of American race relations. (Munro, 2013)

and the group to which Whites convey the most ambivalence towards when speaking of

interracial romances. UCLA sociology professor Darnell Hunt (2005) reminds that even though

> the U.S. population is diversifying at a dizzying rate, when popular accounts of race
>
> present it as an anachronistic concern, when color-blind ideology shapes much of our
>
> public policy, and when affirmation of cultural hybridity and multiple subjectivities is all
>
> the rage, blackness remains a curious, palpable presence in our land. (p. 1)

Perhaps, nowhere is this more apparent than when interracial intimacies are presented in media.

Thus, following the cue of media theorist James Carey (1989), it becomes vital to critically

examine media as a site of cultural ideology[7] surrounding Black/White race relations that, as bell

hooks (1992) reminds, is often not questioned.

The Race Myth

> "Most Americans still believe in the concept of race the way they believe in the law of
>
> gravity – they believe in it without even knowing what it is they believe in" (Graves,
>
> 2004, xxv).

America's cultural history offers copious examples of social issues involving human

behavior and those associated with change. Within the United States specifically, historical

changes have had a direct effect on the current social experiences and frameworks of its people,

especially those dealing with race and race relations. History sets up precedence and establishes

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[7] For this study, ideology refers to the "set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as ways of perceiving and thinking that are agreed on to the point that they constitute a set of norms for a society that dictate what is desirable and what should be done…[as] a form of consent to a particular kind of social order and conformity to the rules within a specific set of social, economic, and political structures" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2007, p. 291).

frameworks in which today's society still operates. Most people, regardless of personal ignorance of the past, are affected in many ways based on what historical events took place in their respective surroundings. Discussing race is one of the most complex and difficult endeavors in America, as the "color line is [now] a curtain of silence" (Shipler, 1997, p. 473).

Most Americans adhere to the idea that race is a biological fact (Graves, 2004). However, most scientists agree that the very concept of race has absolutely no basis or meaning in biology (Petit, 1998). According to the American Anthropological Association (1998), "the concept of race is a social and cultural construction.…Race simply cannot be tested or proven scientifically….The concept of 'race' has no validity…in the human species" (as quoted in Petit, para. 8). Graves (2004) argues that popular American thought surrounding race exists because few alternative views have ever been clearly presented. Race is a social construct that is heavily invoked in everyday life (Mills, 1998). Socially constructed race came to fruition in a social system that precisely identified who was privileged (Whites) and who was not (Blacks).

However trying it may be, it is imperative to look at the historical implications race relations and interracial marriages have had in American history. This country was built on the convenient and accepted ideal of a racial hierarchy, which justifies racism. Racism is a belief or doctrine that inherent differences among the various human races determine cultural or individual achievement, usually involving the idea that one's own race is superior and has the right to rule others. It also refers to the intolerance or hatred of another race. Racism is instrumental in maintaining social hierarchy.

Professor of education Sonia Nieto (1996) identified two layers of racism – individual and institutional. Individual racism refers to the biases and negative perceptions of individuals toward members of other groups (i.e., person-to-person), whereas institutional racism is the

harmful policies and practices within institutions aimed at certain groups of people by other groups of people (i.e., laws and policies of governmental bodies). As pointed out by Nieto (1996), individual racism is harmful, but does not have the "long-range and life-limiting effects of institutional racism" (p. 37). Although law and policy now prohibit overt forms of racism (at the institutional level), racism continues to abound at the individual level and at the societal/cultural layer, which includes media.[8]

Understanding racism as a systemic, institutionalized problem in the United States is complicated because systemic racism is rarely, if ever, discussed (Beeman, 2007). Racism is an institutionalized categorical condemnation that is so entrenched in U.S. culture that it carries a benign mask of subtleties. The effects of racism are widespread and long lasting. American citizens tend to offer individualistic reasons for racism and are therefore inclined to dismiss the subtle nature of racism and the existence of structural barriers to equality (Kluegel, 1990). Because of this, it is vital to study subtle forms of racism in American society and to address racism surrounding interracial sexuality as a concealed and institutionalized problem (Beeman, 2007).

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[8] Sonia Nieto (1996) identified individual racism and institutional racism in her work. However, this study teased out institutional racism to include only law and policy and created an "in-between" category, the societal/cultural, to include media.

Historical Perspectives

> To all persons acquainted with the social conditions of this state [Mississippi] and of the
>
> Southern states generally it is well known that it is the earnest desire of the [W]hite race
>
> to preserve its racial integrity and purity, and to maintain the purity of the social relations
>
> as far as it can be done by law. (*Rice v. Gong Lum*, 1925, at 108)

The history of African slavery[9] in the United States will provide a starting point for understanding race relations (and race mixing) in this country and justification for the assumption of a clear Black/White binary prevalent even today. The history of America's attitude toward Black/White interracial marriages began almost immediately after the first slaves were brought to U.S. soil in 1619. American society, obsessed with racial categories, has found comfort in the "neat matrix of [B]lack and [W]hite" (Shipler, 1997, p. 112).

This Black/White dichotomy dates to the "one-drop rule"[10] of slavery, which assigned a Black identity to anyone with a single known Black ancestor. Most slaves in this country through the eighteenth century were Black males and White female indentured servants. This caused a large frequency of sexual relations, and marriages, between the two, even though miscegenation laws had been the norm since the late 1600s.[11] In addition, most would agree that a majority of the first interracial (sexual) mixing was the result of sexual curiosity when White slave masters would often take sexual liberties with Black female slaves, leading to a dynamic power

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[9] Slavery, in this sense, will be explored as an institution. Uniform terminology does not exist, and neither does a definitive definition of the word, making it difficult to examine unless as a social institution.

[10] According to the "one-drop rule," a single drop of African blood in one's lineage makes him/her Black. Martha Hodes (1997) further explicates this rule in her book, *White women, Black men: Illicit sex in the 19th-century south*.

[11] As early as 1691, the Colony of Virginia passed a law against what would later become known as miscegenation (Alonso, 2000).

relationship emergent between the two races. Black slave women were raped by the tens of thousands by White men, most without reservation of their White wives finding out (Shipler, 1997). As Smith (1966) points out, White owners often forced themselves onto Black women "without benefit of marriage, romance or any status that might be associated with an affair" (p. 170). The government, in response to large societal concerns of the race mixing, established segregation laws to prohibit interracial intimacies[12] and marriages in efforts "aimed at preserving the racial purity of the [W]hite race" (Oh, 2006, p. 1329) and blocking the legitimation of mixed race children (Heer, 1966). Antimiscegenation laws, found in 40 of the 50 states at one time or another (Weinberger, 1966), specifically targeted Blacks: "the sole racial group (other than [W]hite persons) affected by all…statutes is the Negro" (Weinberger, 1966, p. 160).

Throughout the next 400 years, various Supreme Court rulings were handed down that directly dealt with U.S. race relations. In the mid-1800s, as the South was vigorously defending slavery,[13] several cases were brought before the Court that challenged any notion of the ideology of racial equality. By striking down the Missouri Compromise as unconstitutional in the 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case, the court decreed that slaves were indeed their masters' property and African-Americans were not citizens. After the end of the U.S. Civil War in 1865,[14] the Fourteenth Amendment[15] (1868) declared African-Americans were equal citizens of the U.S.[16]

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[12] These laws were targeted at the interracial intimacies between White women and all men of color, namely Black men. It was acceptable, however, for White men to have sex with women of all races, as long as it was not displayed publicly. Hence, woman and men were racialized differently, ultimately aiding in the construction of "whiteness," a social construct that privileges Whites.

[13] The North had already abolished slavery by this time.

[14] The first Ku Klux Klan was formed shortly after the end of the Civil War.

[15] The Fourteenth Amendment prohibited states from taking away life, liberty, or property without some form of legal proceeding. It also required that all citizens be treated equally under the law, known as "equal protection under the law."

Two years later, the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited the federal government and individual states from preventing any citizen from voting because of race or color. In response, many Southern states designed laws, known as "Jim Crow Laws," that kept Blacks in a lower social level than Whites. Under these laws, Blacks in 1873 were

> forbidden to appear in the towns in any other character than menial servants. They were required to reside on and cultivate the soil without the right to purchase or own it. They were excluded from many occupations of gain, and were not permitted to give testimony in the courts of any case where a [W]hite man was a party. It was said that their lives were at the mercy of bad men, either because the laws for their protection were insufficient or were not enforced. (Opinion of Justice Samuel F. Miller in *The Slaughter-House Cases*,[17] April 14, 1873, p. 71).

A "Jim Crow" society allowed for systematic physical and social separation of Blacks and Whites, and was fundamental in maintaining racial hierarchies that placed Whites at the top.[18] After all, "racial segregation was the linchpin of the Jim Crow, for the arrangement that set Blacks from the rest of humanity and labeled them an inferior race" (Morris, 1984, p. 2).

The Civil Rights Act of 1875 was short-lived as the U.S. Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional in 1883 following a number of cases brought against the Act. The ruling allowed for private sector segregation, with the goal of preventing the development of intimate

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[16] The "end" of slavery has been a point of contention among historians and scholars. For example, Douglas A. Blackmon, a White American author, contends in his 2009 Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Slavery by Another Name* (2008), that slavery persisted deep into the twentieth century and really did not come to an end until the 1940s.

[17] The 1873 Slaughter-House Cases were the first U.S. Supreme Court interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment, adopted on July 9, 1868, to the Constitution.

[18] In addition, it should be noted that during the late 1800s and early 1900s, Blacks provided a convenient scapegoat for White mobs who frequently lynched Black males when it was believed White womanhood was in "sexual danger."

social relationships between Blacks and Whites. As Texas Wesleyan School of Law Professor Reginald Oh (2006) points out,

> When a state segregated the [W]hite and [B]lack races, its specific goal was to separate (1) [W]hite women from [B]lack men and (2) [W]hite men from [B]lack women. The term 'racial segregation,' however, fails to capture the gendered sorting that occurs through segregation. Thus, armed with the anti-essentialist understanding that a word does not objectively describe a social practice, to fully describe how racial segregation also regulated gender relations, we could rename 'racial segregation' as 'gender segregation on the basis of race.' (p. 1348)

The famous "separate but equal" segregation policy was a result of the 1896 case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The ruling stated that segregation was legal and constitutional as long as "facilities were equal."

The overarching sentiment regarding interracial marriages through the early 1900s can best be summed up by a quote from Georgia Representative Seaborn A. Roddenberry, who introduced a constitutional amendment to ban intermarriages to Congress on December 11, 1912:

> Intermarriage between [W]hites and [B]lacks is repulsive and averse to every sentiment of pure American spirit. It is abhorrent and repugnant. It is subversive of social peace. It is destructive of moral supremacy, and ultimately this slavery of [W]hite women to [B]lack beasts will bring this nation to a conflict as fatal and as bloody as ever reddened the soil of Virginia or crimsoned the mountain paths of Pennsylvania…Let us uproot and exterminate now this debasing, ultrademoralizing, un-American and inhuman leprosy. (U.S. Congressional Record, 62d Cong., 3d sess., pp. 502-503)

Eventually, the turn of the century did bring about a paradigm shift in race relations thought within the U.S. Supreme Court.

In the 1932 case of *Powell v. Alabama*, the Court overturned the "Scottsboro Boys"[19] convictions and guaranteed counsel in state and federal courts. The judges ruled in *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948) that a court may not constitutionally enforce a "restrictive covenant," which prevented people of certain races from owning or occupying property. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s, however, that racial tensions, especially those between Blacks and Whites, visibly peaked. Calls for change in racial inequalities could no longer be ignored. Various laws were enacted that prohibited overt forms of racism. For example, in 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court reversed *Plessy v. Ferguson* by a unanimous vote in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and ruled that establishing separate public schools for Black students and White students was unconstitutional and violated the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause. The Court reasoned that

> [t]here are findings below that the Negro and [W]hite schools involved have been equalized, or are being equalized, with respect to buildings, curricula, qualifications and salaries of teachers, and other 'tangible' factors. Our decision, therefore, cannot turn on merely a comparison of these tangible factors in the Negro and [W]hite schools involved in each of these cases. We must look instead to the effects of segregation on public education. (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954, at 492)

Hence, *Brown* ended public school segregation because it was "a denial of the equal protection of the laws" (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954). *Brown's* implications went far

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[19] The "Scottsboro Boys" were a group of nine Black teenage boys who were accused of rape in Alabama in 1931. The case is known as one of the largest miscarriages of justice in U.S. history and led to the end of all White juries in the South.

beyond the context of education, however. Many citizens felt the desegregation of public schools would only encourage the "problem" of interracial mixing, dating, and marriage:

> How do we know, if we shove our kids in schools together, our [W]hite girls won't get so used to being around nigras (sic) that after a while they won't pay no attention to color? Then pretty soon they will be socializing together, dancing all hugged up, and the next thing they'll be at the altar. (Cray, 1993, p. 451)

Fears of interracial relationships and marriages resounded nationally, with many thinking that they would ultimately lead to the destruction of society, "White and Negro children in the same schools will lead to miscegenation. Miscegenation leads to mixed marriages and mixed marriages lead to mongrelization of the human race," (as quoted in Siegel, 2004, p. 1482). This type of response resonated nationally:

> If we are compelled to have Negroes and Chinamen among us, it is better, of course, that they should be educated. But teach them separately from our own children. Let us preserve our Caucasian blood pure. We want no mongrel race of moral and mental hybrids to people the mountains and valleys of California. (As quoted in Kuo, 1998, p. 190).

> With the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered a speech before Congress on November 27, 1963, urging them to take action for racial equality because they "have talked long enough in this country about equal rights. We have talked for a hundred years or more. It is time now to write the next

chapter, and to write it in the books of law" (excerpt from Zinn, 1995, p. 444). In response, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964[20] and the Civil Rights Act of 1965.[21]

Although the U.S. was making strides toward Black/White racial integration, there continued to be an invisible line at the bedroom door. As Daisy Hernandez (2006) points out,

Nowhere in our lives, perhaps, is race trickier than when it comes to affairs of the heart, bedroom, and joint savings accounts. It is one thing to craft public policy or organize the masses—but it's quite another to get race issues sorted out in our love lives, a place that is already filled with vulnerabilities and expectations. (p. 25)

Even racial equality activists and sociologists[22] were said to have discouraged interracial dating between themselves out of concern that such dating would provoke deep-seeded fears and undermine their efforts to bring about major changes in Black and White race relations (Romano, 2003). However, as Gordon (1964) pointed out, widespread tolerance of interracial relationships within society would be a major step in the integration process and promotion of interracial relationships. Several court cases were tried throughout the late 1800s and 1900s that dealt with Black/White interracial mixing.

One of the earliest instances was *Pace v. Alabama* (1882). At the time, Alabama had a law that made it illegal for unmarried partners to engage in sexual relations. However, the penalty was harsher if the "guilty parties" included one Black person and one White person. Basically, interracial sex was a felony, whereas extramarital sex was only a misdemeanor. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld Alabama's law because it reasoned that the law could not be said to

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[20] The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it illegal to discriminate against minorities in employment and public accommodations.

[21] The Civil Rights Act of 1965 ended racial discrimination in voting.

[22] Sociologist Milton Barron famously published an article in 1951 warning that Black/White intermarriage was a huge "problem" in society and was the result of lack of institutional control in church and state.

discriminate against Blacks since the punishment for each participant was the same, regardless of his/her race. The Court determined that this was equal application of the law. After *Pace*, the constitutionality of anti-miscegenation laws remained unchallenged until the 1920s. In *Kirby v. Kirby* (1921), Mr. Kirby asked the state of Arizona to annul his marriage to his "negro" wife. The Arizona Supreme Court judged Mrs. Kirby's race by observing her physical appearance; it determined that she did have "negro" blood and granted the annulment to Mr. Kirby.

Naim v. Naim (1955) was the first major challenge to the constitutionality of Virginia's miscegenation law. However, it was not a criminal case; it was an annulment suit between a White woman and her Asian husband. The Supreme Court of Virginia granted the annulment, saying:

> We are unable to read in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution . . . any words or any intendment which prohibit the State from enacting legislation to preserve the racial integrity of its citizens, or which denies the power of the State to regulate the marriage relation so that it shall not have a mongrel breed of citizens. We find there is no requirement that the State shall not legislate to prevent the obliteration of racial pride, but must permit the corruption of blood even though it weaken or destroy the quality of its citizenship. Both sacred and secular histories teach that nations and races have better advanced in human progress when they cultivated their own distinctive characteristics and culture and developed their own peculiar genius. (*Naim v. Naim*, 1955, at 755-756).

In 1964, the U.S. Supreme Court reviewed a Florida law that made it illegal for interracial couples to live together without marrying in *McLaughlin v. Florida*. The Florida law punished "any negro man and [W]hite woman, or any [W]hite man and negro woman, who are not married to each other, who shall…live in and occupy in the nighttime the same room." No

penalty was imposed for the same conduct by a racially homogonous unmarried couple.

Ultimately, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the law. It took three more years

until the U.S. Supreme Court finally eradicated the outdated race-related legislation involving

relationships between two people of different races on a federal stage in its landmark decision in

Loving v. Virginia (1967).[23] *Loving* challenged the same Virginia statutory scheme[24] at issue

only 12 years prior in *Naim*.

In this seminal case, Richard Loving, a White man, and Mildred Loving, a Black woman,

were married in Washington, D.C., in 1958 (Alonso, 2000; Root, 2001). However, the couple

lived in Virginia, where an anti-miscegenation law made it a crime for a White person to marry

someone of Color. As stated in the language of Section 20-58 of Virginia's law:

> If any [W]hite person and colored person shall go out of this State, for the purpose of
>
> being married, and with the intention of returning, and be married out of it, and
>
> afterwards return to and reside in it, [living together] as man and wife, they shall be
>
> punished as provided in Section 20-59. (Virginia Annotated Law Codes, section 20-58,
>
> 1950).

The penalty, as prescribed in Section 20-59 of Virginia's law stated

> If any [W]hite person intermarry with a colored person, or any colored person intermarry
>
> with a [W]hite person, he shall be guilty of a felony and shall be punished by
>
> confinement in the penitentiary for not less than one nor more than five years. (Virginia
>
> Annotated Law Codes, section 20-59, 1950).

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[23] Some law scholars (for example, see Oh, 2006) have argued that the issues of race and gender
are so intertwined that *Loving* should be viewed as a continuation of the *Brown* decision.
[24] The statute made it a felony for a White person to intermarry with a "colored person" and
rendered void any such marriage. Although the statute required that White persons marry only
other White persons, it permitted intermarriages between any two persons of color (different
non-White racial groups).

The couple was arrested and banned from living together due to the state's anti-miscegenation law, even though Section 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment provides that

> [a]ll persons born…in the United States…are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

The American Civil Liberties Union, on behalf of the Lovings, brought the case to the U.S. Supreme Court. On June 12, 1967, the Court held that anti-miscegenation laws violated equal protection because they were illegitimate tools "designed to maintain White Supremacy" (*Loving v. Virginia*, at 11). Chief Justice Warren ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment required that the freedom of choice to marry not be restricted by racial discriminations. Ultimately, he ruled that the U.S. Constitution allows for a person's right to choose to marry someone of another race and that the right to do so could not be infringed by the state, as that would be unconstitutional. *Loving* ultimately set the precedence to end all miscegenation laws. At the time of the ruling, 16 states[25] had laws banning interracial marriage and have since been forced to revise their laws.[26]

Since then, the U.S. has seen a constant rise in the number of interracial marriages (Taylor et al., 2012). Although legal barriers were removed and obvious forms of discrimination against such couples is now illegal, social taboos against interracial mixing are still prevalent and subtle forms of racism remain. In addition to these seminal court cases, the following represents

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[25] These 16 states included Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

[26] Alabama was the last state in the U.S. to repeal its ban on interracial marriage in the year 2000.

an overview[27] of significant societal events related to Black/White relations in the U.S. from

1955 to present day:

- 1955 – An NAACP membership application rejoiced in the *Brown v. Board of Education*
  case. The pamphlet urged "every freedom-loving American to put into everyday practice
  both the letter and the spirit" of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision (Smithsonian, 2014).

- August 28, 1955 – Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam murdered 14-year-old Emmett Louis Till
  in Mississippi after he reportedly flirted with a White woman. Till was beaten, had an eye
  gouged out, shot through the head, and disposed of in the Tallahatchie River. His body
  was recovered three days later and returned to his mother, Mamie, in Chicago. She
  insisted on having a public viewing with an open casket to expose the world to the
  brutality of racism. Bryant and Milam were acquitted of Till's kidnapping and murder,
  only to publicly admit months later to killing him. Till's murder is said to have sparked
  the Civil Rights Movement (Harold & DeLuca, 2005; Levy, 1998; Metress, 2002;
  Nelson, 2005).

- September 24, 1957 – With the presence of U.S. Army troops sent by President Dwight
  D. Eisenhower, the Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, was racially integrated.
  News cameras broadcast the event nationally as soldiers escorted nine Black students past
  threatening White mobs. Newspapers also ran photographs of the event worldwide
  (Metcalf, 1983).

- February 1, 1960 – Ezell A. Blair, Jr., Franklin E. McCain, Joseph A. McNeil, and David
  L. Richmond, four Black male college students, sat at a Whites-only lunch counter in a
  Greensboro, North Carolina, Woolworth's department store (Upchurch, 2008). They

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[27] This list is not comprehensive. Rather, it briefly discusses major national events that have
occurred in the U.S. over the past 59 years.

politely asked for service, but were denied and asked to leave. Rather than depart, the

four young men remained in their seats, ultimately inspiring peaceful protest sit-in

movements across the South (McGee, 2007; Smithsonian, 2014). The protests ultimately

led to the desegregation of Woolworth's lunch counter on July 25, 1960 (Smithsonian,

2014).

- 1963 – In his "Birmingham Manifesto," the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. called for

  desegregation of all lunch counters, department stores, restrooms, and drinking fountains

  in Birmingham, Alabama (Buchanan, 2005). Under his leadership, repeated protests were

  carried out, leading to integration in Birmingham. On August 28, King helped organize

  the March on Washington, where he delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech from

  the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The March on Washington emphasized equal jobs and

  freedoms for Blacks. The next day, famed journalist James Reston of *The New York*

  Times wrote:

> Dr. King touched all the themes of the day, only better than anybody else. He was
>
> full of the symbolism of Lincoln and Gandhi, and the cadences of the Bible. He
>
> was both militant and sad, and he sent the crowd away feeling that the long
>
> journey had been worthwhile.…It had the force of numbers. It had the melodies
>
> of both the church and the theater. And it was able to invoke the principles of the
>
> founding fathers to rebuke the inequalities and hypocrisies of modern American
>
> life. (Excerpt from Meacham, 2001, pp. 285-286).

- 1966 – The Black Panther Movement for Self Defense, a militant Black revolutionary

  group, was formed in California. The group's main purpose is said to have been to spread

  Black Nationalist ideology and inspire a Black power movement that emphasized Black

identity and racial pride (Murch, 2007). The group provided a more forceful response to White violence.

- July 28, 1967 – President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, later known as the Kerner Commission after its chair, Governor Otto Kerner, to issue a report on the "civil unrest"[28] in the U.S. (Wilson, Gutiérrez & Chao, 2003).

- September 1, 1967 – Thurgood Marshall became the first Black Supreme Court justice sworn into office.

- February 1968 – The Kerner Commission released their report. The basic conclusion that was reached was quite simple – the nation was "moving toward two societies, one [B]lack, one [W]hite – separate and unequal" (para. 6). The report highlighted the discrimination and segregation saturating the historical trend of American news coverage against People of Color, but offered hope that "choice" was still possible if Americans could "require new attitudes, new understanding, and, above all, new will" towards Black/White race relations.

