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Representation of interracial couples on mainstream television : confining identities of race and gender in Heroes

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REPRESENTATION OF INTERRACIAL COUPLES ON MAINSTREAM
TELEVISION: CONFINING IDENTITIES OF RACE AND GENDER IN *HEROES*

by

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Representation of interracial couples on mainstream television

Master of Arts, 2007

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Abstract

Using textual and discourse analysis and a semiotic, narrative approach to television texts, I explore representations of identity, specifically interracial couples. I use three interracial couples on the popular mainstream television show *Heroes* to analyze and explicate the ideological portrayals of gender, race and their interplay as shown on television. Taking into account historical gender and race representational studies on television, I analyze Heroes as a multiracial, current mainstream television show in the contemporary comic book genre to understand the ways interracial couples are represented.

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Introduction

In the fall of 2006, I received several glowing recommendations from fellow trusted TV fans for a new television show called *Heroes*. When I watched it for the first time I found that I enjoyed the show; it looks fantastic, the characters are easily recognizable, and the story action is continuous and surprising. However, something seemed off-putting to me about the show which I could not put my finger on. As I continued tuning in to find out about the various plot twists from week to week, the reasons became clearer. I was hooked on the story and the characters and eager to find out what would happen next and I was deeply involved in the secrets behind the characters' super powers and positions within the complex world of the show. However, I noticed the characters were more like caricatures and the narrative of the show is not driven by the drama of human interactions, but peculiar plot twists and action sequences. I found many of the characters to consist of various common stereotypes patched together to create characters without complexity. I found the two main female characters – an attractive white single mom and a white blonde high school cheerleader – to be particularly stereotypical in the sense that they are based on common, hegemonic expectations of what women should be. These characters were depicted with no depth to redeem them. But of course it is not as simple as that, and as an academic, *Heroes'* representations of gender and race intrigued me to no end. And thus, my thesis research interest became focused upon an exploration of *Heroes'* representation of interracial couples.

Since most would consider me an interracial person – my mom is Chinese and my dad is White – I have often grappled with questions of my own identity. Both my parents

grew up in Canada, as did my brothers and I. I have never identified with or felt a part of any particular race as opposed to another one. My family never addressed any race issue from the inside or about what race "we" are. The only mention of race was when my mom would complain about racism or ignorance she experienced outside of our home because she is part of a visible minority. I have luckily never experienced any type of overt racism like this.

I partly attribute this to the fact that I am "half" and it is not clear "what I am" or that I am different from the White norm around me. I think this is why people always question me about my "background" or ask, "What are you?" I am happy to respond, but my answer does not represent my own thoughts about my identity because my personal identity has little to do with my race. Instead, I tell them what I think will help them make sense of me; that I'm "half-Chinese, half-Scottish" is my most common answer. Because it is hard to discern my race and I can be easily mistaken for other races (i.e. Spanish, Lebanese, Philippino, Aboriginal, Indian, etc.), I notice that people treat me differently and form different assumptions about me based on what race they think I am. The fact that I am not aware of my race, but that it seems so important to everyone who meets me, cued me into thinking and reading about how this matters. How much, and in what ways, do we shape our perceptions and reality based on the appearance or representation of arbitrary physical characteristics? This has been a thematic question throughout my academic and artistic careers.

So *Heroes*, a new show with high ratings with not only one, but three interracial couples on the show presents a fantastic opportunity for me to explore representational issues of race and gender. However, these issues are not only important to me, but also to

a society that continues to make judgements and form reality based on these arbitrary markers often with detrimental effects. This is something that interests me and I hope to explore it in my thesis.

At the beginning of this project, I asked the question: How are interracial couples portrayed on the popular primetime television show, *Heroes*? To answer this question, I start with a review of cultural studies to give a framework for my analysis of *Heroes*. I also explain television representational studies to link theories of ideology to my analysis of a television text. My methodology section covers television textual analysis and various components of this type of critical analysis which will hopefully contribute to thorough close readings of the representation of the interracial couples on the show. My next sections give background to representational television studies of gender and race to contextualize the representations of race and gender on *Heroes*. I next give a brief overview of interracial couples and the implications of this phenomenon in society and on television. My final section is thorough close readings of three interracial couples on *Heroes* that draw upon cultural studies and theories of ideology to show the reasons for, and implications of, these representations.