- April 4, 1968 – The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, at the age of 39. James Earl Ray, a White fugitive from the Missouri State Penitentiary, was arrested two months later. The following year, Ray entered a plea of guilty and was sentenced to 99 years in the Tennessee State

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[28] Through the 1960s, when referring to people of color, American news media used stereotypes and racial epithets. Subsequently, race-related issues were often reported using an "us versus them" perspective (Wilson, Gutiérrez & Chao, 2003) and often depicted people of color as "adversarial because they were seen as threats to the social order" (Wilson, Gutiérrez & Chao, 2003, p. 119).

Penitentiary. However, he later attempted to withdraw his guilty plea and be tried by a jury.[29] King's death prompted many riots across the U.S.

- 1970s – Although some have identified this decade as a "time for healing" (Upchurch, 2008, p. 112), many Blacks began to feel neglected and threatened, as there were few attempts at enforcing existing civil rights laws. Black militant protest began to diminish, and Black poverty and unemployment increased. Although Jimmy Carter's election in 1976 provided hope for Blacks,[30] the vast majority felt he did not do enough to help them (Cowan & Maguire, 1994). Under the guidance of Derrick Bell, Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado, Kimberle Crenshaw, among others, critical race theory was introduced and originally framed around the U.S. legal system. These scholars used race, racism, and power as foundational blocks for the exploration of liberal order, including legal reasoning and neutral principles of constitutional law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

- 1971 – The Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) was formed to represent Black members of the U.S. Congress. The mission of the CBC is to "empower America's neglected citizens and to address their legislative concerns…[by] consistently be[ing] the voice for [P]eople of [C]olor and vulnerable communities" to ensure that "everyone in the United States has an opportunity to achieve their version of the American Dream" (2014, para. 1).

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[29] On December 9, 1999, a Memphis jury ruled in a civil suit brought by the King family that Loyd Jowers, along with "others, including governmental agencies," (para. 3) had been part of a conspiracy to kill King. James Earl Ray was the scapegoat for the assassination. Dexter King, the youngest son of Dr. King, said his family hopes history will be rewritten to reflect this version of the assassination. (Yellin, 1999)

[30] President Jimmy Carter did name several Blacks to high-level government positions, including Andrew Young as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations (Walton & Smith, 2007) and Patricia Harris as the cabinet head of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (King, 2010).

- 1980s – This decade was marred by racial disparities in employment and education (Ogbu, 1990). When President Ronald Reagan took office, many Blacks felt that he ignored their issues (Cowan & Maguire, 1994). By appointing conservative judges, Reagan was instrumental in striking down numerous programs that had been put in place to rectify past discrimination against Blacks. Later in the decade, however, many key figures in the Black community gained prominent public positions with the 1988 election of George Bush. For example, General Colin Powell was named Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, making him the first Black to hold the military's top-ranking position (Buchanan, 2005), and Dr. Louis Sullivan was appointed Secretary of Health and Human Services. In addition, this decade was marred by "[W]hite flight" to the suburbs (Avila, 2004) and President Ronald Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign, which many argue was targeted at the Black community.

- 1990s – States began adopting the "Three Strikes Law" statutes,[31] which mandate states to impose harsher sentences on habitual offenders. The law imposes a life sentence for almost any crime, no matter how minor, if the defendant has two prior convictions for crimes defined as "serious or violent" (Stanford Law School, 2013). Legal scholar and civil rights litigator Michelle Alexander (2012) goes as far as to say the "war on drugs" and the "Three Strikes" statutes act as a new system of racial control comparable to slavery and "Jim Crow." Referred to as "The Punishing Decade," the 1990s were known

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[31] Texas was the first state to adopt the "Three Strikes Law" in 1974, doing so with a mandatory life sentence.

for incarcerating more people than in any other decade in previous history (Justice Policy Institute, 2000).[32]

- 1990 – The Hate Crime Statistics Act was passed, which required the Justice Department to collect statistics on crimes committed against individuals based on race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation (Jenness, 1999).

- March 3, 1991 – After leading police on an intoxicated high-speed freeway chase, Rodney King was severely beaten by multiple, White Los Angeles City police officers. The beating was caught on videotape and released to various media outlets. The four officers were originally charged with using excessive force, but were acquitted the following year. The acquittals led to riots on the streets of Los Angeles and prompted then-governor Pete Wilson to declare a state of emergency (Buchanan, 2005; CNN Wire Staff, 2012).

- June 12, 1994 – O.J. Simpson led Los Angeles police on a low-speed chase after the murders of his wife, Nicole Brown,[33] and her friend, Ronal Goldman. As part of his defense, Simpson's lawyers grilled then-Los Angeles police detective Mark Fuhrman about his use of racist language and derogatory labels for African-Americans, arguing that there was no possible way Simpson received a fair investigation. The jury agreed; on October 3, 1995, Simpson was acquitted after a trial that lasted more than eight months (Maxwell, Huxford, Borum & Hornik, 2000; Schuetz & Lilley, 1999; Thaler, 1997; Williams, 2002).

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[32] By comparison, the number of prisoners added to American prison institutions was 25 percent higher in the 1990s than during the 1980s (Justice Policy Institute, 2000).
[33] It should be noted that the racial component of this couple (she was White, he is Black) often came into play during media coverage surrounding his trial.

- October 16, 1995 – The "Million Man March" was held around the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Nearly two million Black male activists congregated to raise awareness of the issues facing the Black community. Many saw this as a sign of the resurgence of Black nationalism (West, 1999), even though its legacy was marred by controversy over several issues, namely its leader.[34]

- 2000s – The Great Recession resulted from a weak economy of the 2000s. Poverty increased during this decade as unemployment soared (Shierholz & Gould, 2012). However, in terms of Black achievement in high-level government positions, this decade was unlike any other: Dr. Condoleeza Rice became the first Black named as U.S. National Security Advisor in 2001; General Colin Powell became the first Black U.S. Secretary of State, also in 2001; and Barack Obama was elected as the first Black[35] U.S. President in 2008.

- 2009 – The Southern Poverty Law Center reported that the millennium brought with it a substantial increase in White supremacist groups (Meddaugh & Kay, 2009). Furthermore, the Institute of Government & Public Affairs at the University of Illinois released a study showing that a significant number of individuals are still resistant and opposed to interracial marriage, especially those between Black and White individuals: 38 percent of White southerners opposed interracial marriage, while 26 percent of White non-southerners opposed interracial marriage (Krysan, 2011).

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[34] Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Million Man March, is a controversial and outspoken leader of the religious movement, the Nation of Islam. His remarks are often criticized as being anti-Semitic and anti-White.

[35] President Obama is only half-Black. His mother, Stanley Anne Dunham, is primarily of English heritage and his father, Barack Obama, Sr., is of Luo Kenyan heritage. He is often referred to as the "first Black President" of the United States, even though he is not fully Black, he is biracial.

- February 26, 2012 – Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teen, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, described in the media as a "White-Hispanic." Zimmerman was not arrested until six weeks after the murder. After a highly publicized trial (Andrus, 2012; Ritter, 2014), Zimmerman was acquitted under Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law.

- July 19, 2013 – Asked for his thoughts on the Zimmerman verdict, President Obama urged people to challenge their own biases: ""Each successive generation seems to be making progress in changing attitudes when it comes to race. We're becoming a more perfect Union. Not a perfect Union, but a more perfect Union."

- February 15, 2014 – Michael Dunn was convicted in a Florida courtroom on four charges, including three counts of attempted second-degree murder, after shooting into an SUV holding four Black teenagers on November 23, 2012, and killing 17-year-old Jordan Davis. Dunn, who is White, was arguing with the teens about the volume of their music. A first-degree murder charge for Davis' death resulted in a hung jury;[36] a retrial on this count has been slated for May 2014.

- March 5, 2014 – A study from the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance project revealed that nearly half of all U.S. states fail at teaching the civil rights movement to students. From the report, 20 states received grades of "F," including five states[37] that neither cover the movement in their state standards nor provide adequate resources to even teach it (para. 5). Only three states[38] received grades of "A."

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[36] After the trial, it was reported that two jurors initially believed Dunn was justified in Davis' shooting. An eventual 9-3 deadlock left jurors unable to reach a verdict.
[37] These five states were Alaska, Iowa, Maine, Oregon, and Wyoming.
[38] The three states receiving "A" grades were Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina.

In summary, this historical overview provides insight into the various race-related events that took place on a national level. It is hoped that this brief summary provides a deeper context in which to understand the deep-rooted ideologies when it comes to Black and White race relations in the U.S. The next section explores cultural hegemony, which provides one of the frameworks for this study.

Cultural Hegemony

"Culture is an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about their attitudes toward life" (Geertz, 1973, p. 89).

"Hegemony is never finally and utterly won but needs to be continually worked on and reconstructed, and sexual and racial ideologies are crucial mechanisms in the maintenance of power" (Carby, 1987, p. 18).

French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was one of the first to explore the complicated relationship between individuals and society. He illustrated how the intellectual activity of society is much more complex than an individual's "intellectual activity" by writing:

Society is a reality *sui generis*; it has its own peculiar characteristics, which are not found elsewhere and which are not met with again in the same form in all the rest of the universe. The representations which express it have wholly different contents from purely individual ones and we may rest assured in advance that the first add something to the

second…Collective representations are the result of an immense cooperation, which

stretches out not only into space but into time as well; to make them, a multitude of

minds have associated, united and combined their ideas and sentiments; for them, long

generations have accumulated their experience and their knowledge. (Durkheim, 1967, p.

29)

It is because of this that we have a history that enriches our thoughts. Durkheim (1967)

illustrated the relationship of individuals and society by stating that man has two beings in him –

in one sense, he is in society, and in another sense, society is in him. Karl Marx (1891-1937) was

a pioneer in explaining that human consciousness is social. Individuals are socialized by strong

social dimensions in their lives; in today's world, none may be stronger than the media. From

this, it can be derived that since media plays such an important role in the lives of humans today,

it ultimately can help to shape individual consciousness (Althusser, 2006; McLuhan, 1964).

All artifacts of an established culture and society are riddled with meanings that advance

relations of power and hegemony, or the "way of life and thought that is dominant in society to

the point that it seems natural" (O'Donnell, 2013, p. 138). Cultural texts are laden with social

meanings that can reproduce the status quo or challenge it as sites of resistance and negotiation.

Marx and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) were among the first to critique the hierarchal power

structure in society. Marx and Engels did so by examining the role of class struggle in systemic

economic change:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas; i.e., the class which is

the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The

class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same

time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas

of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (1976, pp. 59-62)

Today, culture includes discourses, images, stories, and other various forms that generate

meaning for members of a society. American culture, in particular, is heavily constructed in,

influenced by, and disseminated via mass media channels. Hegemony, a process of cultural

struggle, then occurs when "dominant groups (i.e., television producers) control the flow of a

cultural projection" (Gallagher, 2004, p. 152).

In the 20th-century, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) developed the theory of cultural

hegemony,[39] defined as the "process of moral, philosophical, and political leadership that a social

group attains only with the active consent of other important social groups" (Artz & Murphy,

2000, p. 1). Simply stated, one social class can control the system of values and mores of a

society, in order to create and establish a ruling-class worldview that justifies the status quo of

bourgeois domination of the other social classes in society. Gramsci developed the ideals of

Marx and Engels and argued that hegemony is never a permanent state of affairs[40] and that

diverse social groups attain "hegemony" at different times through the consent of those in power.

Hegemony is often used to describe not only the process by which the ruling class shapes the

consciousness of the masses, but also as the system of power that has the support of the

subordinate (Artz & Murphy, 2000). Gramsci believed that societies maintained their stability

through a combination of hegemony, defined as consent to "intellectual and moral leadership,"

and domination (1971, pp. 52-53 and 57-58). Hegemony calls for "historically specific

sociocultural analysis of particular contexts and forces…from the media to…broader social and

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[39] Gramsci developed the theory of cultural hegemony from the philosophy and sociology of geopolitical hegemony.
[40] Stuart Hall (1980b) referred to hegemony as "the (temporary) mastery of a particular theatre of struggle" (p. 24).

political ends" (Durham & Kellner, 2012, p. 6). Gramsci's conception of hegemony best expresses this reworking of the dominant ideological[41] images into social categories of race, gender, and class, among others.

The role of media in passing ideology cannot be overlooked or undermined in importance. Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1980a; 1980b) emphasized that contemporary media practices have been constructed according to prevailing dominant ideology and the needs of dominant social and political interests. Ideology, then, is practiced daily and appears as "commonsense." In addition to reflecting society, media also aid in defining it. Hegemony is conditioned by media's ability to represent popular subordinate interests (Artz & Murphy, 2000).

Television is recognized as the "dominant means for public representations of knowledge in the United States" (Artz & Murphy, 2000, p. 63), even though the dominant voices in television production includes only a select few and excludes many. Thus, televised representations of cultural practices consist of portrayals promoted by a trifling number of agents sanctioned by hegemonic institutions. As a result, television provides "a series of common, shared experiences and images which have become part of the collective shared traditions of society" (Marsden, 1980, p. 124).

This study will center cultural hegemony to show how a particular medium (i.e., television) has contributed to broader societal views regarding race. Taylor and Dozier (1983) contend that

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[41] Gramsci believed that ideologies, existing in human thought and action, have serious consequences because they arrange human practices and are legitimate to the extent that they are functioning in everyday life (Artz & Murphy, 2000).

not only does TV uncritically reflect the social structure of society in its selection and

presentation of characters…but it also reinforces the notion that there is a fixed order in

society, and that whoever tries to upset that order will meet with tragedy. (p. 109)

By examining television as a process that reinforces societal norms and ideals to the benefit of

those in power,[42] this study will illustrate how it works to deviantize Black/White interracial

relationships by projecting racial stereotypes as reality from the 1970s to present-day. If

Black/White interracial relationships are constructed as "problematic" in media, then they should

be of importance to consider.

Interpretive Turn in Media

"Believing…that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has

spun, I take…the analysis…to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law

but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz, 1973, p. 5).

Cultural studies make a case for valuing the study of "low culture" (Brottman, 2005).

Scholars often question the "power" of mass media and their roles as mediums of culture. British

sociocultural theorist Stuart Hall (1981b) was instrumental in contesting the linear model of

communication and saw audiences as active decoders, instead of passive recipients, of mediated

messages, where they accept, reject, modify and/or interpret messages based on their own class

position within society. Hall's model of encoding/decoding (1980b) is based on the premise that

there is a correlation between an individual's social situation and the meanings he/she decodes

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[42] Historically, the U.S. follows a White, male individualistic cultural standard. Therefore,
cultural hegemony can aid in explaining the ways in which (White) male power and dominance
function in media.

from an encoded symbol. When applied to television, Hall (1980b) posited that if the meaning

that the viewer decodes is the same or similar to the meaning that the television discourse

encodes, the result would be hegemony. Hall (1980a; 1980b; 1981a; 1981b; 1989), a radical

optimist whose work strives to plant seeds of change, points out the mass media have

progressively colonized culture and are more and more responsible for providing individuals

with meanings about self and others to create a complete view of society. One approach to

exploring these issues provides audiences with ways of interpreting the world that shapes their

existence and participation in society.

Stemming from British cultural studies (e.g., Fiske, 1987; Fiske & Hartley, 1978/2003;

Hall, 1980a; 1980b; 1981a; 1981b; 1989), the "interpretive turn" in media studies has often been

thought of as representing a fundamental challenge to "traditional" positivistic research,

especially studies involving media "effects" inquiry, and is distinguished by its move to

empower the audience. Interpretive approaches challenge traditional communication approaches

because they view the social and cultural world as milieu of meaning, and view media as sites of

struggle in which subjectivities are constructed and identities are contested, instead of as definers

of "reality." Whereas positivistic research deduces causal deterministic relationships, interpretive

research positions the socially situated individual's experience of meaning as fundamental in the

communication process.

The interpretive turn in social science involves many perspectives that share a common

emphasis on the analysis of constructions of meaning, as cultural productions, and the ways in

which people make sense of the content of their everyday experiences. As Campbell, Martin, and

Fabos (2012) remind, "Culture is the world made meaningful; it is socially constructed and

maintained through communication. It limits as well as liberates us; it differentiates as well as unites us. It defines our realities and thereby shapes the way we think, feel, and act" (p. 16).

British cultural critic and historian Raymond Williams (1989) was instrumental in the development of interpretive research. He argued that there was a fundamental paradigm shift in communication research when humans began using and adapting to technology as major means of communication. Williams (1989) saw communication as a form of social relationship, with communication systems acting as social institutions. Williams (1977) also expanded on the role of hegemony as it pertains to media:

> Hegemony is then not only the articulate upper level of "ideology," nor are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as "manipulation" or "indoctrination." It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of our living: our senses, our assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meaning and values – constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. (p. 110)

Simply stated, hegemonic ideology, including those found in media, can be exemplified as that "which goes without saying" (Berger, 2007, p. 21). Society is dominated by hegemonic ideals, but most are not recognized because they are ubiquitous and seem to be nothing more than common sense. The function of this domination helps maintain the status quo and solidify the role of the ruling class in society.

Cultural studies scholar James Carey (1989) was influential in bringing to the United States the interpretive study of communication and media. A political moderate, Carey saw communication as a symbolic process of producing and maintaining reality and news media as presenting a reality that gives everyday life overall form and order. He (1989; 1997) protested the "blind faith" in quantitative methods in social science and raised awareness across multiple disciplines that knowledge and interest are intrinsically entangled with one another. He offered a radically alternative view of how to study and think about communication and media in a deeply humanistic way, ultimately advancing the interpretive cause. Interpretivist research recognizes the cultural and historical contexts of constructions of meaning by the researchers that developed them and provides enhanced insight into the text of daily lives and what "ought to be" (e.g., rejection of the status quo). The power of interpretive research lies within its ability to uncover the observable injustices and failings of existing social structures. It also allows the deciphering of potential sites of cultural resistance.

Black/White interracial pairings can be viewed as a site of cultural resistance, both in reality and in media. Fiske (1987) defines cultural resistance as "an alternative semiotic strategy of resistance or evasion" (p. 240), but warns it is not

> overtly political or even revolutionary [sense] of attempting to overthrow the social system. Rather it refers to the refusal to accept the social identity proposed by the dominant ideology and the social control that goes with it. The refusal of ideology, of its meanings and control, may not of itself challenge the dominant social system but it does resist incorporation and it does maintain and strengthen a sense of social difference that is a prerequisite to any more direct social challenge. (p. 242)

By these interracial couples rebutting mainstream ideology, certain barriers have been erected that aim at preventing the widespread acceptance of these relationships (Perry & Sutton, 2006). The "clash of sexualities was an important feature in the development of ideologies that defined each group and the construction of ethnic boundaries that divided them" (Nagel, 2003, p. 83). The interracial barricades that are constructed can be understood within the framework of critical race theory (CRT). CRT posits that although blatant forms of racial discrimination have been outlawed, subtle forms of racism abound. Rejection of such couples, in media and in real-life, can be seen as an indicator of racism. CRT, then, provides a powerful and applicable lens by which to understand the effects of race and racism in everyday life.

Critical Race Theory

"Racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society" (Bell, 1992, p. ix).

Understanding interracial marriage portrayals in media can be understood using a critical race lens. As previously noted, some of the first Black/White interracial pairings in this country were a result of slavery. Law professor and civil rights activist Derrick Bell (2008), often considered the "father" of critical race theory (CRT), saw slavery as setting the precedence for sacrificing Black rights in order to maintain the (White) status quo. CRT can be found extensively in research pertaining to law, family studies, sociology, and (most recently) education (e.g., Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Parker, Deyhle & Villenas, 1999; Solorzano, 1997). It is best known as a movement that attempts to transform the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Very little research

critically explores the racist undertones of attitudes and stereotypical depictions of Black/White interracial couples specifically, and even fewer explore media portrayals of such couples using a CRT lens. This study is an attempt to answer the call made by Parker and Lynn (2002) that CRT needs to connect with "real world" practice.

Although CRT was established from the insights of critical legal studies, this study will argue that it can be useful when exploring race and race relations in media for several reasons. CRT recognizes racism as an everyday lived occurrence that is permanently embedded into our institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), including the social institution of media. Most people do not recognize the systematic and often subtle forms of racism saturating society, and namely media. Rather, many choose to adopt the "post-racial"[43] or "colorblind"[44] conception of equality because it is comforting to believe that the U.S. has moved beyond its racist past. As CRT scholars point out, this is one of the defining characteristics of American society, given its historical roots in slavery, and American media practices (Campbell, LeDuff, Jenkins & Brown, 2012; Chito Childs, 2008).[45] Adopting "colorblind" notions can be dangerous, as several studies (i.e., Dovido & Gaertner, 1986; Gaertner & Dovido, 2005) have found that many Whites who believe their behavior toward People of Color is unaffected by race continue to maintain some

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[43] When Barack Obama won the presidential election in 2008, many believed it was evidence of racial harmony. However, there is minimal evidence to support this belief.

[44] The exact definition of a colorblind ideology has been contested amongst scholars. It is recognized as a guiding philosophy that de-emphasizes race in efforts to see "each person as a unique individual, as opposed to an interchangeable member of a social category" (Wolsko, Park, Judd & Wittenbrink, 2000, p. 636). Colorblindness aims to minimize the differences of individuals on the basis of skin color. However, it is ultimately counterproductive because it minimizes the vital differences that individuals have based on race and skin color. Adopting a colorblind view of society upholds the status quo and those who have been historically disadvantaged because of race and skin color are further prevented from "mobilizing and advancing their agendas" (Guinier & Torres, 2003, p. 56).

[45] Campbell, LeDuff, Jenkins, and Brown (2012) argue that "journalism routinely overlooks the impact of race and racism and has contributed to the notion that we are actually living in a post-racial world" (p. x).

level of negativity, whether consciously or unconsciously. Further, Erica Chito Childs (2008) contends that examining interracial relationships, specifically, through a "colorblind" lens is "problematic because it ignores, even disguises, the power and privilege that still characterize race relations in this country" (p. 2772). This study will attempt to challenge the dominant ideology that we, as a society, have overcome racism by exposing racial disparities and prejudices found in media.

"Social construction," another tenet of CRT, sees race as a product of social thought and, according to Frankenberg (2001), "arguably the most violent fiction in human history" (p. 72). In this sense, race is not objective and is not a biological or genetic trait. Being a social construct allows for permanent assignments of pseudo traits to groups, which can often lead to discriminatory practices and create social hierarchies. By race being an ideological social construct, it is "above all, [a] historical product" that is dependent on collective agreement amongst those in society (Bederman, 1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Fields, 1982; Tate. 1997). Accordingly, "whiteness" can be understood as a social construct that essentially privileges Whites, especially in media as whiteness is generally associated with "goodness" and purity (Hughey, 2010). As pointed out by Winant (2001), whiteness is the product of accomplishments and containments of the Black movement. Whiteness[46] also serves as the standard for the status quo in which all "Others" are judged against. This, in turn, creates a noticeable Black/White binary, which clumps all "Others" as being comparable to Blacks – a dangerous practice in its own right. For the most part, all People of Color have been viewed and

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[46] Scholars (e.g., Wander, Martin & Nakayama, 1999) argue that shifting the study of race to whiteness will allow for an expanded view of how "racial categorization frameworks operate to reinforce their historically established hierarchies through a range of strategic devices that mask its true operations" (p. 23).

constructed as racial objects, whereas Whites, because of their whiteness, have largely been left

unexamined:

> The invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in [W]hite discourse is a piece of its
>
> ubiquity…In fact for most of the time [W]hite people speak about nothing but [W]hite
>
> people, it's just that we couch it in terms of 'people' in general…Whites are everywhere
>
> in representation. Yet precisely because of this and their placing as norm they seem not to
>
> be represented to themselves *as* [W]hites but as people who are variously gendered,
>
> classed, sexualized and abled. At the level of racial representation, in other words,
>
> [W]hites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race. (Dyer, 1997, p. 3)

Given that what constitutes race is determined largely by historical and material

conditions (Roediger, 1994), it follows that racism cannot be a fixed, rigid concept but rather one

that evolves and multiplies in and across various settings. As noted by Columbia University

American history professor Barbara Fields (1982), American history has an "overarching theme

of race" (p. 144). Fields (1982) reminds that ideas surrounding race derive their importance from

their context.

"Interest convergence" directly challenges dominant racial ideology by exposing the

ways in which Whites benefit from eradicating racism. In essence, eliminating racism is not done

for the good of those subject to the racism (i.e., Blacks). Rather, it is only done because Whites

have something to gain from its elimination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Basically, the interest

of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the

interests of Whites. This is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve when media portray

Black/White interracial pairs – as is, there is no incentive for Whites to portray these couples as

emotional equals to racially homogenous couples. In other words, it is not convenient or beneficial for media to portray interracial couples as equal, so most do not.

CRT is a direct challenge to accepted civil rights thoughts and resists the popular "progressive" notions associated with it. Whereas most saw the civil rights movement as a huge step toward racial equality, scholars from various disciplines became sensitive to the subtler forms of racism that were not outlawed. This study argues that institutionalized racism and discrimination, in this case directed towards Black/White interracial couples, continue to permanently blemish society, especially in media.

Under CRT, the rejection of relationships between Blacks and Whites can be seen as indicators of subtle racism and the underlying efforts at maintaining race-related subordination. Recognized as institutionalized racism that is often not easily detectable, but that upon closer examination can be seen to reveal the inability of Whites to see Blacks as emotional equals – as human beings capable of experiencing intimacy and expressing human feelings (Feagin, Vera & Batur, 2001), especially to White partners. It is the argument of this study that society remains structured by unequal access to and distribution of power as a result of race, gender, and class. Media portrayals, as reflections of this inequality, are in turn produced in terms of racialized social formation. Mainstream mass media can be viewed as cultural narratives that are playing critical roles in maintaining myths and taboos associated with intimate relations between Blacks and Whites. The cultural narratives sustain and justify subtle and insidious forms of racism, as most are told by Whites, and counter-narratives told by non-White voices are often missing.

Media as Cultural Instruments

> The role of communication may be regarded as that of a major carrier of culture. The
>
> media of communication are cultural instruments, which serve to promote or influence
>
> attitudes, to motivate, to foster the spread of behaviour patterns, and to bring about social
>
> integration. For millions of people, they are the principal means of access to culture.…In
>
> the modern world, the mass media supply the cultural fare and shape the cultural
>
> experience of many millions of people. (MacBride Commission, 1981, pp. 30-31)

The relationship between culture, communication and media is clearly demonstrated in

the quote above. Simply stated, communication is a vital component of any culture, and mass

media provide a strong vehicle for cultural dissemination (Okunna, 1993). Culture, in this

instance, refers to "a lived practice formed by conscious human beings from their lived

experience, and constituting for them a whole way of life" (Hargreaves, 1982, p. 41). Mass

media provide a "legitimate source of data for research that contributes to our understanding of

not only popular culture but also our collective beliefs, values, and social institutions" (Chito

Childs, 2009, p. 3), as they are the most potent and pervasive communicators of sociocultural

standards in America (Heinberg, 1996). Numerous studies have identified the "normalizing

regulatory function" (Chito Childs, 2009, p. 3) of media in constructing and negotiating

meanings consistent with the racialized status quo (for examples, see Collins, 2000; 2005;

Marchetti, 1993; Vera & Gordon, 2003; Williams, 2001).

Research has shown American mass media, especially in the mainstream, provide

cultural narratives that stigmatize and maintain racial taboos associated with Black/White

interracial pairings. Popular culture contributes to many beliefs about these interracial couples.

When these relationships are shown (which is rare in itself), they are depicted as problematic, sexually curious, dysfunctional, dangerous, doomed and unnatural. Justification for such pairings in media is the norm (i.e., there *must* be a reason these two are together – it can not be anything sincere) because, as bell hooks (1992) points out, true love in media cannot occur across boundaries. Most validation for Black/White interracial relationships lies in perceptions of sexuality, especially for Whites. Cornel West (1993) contends that White fear of Black bodies is

> rooted in visceral feelings about [B]lack bodies and fueled by sexual myths of [B]lack
>
> men and women…either as threatening creatures who have the potential for sexual power
>
> over [W]hites, or as harmless, desired underlings of a [W]hite culture (p. 119).

A University of Florida study echoed these findings: "Despite growing numbers of mixed couples in America, [media] relationships between men and women of different races are most likely to be short-lived, oversexed and downright dangerous" (Keen, 2006). Thus, the response to such couples is that they are "less than" their racially homogenous counterparts. Based on this historical legacy, it should come as no surprise that it is nearly impossible to view interracial marriages as anything other than a threat to the natural order of society. Drawing on these "common sense" notions, cultural representations of interracial pairings found in media provide a racialized experience for real-life interracial couples. In other words, these personal relationships are given a racial meaning within the context of American society (Omi & Winant, 1994). Simply stated, the ways in which media socially construct interracial couples are mutually constituted by the social constructs of race and hierarchal groupings in society. Constructing race, as Stuart Hall (1981b) reminds, is a collective process and practice that produces a clear set of meanings.

In recent years, American television has become the beacon which contemporary television around the (western) world follows (Bignell & Fickers, 2008). It is a vital cultural form, not only because it reflects the dominant views of society, but also because of the possible influence it has on the views of the members of a society regarding race. Television, as a universal storyteller, has often been thought of as a medium in the socialization and enculturation process that aids in maintaining social order and upholding the status quo (Baran & Davis, 2011).

Reeves and Campbell (1994) remind that television is fundamental in constructing and circulating popular understandings with respect to major social questions confronting America. Television uniquely offers audiences with ways of viewing, and more importantly understanding, interracial relationships by presenting discursive and visual cues in one's own living room. Since cultural representations, like those found on television, draw on societal "common sense," one could argue what the portrayals mean and what messages they send regarding such couples. In this sense, it can be seen as a means of providing society with ways of understanding who interracial couples are and what meanings these unions represent.

In the multifaceted web of life imitating art imitating life, media's role in forming and reinforcing Black/White interracial relationships is not something that can be overlooked. Through a critical race lens, the rejection of Black/White couples can be seen as maintaining race-related subordination, and, ultimately as subtle forms of racism. This racism is an everyday lived experience for People of Color and their partners.

Locating This Research

> The reality is that interracial couples still deal with discrimination and hate. It's a positive thing that we're seeing less of a tragic element. Television models for us what we should think about people, really determines our taboos and what's acceptable. (Carmen Van Kerekhove, co-director of diversity training company New Demographic, as quoted in Oldenburg, 2005, para. 12)

Building on existing interracial relationship research (e.g., Auletta & Hammerback, 1985; Chito Childs, 2005; 2009; Craig-Henderson, 2006; Hodes, 1997; Lemon, 1977; Perry & Sutton, 2006; Scott, 1984; Williams, 2001) and television research (e.g., Buonanno, 2008; Fiske, 1987; Galician, 2004; Hartley, 1999; Williams, 1989), this study argues that mass media depictions of Black/White interracial couples aids in the construction and distribution of long-ingrained racial prejudices and fears. Specifically, this research aims to critically examine how Black/White interracial marriages have been portrayed on major network primetime television programs.[47] There is limited qualitative research that explores the dynamics of Black/White interracial marriages,[48] and even less research focused on systematically comparing and contrasting historical interracial relationship narratives found within primetime television sitcoms.

Research of televised portrayals of Black/White interracial couples, especially married couples, remains an area of inquiry needing continued exploration. This study seeks to contribute

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[47] Portrayals of interracial marriages have been prevalently shown on non-commercial television, limiting the potential reach due to the distribution venue. For example, PBS aired a five-part series in 1999 entitled *An American Love Story*, that followed Bill Sims, a Black man, and Karen Wilson, a White woman, and highlighted their 30-year struggle against racial prejudice (PBS, 1999).

[48] For scholarly examples, see Barnett, 1963; Brown, 1987; Chito Childs, 2005; 2008; 2009; Gaines and Leaver, 2002; Hodes, 1997; Luther and Rightler-McDaniels, 2013; and Romano, 2003.

to these scholarly studies by examining the interracial pairings' associated texts as they were presented on primetime network television. To explore this material, a critical discourse analysis was conducted on the portrayals of Black/White interracial couples that were prominent in two situational comedies, *The Jeffersons* (1975) and *Happy Endings* (2011). Engagement with texts will allow for stereotyped representations to be uncovered and challenged (Hall, 1981a; 1981b). Interracial relationships are defined in terms of the racial composition of the individuals in the relationship, and as such, critical race theory (CRT), centrally focused on the inherent Black/White binary in American society, was the guiding theoretical framework. CRT allows for full consideration of the horrid racial past and present of the U.S. and argues that the American culture of domination is inherent to the subordination of non-Whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The rhetoric of progress that saturated American discourse after the U.S. civil rights movement suggested that race is no longer a significant issue (Tate, 1997). However, CRT scholars (e.g., Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dickinson, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997; Taylor, 1999) argue that racism, which is both institutional and mainstream, continues to perpetuate American society; as a result, only a façade of equality truly exists.

This study includes the televised images consumed by the most diverse American audience possible, independent of socio-economic and geographic barriers, such as cable, satellite, or other broadband offerings. By selecting primetime programs that originally broadcast free of charge on two of the four major networks – CBS and ABC – this study concentrates on programs regularly available to viewers in all American television markets. In this analysis, primetime is defined as programming airing in the 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. Eastern Standard time zone time slot on Mondays through Saturdays, or 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. Eastern Standard time zone on

Sundays. Primetime hours were chosen as these windows tend to attract the highest number of viewers, thus making the images portrayed on these programs the most widely watched.

Each chosen program was a regularly scheduled situational comedy, which has been the most dominant form of television programming in American primetime television for more than 50 years (King, 2002; Mills, 2008; Savorelli, 2010). Other programming, such as news, reality shows, dramas, and sports, was excluded. Each examined interracial couple was heterosexual and comprised of one Black individual and one White individual.[49] They were recurring characters that were central to each television show. The first full season of each program was chosen to provide consistency in the comparisons.

It should be noted that throughout this study, the term "Black" or "Blacks" will be used as the label to describe Americans of African descent, rather than African-Americans, as Whites can be African-Americans. By the same token, "White" or "Whites" will be used as the label to describe Americans of European decent. For many, the term "African-American" refers to a name meant for descendants of American slaves, whereas being "Black" is widely known as an expression of pride and a strategy to defy oppression (Washington, 2012). In addition, many Black people have multiple ethnicities not tied to Africa; in fact, most Blacks in today's society are several generations removed from their African heritage. Furthermore, a January 2011 NBC/Wall Street Journal poll showed that 42 percent of respondents preferred to be called Black, while only 35 percent said African-American (Hart & McInturff, 2011).

The second chapter discusses mainstream media portrayals of Blacks and Whites and highlights the relevance and importance of examining television specifically. In addition,

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[49] The couple examined on *The Jeffersons* comprised of a White man and a Black woman, whereas the couple examined on *Happy Endings* comprised of a Black man and a White woman.

televised portrayals of Black/White interracial couples through the decades between 1950 and 2000 are explored.

The methodological approach taken for this study is outlined in chapter three. Rather than focusing on a quantitative content analysis of media portrayals of Black/White interracial couples, it was decided that a critical discourse analysis of mainstream television sitcoms would yield greater insight as to how these couples were portrayed. In addition to specifying the particular method used, a personal disclosure by the researcher is provided.

In the results and conclusions chapter, the researcher describes how although important social, legal, and political events pertaining to race relations took place from the 1970s to 2010s, little variation existed in the thematic representations of Black/White interracial couples between the selected shows that aired in two different time periods (one in the 1970s and the other in the 2010s).

Chapter II

"A Blend Can Be Obtained"

"Depictions of interracial couples learning lessons from mass media about racial bonding are taught that curiosity about those who are racially different can be expressed as long as boundaries are not actually crossed and no genuine intimacy emerges" (hooks, 1995, p. 113).

Mainstream Media Portrayals

Interracial images on television allow [W]hite people to satisfy their attraction/fascination with illusions of interracial sex in a safe space, so they watch it without being contaminated by it, and better yet can say, 'I am hip…I am not a racist…I watch interracial couples on TV'. (Chito Childs, 2009, p. 57)

As the backdrop of the nation changes, so too does the television landscape. In the complex web of life imitating art imitating life, media's role in constructing and reinforcing Black/White interracial relationships is considerable. Especially since, as Perry and Sutton (2006) remind, most media representations of interracial relationships reinforce that they occur in a gauntlet between dysfunctional and dangerous. This stigmatization allows for a "permission to hate" culture (Perry & Sutton, 2006).

Past research (Chito Childs, 2009; Ramono, 2003; Wiegel, Loomis & Soja, 1980) shows story lines involving Black/White interracial couples on television were extraordinarily limited in that they were often featured as one-time-only story elements, usually to cause conflict and moral dilemma, and were quickly dismissed by an episode's end. Although the appearance of

such couples in media did increase visibility, the dynamics and issues of racism surrounding the couple were rarely discussed in detail. Brief appearances dotted network landscapes to "pepper" onto the narrative, but did not continue long enough to threaten the hegemonic status quo. This lack of depth is part of a process that works to reinforce certain norms and ideas that benefit society's most powerful groups.

It can be argued, however, that the frequency of interracial pairings have increased on network primetime television programming since the first scripted interracial kiss between a White man and a Black woman happened on American television in 1968 when Lieutenant Uhura (played by Nichelle Nichols) kissed Captain Kirk (played by William Shatner) on the hugely popular television series, *Star Trek*. While today's characterizations of individuals in Black/White interracial relationships may seem more diverse and varied than their counterparts from the 1960s and 1970s, this research considers if and how these portrayals have evolved. It examines elements such as how the televised interracial couple looks, how they act towards one another, and how those around them act. Deep readings of the texts involving Black/White interracial couples may reveal answers to these and other questions. Interracial couples, their position in society, and their function in media require in-depth analysis to fully comprehend their place in media history and their role in American society today.

Congruent with the premise of CRT research, this study will explore whether a Black/White binary exists as a primary structure framing media depictions of interracial couples, as it has been shown to do in American society. In order for television to make meaning for its audience, it must draw upon and operate on the basis of "generalized societal common sense" about society and people's location within it (Gray, 2004, p. 9). First, however, it is significant to highlight some of the earliest interracial intimacies found in media, and scripted television

specifically, from the 1950s,[50] when the Hollywood Production Code[51] lifted its ban on

"miscegenation" in American films (Perry & Sutton, 2006), to current day.

The Essential[52] "Tube"

> "Television remains a decisive arena in which struggles for representation, or more
>
> significantly, struggles over the *meanings* of representation, continue to be waged at
>
> various levels of national politics, expressive culture, and moral authority." (Gray, 2004,
>
> p. xvii)

Popular culture involves the use of wide-ranging, but specific social practices, of

commonsense understanding of the world, thus creating unique sites of struggle and contestation

(Hall, 1981a). For the vast majority of Americans, television,[53] although complex and

contradictory, is the medium of choice (Gray, 2004). Research (e.g., Campbell & Reeves, 1989;

Ehrmann, 2009; Fiske, 1987; 1989; Gitlin, 1983; Graves, 1999; Gray, 1993a; Hall, 1981a;

Reeves & Campbell, 1994) has shown television to be a major conduit able to produce powerful

cultural effects as it operates on the foundation of popular and common sense notions about the

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[50] The researcher recognizes that Thomas Cripps' 1915 film "Birth of a Nation" was a turning point in Black consciousness regarding the power of mass entertainment. The film was hailed as a "cinematic masterpiece" at that time for its glorification of the Ku Klux Klan, and was credited with the resurgence of the organization to a more powerful incarnation than was the original. The film depicted African-American men (White actors in blackface) as lust-crazed beasts.

[51] The Hollywood Production Code, also referred to as the Hays Code, was written in 1930 and banned "miscegenation" in all U.S. films. The Code was also an attempt to censor motion pictures from including sexual material, including risqué costumes and elicit language, as well as "implicitly immoral characters" from Hollywood films. Under the Code, all films were intended to be suitable for viewers of all ages.

[52] The average American home now has 2.71 television sets, which is more than the average number of people – 2.55 – per home (Nielson Media Research, 2014).

[53] The average American adult consumes 5.20 hours of television each day (Bissel & Parrott, 2013).

current state of affairs in American society. As Gray (2004) states, "television itself also constituted a significant social site for shaping, defining, contesting, and representing claims about American society" (p. 15).

Television as a text has been described as a centralized system of storytelling. As a "cool" media, television audiences are responsible for filling in the gaps of television stories – viewers must become perceptually involved with the media. Because of this, a television culture has emerged as people respond to television and it responds to the world of each viewer.[54] In addition, as pointed out in various studies (e.g., Fiske & Hartley, 1978/2003; Gray, 1993a; Hartley, 1999; Lewis, 2008; O'Donnell, 2013), television is a conduit for transmitting a sense of cultural membership to viewers by being the vehicle through which "important cultural conversations" (Postman, 1985, p. 16) take place.

Television representations are often socially and culturally rooted with real issues, hence their mass appeal. Television is often thought of as a medium of socialization and enculturation. Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, and Signorielli (1978) remarked:

> The repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images forms the mainstream of the common symbolic environment that cultivates the most widely shared conceptions of reality. We live in terms of the stories we tell—stories about what things exist, stories about how things work, and stories about what to do—and television tells them all through news, drama, and advertising to almost everybody most of the time (p. 178).

The point of Gerbner's research described how watching television ultimately led to adopting beliefs about the social world, "which conformed to the stereotyped, distorted and very selective

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[54] This is the social aspect of technology referred to by Williams.

view of reality as portrayed in a systematic way in television fiction and news" (McQuail, 2010, p. 497).

As Fiske (1987) points out, although television may have the façade of reality, it is not actually realistic because it merely produces the mass cultural appeal of the dominant sense of reality. It is worth exploring the façades presented (in terms of interracial relationships between Black and White partners) in order to understand the dominant discourse surrounding such couples. Hall (1989) emphasized the significance of focusing on the everyday lived experiences that mold and shape our existence. As pointed out by Vera and Gordon (2003), television is a product of popular culture and provides "us with the elements we use in our everyday life to think with and to function in an increasingly complex world. We live in the bubble of our stock of knowledge, that collection of ways of thinking, feeling, and acting we share with other members of our society…we live using sincere fictions, those mental templates we use to relate to others" (p. 185). In essence, television is a centralized system of storytelling; its role in creating this illusion is fundamental as it constructs and disseminates images and texts surrounding interracial intimacies and makes their portrayals meaningful, legitimate, and commonplace for the audience (Gray, 2004). The power of television is its ability to construct these representations with and against various societal and political positions (Gray, 1993b; Grossberg, 1992; Hall, 1981b; Kelley, 1994).

As stated previously, television is a contested terrain that makes the struggles over the meanings and uses of portrayals of interracial couples dynamic points of engagement (Gray, 2004). Depictions of such couples in television programs provide discursive sites where disputes over the meanings of such relationships are waged. Media representations of interracial couples, especially those found on television sitcoms, tend to reinforce the existing racial hierarchy by

functioning to serve the White hegemony in deviantizing interracial relationships by projecting stereotypes and racial biases as reality. As bell hooks (1995) reminds, "True love in television…is almost always an occurrence between those who share the same race. When love happens across boundaries…it is doomed for no apparent reason and/or has tragic consequences" (p. 113).

Critical television studies (e.g., Gray, 1993b) involving race (and gender, class, and power) situate questions about these representations and struggles within the context of American entertainment media.[55] In line with cultural studies,[56] by engaging the text together with context, meanings can be deduced from media discourse. As Fiske (1989) reminds, these meanings are determined by what people do with them, how they use them, and under what circumstances the significance was produced.

Scholarly research examining media representations of interracial couples on television (e.g., Chito Childs, 2009; Perry & Sutton, 2006; Squires, 2009) have found that these couples are overwhelmingly presented as problematic and unnatural, when shown at all. For example, sociologist Erica Chito Childs (2009) investigated interracial pairings on primetime television and found that depictions of such couples was rare and when shown, were often relegated to minor roles. It is thus necessary to explore the historical trajectory of these couples as presented on mainstream television.

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[55] In this respect, a critical approach is a transdisciplinary approach used to overcome the fragmentation of the cultural studies field. This study will combine works of communication and media with cultural studies in order to bring the study of race into the center of the study of media culture.

[56] This study recognizes the value of cultural studies as it provides tools that enable one to read and interpret one's culture critically.

Televised Interracial Portrayals Through the Decades

"Race difference is an elephant in the room, instead of a window into a new experience.

It's time for network TV to fully tap the real dramatic potential of these [Black/White

interracial] couples, and let them talk about the issues we're already tackling in the real

world" (Deggans, 2011, para. 9).

1950s

In the early 1950s, there were approximately 8 million television sets in American

households, and the sitcom was among the first formats adapted for the new medium of

television (Monaghan, 2014). Most sitcoms were a half-hour in length and aired weekly. Many

of the earliest sitcoms were direct adaptations of existing radio shows, such as *Amos 'n' Andy*.

Early sitcoms were broadcast live and were either recorded on kinescopes or not recorded at all.

Television shows of this decade were hailed as idealizing a "qualitatively new phenomenon"

(Coontz, 1992, p. 25). Television of this time period provided an intimate family prototype: one

that was natural, didactic, but still theatrical (Spigel, 1992). Early situational comedies, in

particular, frequently used broadly played physical comedy (Brooks & Marsh, 2007, p. xiv).

Scholar Herman Gray (2005) points out that during this time, one of the most important

trends of television, "crafting homogeneity out of difference" (p. 6), became a popular vehicle by

which to recruit viewership. This trend focused on universally felt differences, namely that

Whites were superior to Blacks.[57] During the 1950s, most Blacks portrayed in media depicted

stereotypical subservient roles, such as maids, servants, and "mammies" (Dates, 1990; Ely,

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[57] Although this strategy has roots in the 1950s, it continues to be extensively used in the sitcoms
of today.

1991). Two of the most well known shows presenting Black life, *Amos 'n' Andy*[58] (1951-1953) and *The Jack Benny Show* (1950-1965), legitimized racial order by depicting racist typecasts that built on the notion of White supremacy. Such shows blatantly used racist humor for White amusement. One exception to this was *The Nat King Cole Show*, which premiered November 5, 1956, on NBC. Although the content was not as risqué as some of its counterparts, no sponsor would take it, and all southern affiliate stations refused to run it. Subsequently, it was cancelled the following year. Interracial intimacies between Whites and Blacks simply did not occur. There was one primetime program, however, that depicted telelevision's first interracial couples.

     I Love Lucy (1951-1957) featured a White woman, Lucy Ricardo (played by Lucille Ball), and her Cuban husband Ricky (played by Desi Arnaz). Although some would argue they were not a "true" interracial couple – Desi had a strong European heritage – network executives were still hesitant to give Arnaz the role, as he was darker than a White counterpart would have been. Ball fought for Arnaz to play her husband in the sitcom, as they were married in real-life. Although taboo for most to accept back then, Lucy and Ricky stand as television's first interracial couple and remain as one of the most beloved sitcom couples of all time. The show has also been said to set the situational comedy precedence that is still in use today, "Ever since *I Love Lucy* zoomed to the top rung on the rating ladder, it seems the networks have been filling every available half-hour with another situation comedy" (TV Guide, October 23, 1953).

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[58] *Amos 'n' Andy* started out as a popular radio program on WMAQ-Chicago. The original radio broadcasts were written, produced, and performed by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, both of whom were White. The *Amos 'n' Andy* show is arguably one of the most listened to primetime entertainment series in the history of radio (Ely, 1991).