Chapter 1: Theoretical perspectives in representational television studies

Part 1.1: Cultural Studies

In my project studying combined representations of race and gender on television, it is most useful for me to take a cultural studies approach. Cultural studies show how media culture articulates the dominant values, political ideologies, and social developments and novelties of any given era. It develops critical perspectives by which media are evaluated and appraised. Cultural studies is an important perspective for my project because it looks at markers of identities as cultural constructions and ideology, as I do, and then explains the reasons why some of these constructions are valued or inherently express more power than others. To simply analyse social constructions is not enough; it is important to contextualize the hierarchical dimensions of these to get at a sense of who benefits from ideology and who is at a detriment.

Cultural studies has a long, rich history. It was developed when theories by Karl Marx were taken up by the Frankfurt School as a reaction to the new mass media products of the 1930s such as film and popular music, and later television. Since then, a variety of critical approaches have been developed surrounding theories of ideology and hegemony. More recently, the Birmingham School has continued this work to explore issues of identity within this realm. In contemporary times, cultural studies is a fully fleshed out critical tool that provides comprehensive approaches to culture that can be applied to a wide variety of television representations. The importance of mass media in our society cannot be understated. It helps teach us our notions of self and how the social world operates. Narratives in the media dramatize and legitimate who has power and who is powerless (Kellner, 2004, 44). A cultural studies perspective seeks out these messages

and is critical of forms of domination. Because of this, it is an appropriate tool to critique the important site of television.

As is most obvious "cultural studies" is the study of culture. Because the term is complex, it would be helpful to situate television within the definition of culture in order to pinpoint what would be included in a cultural studies examination of television. Culture can be defined in a democratic sense which would include popular forms (television and popular music) as well as the traditional, more established forms of so-called "high" culture (sculpture and painting). Turner (2003, 53) talks about culture in this sense when he writes of cultural aspects of our lives that are so unquestioned and powerful in their influence that they are almost invisible and unnoticed. Television is part of the lived culture or the culture of the everyday and ordinary. Television's organization and industry, its programs, and the reaction of audiences to these programs can similarly be defined as culture. In this way, television is a significant aspect of cultural life in our society. Thus television studies fits under the larger definition of cultural studies.

Television is only a recent addition to the list of artifacts considered by cultural studies theorists. The broader study of culture has a longer history and has been through a number of phases, some existing before the invention of television. As Brundson (1998, 114) has pointed out, television studies has evolved only since the 1970s and is based on the premise that television be regarded as both worthy of study and conceptually specific and separate as a medium. It is only more recently that the study of television has become somewhat looked down upon less by cultural elites, and this shift has become evident within the discipline of cultural studies.

During the 1930s, neo-Marxist critical theorists Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and others immigrated from Europe to the United States to create what is now known as the Frankfurt School. They inaugurated a critical studies of mass communication and culture and developed an early model of cultural studies (Kellner, 1995, 29). The Frankfurt School was the first to develop a multidisciplinary approach to combine critique of the political economy of the media, analysis of texts, and audience reception studies and the social and ideological effects of mass culture and communications. They were the first to analyze cultural products like novels, radio, popular music, film, fashion, and television as texts and categorize them as part of a commodified and standardized mass culture. Horkheimer and Adorno coined the term "culture industries" to signify the process of the industrialization of this mass-produced culture and the commercial imperatives that drive the system (Kellner, 2005, 29). They criticized this mass media for using dominant ideology to numb and pacify the masses into accepting industrial capitalism. According to them, the culture industries provide a specific ideological function of legitimating the existing capitalist society and of integrating individuals into the framework of its social formation with a minimum of disruption (Kellner, 2005, 30).

The Frankfurt School saw the culture industries, including television, as a threat to democracy and looked upon them with disdain and distrust. This aspect of their approach has been criticized. The Frankfurt School model of a monolithic mass culture contrasted with "an ideal of 'authentic art', which limits critical, subversive, and emancipatory moments to certain privileged artifacts of high culture is highly problematic" (Kellner, 1995, 29). Some theorists take issue with the Frankfurt School

position that sees all mass culture as ideological and debased, having the effects of duping a passive mass of consumers. Instead, current positions in cultural studies see critical and ideological moments in a broad range of cultural expression. Updated critical theories "allow for the possibility that critical and subversive moments could be found in the artifacts of the culture industries, as well as the canonized classics of high modernist culture that the Frankfurt School seem to privilege as the site of artistic opposition and emancipation" (Kellner, 1995, 29-30).