1960s

Sitcom production of the 1960s mainly used the single camera filming style, which was more practical and allowed for the creation of special effects that were not possible with multi-camera production. Because of this, most programs were not filmed before live audiences, and rather, featured a laugh track. A trend beginning in the 1960s was the expansion of the domestic comedy beyond the nuclear family or married couple. More youth were tuning to situational comedies, with many referring to the decade as the "youth decade" for television viewing (Brooks & Marsh, 2007, p. xvi). By the mid-1960s, sitcom creators began adding more fantastical elements to live action sitcoms in the so-called "high concept" style.

In response to the civil rights movement and calls for less explicit stereotypical Black images, television of the 1960s saw a different wave of portrayals for Blacks.[59] Network programs showing Black characters now focused on the professional and family side of the American Black family. Shows like *I Spy* (1965-1968) and *Julia* (1968-1971) became popular among Black audiences, as well as mainstream White audiences, by depicting Blacks as acceptable because of containment. Blacks were shown as contributing to the greater good of (White) society, thus making them acceptable to White audiences. In November of 1968, as previously mentioned, the first Black/White interracial kiss appeared on television when Lieutenant Uhura (played by Black actress Nichelle Nichols) kissed Captain Kirk (played by White actor William Shatner) on the *Star Trek* episode "Plato's Stepchildren" (Molloy, 2009).

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[59] In addition, the film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was released in 1967. The film's narrative, triumphed as a milestone among Hollywood films, championed against an intolerant America by condemning many of the prejudices and fears surrounding a Black/White interracial couple.

The 1960s were a productive decade for Black television actors and actresses.[60] Cicely Tyson was the first Black woman with a key role in a drama series (she played Jane in *East Side, West Side* in 1963), and Bill Cosby won an Emmy Award for his 1966 role in *I Spy*. *Julia* premiered on NBC on September 17, 1968, starring Diahann Carroll, who was the first Black actress in a lead for a sitcom, and Otis Young was the first Black actor to star in a television western (1968's *The Outcasts*).

Congruent with the times, the 1960s was also the first decade to broadcast real-life race relation stories for mass audiences. A few examples include:

- On September 2, 1963, CBS aired a three-hour program on civil rights.

- In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a committee[61] to issue a report on the civil unrest in the U.S. In February of the following year, the Kerner Commission released their findings. They found that a majority of civil unrest stemmed from the historical trend of news coverage against People of Color. The report elaborated how non-Whites were not portrayed as part of the whole society, and how most were seen as "outside" the American system. The report directly charged the mass media with perpetuating racial discrimination (Kerner Commission, 1968).

- The assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968, filled the airwaves as news coverage surrounding the event was seen around the world.

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[60] The decade also provided many triumphs for Blacks in film. In 1960, Harry Belafonte was the first Black to win an Emmy Award, and Sidney Poitier was the first Black actor to win the Best Actor Oscar for his role in *Lilies of the Field* in 1963.

[61] The official name of the committee was the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.

- Harry Belafonte was a guest on the April 9, 1968, episode of *Petula*. Viewers were outraged when star Petula Clark touched Belafonte's arm and strongly objected by phone to the network.

- Winning American Black sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos held up their black-gloved hands at the 1968 Mexico City Summer Olympic Games in protest to U.S. racial discriminations. That moment remains one of the most iconic visuals from the Civil Rights Movement.

By the end of the 1960s, the number of American households with at least one television set was approximately 78 million (Monaghan, 2014).

1970s

Early 1970s sitcoms continued to focus on family life, with *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974) and *The Partridge Family* (1970-1974) as prime examples. Sitcoms largely returned to the three-camera shoot before live audiences. Many programs of this era were recorded on videotape as opposed to film. By the end of the decade, estimates totaled that there were 79.3 million black-and-white television sets and 71.3 million color sets in use in the U.S. Congruent with these numbers, for the first time in history, more Americans reported getting their news from television,[62] rather than newspapers (PBS, n.d.).

Although some strides for racial equality were achieved in the 1960s (e.g., television depicted Blacks in less subservient positions), most representations still did not show "authentic" Black representations. As a result of Black social protest, television programs beginning in the

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[62] During Nixon's presidency, two events brought about the prominence of television news: the Pentagon Papers (1971) and Watergate (1972). In addition, 60 Minutes became the nation's most popular program during the 1970s (PBS, n.d.).

1970s started to show Black life equated with poor urban living conditions (MacDonald, 1983; Montgomery, 1989; Winston, 1982). For example, the sitcom *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977) portrayed Fred Sanford, a widowed Black father (played by Redd Foxx), and his 30-year-old son Lamont (played by Demond Wilson). Fred was a loud-mouthed, sarcastic junk dealer whose frequent get-rich-quick schemes backfire, leaving Lamont to pick up the pieces. Fred often refers to his son as a "big dummy," while Lamont frequently refers to his father as an "old fool."

Television writer and producer Norman Lear often used the sitcom format to address social issues through his series *All in the Family* (1971-1979) and *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985). He debuted *All in the Family* on January 12, 1971, with a disclaimer warning audiences that the series "seeks to throw a humorous spotlight on our frailties, prejudices, and concerns. By making them a source of laughter we hope to show – in a mature fashion – just how absurd they are" (as quoted in Fearn-Banks, 2006, p. xxx).

The Jeffersons provided a break from "poorer" Black depictions and featured an affluent Black couple (George and Louise Jefferson, played by Sherman Hemsley and Isabel Sanford[63]) making their way up the social and economic ladders of America. The Jeffersons' neighbors, Tom and Helen Willis (played by Franklin Cover and Roxie Roker[64]), were the first televised example of a married Black/White couple, and were prominent characters of the show, albeit in secondary roles. Still, Tom and Helen Willis paved the way for interracial relationships on and off screen.

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[63] Isabel Sanford was the first Black to win the Primetime Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy on September 13, 1981. Sanford was the second Black woman to win an Emmy: Gail Fisher won the 1970 Emmy for Outstanding Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role in Drama for her role as Peggy on *Mannix*.
[64] Roxie Roker was in a real-life interracial marriage with her husband Sy Kravitz. Together, they worked on breaking down racial barriers. They had one son, Lenny Kravitz.

The Willises were often ridiculed by their Black neighbor, George, due to their differing race (Chito Childs, 2009). George did not approve of race mixing and feared his son might marry their biracial daughter, Jenny (played by Berlinda Tolbert), who he often called the derogatory slang term "zebra." Racist language, such as the words "nigger" and "honky," were heavily used on the show, especially during the early years. *The Jeffersons* helped to reinforce powerful stereotypes about Blacks in America by portraying George as sassy, rude, and at times, "barely tolerable" (Coleman & McIlwain, 2005, pp. 126-127). However cumbersome George could be at times, *The Jeffersons* remains as one of the most beloved sitcoms of all times, and is syndicated and still runs on-air almost 40 years after its premier.

Another watershed moment in television came in 1976, when author Alex Haley released his soon-to-be award winning book *Roots: The Saga of an American Family.*[65] The novel was distinct from previous literature for constructing the image of slavery from the viewpoints of individual Black characters. It was hailed as groundbreaking discourse that transformed discussions about slavery and American Black/White race relations, and allowed the opportunity for media to reconstruct Black representation, specifically those found on television. During the week of January 23-30, 1977, the miniseries *Roots*, dramatizing Haley's novel, aired for 12 hours on eight consecutive nights, reaching an unprecedented audience of 36.3 million households (Fearn-Banks, 2006). An interesting point of contention is how the television series, adapted from the book, was scripted. Television writers tailored to the White audience and depicted Whites as saviors of Blacks (Tucker and Shah, 1992); hence, while White readers were shown the atrocities of slavery, White viewers seemed to be put at ease for the guilt over what happened to Blacks and saw slavery as something of the past. The television mini-series garnered 130

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[65] Haley was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1977 for *Roots*.

million viewers over its eight-night run – the highest Nielsen rated television mini-series at that time (Gorman, 2009).

Several monumental moments with respect to Blacks on television happened during the 1970s. The Jackson 5 debuted on *American Bandstand* (1952-1989) on February 21, 1970. Later that year, on September 17, 1970, *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970-1974) debuted on NBC and was the first successful variety series with a Black star. *Good Times* (1974-1979), which featured the first Black-cast sitcom about a family with a mother *and* a father, aired on CBS on February 1, 1974.

1980s

To some extent, many American sitcoms of the 1980s returned to themes of family life. By the mid-1980s, the growth of cable television,[66] additional broadcast networks, and the success of first-run syndication[67] meant that television audiences were fracturing. Programming could now be targeted at specific audiences rather than at a "general" or "adult" audience, and this included sitcoms, too. In the 1980s, stand-up comics starred in sitcoms, which was the earliest of the current trend of successful sitcoms built around a stand-up comic's stage persona. One example of this was the hugely successful run of *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992). After airing on September 20, 1984, *The Cosby Show* became one of the highest-rated sitcoms in television history, the first Black-cast sitcom to win the Emmy for Outstanding Comedy Series (1985),[68] and the only Black-cast sitcom to finish a season as the number one overall rated show. Bill

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[66] In 1980, the first Black-owned cable television channel, Black Entertainment Network (BET), was launched.

[67] *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (later titled *Oprah*) made its debut on syndicated television on September 8, 1986. It was the highest-rated daytime talk show in television history.

[68] That same year, Robert Guillaume became the first Black actor to win the Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Comedy Series for his role in *Benson*.

Cosby was inducted into the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame in 1991 because of his role on the show.

Building on momentum from the 1970s, television shows in the 1980s continued depicting Blacks as moving upward in social mobility; most, however, still included the element of humor (Gray, 1986). White was still shown in media as the privileged status, and hegemonic examples flood media discourse from this decade (Kelley, 1994). However, the 1980s also saw growing tensions between Black demands of unity and the reality of difference. Of particular contention was the issue of showing Black/White interracial intimacies in mainstream media (Gray, 2004).

Dynasty (1981-1989) offered television viewers a rare glimpse of the challenges associated with being in an interracial relationship with the coupling of Dominique Deveraux (played by Millie Cox), a "villainess" Black woman, and Garrett Boydston (played by Ken Howard), a White man. Although the two had a daughter, Boydston did not want to commit to Deveraux. Still, the two created nighttime soap opera's first Black/White interracial couple.

Simone Ravelle (played by Laura Carrington), a Black woman, and Tom Hardy (played by David Wallace), a White man, made headlines as the first Black/White interracial couple on the long-running daytime soap opera, *General Hospital* (debuted in 1963). In addition to being the *JET* magazine cover couple in 1988, the couple is also known as being the first interracial married couple on daytime television. Carrington hoped the interracial marriage would create a positive influence on the audience: "I'm hoping when they get into the relationship with them living and decorating and all that stuff that people can see that a blend can be obtained, a harmonious blend. We really want to teach and influence, educate people that it's nothing so strange" (p. 58).

As with previous decades, most interracial intimacies featured on television programming during the 1980s dealt with the fear of the unknown about the "Other." Television sitcoms, such as *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992), attempted to portray potential interracial romantic interests ("Mixed Blessings" episode from March 19, 1988). Most, however, in line with cultural hegemony, did so to draw out White prejudices and suspicions about Blacks. This fear, though, was short-lived and shown to simply be a misunderstanding that was easily resolved with the 30-minute span of the episode. Rarely did an interracial intimacy become a recurring theme in any television sitcom during this decade (Ehrmann, 2009).

1990s

On-going storylines, or story arcs, were commonplace in the 1990s. Comedies and satires featuring Blacks also saturated television in this decade. Shows like *In Living Color* (1990-1994) and *Martin* (1992-1997) addressed questions of race, but did so in a comedic fashion. This was also the decade when intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1988) became prominent when dealing with social and identity conflicts. For example, an episode of *Roc* (1991-1994) dealt with questions of race, sexuality, and masculinity. A Black family was angered over their gay uncle's wedding. However, the audience is left to question what the family is more upset over – the fact that their family member is gay or the realization that his new husband is White.

There was one primetime sitcom that centered on the blending of two families, *True Colors* (1990-1992). The show featured a Black male dentist (played by Frankie Faison) married to a White female kindergarten teacher (played by Stephanie Faracy). Although race was central to the show, the family aspect made it appeal to a wider audience demographic – some even

referred to the show as the "interracial *Brady Bunch.*" The show discussed race through humor and often highlighted the challenges the family faced because of their interracial mixing. Faison later gave an interview stating that he took the role because he thought it would be "a real breakthrough for television…[he] thought it would be challenging and would deal with issues – like *All in the Family*" (Fearn-Banks, 2006, pp. 445-446). What Faison was not anticipating, though, was the overwhelming amount of hate mail sent to the cast and creators of the show. Some of the mail was threatening enough that the show involved the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who advised the cast on how to secure their lives (Fearn-Banks, 2006). Although most reviews supported the premise of the show, it was short-lived and cancelled after its second season.

2000s

The early 2000s saw a rebirth of the single camera shooting style for half-hour sitcoms. With the turn of the century, television programming also slowly began incorporating more interracial intimacies into their story lines. Most, however, have not depicted interracial intimacies between Black and White individuals. Rather, they have depicted interracial relationships between Whites and Asians (e.g., Angela Montenegro, played by Michaela Conlin, and Jack Hodgins, played by T.J. Thyne, on *Bones* – debuted in 2005*)*, Blacks and Asians (e.g., Dr. Cristina Yang, played by Sandra Oh, and Dr. Preston Burke, played by Isaiah Washington, on *Grey's Anatomy* – debuted in 2005), and Hispanics and Blacks (e.g., Christopher Duncan Turk, played by Donald Faison, and Carla Espinosa, played by Judy Reyes, on *Scrubs* – 2001-2010).

When Black/White couples are shown, they usually must provide some sort of justification for the audience, such as humor (e.g., Brad Williams, played by Damon Wayans, Jr.,[69] and Jane Williams, played by Eliza Coupe, on *Happy Endings* – 2011-2013), sexual verocity (e.g., Veronia Fisher, played by Shanola Hampton,[70] and Kevin Fisher, played by Steve Howey, on Showtime's *Shameless* – debuted in 2011; Darnell Turner, played by Eddie Steeple, and Joy Turner, played by Jaime Pressly, on *My Name is Earl* – 2005-2009; and Kevin Hill, played by Taye Diggs, who dated several White women on *Kevin Hill* – 2004-2005), or forbidden love (e.g., Fitzgerald Grant, played by Tony Goldwyn, and Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington on *Scandal* – debuted in 2012). Sometimes, the interracial component to the relationship was unexpected and ultimately catches the audience off-guard, as was the case with Bernard Nadler, played by Sam Anderson, and Rose Nadler, played by L. Scott Caldwell, on *Lost* (2004-2010).[71]

As American history illustrates, popular culture is vital to the conception and reality of our culture. Television, in particular, has been identified as an institution where oppositional forms of ideology are contained and adapted to dominant ideology, usually in the form of core hegemonic principles. As Barker (2009) contends, television remains the central representational

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[69] Damon Wayans, Jr. was nominated for Best Supporting Actor in a Comedy Series at the 2013 NAACP Image Awards.

[70] In 2013 recent interview, Shanola Hampton said she has received hate mail calling her "the White man's slave."

[71] The couple was separated after the plane they were traveling on split in half, sending her to an island with his whereabouts unknown. Although she often speaks of her husband during the first season, the audience never sees him. It was not until the midway point of season two that he appears and the audience can finally put a face with his name.

form of popular western culture and is of huge concern to cultural studies[72] (exposing the control of representation).

Critical exploration of Black/White interracial couples on primetime television is noticeably missing from the literature. Very few studies systematically compare these couples through a historical trajectory. One reason for this, as Chito Childs (2009) points out, could be because these interracial pairings that try to materialize on television programs rarely materialize and are often delegated to minor roles. When these couples are shown, the representation in entertainment media overwhelmingly show them as problematic. This stigmatizes Black/White interracial intimacies and, in turn, leads to a socially constructed derision toward interracial coupling and maintains White privileging (Luther & Rightler-McDaniels, 2013). Thus, it remains vital to critically examine the mass disseminated messages regarding such pairs.

Research Questions

This study hopes to procure a more complex understanding of Black/White interracial couple portrayals in mainstream television comedic sitcoms. Using critical race theory as a guide, it considers certain questions surrounding these types of portrayals on television. The overarching research question for this study is:

How have Black/White interracial marriages been portrayed in American television entertainment media?

To explore this question, two subset questions were developed to critically deconstruct the portrayals of interracial couples in comedic sitcoms in order to reveal predominant themes:

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[72] For this study, it is not necessary to separate media studies from cultural studies, as they are not opposing disciplines. By doing so, this study recognizes the difficulty in separating the interconnections of society, culture, and everyday life with theory.

1. How do television sitcoms reflect race relations during the decade in which each was produced?

2. What meanings are associated with Black/White interracial marriages in television sitcoms?

The above questions are based on several assumptions, most notably – in line with critical race theory – that race is a social construction that can generate certain meanings through media. Mass media, and television in particular, can be seen as an essential cultural barometer that is able to constitute and reflect the time period in which content is produced. It is further assumed, following CRT, that a critical discourse analysis of the Black/White narratives in the sitcoms will reveal power relations that exist in society and will provide evidence that could support claims about racist stereotypes in American social structures. However, a point to clarify is that this research, in line with cultural studies (e.g., Carey, 1989; 1997), attempts to uncover meaning to better understand behavior and interpret its significance, rather than explain behavior universally. The hope is that the investigation of the Black/White binary will help us to further understand race relations in the United States, particularly when it comes to intimate relationships between the two races.

Chapter III

Method

In every culture are found a limited number of dynamic affirmations, called *themes*, which control behavior or stimulate activity. The activities, prohibitions of activites, or references which result from the acceptance of a theme are its *expressions*…The expressions of a theme, of course, aid us in discovering it. (Opler, 1945, pp. 198-199)

This is an exploratory study of the texts surrounding the portrayals of Black/White interracial intimate relationships on American network television from the 1970s and 2010s. A primary interest of this study is to examine the portrayals within primetime situational comedies that have the capacity to reach broad, mainstream audiences. Simply counting the number of Black/White interracial couples that appear on each program would not gauge the depth of those relationships, nor would it delve into how each couple is perceived by those around them. Therefore, this dissertation attempts to provide deeper readings of the texts to reveal underlying meanings in them.

A qualitative research approach, which offers rich contextual and informational insight, was considered most appropriate for this exploratory research. Critical discourse analysis, which attempts to probe below the surface of a text to expose richer meanings, will be used to systematically examine the content, rather than the extent, of texts surrounding the portrayal of interracial relationships between Black and White individuals within each program.

Qualitative Research

> "Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is being studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 4).

Qualitative research approaches are exceptionally diverse, complex and nuanced (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Qualitative research is conducted as a means to understand human action or human experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), where emphasis is placed on processes and meanings, rather than on measurement of data. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) define qualitative research as a situated activity that positions the researcher in the world. A primary purpose of qualitative research, then, is to offer rich description by understanding through inductive analysis and interpretation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Patton, 2002). Further, it is understood that multiple realities, or the lived experiences of the participants, exist within this realm of study.

Qualitative research plays a crucial role in understanding the influences on change that originate outside the rational explanations traceable through observation. This study provided a historical context through secondary source research, which is qualitative in nature, meaning that the research relies on one researcher's interpretation and not on statistics. The historical context provided the researcher with the information to assemble a logical approach to trace mass media-created portrayals of Black/White interracial marriage in the U.S. and allowed her to immerse herself into the past, which allowed the study to be grounded (Curran, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The research thus creates a historical base, or context, which enhances the richness of the study. As pointed out by Dixson and Rousseau (2006), "in qualitative research,

the context not only affects the data collection process but also adds to the understanding of the research question" (p. 213).

Critical Discourse Analysis

> Discourse cannot be removed from power relations and the struggle to create particular meanings and legitimate specific voices. Dominant discourses shape the research process emerging as technologies of power that regulate which knowledges are validated and which ones are relegated to the junk heap of history. (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004, p. 7)

> Critical discourse analysts want to know what structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events play a role in the [dominant] modes of reproduction…that results in social inequality, including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial and gender inequality. (van Dijk, 1993, p. 250)

Critical discourse analysis is based upon a realist social ontology (Sayer, 2000), which sees social reality based on two components: concrete social events and abstract social structures (Fairclough, 2010). To garner the major themes[73] surrounding Black/White interracial marriage, a critical discourse analysis of the text (script)[74] was conducted. As opposed to textual analysis, where research is solely focused on the text, discourse analysis allows researchers to consider the context – social, political, and cultural – in which the text was produced. Texts can be seen as products of their environment and when researchers are able to evaluate a text within its context,

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[73] A theme, in this instance, captures a central piece of information about the data in relation to the overall research question being asked. A theme represents some level of patterned response or meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

[74] Discourse, in this instance, refers to spoken and written (script) language use.

it allows them a more complex and deeper understanding of the material. Media texts, then, could offer insight into the prejudices and hegemonic structures that may exist within the social structures that created them (Fairclough, 2010).

One of the key assumptions of critical discourse analysis is that the choices of words or phrases used within a text are ideologically based (Fowler, 1991; van Dijk, 1993). In essence, they embody the social context within which they were generated (Fowler, 1991). Consequently, through an analysis of text, one is able to reveal the biases and discursive sources of power that exist. The text essentially becomes a major source of evidence for grounding claims about social structures, relations and processes. Critical discourse analysis approaches research questions by focusing on "the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 249).

Critical discourse analysis allows for greater flexibility in uncovering the underlying meanings in media texts. In order to carry out a critical discourse analysis, each episode in season one for both of the television programs chosen was viewed in its entirety multiple times. Since understanding is only accomplished through inductive interpretation, deeper readings of each episode (scene-by-scene) are necessary.

Following professor of linguistics and discourse Teun van Dijk's (1993) method of critical discourse analysis, the microstructural elements of each episode were analyzed by examining the selection of words or phrases used and any usage of metaphors or analogies.[75] Several aspects regarding the interracial couple will be noted, including: key phrases used by the interracial couple, key phrases used by others about the interracial couple or to the interracial couple, analogies used in association with and/or about the interracial couple, and (to a lesser

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[75] Analysis of metaphors or analogies in the text will aid in deducing the broad underlying themes that might be produced with their usage (D'Andrade, 1995; Strauss & Quinn, 1997).

extent) various visual, non-verbal communication cues used by the interracial couple and others about and/or to the interracial couple. In examining the sitcoms that appeared in varying decades, an effort was made to first suspend knowledge regarding the time period during which the sitcom was produced. This was done to focus primarily on interpreting the connotations surrounding each Black/White interracial couple.

The episodes were then examined at the macrostructural level by carefully analyzing the element-based patterns that existed (i.e., levels of intimacy between the interracial couple, the general story line in terms of acceptance/rejection of the interracial couple, and the unique sites of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1988) – race, gender, class – that may reveal deeper insights into the constructions and representations of each). Doing so brought central themes that were manifested across the episodes to light. The thematic patterns that existed across the sitcoms were identified and any substantial shifts in the patterns of each decade's sitcom were contemplated. The analysis process entailed several iterations of deep reading and viewing of the text.

Critical discourse analysts are said to "go beyond the immediate, serious or pressing issues of the day" in order to gain insight into some of the more "long-term analyses of fundament causes, conditions and consequences of [social] issues" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 253). A fundamental presupposition of adequate critical discourse analysis is understanding the nature of social power and dominance (van Dijk, 1993). Critical discourse analysis also involves recognition of institutionalized forms of dominance and power, which, for this study, ties into critical race theory.

Justification for Genre Selection

"Genre, then, is not simply important as a way of classifying different modes of artistic expression, but explaining how these different modes of expression can actually create meaning for an audience" (Creeber, 2008, p. 1).

Television sitcoms are the most numerous form of program on television. Conservative estimates place the number of scripts written and produced for television sitcoms around 27,000 in the past 50 years (Taflinger, 1996). Television genres are "shared ideas about particular stories" (Russell, 2008, p. 143) and are the "primary way(s) to classify television's vast array of textual options" (Mittel, 2004, p. 3). Genre classification is important because "television genres matter as cultural categories [that are] best understood as a process of categorization that is not found [solely] within media texts, but operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts" (Mittel, 2004, p. xi). Thus, to choose a genre is to opt for or against a certain emotional experience, making its norms and conventions practical for everyday application (Mittel, 2004).

The comedy genre was selected for this study because "throughout U.S. television history, comedy has been the narrative form to first offer representations of those aspects of society outside of the hegemonic norm" (Dalton & Linder, 2005, p. 139). The comedy genre is comprised of numerous "social rules" that are necessary for the members to comprehend as they dictate whether he/she is socially accepted within this society (Dalton & Linder, 2005; Greene, 1992; Orlebar, 2011). According to Hirst (1979),

[t]hese rules are society's unwritten laws regulating behaviour, the dictates of propriety

which, though they may differ in detail from age to age and class to class, are always

basic to the conduct of the characters in the comedy of manners. (pp. 2-3)

Situational comedies, often shortened to comedic sitcoms, are a genre of comedy that

features recurring characters in a common environment where jokes are a routine part of the

dialogue. Often times, comedy tends to depart from what are considered "normal" routines of

life, especially within social groups (King, 2002). The comedic aspect, then, can result from a

sense of things being "out of place, mixed up or not quite right, in various ways" (King, 2002, p.

5). Comedy is an important cultural form because it is socially constructed and plays a vital role

to hegemonic consent. British film critic Andy Medhurst (1990) points out,

> if you want to understand the preconceptions and power structures of a society or social
>
> group, there are few better ways than by studying what it laughs at. Comedy is about
>
> power: there are those who laugh and those who are laughed at. (p. 15)

A primary function of comedy is to "police the ideological boundaries of a culture, to act

as a border guard on the frontiers between the dominant and subordinate, to keep the power of

laughter in the hands of the powerful" (Medhurst, 1990, p. 16). As a genre, comedy is distinctive

in that it can negotiate hegemony, dominant social groups embarrassing or putting down

subordinates, and counter-hegemony, disrupting social order and ridiculing those in power (Artz

& Murphy, 2000).

Historically, comedies have offered some of the first portrayals of non-White characters

and often introduce and contain "taboo" topics that can be included because laughter seems to

"soften" these difficult issues (Dalton & Linder, 2005). Stuart Hall (1981b) reminds that

situational comedies, in particular, allow viewers to take in significant racialized meanings under

the guise of comedy. This is crucial when deviating from other types of television programming, as audience members may not realize they are participating in discussions about race.

Comedic sitcoms, and television studies for that matter, can be easily disregarded in academia, even though the genre offers endless opportunities for exploration (Mills, 2008). Previous research (Tueth, 2005) has shown that viewers prefer to watch situational comedies over all other genres of television. Domestic comedies emphasize character growth and development as human beings (Taflinger, 1996). The problems encountered in a domestic comedy tend to deal with more serious societal issues and those relating to human nature, especially mental and/or emotional issues. As a result, sitcoms become a crucial vehicle by which Americans can digest racialized meanings in a way that does not require a tremendous emotional investment. This, as Hall (1981b) asserts, illustrates the double-edged sword of sitcoms – they can relay serious meanings under the guise of "good, clean fun" (p. 278). This seems implausible, given that much of the humor stems from racial hierarchies and stereotypical representations.

Program Selection Criteria

Each television program was selected based on the following criteria:

1) The television show must have been/currently be a 30-minute sitcom.

2) Each show must be identified as a "situational comedy."

3) There must be one television show from each of the following decades: 1970s and 2010s (for a total of two television shows).

4) The television show must have originally aired on one of the four major television networks (NBC, CBS, ABC or FOX – although FOX was not a major television network until the late 1980s).

5) The television show must have originally aired during primetime television viewing hours. Primetime hours are defined as 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. Eastern Standard Time on Mondays through Saturdays, or 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. Eastern Standard Time on Sundays.

6) The television show must feature an interracial couple.

To further narrow down the television programs, each program must contain the following interracial coupling criteria in its first season:

1) The interracial couple must be comprised of one Black partner and one White partner.

2) The couple must be heterosexual (one male and one female).

3) The couple must be presented as a central part of the show (for a minimum of 10 episodes during the first full season).

After addressing all criteria, *The Jeffersons* and *Happy Endings* were selected to be analyzed.[76]

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[76] There was approximately 11 total hours of sitcom footage analyzed. Tom and Helen Willis appeared in 10 of the 13 season one episodes of *The Jeffersons*. Brad and Jane Williams appeared in all 13 season one episodes of *Happy Endings*.

Table 1. Selected Television Programs

	Television Program	Couple	Year Show First Aired	Network Originally Aired	Time Originally Aired (EST)	Race of IR Coupling
1970s	*The Jeffersons*	Tom and Helen Willis	1975	CBS	Saturdays at 8 p.m.	White male; Black female
2010s	*Happy Endings*	Brad and Jane Williams	2011	ABC	Wednesdays at 9:30 p.m.	Black male; White female

The Sitcoms

"The ways that interracial couples are socially constructed within media and popular culture mirrors the social construction of race and racial groups in society." (Chito Childs, 2009, p. 3)

The Jeffersons

One of the most beloved and longest-running[77] sitcoms in American television history, *The Jeffersons*, developed by prolific television producer Norman Lear, premiered on CBS on January 18, 1975, and focused on affluent[78] Black couple George and Louise "Weezy" Jefferson (played by Sherman Hemsley and Isabel Sanford). As the second spin-off to *All in the Family* (1971-1979), *The Jeffersons* centered on bigoted, loudmouth George and his unrelenting

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[77] This show can be seen as an anomaly for lasting for more than a decade; it should be noted that most shows highlighting a Black/White interracial couples are often short-lived and cancelled soon after premiering.

[78] George Jefferson won a civil-action lawsuit after his car was rear-ended by a New York City bus. He used this money to "move on up" to the East-side of New York City, where he opened his first of five dry-cleaning stores.

comments about various social issues; his most vocal, perhaps, targeted his neighbors, Tom and

Helen Willis (played by Franklin Cover and Roxie Roker), who happened to be an interracial

couple. In fact, Tom and Helen Willis are known as television's first married couple in which

one individual is Black and one individual is White. The couples each had grown children:

George and Louise had a son, Lionel (played by Mike Evans)[79], and Tom and Helen had two

children, a son, Allan (played by Andrew Rubin)[80] and Jenny (played by Berlinda Tolbert). To

everyone's delight, but George's disgust, Lionel dated Jenny, eventually marrying her and

having a daughter.

     The Jeffersons, although known as a traditional comedic sitcom, did address certain

serious social topics, including racism. In total, *The Jeffersons*, which performed in front of a

live studio audience, had 253 episodes during its 11 seasons on-air. The show's characters[81]

garnered many accolades, including 13 Emmy Award nominations,[82] five Golden Globe Award

nominations[83] and one TV Land Award.[84] Season one, which will be analyzed in this

dissertation, ranked fourth in Nielsen ratings. Episode specifics are described in the following

table:

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[79] Mike Evans originally played Lionel in season one. Damon Evans (no relation) then took the role for seasons two through four, before Mike Evans returned to play the role in season six and beyond.

[80] Andrew Rubin only played Allan for season one of the sitcom. After that, Jay Hammer played Allan Willis (only had main role during season five).

[81] Although the individual actors received numerous nominations, the show itself failed to garner any prestigious accolade nominations.

[82] Isabel Sanford was nominated for seven consecutive Best Actress in a Comedy Series Emmys (1979-1985), finally winning in 1981. Marla Gibbs was nominated for five consecutive Best Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series (1981-1985). Sherman Hemsley was nominated for Best Actor in a Comedy Series in 1984.

[83] Isabel Sanford was also the recipient of five Golden Globe Award nominations (1977-1978 nominated for Best TV Actress in a Musical/Comedy and 1983-1985 nominated for Best Performance by an Actress in a TV Series – Comedy/Musical).

[84] In 2004, Isabel Sanford and Sherman Hemsley won the award for Favorite Cantankerous Couple for their roles as George and Louise Jefferson.

Table 2. The Jeffersons Season One Episodes

No.	Title	Airdate	Synopsis*
1	A Friend in Need	January 18, 1975	Louise makes an uneasy adjustment to her new wealthy life while befriending a maid in the building. Complicating matters is George's insistence they hire a maid.
2	George's Family Tree	January 25, 1975	The Jeffersons and the Willises engage in a debate about the importance of ancestry thanks to a housewarming present the Willises give their new neighbors. George couldn't care less about his lineage - until he discovers he might have royalty in his blood.
3	Louise Feels Useless	February 1, 1975	Louise, uncomfortable with her sole identity as the wife of a wealthy man, pleads with her husband to work at one of his stores. When he refuses, she goes to work for his competitor. George then devises a self-serving way to deal with his wife's new job.
4	Lionel the Playboy	February 8, 1975	The new status of his family starts to affect Lionel, who spends and parties and plays like, well, like the son of a rich man. George might live vicariously through his son's escapades, but sings a different tune when Lionel announces his intention to quit school.
5	Mr. Piano Man	February 15, 1975	It's the classic George Jefferson set up: he stubbornly refuses to do something. But when he realizes doing it might lead to an opportunity, he does it at any cost. The something: Attending a tenant meeting. The opportunity: Meeting H.L. Whittendale, the buildings wealthy landlord. The any cost: Redecorating the apartment, with a grand piano as the centerpiece.

Table 2. The Jeffersons Season One Episodes Continued

No.	Title	Airdate	Synopsis*
6	George's Skeleton	February 22, 1975	George's old buddy Monk Davis arrives to extort George with information about the dry-cleaning moguls past; Louise bird-sits (and plant-sits) for Mr. Bentley.
7	Lionel Cries Uncle	March 1, 1975	When Louise's Uncle Ward visits, Lionel and George treat him like an Uncle Tom for being a butler. But Lionel faces a bigger problem: a fight at school.
8	Mother Jefferson's Boyfriend	March 8, 1975	Olivia Jefferson: Sugar Mama. At least, that is George's fear when she introduces her new beau.
9	Meet the Press	March 15, 1975	When George wants some publicity, he invites a reporter to profile him as one of the city's most successful businessmen. The appearances of the Willises and Mr. Bentley cause distractions.
10	Rich Man's Disease	March 22, 1975	George reaches a milestone as a rich man: an ulcer. Louise gets wife-of-spoiled-mans disease: her mother-in-law visits. Nevertheless, Louise attempts to reduce the level of stress in the high-traffic apartment.
11	Former Neighbors	March 29, 1975	It's the classic dinner-party conflict: George invites a pompous potential client while Louise invites a couple from the old block in Harlem.
12	Like Father, Like Son	April 5, 1975	Lionel becomes more and more like his father, especially when it comes to business dealings. Meanwhile, Helen and Tom support opposing candidates in an election.
13	Jenny's Low	April 12, 1975	Allan Willis, Tom and Helen's son, arrives home from a two-year stint in Europe. Jenny's hostility toward him concerns everyone.

* Each show's synopsis was found on the "Episode Guide" tab of the TVland website,

http://www.tvland.com/shows/jeffersons/episode-guide.

Happy Endings

Called "the funniest show on TV" (Moore, 2012), *Happy Endings* tracked the lives of six friends, Dave Rose (played by Zachary Knighton) and his ex-fiancée Alex Kerkovich (played by Elisha Cuthbert), Brad and Jane (Kerkovich-) Williams (played by Damon Wayons, Jr. and Eliza Coupe), and singles Penny Hartz (played by Casey Wilson) and Max Blum (played by Adam Pally), trying to learn the ropes of adulthood in Chicago. The premise of the series begins with the six friends coping with their changing group dynamic after the couple that brought them all together suddenly breaks up.

Premiering on April 13, 2011, on ABC, it featured several differing couple dynamics: a "crazy-in-love" interracial couple, businessman Brad and zealous perfectionist Jane, whose over-the-top displays of affection often made the other friends uneasy; a dysfunctional ex-couple, Dave – who has random hook-ups after being stood-up at the alter by his fiancée – and Alex, who is as confused as ever about the direction of her life; single lady Penny, who constantly tries to reinvent herself to please some man; and the non-flamboyant gay friend Max, who has his own trouble finding "Mr. Right." Although the show had rave reviews, it only aired 57 episodes during its three-year run.[85] The episodes that were analyzed can be found in Table 3:

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[85] Many blame the network's erratic scheduling of the third season on the show's low ratings. The subsequent cancelling of the show was called one of the "worst TV decisions" of the 2012-2013 television season (Adalian, 2013).

Table 3. Happy Endings Season One Episodes

No.	Title	Airdate	Synopsis*
1	Pilot	April 13, 2011	After Alex leaves her fiancé, Dave, at the altar, they struggle to maintain relationships with their mutual friends.
2	The Quicksand Girlfriend	April 13, 2011	Dave's fling begins turning into a relationship he doesn't want; Jane tries to help Alex find a roommate.
3	Your Couples Friends & Neighbors	April 20, 2011	Jane thinks she and Brad should befriend a sophisticated couple; Max and Dave notice that things are disappearing from their apartment; Alex starts dating an artist.
4	Mein Coming Out	April 20, 2011	Max's friends encourage him to tell his parents he is gay; Penny meets her perfect man.
5	Like Father, Like Gun	April 27, 2011	When Brad's dad receives good news on some medical tests, his new view on life is difficult for Brad to accept; Penny meets an attractive Italian, but she can only speak to him when she's drunk.
6	Of Mice & Jazz-Kwon-Do	May 4, 2011	Brad plays matchmaker to a co-worker; Penny regrets inviting Jane to her martial-arts class; Dave helps Alex with odd jobs, leading his friends to think he's not over their relationship.
7	Dave of the Dead	May 4, 2011	Dave shocks everyone by quitting his job and plans to open a restaurant; Jane and Max face off in silly challenges; Penny is exhausted by trying to keep up with her new boyfriend's friends.
8	The Girl with the David Tattoo	May 11, 2011	Dave and Alex regret their his-and-her tattoos now that they are no longer a couple; Jane thinks Max is passing on a perfect guy; Brad takes a stand against a bad waiter.
9	You've Got Male	May 11, 2011	Dave is ecstatic when his high school teacher turns up; Max takes action when a big coffee chain moves next to Alex's shop.

Table 3. Happy Endings Season One Episodes Continued

No.	Title	Airdate	Synopsis*
10	Bo Fight	May 18, 2011	Penny is irritated when Alex plans a series of girls' nights; Max persuades Dave to seek revenge; Jane talks Brad into a night out.
11	Barefoot Pedaler	May 18, 2011	Dave and Alex persuade the gang to go to a concert together, but their trip doesn't go as planned; Penny tries to get backstage.
12	The Shershow Redemption	May 25, 2011	The news of an old friend's wedding has surprising results; Brad and Jane make a discovery about their marriage; Penny and Derrick pretend they are engaged; the bride fears Alex is bad luck.
13	Why Can't You Read Me?	August 24, 2011	Alex and Jane's sibling rivalry heats up; Dave dates an attractive woman with an unusual quirk; Penny gets an assistant.

* Each show's synopsis was found on the "Episode Guide" tab of the ABC website,

http://abc.go.com/shows/happy-endings/episode-guide?season=season-1.

Crucial social, legal, and political events pertaining to race relations took place during the study's chosen time frame of 1975-2011. However, perspectives from critical race theory suggest that even with these changes, fundamental perceptions of race and race-relations, especially intimacies between Blacks and Whites, have not changed. CRT challenges the very foundations of society and raises questions on the subtler forms of racism that still abound today. This perspective propelled the analysis to explore whether or not the representations in the sitcoms reflected changes in attitudes toward Black/White romantic couples or if they manifested the insidious forms of racism that critical race scholars argue still exists today.

Each sitcom is thought of as a cultural "text" that aids in the meaning-making process. Then, as cultural studies scholar Melani McAlister (2005) contends, "we can begin to see how certain different sets of texts, with their own interests and affiliations, come to overlap, to reinforce and revise one another toward an end that is neither entirely planned nor entirely coincidental" (p. 8). This study employed the use of two researchers, one a White female and one a Black male. As there are possibilities for alternate and oppositional readings structured by personal experience, race, and gender, it was determined that incorporating readings from both races and genders would greatly enhance the strength of the study. Both researchers analyzed the selected sitcoms by watching each episode in its entirety several times and by reading and rereading the script for each episode to identify comparative categories, with the emphasis being on construction rather than enumeration. The researchers independently completed this process and discussed on several occasions to evaluate, adjust and refine initial findings. Consensus was achieved through an iterative process that resulted in an intersubjective interpretation of the data.

Researcher Disclosure

As Dyer and Wilkins (1991) suggest, I want to offer a disclosure regarding this research. I would like to express my personal experience with the subject matter: I am a White woman married to a Black man and realize my personal bias is inherent with this topic. However, I feel I bring a more critical and engaging perspective to the topic for this same reason. Furthermore, my position acknowledges and appreciates that varying readings of the same text, structured by one's personal experience, race, gender, class, and so on, could exist. The following analysis is based on two researchers interpretations of the data.

Derrick Bell (1992) argued that racial oppression in the U.S. is permanent:

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we

hail as successful will produce no more than temporary 'peaks of progress,' short-lived

victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain [W]hite

dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it,

not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance. (p. 12)

Congruent with CRT, I believe in the permanence of racism. However, this does not

mean that efforts for liberation and equality should be abandoned. Bell (1992) insists that

accepting the permanency of racism will provide a foundation to achieve realistic goals. This

dissertation is one attempt to shed light on the subtle forms of racism experienced by

Black/White interracial couples on television sitcoms, as they can be reflective of real-life

Black/White interracial pairs. In the next chapter, the researcher describes her findings from the

aforementioned television sitcoms.

Chapter IV

Findings

Interracial sex and marriage represent a transgression of symbolic racial borders and

provide a space for groups to express and play out their ideas and prejudices about race

and sex that are integral to understanding the ways in which sexuality is racialized and

discourses on race are imbued with sexual meanings. Envy and desire of racial Others is

as much a part of racism as fear and hatred. Since interracial couples exist at the color

line within society, the ideas and beliefs about these unions are a lens through which we

can understand contemporary race relations. (Chito Childs, 2009, p. 1)

This exploratory study examined the texts surrounding portrayals of Black/White

interracial marriages on primetime television shows on major U.S. networks during the 1970s

and 2010s in hopes of procuring a more complex understanding of how these couples are

portrayed in mainstream comedic sitcoms. The two sitcoms analyzed were *The Jeffersons*, which

premiered on CBS in 1975, and ABC's *Happy Endings*, which began airing in 2011. Each show

contained a heterosexual, Black/White interracial married couple: Tom and Helen Willis (played

by Franklin Cover and Roxie Roker), television's first Black/White married couple, were the

couple of focus from *The Jeffersons*, and Brad and Jane Williams (played by Damon Wayons, Jr.

and Eliza Coupe) were the focal pair from *Happy Endings*. Congruent with prior research (Chito

Childs, 2009) on Black/White interracial couples, both interracial couples were secondary to

each show's primary couple: George and Louise "Weezy" Jefferson (played by Sherman

Hemsley and Isabel Sanford) on *The Jeffersons*, and Dave Rose (played by Zachary Knighton)

and his ex-fiancée Alex Kerkovich (played by Elisha Cuthbert) on *Happy Endings*. During

season one of *The Jeffersons*, other main characters included George and Louise's son, Lionel (played by Mike Evans), who was dating Tom and Helen's daughter, Jenny (played by Berlinda Tolbert). Single lady Penny Hartz (played by Casey Wilson) and single, gay man Max Blum (played by Adam Pally) were recurring characters on *Happy Endings*.

Critical race theory was the lens by which the systematic examination was done. Multiple deep readings revealed modest variations in the thematic representations of Black/White interracial couples across the two time periods. Consistencies in themes between each sitcom existed: continued persistence of a color line, interracial mixing continued to be shown as problematic, and racial stereotypes were reinforced. This chapter will address each theme in detail and provide specific examples from *The Jeffersons* and *Happy Endings* to substantiate each theme's pattern formation.

Persistence of a Color Line

Racism exists as a subtle and concealed institution, often making it challenging to study. In American society, it is not socially acceptable to be overtly racist. Today, many Americans subscribe to "colorblind" ideology, which seeks to avoid categorizing individuals by disregarding category-relevant information in efforts to reduce prejudiced behavior (Tajfel, 1969). According to supporters of this philosophy, if one cannot differentiate between "in-groups" and "out-groups," one cannot favor any one group over another (Correll, Park & Smith, 2008). Lack of differentiation implies that "race should not and does not matter" (Neville, Roderick, Duran, Lee & Browne, 2000, p. 60).

The first research question of this dissertation asked how television sitcoms reflect race relations during the decade in which they were produced. Discourse surrounding race and race

relations was prevalent in both *The Jeffersons* and *Happy Endings*. While *The Jeffersons* overtly discussed race relations and racial tensions of the time, *Happy Endings* seemed to be more reluctant to directly address racial issues – in fact, most instances were quelled immediately after they were brought up, insinuating a "colorblind" approach from the White characters. Both sitcoms struggled with how to discuss racism, as both were produced and circulated in a society that told them that racism was a thing of the past. However, both appeared to be attempting to point out that racism continues to exist in society as distinct "color lines" were found in both sitcoms.

The Jeffersons

With *The Jeffersons* airing only a few short years after the U.S. civil rights movement, much of the racial discourse centered on how racism, like slavery, was a thing of the past. As an example, in episode one of *The Jeffersons*, Florence Johnston (played by Marla Gibbs), who would later play the Jeffersons maid, questioned how two Black women, Louise Jefferson and Helen Willis, could live in such exclusive high-rise apartments:

Florence: "You live in this apartment, right? And you got an apartment in this building, too? Well how come we overcame and nobody told me?"

George Jefferson was notorious for making comments about how far removed from slavery he was, even when Louise jokingly told George, "three generations ago, the only thing the Jeffersons were picking was cotton." When examining his own ancestry in episode two, he claimed, "mine starts here, not there" (referring to Africa), emphasizing his roots began in America, not Africa. To further distance himself from the thorns of slavery, he exclaimed, "I need to change my name because 'Jefferson' is a slave name." However, upon further

examination, it was revealed that his ancestors were indeed American slaves. In a moment of sheer disappointment, George admitted, "not only did I come from slaves, I came from slaves of slaves…My people were slaves, not just here, but there (Africa), too." Rather than address this harsh truth, he brushed it off, telling Louise that "it don't (sic) matter where you come from, it matters where you at (sic)." In a way, he was reminding viewers that what happened in the past is in the past, and it is time to move forward. Although racism marred American's history, it is time to move beyond it. After all, as he reminds in episode five, "we (Blacks) have suffered enough." This echoed the push from the 1970s that everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, could "achieve their version of the American Dream" (Congressional Black Caucus, 2014, para. 1). Even with this admission, tenets of slavery discourse continued to weave their way throughout the season, perhaps none as poignant as episode seven.

"Lionel Cries Uncle" addressed many of the harsh realities of Blacks in society following the civil rights movement. Louise's uncle Ward, whom George refers to as "Uncle Tom," was visiting the family and was a physical embodiment to the explicit struggles facing lower to middle-class Blacks at the time. George, none too thrilled about the visit, expressed his disdain for having Uncle Ward visit: "He don't (sic) even sound like a country boy from the bottom no more (sic), he sounds like one of them uppity 'honkies,' all proper."