The Frankfurt school developed their model of the culture industry in the decades from the 1930s through the 1950s, which became the bedrock of the cultural studies we know today. After this they did not develop any significantly new or innovative approaches to media culture (Kellner, 1995, 31). Then, in the 1950s, a number of theoretical directions have prospered, and out of these what is now called "cultural studies" has properly emerged. "The first wave of theorizing became known, retrospectively, as 'culturalism' and is mainly British. The second is an European-influenced approach, using the umbrella title of 'structuralism'" (Casey, 56).

This "break" came in the form of a small number of books by British academics with socialist principles and from working-class backgrounds. Collectively, Richard Hoggart (1957), Raymond Williams (1958), Stuart Hall (1964), and the historian E.P. Thompson (1968) later became labeled "culturists" (Casey, 57). Although there were differences in their work, they had in common their serious attention to popular culture. This set them apart from their forerunners in the Frankfurt School. These writers "formed a challenge to the liberal/idealist tradition (culture and civilization) in which values and ideas are essentially autonomous and free-floating, separate from economic and political

life of society" (Casey, 57). But they also challenged the earlier, reductionist Marxist theories that viewed culture as ultimately determined by the economic base of society. The new theorists tried to explain culture as having a complex interrelationship with other aspects of political and economic life. Thus, to use a term borrowed from Louis Althusser, culture is seen as "relatively autonomous," not a simple reflection of economic structures (White, 168). The economic base also influences and has consequences for economic relationships, rather than being simply influenced by them. Culture is actively produced. It is not simply a passive receiver, influenced by economic structures. It can be, in its turn, influential.

This era after the Frankfurst School signified an important change of attitude towards cultural products and practices. These theorists no longer talked of an impoverished "mass" culture. They were studying a rich, diverse and familiar "popular" culture. This relativist position takes the largely non-judgmental view that all forms of culture are worthy of investigation. Thus, the study of television, perhaps the clearest form of truly "popular" culture, came eventually to be seen as a more respectable, if not an entirely respected, academic practice.

The next evolution in cultural studies, British cultural studies, emerged in the 1960s as an approach to culture from critical and multidisciplinary perspectives. It was instituted by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Studies in England. The centre was founded by Richard Hoggart in 1964 and its first director was Stuart Hall. The centre became extremely influential in developing a new tradition of cultural studies through its initial interest in everyday life and later through a focus on ideological functions of the media. British cultural studies situates culture within a theory of social production and

reproduction, specifying ways that cultural forms serve either to further social domination, or to enable people to resist domination (Kellner, 1995, 31). Society is conceived of as a hierarchical and antagonistic set of social relations characterized by the oppression of a subordinate class, gender, race, ethnic, and national strata. Building on Gramsci's model of hegemony, cultural studies theorists analyze hegemonic, or ruling, social and cultural forms of domination, and seek counterhegemonic forces of resistance and struggle (Kellner, 1995, 31). A further explanation of ideology and hegemony will come later in this chapter.

During the 1960s, a rival way of approaching popular culture was imported from Europe in the shape of structuralism. The originators of this different way of analyzing texts were writers such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Roland Barthes. Put most simply, "structuralism is a highly rational, highly abstract, non-interpretative form of analysis which challenges the idea of an essential meaning in any text" (Casey, 58). It seeks to uncover and elaborate upon the rules or "signifying systems" underlying the texts of popular culture and to demonstrate how these rules exist independently of the individual user or consumer. Structuralist approaches developed into semiotics, discourse analysis and post-structuralism (including psychoanalytical approaches) during the late 1970s (Seiter, 60).

Structuralism takes a different approach to texts because it does not start with the notion of shared experience, but looks at systems and structures that produce meaning. All cultural phenomena are semiotic in that they produce meaning, but the meanings are produced by an underlying system of conventions (Seiter, 32). This system is considered

to be a kind of grammar, which helps to organize and categorize objects in relation to each other. This system of signs is not natural but more or less socially constructed.

In the more recent years of the 1980s and 1990s there was a further shift of emphasis toward investigating pleasure and spectacle and interrogating the postmodern condition. This was a "turn toward cultural populism that valorized audiences over texts and the production apparatus, the pleasure of television and popular culture over their ideological functions and effects, and that refocused television criticism on the surface of its images and spectacle, rather than deeper embedded meanings and complex effects" (Kellner, 2005, 40). This contemporary work in cultural studies rejects the "grand discourse" – that is, internally coherent systems of explanation such as Marxism or feminism – and looks instead to the fragmentation of meaning and experience within culture. While there is some strength in this postmodern position, such descriptions often flattens the subject and overlooks the context. Such postmodern cultural analysis is too one-sided and limited by itself, for either its restrictive focus on form, image and spectacle alone, or for its abandonment of critical analysis altogether in favour of grandiose totalizing metaphors.

For the purpose of my project I will "analyze both form and content, image and narrative, and postmodern surface and the deeper ideological problematics within the context of specific exercises which explicate the polysemic nature of images and texts, and which endorse the possibility of multiple encodings and decodings" (Kellner, 2005, 43). The postmodern condition is a small part of a thorough critical analysis and thus should be used in conjunction with deeper, ideological analysis.

For a most comprehensive and flexible model for doing television studies, I have chosen to adopt the work of cultural studies, critical perspectives developed by the Frankfurt School, British cultural studies, structuralism, and other scholars who focus on the dissection of television production, political economy, texts, audience reception, and sociopolitical context in a framework that utilizes multiple perspectives.

Part 1.2: Ideology and hegemony

Of central importance to this comprehensive cultural studies is the concept of ideology. Ideology is also central to understanding television representational theory. My study of interracial couples on *Heroes* relies heavily on explicated the ideological dimensions present in these representations.

In television studies, media studies and other social sciences, the term ideology is generally understood to refer to a system of ideas, assumptions and beliefs. Further, ideology presents "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" (O'Donnell, 281). Ideology socializes people into viewing the way their world operates as if it were natural, common sense and thus ideology is invisible and unquestioned. This is how ideology acts to ensure consent to a particular kind of social order and conformity to the rules within a specific set of social, economic, and political structures.

Louis Althusser is a theorist associated with expanding the notion of ideology and stressing its importance in social life. He insisted on the centrality and inevitability of ideology, arguing that we are all ideological creatures and that since we all need ideas,

beliefs, values and assumptions about the world, ideology is a part of our cognitive existence (White, 168). Althusser conceived of the mass media, as well as institutions like the schools and the Church, as ideological apparatuses, crucial to the maintenance of our ideological beliefs.

Althusser's conception of ideology has been criticized for its monolithic quality. He described "an overarching capitalist ideology operating like a vast orchestra on a single score" (Casey, 121). Another theorist, Antonio Gramsci, conceived of ideology as more flexible and dynamic – a vital arena in the struggle for power between different groups. While repressive dictatorships can control the population by force, the struggle for power and dominance in democracies, he argued, takes place at the level of civil society through ideology (White, 167). Gramsci used the term "hegemony" to describe this contested nature of ideology.

This part of Gramsci's work is concerned with the belief that culture, including television, is inseparable from politics and inextricably bound up with leadership. To more fully understand Gramsci's perspective, it is necessary to know something of Marxist theory. Marxist analysis is based on the idea that society is divided into different economic classes and that the economically dominant class is also the class that rules a society's views and ideas. Marx saw the economic realm of society as its "base" and everything else – what we would broadly call its culture, flows from this base. Marx labeled this the "superstructure" (White, 164). When applied to television, the argument posits that the people receive the type of television they do because of the economic system in which television is produced. The economic system is designed to be self-perpetuating. In the case of capitalism Marx argued that the ruling class could impose its

values and ideas on the rest of the population because of its privileged economic and political position.

Marx also argued that this was a situation where "the majority" of people were exploited and that sooner or later they would realize this, get fed up with it, revolt, and overthrow the system (White, 166). However, by the mid-twentieth century, the capitalist system seemed to be growing stronger and stronger, and it seemed that the subordinate groups were becoming less and less likely to resort to revolutionary action. So it is important to realize that Gramsci developed the idea of hegemony because he was seeking to explain why socialist revolutions had not taken place.

Gramsci was interested in (and dismayed by) the fact that the working class had not risen up against capitalism, as predicted by Marx, but had somehow settled into an acceptance of capitalism despite the fact that there were still clear economic inequalities between the working and ruling classes. He saw that "capitalism had been very successful in persuading people to identify their interests with the capitalist system (the idea that 'capitalism is good for all of us' rather than exploitative and beneficial only to a minority)" (Casey, 117). The capitalist state had done this by offering a series of "concessions" to the subordinate classes – in other words, "buying them off" with, for example, a more affluent lifestyle.