During the visit, Lionel gets caught, literally, in the middle of a "Whites versus Latino" school fight in his university's cafeteria and subsequently gets kicked out of school. Upon learning this, George immediately assumes it was because of his skin color, but is surprised to learn the dean himself was Black:

Lionel: "The next thing I know there was cops all over the place and I got hauled into the dean's office."

Louise: "And he didn't believe your story?"

Lionel: "Ut uh (sic)."

George: "I know why, it's because you're Black."

Lionel: "No, because he's Black too."

George: "Those are the worst kinds." (roar of laughter from audience)

Lionel, initially hesitant to disclose his suspension to his parents, later confesses that the dean

was adamant about his suspension from college because "he hates all kind of racial trouble."

Although the school fight was not based on a "Black versus White" dichotomy, it still

highlighted the racial tensions that plagued the country. George's reference to the "worst kinds"

of Blacks is a direct reference to the "Uncle Tom" ideology. This credo is also evident in Lionel;

when uncle Ward urges Lionel to apologize, he responds:

Lionel: "See Uncle Ward, maybe you haven't heard. These are the 70s and I don't crawl.

You understand? I don't 'Tom' for nobody."

Being referred to as an "Uncle Tom" meant that a Black person acted subservient to a White

person. This was considered a huge sign of disrespect in the Black community. However, most

people, even those in the Black community, were uninformed of the history behind the name. As

the audience saw, George was no exception.

Uncle Ward: "Tell me something, George. You like to use the words 'Uncle Tom' a lot."

George: "Only when it fits."

Uncle Ward: "Do you know who Uncle Tom really was?"

George: "Sure. He was that dumb nigga…"

Uncle Ward: "Wrong, that's another one of those wrong lies about our people that has

been accepted as truth."

George: "Who was he then? Super fly in disguise?"

Uncle Ward: "No, George. In real life, Uncle Tom was a slave named Josiah Henson, who escaped and walked all the way to Canada from Kentucky with his wife and children. From there, he started the first manual training school for our people."

George: "How you know that?"

Uncle Ward: "I read. Sometimes, I listen. You could do the same thing. You've heard of the Underground Railroad? Well, Josiah Henson helped to hide hundreds of slaves escaping up North, even before there was an Underground Railroad. He was a brave man, a great leader, and I'll tell you something else, George, I'd never call you an Uncle Tom."

In this exchange, Uncle Ward points out the propaganda surrounding the history of Black culture in the U.S. Later in the episode, Lionel tries to further separate himself from the history of slavery and tells his uncle that he is too old to understand what it is like for young Black men during the 1970s:

Lionel: "Look Uncle Ward, you don't understand, so why don't you just stay out of this please."

Uncle Ward: "Lionel, I know you think I'm nothing but what you call an 'Old Uncle Tom.'"

Lionel: "Well, that's pretty close."

Uncle Ward: "But what you don't realize is that in my time, back where I come from, being a 'Tom' was the only way to survive."

Lionel: "Yeah, well that's nice. But, see, I'm not interested in *ancient history*[86] right now."

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[86] Emphasis added.

Uncle Ward: "Lionel, I use to spit on sticks like you before breakfast, so you just listen. Hadn't been for us 'Old Uncle Toms' you young bloods wouldn't be around here today. I remember the time when we Negroes…"

Lionel: "Blacks!"

Uncle Ward: "Look, Lionel. It took us a couple hundred years to get from nigger to colored. And, it took me 25 more years to get from colored to Negro. So you'll just have to forgive me if it takes me a little more time to get to Black. The point I'm trying to make is, I agree with you, son."

George was well aware, too, that although he was now economically well-off and had "made it" financially in America, there continued to be challenges facing the Black community, especially for young Black men. As George points out, these challenges were unique to the Black community:

George: "But see OK is not good enough for a Jefferson. OK is only OK for tall, blonde kids with blue eyes."

Louise: "That's terrible."

George: "Sure is."

Louise: "I meant what you said."

George: "Look Weezy, let's face it. Lionel is gonna (sic) have to fight for everything he gets just like I did. It's part of our Black heritage. It's called 'hootspa.'"

Louise: "Hootspa? That's a Jewish word.

George: "So was ghetto 'til we got a hold of it." (roar of laughter from audience)

This exchange highlights the struggles that continued to face the Black community, and especially young Black males, even though slavery was presented as a historical phenomenon.

Rather than explicate on this, George delivers one of his classic one-liners, and in doing so,

creates a space for the audience to laugh about the issue, instead of discussing its severe

implications for society. Even today, in media and real-life, various types of avoidance,

especially humor, provide safe avenues through which to examine race and racism. This same

type of avoidance to racial discourse was also found in *Happy Endings*. However, rather than

laughter,[87] *Happy Endings* employed a "colorblind" approach when race relations discourse was

presented.

      Happy Endings

      Discussions about race and racism on *Happy Endings* was mainly achieved through the

hypervisibility of its only Black actor, Damon Wayons, Jr., and the avoidance of the topic by the

other main characters. Hypervisibility occurs when one character is juxtaposed against all others

and stands out for some reason; in this instance, Wayons was constantly shown against the

backdrop of an all-White cast, making him stand out as the "Other." Hypervisibility posits that

characters of Color are often contrasted with White, "normal" characters, making characters of

Color vulnerable to reinforcing racial stereotypes (the third theme will elaborate more on this

point). When race was brought up on the show, it was done so by one of two characters,

Wayons' character Brad or the only other marginalized character on the show, Max, a gay man.

Much of this dialogue created a competition-of-sorts between the two minority members.

      In one example, they are debating over who has a harder time in society, Brad, for being

a Black man, or Max, for being a gay man:

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[87] While *The Jeffersons* was filmed before a live, studio audience, *Happy Endings* was not. Producers of the latter did not use a laugh track, either.

Brad: "Oh come on, bro. Being a Black guy is way harder than being a gay guy. Last night, I tried to hail a cab in a $1,200 suit. Dude drove right past me and picked up a White guy in a 'Who Farted?' t-shirt."

Max: "Boo hoo. You can't get a cab. I can't get married or into heaven."

Penny: "You don't want to do either of those things."

Max: "It doesn't matter. Look the president's a Black, right?"

Dave: "Technically, he's more of a tie-dye."

Max: "Whatever. The point is he would've never gotten elected if he was riding in cars with boys."

Alex: "You guys are idiots."

Rather than exploring the barriers that exist in society for marginalized groups, the conversation is cut-off quickly after making humorous remarks about bodily functions and referencing the president's racial composition as that of a "tie-dye." The group is quick to dismiss claims of racism by not acknowledging Brad's concern, suggesting that he may be blowing things out of proportion. No one even responds to his claim of racism and the topic of discussion quickly changes. Although his claim of racism was quickly dismissed, it highlighted the struggle between Brad, who believed racism was still prevalent in society, and his White friends, who believed racism was a thing of the past.

Another instance of setting racism in the past occurred at a wedding the friends were attending:

Melinda (the bride): "I actually have to get going. I have to tell my Aunt Cathy that this isn't her wedding."

Jane: "Yeah, totally. I hate pushy relatives. It's like, 'This is my day,' right?'"

Melinda: "No, not right. She has advanced Alzheimer's. It's been a really trying time for my family. She thinks it's 1952. She's gonna (sic) freak out when she sees Brad in the hotel."

Again, this subtle reminder of racism was set within a historical context. Rather than recognize the existence of racist sentiment, it is easily dismissed as something from the 1950s and from someone who has a mental illness. By showing racism in this way, the scene removes it 60 years and places it out of today's context, further bolstering the notion of a contemporary, "colorblind" society.

While overt forms of racism tended to be downplayed and set up as historic pillars, one questions how much was done in sarcasm or in truth. For instance, during episode four, Jane pretends to be Max's girlfriend, or as the group calls it, his "Beard," while his parents are visiting. During the visit, Jane and Max perform overt displays of public affection, including handholding, groping, and passionate French kissing. After the date with his parents, Max calls Jane to thank her for her help. He ends the call by telling her "if you ever wanna (sic) get into a country club and need a fake White husband, I'm your guy." There is no dialogue after this line – it is simply brushed off and never brought up again. While "colorblind" notions are prevalent throughout society today, color does come into play when it comes to romantic affairs between partners of different races. As evidenced from the quote, society continues to not fully accept Black/White interracial couples as legitimate partners. Given the findings here, it is reasonable to conclude that while racist dialogue, as found in television sitcoms, is more subdued today, interracial pairings continue to be shown as dysfunctional and problematic, suggesting that while they must now be legally tolerated, they are not generally accepted.

Interracial Mixing is Problematic

The second research question probed at what meanings were associated with each televised Black/White interracial marriage. Although both interracial couples observed were shown in various degrees of affection, this study found that overall, both relationships were shown to be problematic and dysfunctional. In fact, Helen from *The Jeffersons* actually referred to her interracial marriage with Tom as the "biggie" problem in their lives. The majority of the time, however, these negative portrayals were the result of some outside force targeting the interracial pair, and not an internal emotion stemming from one partner in the relationship.

For instance, both couples mentioned scorn (from the Willises) or fear (from the Williams') from their families because of their choice to marry someone outside their own race. George Jefferson, the prime instigator of harassment directed at the Willises, did so solely because of their mixed races. In addition, the Willis children were shown to have problems with their own identities because of their biracial heritage.

Both interracial couples expressed how others often viewed their relationship as problematic. Frequently, it was the couples' own families that conveyed the strongest sentiments against the marriage. Early academic research on Black/White interracial marriages (for example, see Brayboy, 1966) strengthened popular belief that Whites who marry Blacks only do so to either punish their parents or as an act of social defiance. Studies (i.e., Beigel, 1966; Franklin, 1963; Korolewicz & Korolewicz, 1985) have shown that high percentages of individuals who become involved in interracial relationships do not inform their parents, which is due, at least in part, because these individuals feel they will be met with overwhelming disapproval. Such was the case in both sitcoms analyzed here. For example, on *The Jeffersons*, both sets of parents were strongly against the interracial marriage of Tom and Helen:

Louise: "Oh, I'm sorry to keep bringing my troubles to you. But there's no one else I can talk to. And you two seem to be able to handle your problems so well."

Tom: "What problems?"

Louise: "Oh, well, you know, you and Helen."

Helen: "Oh, *the biggie*."[88]

Tom: "That's not our problem. It's other people. They're the ones who can't handle it."

Helen: "Not even our own parents. Remember when you first told your mother about us, Tom? I never heard such yelling and screaming."

Tom: "That was my father. My mother didn't say a word." (roar of laughter from audience)

Helen: "Because she fainted. Then there was a disinheritance. The folks cut us off without even a cent."

Louise: "Oh, that's terrible. Were your folks that mad, Tom?"

Tom: "Oh, not my folks. Hers."

In fact, Helen revealed to Louise that they cannot even celebrate holidays together anymore because no one gets along:

Helen: "I'm afraid Tom and I gave up on family Thanksgiving years ago."

Louise: "Yeah? Why?"

Helen: "Well, when his White parents met my folks, we decided there's not much to be thankful for."

Louise: "Well, don't you at least get together for Christmas?"

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[88] Emphasis added.

> Helen: "Oh, yeah. But by mutual agreement, the party is always held some place in no man's land."
>
> Louise: "Well, where is that?"
>
> Helen: "The nearest Baskin Robbins."
>
> Louise: "Well, that way you can get 28 flavors of ice cream and two flavors of family."
>
> (roar of laughter from audience)

This exchange illustrates how the Willises use a coping mechanism to buffer themselves from outside influences – selecting a public space where it is less likely a confrontation will occur. Foeman and Nance (2002) describe this as a way for couples to avoid problematic situations with others. This is though, of course, contingent on the fact that the partners in the interracial relationship are aware of the disdain from others regarding their mixed races. On *Happy Endings*, for instance, Jane was not outright with her parents when she began dating Brad, even though she said it had nothing to do with their mixed races:

> Jane: "I just think he'd (Max) be so much happier if he were honest with his parents."
>
> Brad: "Totally. Just curious, didn't you wait like six months until you told your parents you were living with a Black guy?"
>
> Jane: "That had nothing to do with race. My parents don't see color. They just see 'sleeping with their daughter.' I just needed to tell them in my own time."
>
> Brad: "As opposed to Max, who needs to tell his parents he's gay tonight because his straight friend thinks he should?"
>
> Jane: "That's totally different."
>
> Brad: "How?"

Even though her husband felt the hesitation was due to his race, Jane refused to believe that her

parents may have had racist inclinations. It was commonplace for overt forms of racism to exist

in the 1950s and 1960s, but they did not exist, according to Jane's naivety, in present-day

society, and especially not from her own parents. However, as was evidenced by George

Jefferson berating the Willises throughout the entire first season of *The Jeffersons* in 1975, racist

commentary continued to surround Black/White interracial couples during this time.

The Jeffersons

The negative connotations used by George to describe the Willis family, and especially

Tom, peppered the first season. Throughout the season, in addition to continually huffing, rolling

his eyes, and becoming "sick to his stomach" when the Willises visited, George used a variety of

derogatory racial terms to describe the Willises. Tom was often referred to as a "honky," "Mr.

Vanilla," and "whitey," while as a pair they were called "Mr. and Mrs. Half-and-Half" or the

"zebra" couple. Seldom did George refer to them by name; rather, he seized most moments by

degrading their union because they were not racially homogenous. Every time a racial epithet

was directed at the Willises, a roar of laughter resonated from the live studio audience. When the

couple had disagreements, they would usually escalate because of George's position regarding

their mixed marriage.

> George: "You know damn well what it means. If you two ever really started going at it
>
> with one another, within five minutes he would be calling you a 'nigga.'"
>
> Tom: "Now you listen to me. We have had lots of fights and it's never happened."
>
> George: "Oh, don't tell me it's never crossed your mind."
>
> Helen: "No more than it ever crossed my mind to say the word 'honky' to Tom."

George: "Ha, how come you said it just then?"

Because of George's doggedness on the matter, Helen begins to worry about the marriage.

Helen: "Tom, I'm worried…Just now in there, why did the word 'honky' ever cross my mind?"

Tom: "Why shouldn't it? Don't you think words like that cross my mind too?"

Helen: "Yeah, but even when we've had our worst fights you've never called me 'nigga.'"

Tom: "That doesn't mean it never crossed my mind."

In another example, the couple is having a small argument about the whereabouts of Tom's desk pen. Because of George's persistence, the fight quickly intensifies:

Tom: "You just don't understand. You know what you are? You are a…"

George: "Uh oh, here it comes. He's gonna (sic) say it."

Tom: "You're damn right I'm gonna (sic) say it. You are a woman. A typical woman."

Helen: "That's a terrible thing to say."

George: "I don't think that's so terrible. I would've called you a …"

Louise: "Shut!" (laughter from audience)

Helen: "I'm just a terrible wife. That's what I am, huh?"

George only shows glimpses of kindness to the Willises when he needs a favor. For instance, when he needs people to come to a last-minute cocktail party, he invites them over.

Louise: "You're inviting the Willises? You, who keeps saying you don't want that zebra marriage hanging around."

George: "I don't – but I need him tonight. And you know, all those *phony*[89] liberal writers

love to mix races."

By referencing phonies who love to mix races, one can make the connection that interracial

couples, themselves, are fake, or at least were in the 1970s. It further insinuates that interracial

mixing was just a "fad," or a phase that would run its course and then be over with.

Although Helen originally believes George is inviting them over so they will get arrested

as "house breakers," the couple reluctantly agrees to attend, but on one condition: George had to

make a monetary donation to AFRO.

George: "At least it sounds like it's going for a good cause. What's it stand for?"

Tom: "The Association for Racial Oneness."

George: "Wait a minute…racial oneness? What does that mean?"

Helen: "It means that you just gave us a check for supporting mixed marriages."

At finding out about the charity's philanthropy, George loudly huffs and rolls his eyes to the

delight of the audience. This, of course, is contrary to how George feels about interracial

marriages:

Helen: "I'd like to talk to you about something that will do us both a lot of good."

George: "Oh, you gonna (sic) divorce 'whitey'?"

In this reference, George is directly implying that the Willises interracial marriage is having a

direct, detrimental effect on his life. Hence, it is problematic and needs to be corrected and

"fixed" as soon as possible.

Even when the couple was not present for his mockery, George would often voice his

disparagement for Tom and Helen's marriage. When discussing the option of getting a maid and

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[89] Emphasis added.

Louise tells George the Willises have one, he responds, "I thought they would have three maids. Well, I figure a Black one for Mr. Day, a White one for Mrs. Night, and a plaid one for Jenny." Jenny was also a serious point of contention for George. He disapproved of his son Lionel dating her for the simple fact that she was biracial. He voiced his objections several times throughout the season. Rather than calling her by her name, George would often add his own racist comments, such as "Jenny with the light White dad" and "the famous vanilla and chocolate."

In episode eight, George is presented with two dilemmas, both centering on marriage, and neither of which were his own. His mother, whom he adores, planned to marry her boyfriend. Upon hearing this, George immediately objected, but soon found out that he could benefit from his new father-in-law. By the end of the 21-minute show, George changed his opinion and embraced the idea of having his mother marry and welcomed her boyfriend, literally, with open arms. Part of his acceptance of the union, however, hinged on the fact that Mother Olivia Jefferson (played by Zara Cully) wanted to marry a Black man. Even though George had just met the man, he was more accepting of that union than that of his son, Lionel, to the Willises biracial daughter, Jenny. Even though these two had been dating for years, when a union between the two was brought up, George would get visibly upset. He went so far as to admit that he would fight against the marriage if they took it that far:

> George to Helen: "I'll tell you the date. The day my mother marries is the day your husband changes to the '*right* color.'"[90]
>
> Louise: "George!"
>
> Helen: "Oh, it's alright, Louise. It's a free country – even for jackasses."
>
> George: "What are you asking her for? She ain't family."

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[90] Emphasis added.

Helen: "She will be when Lionel marries Jenny."

George: "That's another fight – let's finish this one first."

Although it is never explicitly stated by George, one must wonder if he is voicing his objection partly because of the "problems" associated with having biracial children.

Numerous studies (for example, see Brown, 1987; Cross, 1971; Gibbs, 1987; Harris, 2000; Morten & Atkinson, 1983; Nance & Foeman, 1998; Stonequist, 1937; Teicher, 1968) have explored the problematic issues facing biracial children. As explained by Harris (2000),

Because we live in a society obsessed with racial categorization the 'dilemma' of biracial and bicultural identity has angered many people. Rather than viewing biracial and bicultural identity as the fusion of two cultures with different qualities, they perceive it as a choice of one race or culture over another. (p. 185)

Following this line of reasoning, it remains a popular belief that both racial groups consider biracial children outcasts. As Foeman and Nance (1999) points out, biracial children can often "find themselves in the paradoxical position of representing both cultural groups while at the same time being a part of neither" (p. 548). This creates a multitude of troubles for mixed race children, as Owusu-Bempah (2005) illustrates:

Marginal status was, therefore, seen as characterized by confusion and a myriad of problems. Culturally and socially, marginal persons were said to live in limbo. Psychologically, they were said to experience torment, to experience psychiatric and emotional problems, low self-esteem and identity confusion. To the point, they were claimed to be deficient in every human domain. (p. 29)

The final episode of the season, "Jenny's Low," delved into the problems facing interracial families and, namely, biracial children. While the audience saw Jenny throughout the

season, this was the first time it was brought up that the Willises also had a son, Allan (played by

Andrew Rubin). Throughout the episode, both children had problems with their own identities as

a result of having one White parent and one Black parent. The episode began with a conversation

between Jenny and Lionel:

> Jenny: "The trouble is my brother takes after my father."
>
> Lionel: "What you mean? He's White?"
>
> Jenny: "That's exactly what I mean. Well, I mean, he looks like he's White."
>
> Lionel: "OK, so one of you turned out White and one of you turned out lucky. Maybe he
>
> didn't stay in the oven long enough."
>
> Jenny: "Lionel, I don't want to talk about it."
>
> Lionel: "Let me ask you something, Jenny. Are you sure it wasn't your brother who
>
> turned out to be lucky?"

When the audience finally meets Allan, it becomes very apparent what Jenny was referring to –

he could easily pass for White, and George agrees.

> George: "You're Jenny's brother?"
>
> Allan: "That's right."
>
> George: "Uh, I thought a zebra was bad enough. Now we got us a palomino."[91]
>
> Louise: "George, will you cut that out?"
>
> Allan: "It's alright Mrs. Jefferson. I'm use to cracks like that."

While Allan acknowledges that he has been the target of racist comments, no one challenges the

actual source of the racism – George. This is a common problem when discussing interracial

couples and their children. Often times, the blame of racism is placed on the shoulders of the

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[91] Palomino refers to a pale yellow color horse.

parents or the child him/herself, with none being placed on the source of the racism. There is a notion that "they should have known better," which completely shifts the responsibility of racism to those being subjected to it. Research (i.e., Nance & Foeman, 1998; Foeman & Nance, 2002) has shown that parents of biracial children may need to examine and re-examine the nuances of racial awareness in light of their children's experiences, as well as their own.

Later in the same episode, it is learned that Allan has dropped out of college and has been in Europe for the past two years. He has had minimal contact with his family while he has been away. His absence has only deepened the divide between his sister and himself. Allan tries in vain to talk to Jenny, but she is not ready to face him, or her own identity crisis, yet.

Allan: "Hey, Jenny. We got a lot to rap about."

George: "Hey, that's a good idea. Why don't you go rap in a White neighborhood?"

Louise: "We *are* in a White neighborhood."[92] (roar of laughter from audience)

George: "I mean up in one in the Willis department."

Allan: "No, he's right. It is a better neighborhood."

George: "Oh yeah, you think anything's better as long as there's 'honky' in it."

Allan: "You know, I knew there was something I missed in Europe. There wasn't anybody to feed me the dumb racial crap."

George: "That's because you never showed your family portrait." (Allan leaves)

Lionel: "Hey pops, why'd you have to say that?"

George: "Why not? It's my house, ain't it?"

Louise: "It doesn't give you the right to be rude."

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[92] Emphasis added.

George: "He had it coming to him. If he had any guts, he wouldn't have hid out in

Europe. He'd a been right here with his mother and his sister, *his own kind*."[93]

Lionel: "Hey, now look, you know you didn't have to take that because of us."

Jenny: "Oh, I know."

Lionel: "Well, why didn't you say something?"

Jenny: "Because your father was right."

George's insistence that Allan should have stayed with "his own kind" reiterates the widespread acceptance of the "one-drop rule" up to and during the 1970s.[94] If an individual was known to have a single drop of African blood in his/her lineage, then he/she is Black and should adopt that single heritage. Obviously, this becomes hugely problematic for biracial children.

Jenny is not the only one who feels abandoned by Allan. Tom and Helen are also perplexed by his two-year absence, and hope it is not because of his biracial identity.

Helen: "Tom, just be patient. I'm sure Allan has an explanation. Let him tell us in his

own way and in his own time. Maybe we're both wrong with what we're thinking."

Tom: "Maybe we're both right with what we're thinking. Maybe you're just avoiding it.

Let's face it Helen, maybe he stayed away from home cause he's ashamed of us."

Helen: "Don't say that."

Tom: "But, we'll never know until we ask him."

Helen: "But not now. He'll come to us in time."

As mentioned earlier, much of the blame for racist attitudes toward biracial children fell onto the shoulders of the interracial parents. Guilt and shame are often expressed from parents who feel

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[93] Emphasis added.

[94] The researcher is not suggesting that the "one-drop rule" ended after the 1970s. Rather, she intends to keep it within the societal context of when *The Jeffersons* aired on television.

they, not the perpetrators of racism, have subjected their children to racist ideology. Such is the

case of the Willises, who soon learn that their premonitions were true.

Allan: "I like Lionel. He seems real together. But that George Jefferson, he's something

else."

Jenny: "Well, at least he always says what he thinks."

Allan: "Trouble is, he don't (sic) think before he says."

Jenny: "He doesn't talk out of both sides of his mouth."

Allan: "I think she just called me a 'hypocrite.'"

Jenny: "You're damn right I did."

Allan: "You know something Jenny, I thought you'd outgrow this by now."

Jenny: "Huh?"

Allan: "But you haven't, have you?"

Jenny: "What are you talking about?"

Allan: "You're still jealous."

Jenny: "Jealous? Of what?"

Allan: "Of me."

Jenny: "Of you?"

Allan: "That's right. And the quicker you face it, the better. The truth will set you free,

baby…"

Jenny: "I'd rather be with Mr. Jefferson than him (Allan)."

Helen: "George Jefferson?"

Jenny: "Yes, at least I know where he's coming from. He believes in calling a spade a

spade."

Jenny leaves the Willis home and Allan follows her to the Jeffersons.

George: "Who's that at the door? Oh, if it ain't the zebra who lost his stripes…"

Lionel: "Pops, don't make things worse. Jenny and Allan already *got problems*."[95]

George: "That ain't (sic) my fault. That's their parent's fault. That's what you get from a mixed marriage – assorted nuts. (roar of laughter from audience) Dig where I'm coming from, your 'whiteness'?"

Allan: "I dug where you was (sic) coming from yesterday chump. And you ain't (sic) cool."

George: "Say what… (jokingly) Take this elite nigga wolfin' (sic) at my door, with yo' (sic) yellow behind, I'm gonna (sic) mop up the entire floor. You only half White, so that makes you half alright."

After going back-and-forth with George, Allan is finally able to confront Jenny.

Allan: "You mean while you're afraid to face yourself."

Jenny: "What did you say?"

Louise: "Will someone please tell me what this is all about?"

George: "It's easy. He crossed the color line. He's passing for an ole fake and his sister don't (sic) dig it."

Jenny: "I don't care what he passes for, as long as he just passes right on by."

Allan: "Green is a color, too, Jenny."

George: "What's money got to do with this?"

Lionel: "No, he means green with envy Pop. Doesn't he, Jenny?"

Jenny: "You turned your back on us, Allan."

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[95] Emphasis added.

Allan: "Look, people are crossing racial lines everyday. Everybody does it."

Jenny: "No, not everybody."

Allan: "Oh no, OK. Let's be honest. Is there anybody here who hasn't wondered just once, what it would be like to be White."

Tom coughs and raises his hand (roar of laughter from audience).

Jenny: "Are you saying that that's what I wanted? To look White?"

Allan: "No. But I am saying that you've looked at me and thought, 'Why him?'"

Louise: "That's just what my father said when I married you."

Jenny: "You were the one who had it easy. You went anywhere you wanted. You did anything you wanted."

Allan: "In other words, why me, right?"

Jenny: "Well, yes. Why you?"

Lionel: "Hey, it's not important. It's only important to admit it. Allan's right about that."

Jenny: "Ma, did you know that's how I felt?"

Helen: "No, there's a lot I didn't know."

Tom: "I believe I acted stupid, too."

George: "Honky see, honky do."

Helen: "Alan, why did you stay away so long?"

Tom: "The truth son, were you ashamed of us?"

Allan: "Hey, I love you. I'd a come home if you asked me to. I figured you didn't care. Maybe it was better if I wasn't around."

Tom: "Didn't care? We were worried sick all the time you were in Europe."

Allan: "Well, you never said don't go."

Tom: "Because we're not possessive parents."

Allan: "Don't knock it 'til you try it. OK, maybe it was me, too. That's why I went to Paris, cause at home, and even in college, I felt I had to be on my guard all the time."

Lionel: "So, you mean you played it White?"

Allan: "Yeah, White right down the line. Cause in Paris, nobody cared, nobody asked me who I was, or what I was. And it was great, for a while. And then I began to ask the question myself. Who am I? That's why I came home. To find out."

Jenny: "I know who you are, my brother."

The dilemma of "passing for White" occurs when a light-skinned Person of Color, for whatever reason, intentionally pretends to be White or is mistaken for a White person and never corrects the misinformation. While the issue with his sister seemed to be curtailed, the problem of "passing," which oftentimes entails enormous internal and external struggles, was never discussed. To lighten the mood (no pun intended) and offer a release from the tension, George offered one final piece of "advice":

Helen: "Oh, I'm sorry George and Louise. I didn't want to trouble you with our family *problems*[96] like this."

George: "Well, I know how you could've fixed this problem from the start."

Helen: "How?"

George: "By not getting married." (roar of laughter from audience)

This line, while found in the last episode of season one, resonates as the overall theme surrounding the Black/White interracial marriage of Tom and Helen Willis as observed throughout the entire first season of *The Jeffersons*. Although the show premiered eight years

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[96] Emphasis added.

after *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), the overwhelming sentiment surrounding mixed marriages, especially those between Blacks and Whites, was that of contempt and aversion.

After careful examination of the discourse, it was concluded that *The Jeffersons* was much more conservative and subtle in their depictions of interracial intimacy than was *Happy Endings*. Throughout the season, the Willises never displayed sexual embraces, even though they already had two children. In addition, they only displayed minimal amounts of affection toward one another and always did so within the "safe" confines of their apartment building. At various times, Helen would rest her head on Tom's shoulder or Tom would place his hand on her knee as they sat. There were two instances of peck-like kisses between them. Their affection was nominal compared to the hypersexualization of Brad and Jane on *Happy Endings*, where lust was a primary factor in their relationship and was often used as justification for their union.

Happy Endings

Studies (e.g., Beigel, 1966; Lewis, 1964; Smith, 1963; Smith, 1966) have shown that one of the primary justifications surrounding Black/White interracial intimacy is the idea that Blacks have an unusually strong sex drive. Historically, Black men especially have been considered "uniformly 'hungry' for sex and therefore dangerous to White women" (Green, 2000, p. 241). Hernton (1965) went so far as to say that all White women are constantly fighting the feeling of attraction for Black men because they are superior sexual animals and could, to the women's desire and delight, rape them at any time. Other elements of this sexual attraction have been discussed in scholarly research, including the lure of the forbidden (Masters, 1962), sexual curiosity (Peters, 1959), Black primitive sensuality (Barnett, 1963; Brink & Harris, 1964), and

the irresistible virility of Black men (Hernton, 1965). These same types of sexual justification were found in the relationship portrayal of Brad and Jane Williams on *Happy Endings*.

Brad and Jane, once referred to as "perverts," openly discussed their physical love for one another in front of the cameras and in front of their friends. Their relationship blatantly comes across as overtly sexual, and they talk about their sexual desires frequently. For instance, Brad gladly tells the group about his and Jane's sex life in "sexy time valley" before he and Jane disappear to have sex upstairs while all their friends are waiting downstairs. Dave asks, "Do they even care that we're here?" to which the group agrees that they do not.

In addition, Brad is shown to have a liking for pornography, which he plays off as pop-ups on his computer, while Jane appears to get turned on by the slightest things, like when she "gets horny when we use our pizza stone" or when Brad talks about wanting a sea kelp face wrap, she replies, "Damn it, why does that turn me on?" It was also revealed that Jane went through a "long lesbian phase" in college. Moreover, they frequently have explicit sexual banter with each other: Jane tells Brad "I'll totally take care of you after you finish with me" and asks him "Why don't you go upstairs…lose all that (pointing to clothes), and let me make it all about you?"

The couple was also less cautious in how they approached their relationship in public than were the Willises (who were never shown in a public setting). Several times, Brad and Jane would leave a social gathering in order to have sex:

Max: "You're not gonna (sic) stay and hangout?"

Brad: "No can do. I got a date-night with the old ball-and-chain. Gonna (sic) put on our weekend sweats, eat a messed-up amount of Chinese food and watch *The Bachelor*."

Max: (snoring) "Oh my God, I just fell asleep that sounded so horrible."

Brad: "Yeah, I hate relaxing at my sweet pad and having unprotected sex with my smoking hot wife. That's terrible. Ewe."

Even while traveling, the couple made sex a priority:

Brad: "Hello, room. Hope you're ready for some sex to be had in you."

Jane: "You don't have to say that to every hotel room we stay in."

Brad: "It's just a courtesy."

Although Brad and Jane displayed blatant forms of sexual prowess, they did not have any biracial children. It was hinted that the couple, at least at one point, wanted children. However, Jane changed her mind and did not want to tell Brad. This led to the first of many instances of deception between the couple.

During episode one, the couple was going through a "pregnancy cleanse" together. However, it is later revealed that Jane did not want a baby and was hiding the fact that she was still drinking alcohol from Brad.

Jane to waitress: "Um, I'm gonna (sic) need vodka in a water glass with ice, and I'm gonna (sic) be ordering 'water' from you all night long. So, one 'water' please."

Waitress: "Did we start already or do you really want water?"

Jane: "Just bring me vodka."

Later in the evening, Brad found out Jane had been lying to him.

Brad: "Jane, you're drinking? No, you're drinking. What about our cleanse? I've had pure evil coming out of both ends of my body for three weeks, and you're drinking vodka?"

Jane: "I just…I don't know. I don't want to have a baby right now. I did when I thought Alex and Dave were going to have one and live next door, and we were all gonna (sic) be

happy together, but now it's just going to be us out there in the suburbs, all alone, slowly

giving up. Five years later, I'm rocking butchy mom hair and dreaming about driving my

burgundy Windstar through a farmer's market…"

Brad: "Well, that's what happens when you drink vodka on a stomach full of cabbage

juice."

Not only was the issue not resolved, it was not discussed again for the rest of the season. One has

to wonder if the stigma of having a biracial child had anything to do with her decision not to

have one. It is worth mentioning here that one of the major explanations given for opposing

Black/White interracial relationships is because of concerns about the biracial children. Some

opponents of mixed unions contend that their resistance to interracial pairings has nothing to do

with racial prejudice; rather, they have genuine concerns about the emotional and psychological

welfare of biracial children. However, Brad challenged this notion when he commented to the

group that he and Jane experience subtle forms of racism on a daily basis because they are not

racially homogenous:

Brad: "Look, all I'm saying is you guys would be surprised. Jane and I get dirty looks all

the time."

Jenny: "The upside is your kids are going be super hot."

Max: "Yeah, I mean half-Black is God's Photoshop. Worse case scenario, you're looking

at an Avatar."

Jane: "She's blue."

This was yet another instance of Brad attempting to air out his grievances on racial difference,

and the group intentionally choosing to ignore what he said. To add further insult to injury, the

group then made the issue of having a biracial child into a joke.

Further deception by Jane ran throughout the season. During episode three, for instance, viewers learned that not only does Jane use a nanny cam to spy on Brad, but he knows about it and uses it to his advantage.

Max: "Why do you have a nanny cam?"

Jane: "Because I like to know what our stuff is doing when we're not here. Okay, we had some workers that I didn't trust, and then I fell in love with the teddy bear, so I left it there."

Max: "You're trying to catch Brad doing something?"

Jane: "Yes, damn it, why hasn't it worked yet?" (Brad walks in.) "Hey, honey."

Brad: "Hi, babe."

Jane: "So, I hope your niece likes the teddy bear. Just remember there's only eight gigabytes of hugs to give." (Jane walks off)

Brad: "So what are you trying to film?"

Max: "What? You know about the teddy cam?"

Brad: "Of course. But, it's cool. I learned how to use it to my advantage."

Another occurrence of deception happened when Jane went to a couple's therapist and then lied to Brad once he found out about it.

Brad: "Did you tell Dianne we went to couples therapy?"

Jane: "What are you talking about, Biscuit? No, Boo, no."

Brad: "No Biscuit, no Boo, no sweetie, no Black Han Solo. None of your pet names will get you out of this. Now, did you tell her that?"

Jane: "OK, I did, but only because she shared so much. I mean, I had to say something."

Brad: "Yeah, but couples therapy? I don't know, couple's therapy."

Jane: "Right, us, couples therapy? That's crazy."

Brad: "Woman, what did you do?"

Jane: "Technically, we did not go, but…I was so freaked out I wanted to go see a couples therapist to make sure we were okay, so I thought I'd meet a few. You know, see who fit."

Brad: "You auditioned therapists? How many?"

Jane: "Five."

Brad: "Five?"

Jane: "Five. See, I thought maybe we had trouble communicating, but the first doctor said we just had different styles, and the second one said I needed to bring up the issue sooner… The fifth one made me realize that I have an amazing husband and a great marriage, so all is good in the neighborhood."

Brad: "Good."

Jane: "Great. OK, you're mad, but I wouldn't have had to go to all these therapists if I though you would be open to it."

Brad: "Oh, so now it's on me?"

As evidenced above, Jane had doubts about the strength of her marriage. The audience is given no viable reasoning as to why Jane feels her marriage may be in trouble. In addition to seeing a couple's therapist by herself, she often asks the others if they think that her marriage is in trouble, almost as if she is seeking others approval. Research (e.g., Kouri & Lasswell, 1993; Lewis & Yancey, 1995; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1990) has shown that Black/White interracial couples intentionally seek out social support from family and friends because of the opposition they endure because of their mixed race.

During episode 10, Jane fears that she and Brad are becoming too comfortable with each

other so she plans a night out for the two of them. Brad becomes irritated at how long the food is

taking and assumes it has to do with them being a mixed race couple. When a tray comes out and

goes to another table, he comments, "Oh, come on. They got here like 20 minutes after us. This

is totally cause we're 'Black on blonde.'"

Both couples were shown to be problematic and dysfunctional on their respective sitcom.

For Tom and Helen, most arguments got exacerbated because of the racist comments made by

George. They also experienced a family crisis when they learned their two children were

experiencing racial identity confusion, albeit for opposite reasons. The couple was only shown in

private settings and had minimal intimate contact. Brad and Jane, on the other hand, were often

shown in public spaces and displayed overt sexual behaviors with each other. They experienced

problems in their relationship due to deceitful practices. Though some progress has been made

toward Black/White racial integration, this research found that there continues to be aversion to

such interracial pairs when it comes to affairs of the boudoir. Furthermore, although the shows

were created and produced nearly four decades apart, they both reinforced similar, existing racial

typecasting. As comedies, perhaps these findings suggest each is trying to subtly highlight the

racist nature that continues to exist for Blacks.

Racial Stereotypes Reinforced

Stereotypes have been defined in countless ways. For this study, stereotypes refer to the

popular adopted viewpoints about the attributes, behaviors, and characteristics of individuals

within certain groups in society. Scholarly work on stereotypical thinking has shown that it

emerges as a result to various environmental factors, including differences in societal roles

(Eagly, 1995) and differences in power (Fiske, 1993), or as a means of justifying the status quo (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Sidanius, 1993). Steele and Aronson (1995) found that racial stereotypes are deeply woven into the fabric of U.S. society, yet their everyday effects are often overlooked and accepted as "commonsense," even though stereotypes based on social constructions, such as race, have colossal potential for error (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996). Racial stereotypes are often used to reinforce the existing racial hierarchy in society. Copious examples of these were found woven throughout the entire seasons of each sitcom. The explicit racist connotations found within the cultural text on *The Jeffersons*, however, overwhelmingly reproduced the racial status quo that defined the 1970s, but did so in a comical fashion.

The Jeffersons

Most references to racial stereotypes in *The Jeffersons* took on humorous tones, such as when George says, "It ain't (sic) easy climbing that mountain when you have a big black bird on your shoulder," or when George asks why "anyone in their right mind [would] move down to Georgia."[97] George, while having a conversation with his White neighbor Harry Bentley (played by Paul Benedict), even makes reference to the Ku Klux Klan through humor:

Mr. Bentley: "I thought you might like a batch (of cookies)."

George: "What kind are they?"

Mr. Bentley: "Hot cross."

George: "Hmmm…hot cross isn't really popular where I'm from."

Most insight into Black culture worked to reinforce negative racial stereotypes, especially those dealing with crime:

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[97] George is questioning why Louise's uncle Ward is moving to the South.

George: "These little boys was (sic) boosting something from Bloomingdale's."

Mr. Bentley: "I beg your pardon – boosting something?"

George: "Yeah, boosting. Shoplifting. That's the ghetto Christmas club."

Criminalization of Black males reached epidemic proportions in the 1970s. Stereotypes about Blacks being lazy and unemployed also resonated throughout this decade, as was evident in an exchange between George and his unemployed friend, Roy Simms:

Roy: "I know what a job is. A job is something that the White dude behind you just got."

George: "I tried to get a job so bad, I even lied about my color."

George also provided a dichotomy of Black and White "winos"[98]:

George: "Saving a wino, a White one at that."

Louise: "How do you know he's White? It doesn't say so in the paper."

George: "Yes it did. The paper called him an Indigent, can't be nothing but a 'honky.'"

Louise: "What makes you say that?"

George: "Because a White wino gets turned over to the Salvation Army and they call him an 'Indigent.' A Black wino is busted and they call him an 'inmate.'"

With the popularity of films and television programs during the 1970s, it came as no surprise that George and Louise had a brief discussion on the power of media in constructing racial ideology at the time:

George: "This Black history is really interesting…When I went to school, only Black history we learned about was 'little Black Sambo,' 'a midget' and 'a horse.'"

Louise: "Well my education was better than yours, George. I went to the Disney movies and I learned all about 'Br'er Rabbit,' 'Uncle Remus' and 'Zip-a-dee-doo-dah.'"

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[98] A "wino" refers to a person who is homeless and/or drinks excessive amounts of cheap wine (alcoholic).

As cultural texts, these electronic media were laden with social meanings that mimicked the status quo that Blacks were less than their White counterparts. The examples given by George and Louise were nothing short of American bigotry cultivating its way into American discourse through the use of Disney characters, which, as an aside, were often not questioned as being racist.

A popular epithet in *The Jeffersons* was the term "nigga." George often threw the word around with little regard to the extraordinarily offensive connotations it can evoke. Although he took liberties with this word, he took offense when others referred to him using derogatory terms. As an example, during a cocktail party one of George's neighbors, Mr. Nelson, said, "Oh hello, Jefferson. I must say we're delighted that you're leading the protest, aren't we Marion? Yes, you '*colored folk*'[99] can teach us a lot." For George, being referred to as a "colored" was much more racist than his liberal use of the word "nigga."

The word "nigga" has since saturated mass media. It remains a hotly debated topic, as evidenced from a 2014 *ESPN Outside the Lines Special Report: The N-Word*. The goal of the show, according to host Bob Ley, was to "have an honest conversation about this word, which is on the third rail of American society. We're going to try and bring this to American living rooms…in a way where maybe it hasn't [been]." There are mixed emotions about the use of the word, however. The majority of older generation Blacks frown on the usage of the word and continue to find it highly offensive. The younger generation of Blacks, however, attempts to apply the word for a variety of purposes, including endearment.[100] One distinction remains clear, though. Whites are not to use the word to refer to any Person of Color, as is evident in *Happy*

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[99] Emphasis added.

[100] On February 23, 2014, ESPN broadcast a special report entitled, "Outside the Lines Special Report: The N-Word" (Kris Kugler, producer). The report examined the use of the "N-word" as it pertains to sports and society. These sentiments were shared in the piece.

Endings, when Max, a White male, attempts to congratulate Brad, the only Black character on the show:

"Oh, my n---." Brad sternly looks at him, to which Max replies, "Why can't I say it?

Fine. My ni---. Nope, changed my mind immediately."

Even half-a-century after the civil rights movement does not provide adequate time to dissolve the long-engrained racial fears, prejudices, and stereotypes surrounding Blacks. This is evident in the discourse of *Happy Endings*.

Happy Endings

While George Jefferson openly mocked Blacks, racist undertones were much more subtle in *Happy Endings*, but were still present throughout the first season. Among the most visible included references to fear of Black bodies, hypersexualization of the Black male phallus, and Black male criminalization (similar to those found in *The Jeffersons*).

The series opened with one of the friends, Alex, leaving her fiancé, Dave, at the alter after another White man objects to the union and ultimately stops the wedding from proceeding. As groomsmen, Brad and Max are unsure of how to handle the situation and what, if anything, they are suppose to do. However, solely because of Brad's race, Max urges him to get involved.

Brad: "Yo, I feel like we're supposed to…kick this guy's ass or something."

Max: "You do it. You're Black. He's probably scared of you."

Brad: "Yeah, but you're gay and chubby. No one will see it coming."

In this instance, Max is referring to the long-engrained fears of Whites of Black bodies (hooks, 1992), although some scholars (e.g., Herrenstein & Murry, 1994; Jensen, 1981; Shockley, 1972) are steadfast that Blacks continue to be genetically, mentally, and physically inferior to Whites.

Further, as explained by Davis (1941), genetic categorization of Blacks and Whites creates a popular caste system based on race, the most powerful and persuasive type of castes. Davis (1941) argues that a racial caste is best upheld and sustained when only two racial groups are identified, and one (Whites) directly benefit at the expense of the other (Blacks). In essence, this stratification reduces people to objects.

According to bell hooks (2004), "the history of the [B]lack male body begins in the United States with projections, with the imposition onto that body of [W]hite racist sexist pornographic sexual fantasies" (p. 67). Simply stated, in American culture, Black male bodies are often reduced to their phalluses, with the stereotype that Black men have large penises (Crawford, 2008; hooks, 1992; hooks, 2004). This stereotype was reinforced multiple times by multiple people on *Happy Endings*. One case in point involved Brad and his friend Carl. Brad was using the restroom, and Carl came in and tried to give him a high-five:

Carl: "Hey, what's up Brad?"

Brad: "Hands are kind of full, bro."

Carl: "Oh, yeah, they are."

In another instance, Penny was telling everyone how a guy she was dating sent her a picture of his penis and Max told her how she should respond:

Penny: "You know that guy Jeremy that I thought was so amazing? He just pexted me."

Jane: "Pext?"

Penny: "Penis text."

Jane: "Oh, oh, oh. Whoa, that is small..."

Penny: "Do you want me to pext him back?"

Max: "If you're gonna (sic) do that, give it to Brad."

As evidenced throughout this research, race has undoubtedly shaped the cultural and ideological landscapes in the U.S. Whether explicit or implied, racist discourse thread throughout each sitcom, especially when examining the Black/White interracial couple. One cannot escape the racist foundations from which this country was built and where we have remained stagnant. Further discussion surrounding the context and implications of this study will now commence.

Chapter V

Discussion

All of my ways of knowing seemed to have failed me – my perception, my common

sense, my good will, my anger, honor and affection, my intelligence and insight…the

commitment against racism becomes itself immobilizing. Even obvious and easy acts

either do not occur to us or threaten to be racist by presumptuous assumptions or

misjudged timing, wording, or circumstances…Our racism is our problem, not theirs.

(Frye, 1992, p. 148)

Early interracial theorists often provided motives and justifications for the occurrence of

Black/White interracial relationships. Some of the earliest, and most widely accepted at the time,

published works that tended to look for ulterior motives in interracial marriages. For example,

Brayboy (1966) asserted that individuals in interracial relationships suffered from mental

instability. Schnepp and Yui (1955) claimed that interracial couples were less religiously devout

than those who married within their own race. Several studies (including those by Hunt &

Collier, 1957; Lynn, 1953; Strauss, 1954) highlighted how individuals in interracial pairings

were more disorganized and stressed than those in same-race relationships. Even later studies

(see Brown, 1987; Porterfield, 1982; Solsberry, 1994) presented case studies of interracial

couples struggling with alcoholism, abuse, and mental disturbance. In fact, interracial couples

were urged to seek mental counseling for their unexplainable urge to be with someone from

another race. It should come as no surprise, then, that these racist notions only strengthened

existing cultural barriers that were erected to keep Blacks and Whites from becoming intimate in

media and real-life.