However, unlike some other Marxist writers, Gramsci did not use the term "false consciousness" to describe the process by which this is achieved (White, 167). For Gramsci, societies maintained their stability through a combination of force and hegemony. He saw

> some institutions violently exerting power to maintain social boundaries
> (i.e. the police, the military, vigilante groups, etc.), while other institutions

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(like religion, schooling, or the media) serve to induce consent to the dominant order through establishing hegemony, or ideological dominance, of a specific type of social order (i.e. liberal capitalism, fascism, white supremacy, democratic socialism, communism, or whatever). (Kellner, 1995, 31).

Grasmsci argued that advanced western democracies are more likely to have a high degree of consensus, and the state does not normally use coercion or obvious forms of control such as violence or order to rule. Rather, these are societies where subordinate classes seem to actively support (or at least accept) the values and ideals of the powerful dominant classes.

In the United States, for example, recent decades have seen the stagnation of real wages for most middle- and lower-income Americans while corporate profits have soared. Although this upward redistribution of wealth would appear to be against most people's interests, there has been little organized protest in the form of political support or industrial action. This, critical media scholars have argued, is partly due to television's role in creating a form of ideological consent or, at least, lack of resistance (O'Donnell, 148). It is argued that acceptance of growing inequalities is sustained ideologically by notions like meritocracy. This is a belief – firmly inscribed within the discourse of television and popular culture – that wealth and power are potentially available to anyone who has the talent and desire to succeed (O'Donnell, 148). For every person, regardless of gender, race, or class, the economically successful life is readily available on American television, and most characters deserving of it appear to achieve it with little effort. The notion of exploitation – corporate profits coming at the expense of wages – is thereby erased and replaced by a discourse of opportunity.

Gramscian theorists argue that the established position of capitalism has been internalized so fully that it is difficult to see any other way of comprehending things – capitalism is just there, just "natural," even though in reality this relative stability and acceptance of capitalism is historically fairly recent and only came to be in the late nineteenth century (Kellner, 1995, 59). The role of the media in this is particularly important because most journalists, producers and programmers come from a similar, narrow, middle-class social background and the majority are White and male (Kellner, 2005, 30). Therefore, television is dominated by a worldview which effectively wipes out alternative ways of seeing and presenting things.

Media culture helps establish the hegemony of specific political groups and projects and produces representations that attempt to induce consent to certain political positions, getting members of the society to see specific ideologies as simply "the way things are" (Lull, 62). Popular cultural texts naturalize these positions and thus help mobilize consent to hegemonic political positions. Criticizing hegemonic ideologies thus requires showing how certain positions in cultural texts "reproduce existing political ideologies in current political struggles, as when some films, television or popular music articulate conservative or liberal positions, while others articulate radical ones" (Kellner, 1995, 59).

Although hegemony works by the appearance of consent and consensus, it does not mean that there is no conflict. On the contrary, conflict is liable to break out at any moment and hegemony must be carefully preserved and monitored by those with vested interests (Kellner, 1995, 112). Hegemony is never fully fixed and if it breaks down then it is quite likely that control or coercion will be brought in to maintain the status quo. Some

theorists have showed how this might work in practice by calling attention to the way

"the state can and will bring in measures (ranging from censorship of television and the

press to actual force, such as using the armed forces to control strikes), in situations

where capitalism is under threat" (Casey, 118). But Gramsci's main point here is that it is

much more effective for capitalism to win the consent of the people (by persuading them

through representations in the media that certain kinds of people are "deviant" or

undeserving, for instance) than to lose the struggle over ideas and have to resort to force

(Lull, 65).

So the concept of hegemony is a much more fluid one than that of coercion or

social control. It is a process whereby the ideas of dominant and subordinate social

groups vie for ascendancy (Lull, 64). This incorporates ideas of struggle and negotiation.

Whoever is involved in cultural life is in a struggle to get their voice heard and their

interpretations seen as valid. Some groups have a greater opportunity to do that than other

groups. Nevertheless, despite the unequal power relations, Gramsci argues that hegemony

can sometimes be won by those who are not the economically dominant force and is

interested in the ways that relatively powerless groups might get their voices heard and

win consent for their ideas.

Thus, the notion of hegemony is a long way from simple ideological

indoctrination. It can be conceptualized as an active, though largely unconscious, process

of negotiation between groups, and it can also be seen as a process of resistance to

dominant forms and practices (Lull, 65). The implications of this kind of analysis are that

culture and media are not just products of a dominant class, nor are they free-floating.

Rather they represent a shifting balance between competing interests at different times.

Gramsci's prime concern as a Marxist was with social class and ownership, but through the idea of hegemony he also points out that there is no one, identifiable "capitalist class;" rather, there is an alliance, a ruling bloc, which combines certain interests (White, 67). Feminists have argued that the ruling bloc is largely male, as well as middle-class, while theorists of race and ethnicity point to white dominance. Moreover, Gramscians acknowledge that social formations within a ruling bloc are constantly shifting (White, 68). They come together at certain points, for instance during moments of crisis, but these alliances are also liable to break up.

Thus, many critics have correctly proposed that ideology be extended to cover theories, ideas, texts, and representations which legitimate interests of the ruling gender and race as well as class powers. And so, doing ideological critique involves criticizing sexist, heterosexist, and racist ideology as well as bourgeoisie capitalist class ideology (Kellner, 1995, 58). Such ideology critique is multicultural, discerning a range of forms of oppression of people of different races, ethnicities, gender, and sexual orientation and tracing the ways in which ideological cultural forms and discourses perpetuate oppression. This perspective "assumes that society is a great field of struggle and that heterogeneous struggles are played out on the screens and texts of media culture and are the proper terrain of a critical media cultural studies" (Kellner, 1995, 58).

Hegemony must then be regarded as rooted in contradiction and tension. Media and cultural products are redefined, understood and used in ways not originally intended by their producers. So the ways we understand a television programme may not be those intended by its makers. Television is an important arena of popular culture where such contradictions are played out.

Hegemony theory has been very prominent in the last twenty years as a means of explaining the relationship between economy and culture. It has the advantage of doing this in a way which does not over-simplify the connection between these two realms (Kellner, 1995, 111). Hegemonic relations might best be seen as struggles from both above and below. Hegemony theory also helps us to see that much of what is produced in the media has an ideological dimension to it that tries to serve particular interests.

Cultural studies analyze how media products communicate dominant ideologies to enable individuals to resist media manipulation and to increase their freedom and individuality. As Kellner (2005, 44) notes, "It can empower people to gain sovereignty over their culture and struggle for alternative cultures and political change." Using cultural studies as a tool to analyze the portrayal of interracial couples on mainstream television can be understood as part of the struggle towards a more inclusive society.

Part 1.3: Television representation

Working within the cultural studies framework, and moving in to the most basic level, my project is a study of television representation. In this section, I hope to make clear two things. First, I hope to show how television shapes our understanding of the world and helps to create normalcy from what is seen on the screen. Second, and related to the first, I hope to show what representations really are and their thorny relationship with reality. One must understand television and representation to grasp how they work within and their connections to ideology. It sounds simple, but really all that is encompassed in the phrase "television representation" is very complicated. I would like

to tease out this deceptively simple sounding phrase to get to a clear and concise

agreement of terms for my analysis.

Television is a term with multiple meanings and is currently caught up in

extensive changes so I want to begin by unpacking what is meant by "television." Julie

D'Acci speaks of television at its most general level, as a technology, a social, economic,

cultural, and ideological institution (D'Acci, 373). At the most rudimentary level it is a

technology that produces electronic images and sounds. It is a social institution because it

produces viewers and citizens. In some societies (like ours) it is an economic institution

that produces consumers. It is a cultural institution because is produces programs and

schedules. And most importantly, television is an ideological institution because it

produces norms and rules that tell viewers what is acceptable and expected in any given

society (D'Acci, 373). Television's schedule, its information, and its stories, therefore,

have active roles in shaping the ways viewers think and feel about themselves and their

worlds. TV represents gender, race, ethnicity, age, class, sexuality, nationality, and

religion. These are categories that humans and their social institutions have developed in

order to "classify and regulate the chaos of their universe" (D'Acci, 373). These

categories are also called markers, identities, and social representations. My project

focuses mainly on gender, race and to a certain extent, class and sexuality, but much

writing by television scholars has focused on the other categories as well.