Scholars have asserted that popular culture has contributed to many beliefs, values, and societal institutions surrounding race. Intimate race relations, when shown, reinforce the existing racial hierarchy and serve specific purposes – to show them as hypersexualized, taboo, and problematic. Televised depictions of Black/White interracial couples are noticeably missing and greatly lag behind the prevalence of such couples in society, even though television remains fundamental in constructing and circulating popular understandings with respect to major racial questions confronting America. When these relationships are shown, they function to serve White hegemony by deviantizing interracial relationships through the projection of stereotypes and racial biases and the presentation of them as reality. The presumption of illegitimacy and hypersexualization surrounding interracial couples today harkens back to the days of miscegenation.

Television, then, allows for the production and reinforcement of racism free from questioning (Hall, 1980b). Producers of television programming emphasize characters and situations that reflect existing hegemonic social relations in reality. The popular stereotypes associated with Black/White interracial couples, and Blacks especially, reflect and reinforce dominant social hierarchies. Medhurst (1990) reminds that every "joke needs an object, a butt, a victim, and that object needs to be recognizable" (p. 21). Subordinate groups in the existing social hierarchy, Black/White interracial couples in this instance, make for convenient and effective "objects" of comedic delight to audiences. Victims of sitcom jokes are more than likely the victims of social inequality, as well.

These problematic constructions of interracial couples become "common sense" and, according to critical race theory, become permanently embedded into our societal institutions, as television acts as a cultivator and reflector of dominant cultural assumptions. Delgado and

Stefancic (2012) remind, "critical race theorists have built on everyday experiences with perspective, viewpoint, and the power of stories and persuasion to come to a better understanding of how Americans see race" (p. 38). In fact, as Hall (1981b) contends, sitcom representation of these assumptions and cultural norms can be considered one of the central functions of television in general. The hegemonic ideology undergirding these representations can be exemplified as that "which goes without saying" (Berger, 2007, p. 21).

The purpose of this study was to explore the meanings portrayed in primetime American television sitcoms pertaining to Black/White interracial marriages from two time periods: the 1970s and 2010s. Any similarities and differences between *The Jeffersons* from the 1970s and *Happy Endings* from the 2010s were of particular interest. Analysis of the two sitcoms revealed that although marriages between Blacks and Whites were increasing in frequency in society, racist attitudes toward such couples persisted. This finding resonates with critical race theory's challenge to the multiculturalism view Americans are said to cherish and buttresses the theory's stance that racism continues to exist today as an everyday reality for People of Color.

By having each couple serve as main characters, albeit in secondary roles[101] to racially homogonous couples, the shows may have intended to diminish the taboos associated with Black/White interracial intimacy simply by their presence. However, each pair was shown to be problematic and dysfunctional in their own way. Further, the shows offered glimpses into the challenges and difficulties faced by individuals in interracial relationships and their biracial children, but did so without challenging long-ingrained notions of race prevalent in society. Rather, the individuals being subjected to racial discrimination beared the responsibility of the

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[101] Sociologist Erica Chito Childs (2009) investigated interracial pairings on primetime television and found that depictions of such couples were extremely rare. When found, they were often delegated to minor roles.

racism. While both sitcoms displayed racism toward the mixed couples, they did so in different ways. Overt displays of racism toward the interracial couple saturated *The Jeffersons*, but was much more subtle in *Happy Endings*. Overall, however, both sitcoms tended to reinforce aversions toward intimate Black/White pairings.

    The Jeffersons aired at a time when America was trying to heal from its racist past and move forward. Showing an affluent Black family and television's first Black/White married couple was viewed as an enlightened approach to racial difference. However, much of the show's success was because the dialogue was anchored with overt racism and familiar racial stereotypes, such as criminalization of Black males and unemployment. The most bigoted examples, however, garnered the most audience laughter and were mostly directed at the interracial couple on the show. By the source of opposition to the interracial intimacy being from the Black community, White audiences could find more amusement than had the opposition come from someone White, even though these types of feelings saturated White society. A Black character's objection serves to "release [W]hites from any responsibility for racism or opposition to interracial relationships" (Chito Childs, 2009, p. 54), and thus serves to uphold the "colorblind" approach to race relations. George never provided justification for why he disliked interracial unions – they were just simply "not right." The Willises never responded to George's hateful comments; rather, they simply ignored him. Conversely, the live studio audience found pleasure in the racist banter, often times laughing during moments of stress or discomfort. This did not come as much of a surprise, given that the show was not far removed for the civil rights movement.

    Norman Lear was often praised for creating television shows that seem to mirror reality – most voice the unpleasant, but real, stereotypes that circulated American society throughout the

1970s. Lear himself acknowledged that many of the bigoted characters in his sitcoms were developed in hopes of amplifying their notions of racism to illustrate to the audience how ridiculous their feelings really were (normanlear.com, 2006). Lear hoped that by giving bigotry a face, his shows could help liberate American television viewers. However, some studies (i.e., Tate & Surlin, 1976; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974) suggest that rather than challenging stereotypes, many of his sitcoms, and *The Jeffersons* in particular, worked toward reinforcing what viewers already believed and held to be true, such as racial stereotypes. Most bigoted viewers of Lear's programming did not perceive his shows as satirical – many identified with the racist and sexist banter (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). A growing body of scholarly work (for example, see Nussbaum, 2014) reflects how audience members bring their own ideas and experiences to their interpretations of television shows, so much so that whatever the intentions of the show's producers may have had in conveying messages, their intended meaning may not match that of the viewer. So, while Lear may have intended for *The Jeffersons* to challenge bigotry and highlight George as an extremist, some viewers may have found his stance on interracial marriages spot-on and laudable. As Black filmmaker Marlon Riggs points out,

> even when it is clear that the critique is trying to empower and trying to heal certain wounds within our communities, there is not any space within our culture to constructively critique. There is an effort simply to shut people up in order to reify these gods, if you will, who have delivered some image of us which seems to affirm our existence in this world. As if they make up for the lack, but in fact they don't. They can become part of the hegemony. (As quoted in Salaam, 1992, p. 5)

In present-day society, Black/White interracial couples are heralded as evidence that America has overcome its painful racist past and all racial barriers separating the two have been

eradicated. Race mixing has become an American story, yet it continues to be one that is either not written or is written off. Nearly 40 years after from *The Jeffersons*, the same racial stereotypes and interracial prejudices could be found on major network primetime television. *Happy Endings* reinforced the same racist stereotypes that were found in *The Jeffersons*, but did so in a subtler manner.

Racial discourse was primarily delivered in one of two ways, through the use of hypervisibility of its only character of color or avoidance by the White characters. By approaching race using a "post-racial" or "colorblind" approach, race became a problem only for the Black character of the show. Brad was often juxtaposed against a White, "normal" character, making him vulnerable to Black stereotypes. Examples of these stereotypes included White fear of Black bodies and the criminalization of Black males. White characters often disregarded Brad's attempts to have racial discourse, which mirrored White society's reaction to racialized issues in real-life.

Many people strongly believe that America is in a "post-racial" era, especially since the 2008 election of Barack Obama. These people are quick to adopt a "colorblind" approach to society, meaning they intentionally avoid discussions on race. In their opinion, racism will continue to exist if race *is* talked about. However, as Wilson (2009) reminds,

> we should not shy away from an explicit discussion of the specific issue of race…on the contrary, we should highlight [it] in our attempt to convince the nation that these problems should be seriously confronted and that there is an urgent need to address [it]…our country would be better off if th[is] problem [was] seriously addressed and eradicated. (pp. 141-142)

Believing in a "colorblind" society encourages the dismissal of racism. However, if racism truly is eradicated, why do we continually see instances in media and experience it in real-life? While most discourse examined in this dissertation illustrated the existence of a color line, there was one jarring moment of overt racism shown in the last 20 seconds of episode 11 of *Happy Endings*. A police officer was talking to Alex about a break-in at her boutique. He believed the break-in was the work of an inside person, and he began looking suspiciously around the room at the group of six friends. The police officer immediately honed in on Brad and asked Alex, "How well do you know this guy?" Brad, ecstatic to rub it in Max's face, yells, "Yes, I told you, bro. It's way harder to be a Black dude. In your face. Being a gay dude is easy. You smell that? Mmmm, racism." The show immediately cuts off after the line.

Whereas racist banter was often a source of humor[102] and entertainment in 1970s television, today it seems to be a source of serious contention. Perhaps network executives do not want to alienate their most profitable market with feelings of White guilt, even though racism is an everyday lived reality for People of Color. For interracial couples especially, race difference is often the "elephant in the room." However, network television has continually refused to delve into the incredible potential of these couples.

Instead, studies have shown television portrayals have often relied on presenting interracial pairs as, at best, problematic and dysfunctional. This study is no exception. When taking a critical look through American and media histories, it can be deduced that if media mirror what happens in society, then interracial mixing, especially between Blacks and Whites, continues to be perceived as problematic by those outside the relationship.

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[102] Communication scholar Catherine Squires (2009) points out that audiences may have been "laughing to keep from crying" (p. 220).

Tom and Helen Willis were constant targets of racial epithets from George Jefferson, who simply did not agree with race mixing. He strongly believed and was vocal about races staying "with their own kind." It is not that he was racist against White people in general, just Whites who have intimate relationships with Blacks. He provided no reasoning for this belief; it merely was. However, it did echo what the majority of Americans felt. Perhaps this is why *The Jeffersons* was so popular – it was a Black show that also appealed to White audiences because they shared similar racial ideologies when it came to interracial marriage. With the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Americans were forced to tolerate other races, but that did not mean they had to accept them.

Biracial children are usually shown on television in surprising, comical, or negative ways (Chito Childs, 2009). Children of interracial couples are often used as scapegoats for the justification of why people should not sexually mix and have children – they are bound to have issues related to their identity because they are both Black and White. Historically, under the "one-drop rule," biracial children have been considered Black. Forcing this on biracial children undermines the formation of healthy racial identities and can create conflicts (Jacobs, 1977; Porter, 1971; Spickard, 1989). Rather than exploring the racist notions that two people of different races should not have children, racism is shifted to those who are subject to it. Such was the case during episode 13 in *The Jeffersons*. Allan confessed that he was "use to cracks like that" about his race (from George), but that does not make them more acceptable because they are not new to him. Rather than acknowledge the racist ideology surrounding children of mixed couples, the parents are blamed for creating the children in the first place. There is a "they should have known better" mentality, rather than the "I'm a racist" mentality. An interesting point to note is that *The Jeffersons* premiered eight years after the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* case, yet the

Willises had two grown children. The back-story of how the couple met and fell in love was not presented to the audience. There were only minimal displays of intimacy. Perhaps some of the lack of intimacy can be explained by the conservative television culture of the 1970s. Such is not the case today.

Studies have shown that most validation for Black/White interracial intimacies lies in the "exceptional" characteristics of Blacks, or in perceptions of sexuality, especially for Whites. Many times, the Person of Color shown in an interracial coupling embodies a "whiteness ideal" (Entman & Rojecki, 2001, pp. 159-160). The individual usually possesses normative White ideals (Gray, 2005), making him/her the exception to the rule. The justification for these couples getting together cannot be sincere; it is merely a sexual curiosity of the "Other." "Jungle fever" is the result, with Whites being simultaneously appalled and intrigued. As Hall (1993) points out, "there's nothing that global postmodernism loves better than a certain kind of difference: a touch of ethnicity, a taste of the exotic…'a bit of the other" (p. 105).

Charles C. Stember (1976), one of the first sociologists to investigate interracial sexuality, pioneered the premise that sexuality and sexual jealousy were primary causes of racial hostility. As such, a White woman is a sexual conquest for Black men, one that White men will never experience based on the fact that they did not experience the same racial subordinate history as Black men have (Stember, 1976). This antagonism, according to Stember (1976), is why White men attempt to prevent interracial intimacies between Black men and White women.

Most interracial couples shown on television do not challenge racial boundaries and occur securely within pre-existing racially constructed borders. Both couples from this study did this – Tom into the all-Black world of *The Jeffersons* and Brad into the all-White world of *Happy Endings*. This helped both men slip into the "Other" world relatively unnoticed, in spite

of their skin color, thus reinforcing the barriers that exist. This is especially true when examining

comedic sitcoms, which are notorious for reinforcing racial boundaries:

> It's shocking to see how segregated comedies are…I don't see (race) entering their
>
> personal relationship. It's not a factor and there are enough factors for them to deal with.
>
> It's not a fresh area and I would love it to be a non-issue. (Television producer David
>
> Kelley, as quoted in Chito Childs, 2009, p. 51)

Many suggest interracial pairings in media are no longer taboo (Sopranik, 2010). There is

a popular rhetoric of progress in society that we are a nation with a racist past, but not a racist

present. Bonilla-Silva (2010) noted that "colorblind" racism can often be married to a "the past is

the past" storyline in media (p. 77). The reality is that laws prohibit blatant forms of

discrimination, but subtler forms of racism abound, particularly in media. As this study has

shown, progression in terms of acceptance of Black/White interracial couples in media, and

society, is no better now than it was 40 years ago. Television notoriously continues to squander

opportunities to respond to Black stereotypes and Black/White interracial resistance. Rather than

creating meaningful dialogue that could challenge these "common sense" notions, television

reverts to humor and ultimately reinforces the whiteness ideal.

Limitations

This study critically explored the still-taboo topic of Black/White interracial marriage by

closely examining the televised portrayals of interracial pairings from primetime network

television and exposing the institutionalized racism surrounding each. While it provided insight

into two television couples from distinct time periods, it is not without limitations.

Analysis of only two couples most likely does not capture all nuanced television portrayals of interracial mixing. The two sitcoms chosen were available for viewing and provided a reasonable point of comparison between the 1970s and 2010s. However, a third program from the 1990s would have enhanced the results of this study. The researcher tried, in vain, for 18 months to obtain access to *True Colors*. First premiering on FOX in 1990, the show featured a widowed Black dentist, Ronald Freeman (played by Frankie Faison), and a White divorced kindergarten teacher, Ellen Davis (played by Stephanie Faracy). The series focused on racial issues as they pertained to their interracial marriage and subsequent blending of two families (he had two sons from his first marriage and she had one daughter from her previous marriage). Although the show received positive feedback, it was short-lived and cancelled after season two. The only access to the show would have been through 20th Century Fox Television in Los Angeles, who was willing to rent out copies of the show for $250 per episode. Without outside funding, and with the 24 episodes needed from season one, this show was not available for analysis.

Another limitation to the study concerned the method itself. As with all discourse analysis, this work remains the interpretation of a minimal number of researchers, two in this case, who are aware of the possibility of varying readings of the sitcoms analyzed. As Dey (1993) points out,

> there is no single set of categories [themes] waiting to be discovered. There are as many ways of 'seeing' the data as one can invent. Any distinction has to be considered in relation to the purpose for which it is drawn. (pp. 110-111)

This study was based on selective perception, or the inclination for one's perception to be influenced by wants, needs, attitudes, and various other psychological factors (Severin &

Tankard, 2001). Simply stated, different people can have very different reactions to the exact same message. It is vital to understand selective perception because the findings from this research may have completely different meanings for someone else. However, that does not imply the research is without merit. The findings showed that mainstream cultural narratives continue to stigmatize and maintain racial taboos associated with Black/White interracial relationships, even some 40 years after the first Black/White married couple appeared on primetime television. Apparently, nearly a half-century is not enough time to dissolve the long-ingrained racial fears and prejudices surrounding interracial marriages that were constructed when *Loving v. Virginia* was decided. This remains a vast area of inquiry that should be further explored.

Chapter VI

Conclusions and Recommendations

There are no complex sociological reasons for the taboo still attached to interracial romance in movies. It's racism, pure and simple. Perhaps these attitudes are sometimes connected to an executive's fear that audiences will be turned off by the sight of [B]lack and [W]hite together, but a decision that bows to racism must bear the mark of racism itself. (Taylor, 2000, p.1)

Conclusions

This study, heeding the call of Derrick Bell (1992) to "'get real' about race and the persistence of racism in America," (p. 5) applied a critical race lens to televised media portrayals of married Black/White interracial couples from the 1970s and 2010s. Although the total number of interracial marriages in the U.S. has nearly tripled in that time, representation in media has not kept up. This drought in interracial couple portrayal remains a pivotal question for American television. Very little research has been done that critically explores the stereotypical and racist depictions of Black/White interracial couples specifically, and even fewer explore portrayals of such couples using a critical race lens.

This study found that the interracial images portrayed in the 2010s are relatively the same as those portrayed in the 1970s, highlighting that the more things change, the more they remain the same. Congruent with previous research on Black/White interracial couples in media, these couples continue to be presented as problematic and dysfunctional. These depictions project racial stereotypes as reality and thus aid in the construction and distribution of long-ingrained racial prejudices and fears, especially surrounding the intimate mixing of Blacks and Whites.

The representations work to reinforce the existing racial hierarchy by functioning to serve White hegemony in deviantizing interracial relationships by projecting stereotypes and racial biases as reality. This study provided powerful examples of the prejudices that existed in America in the 1970s, and reminds viewers of the prejudices that, sadly, continue to exist today. In fact, a 2006 University of Florida study found that racial segregation in romantic relationships has become more common, rather than less, since the 1970s (Keen, 2006). So, although there have been strides toward Black and White racial integration, there continues to be a hidden hurdle at the bedroom door. As Harris and Toplin (2007) suggest, resistance to marriage between individuals from distinctive racial and ethnic groups is a pernicious form of bigotry that is nearly impossible to destroy.

Consistent with the taboo against interracial intimacies documented throughout history, the findings of this study suggest that Black and White partners remain a highly rejected racialized group in the U.S. television industry. Such cultural images perpetuated by the media not only stigmatize interracial relationships, they also serve to dehumanize relationships involving Blacks. Recognizing these sites of institutional racism that are often not easily detectable is key to seeing Blacks and Whites as emotional equals, or human beings capable of experiencing intimacy and expressing genuine human feelings (Feagin, Vera & Batur, 2001).

Individuals in these interracial relationships continue to be subjected to a racialized society that does not fully accept them as a couple. Racial segregation in intimate relationships is profoundly practiced in mainstream television and, as mentioned previously, has become more common than not since the civil rights movement. Perhaps, as prior research suggests and this study concurs, adopting a "colorblind" notion of reality causes more harm than good. The fact remains that America was built on the backs of slaves. This researcher finds it troubling the way

a majority of Americans talk, or more accurately, do not talk, about slavery in the 21st century because it is "too upsetting" (Rosen, 2014, para. 2).

It is imperative now more than ever to examine the institutionalized racism that exists in mainstream media, given that most portray subtle amounts of racism towards interracial relationships. As Beeman (2007) reiterates, "Problematic portrayals of…interracial relationships may not be easily discernible to the average US viewing public, especially since such images are embedded in US racist ideology" (p. 708). However, findings in systematic studies of American media, such as this one, suggest that there is, in fact, a negative message being sent out with regard to interracial relationships (Beeman, 2007). This negative cultural imagery is reinforced by the media and may indirectly affect the social and economic status of Blacks and those in interracial relationships with Blacks (Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993). Challenging this negative imagery is crucial if we are all to achieve equality.

Racism is an ideology embedded in American society, and emotional segregation operates within institutions, such as the media and the television industry, to reinforce racist attitudes towards Blacks. Contemporary portrayals of interracial couples may be sending racist messages in a more subtle way than in the past. It is this subtlety of racism that poses a threat to equality, because it prevents the public from acknowledging that racism still exists. Through continued systematic study, racism may be exposed as a hidden, yet persistently viable social ill that permeates institutions, such as the media; hence, maintaining the "privilege and purity" of whiteness (Romano, 2003). However, until we first recognize and dismantle the problem, we will never find a solution.

Understanding racism as a systemic, institutionalized problem in the U.S. is difficult because systemic racism is seldom, if ever, discussed. American citizens tend to offer

individualistic explanations for racism and are therefore inclined to dismiss the subtle nature of racism (colorblindness) and the existence of structural barriers to equality (Kluegel, 1990). At the institutional level, laws and policies have made overt forms of racism by government entities and companies illegal. However, as this study showed, societal/cultural racism as found in media remains prevalent. Because of this, it is vital to study subtle forms of racism in American society and to address racism surrounding interracial intimacies as a concealed and institutionalized problem.

Although there may be a greater number of interracial relationships in the media in the post-Civil Rights era, there is a lack of scenes in television where these groups share emotional and intimate moments (Beeman, 2007). In order to overcome these emotional barriers and the subtle forms of institutionalized racism that built them, these barriers must first be recognized and dismantled. This will require greater systematic examination of the institutions, such as the media industry, that perpetuate racism (Beeman, 2007).

The question now is, so what? Does this really matter? Can things change? Importance of dissecting and deconstructing the images that contribute to racial stereotypes cannot be ignored in popular culture, especially if "the idea of an interracial relationship still matters somewhere to somebody, it is ultimately much better to explore it than ignore it" (actress L. Scott Caldwell, as quoted in Oldenburg, 2005, para. 37).

Recommendations for Future

A recent *Los Angeles Times* article highlighted how puzzling it was that interracial couples continue to face added barriers to marrying (Alpert, 2013). Perhaps more critical examinations of media would shed some light on this phenomena. It is hoped that this

investigation will help to further understanding surrounding Black and White race relations in the U.S., particularly when it comes to intimate relationships between the two races.

The goal of critical scholarship is to expose damaging cultural practices that enable power inequalities and domination over marginalized groups of people. Critical race theory posits an activist approach in efforts to challenge and change the insidious, institutionalized forms of racism that undergird U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Change, however, cannot occur unless acknowledgement of "problems" exists. This study is an attempt to first highlight the subtle forms of racism that exist in U.S. media in hopes of ultimately provoking changes to illustrate interracial couples in more positive manners, rather than as permanent blemishes on the face of society.

The researcher will conclude with a final thought: it is urged that people recognize the difference between "tolerance" and "acceptance." Tolerance proves problematic because it

> doesn't really fight the problem of hatred; it maintains the very structures of hierarchy and discrimination on which hatred is based…Not only does tolerance reinforce structural inequality, but it also sets up a political culture in which extremism, rather than injustice, is the major problem to be addressed in public life…Rather, when the situation is characterized by tolerance, the public is not expected to take a stand against injustice, but merely to tolerate both sides of a conflict. (Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2004, pp. 50, 59)

Loving v. Virginia (1967) made Black/White interracial marriages tolerable at the institutional level. However, media continues to portray racist tendencies when it comes to interracial mixing. Media, as a major conduit of ideology, has the power to shape individual ideology surrounding these couples. It remains a personal choice to accept these couples.

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Vita

Jodi Lynn Rightler-McDaniels, daughter of Philip G. Rightler, came to the University of Tennessee in 2002 after graduating from Seymour Senior High School in Indiana. She graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Science degree in 2005 and a Master of Science degree in 2008, both from the College of Communication and Information. In 2014, she was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Communication and Information, with a primary concentration in Journalism and Electronic Media and a secondary concentration in Cultural Studies in Education.

During her graduate studies, she has served as a teaching assistant, research assistant, and, most recently, as a graduate teaching associate for the School of Journalism and Electronic Media. Her research and teaching interests include critical/cultural media studies, sports media, and media history. While at UT, she has won numerous scholarships, including the Reeder-Siler Fellowship Scholarship, Dr. Herbert Howard Fellowship Scholarship, ESPN Scholarship, Karl A. and Madira Bickel Scholarship, and the Claude M. Tomlinson Scholarship. In addition, she has been selected as a member of the Kappa Tau Alpha Honor Society, Journalism and Mass Communication National Honor Society, and the National Scholars Honor Society.

Rightler-McDaniels enjoys serving on various diversity and multicultural panels, and is currently a member of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the Broadcast Education Association, the American Journalism Historians Association, and the Society for Professional Journalists. She is also active with Human-Animal Bond in Tennessee (H.A.B.I.T.), Habitat for Humanity, the American Cancer Society's Race for the Cure, and the Walk to End Lupus Now.

She currently lives in Knoxville with her husband, Will, and their two four-legged children, Yorkshire Terriers Reese and Tiki.