"Representation," as a term, has typically been defined as referring to signs,

symbols, images, portrayals, depictions, likenesses, and substitutions. We have tended to

think of representation as the primary function that television performs. Therefore,

"television representation" conjures up notions of one thing, seen and heard on the

television screen, functioning as a stand in for something else, something "real." We contrast this television representation with reality, believing, for example, that "the electronic image of a man on the TV screen is a portrayal, a substitute, or a reproduction of a flesh and blood man out there in the world of empirical reality" (D'Acci, 374). But, as much recent writing has argued, it may not be as simple as that.

As critical television scholars, we must consider reality unknowable to us as human beings. There is no objective truth that exists outside of our minds; rather we impose order and categories on the world within the limits of human perceptual capability. Although nature does present some repeated patterns – some similarities and differences – we as human beings, are still fundamentally bound by our own limited ways of processing, interpreting and making meaning out of our world. In other words, reality is socially constructed. Furthermore, different human societies train (even inadvertently) their subjects to perceive and interpret reality in particular ways and this social reality passes for natural reality, the truth. (D'acci, 374). The constant generation of representations of this social reality, such as those in the media, and especially television for my purpose, repeatedly enforces the notion that this human, social construction is the real thing. Speaking of representations as social constructs "emphasizes that [they] are mediations – that is, they are formed in the human mind and are human interpretations of some exterior realm" (D'Acci, 375). A study of television representation, then, is a study of how humans interpret reality and how these representations work in the social realm.

To explain this concept, D'Acci (375) uses a gender-related example that is transferable to many societies: masculinity. At a particular point in his life, a boy may start to dress like the men in his family or region or country. As D'Acci explains further,

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> He may then represent to himself and to those around him something like young manhood or masculinity. He may start to talk and move and adopt the behaviours of the men around him, again representing masculinity. Pretty soon, these representations come to seem to him (as they have before to those around him) natural. (D'Acci, 375).

As a boy who is becoming a man, he learns how men act and how they represent a masculinity that exists out there already in nature. The point that needs to be made is that there is no real manhood out there in nature of which this enactment is a representation (D'Acci, 375). The representation, the social construction, has come to stand in for an imaginary original reality.

Representations like this one involving the boy are referred to as "social" representations, whereas other representations such as those involving the spheres of television, film, literature, art, and so forth are referred to as "cultural" representations. Cultural representations do their work in the cultural realm of language, art, entertainment; the realm specific to ideas, thoughts, and the mind. D'Acci (375) argues that even though social representations seem to be more directly connected to our material existence, in fact these two types of representations are of equal importance in the way they influence our understanding and sense of our surroundings.

And so television representations indeed have very profound effects on very real human bodies, societies, and economies. For example, "most of us come to have at least an inkling of what the normative ideal of what a woman or man from our own nation is supposed to look like, behave like, think like and feel like" (D'Acci, 376). This also corresponds with other normative ideals pertaining to race, sexuality, and class. Watching television representations of identity shows us how we are expected to behave.

So the way we see the world is a social construction and the representation of the world on television is yet another interpretation of this interpretation. These representations provide us with lessons and boundaries regarding what is normal and what is acceptable. Therefore, it is useful to analyze these representations to find out what we are being taught and how television helps to govern our interpretations of ourselves and the world around us. Television is not made in a black hole and the messages carried are in no way arbitrary. Television is utterly selective about the things it represents and how they are represented (D'Acci, 376). The forces and pressures influencing the "reality" that we see on our television screens are important to discuss.

The reasons television is selective about what it shows has everything to do with the countries and regions in which it is produced and the types of institutional arrangements (government, public, community, commercial, religious, local, and so forth) that fund or support it. Television shows are produced in socially and historically specific contexts and therefore express and promote values, beliefs, and ideas in relation to the contexts in which they are produced, distributed and received. In the commercial US system, for instance, it is possible to trace direct relationships between television representations and television's economic imperatives (D'Acci, 376).

Media culture in the United States and most capitalist countries is a largely commercial form of culture, produced for profit, and disseminated in the form of commodities (Kellner, 1995, 16). The commercialization and commodification of television culture has many important consequences. First, production for profit means that the executives of television will attempt to produce programs that will be popular, that will sell, and will attract mass audiences. In many cases, this means catering to the

lowest common denominator- producing programs that will not offend the majority of people and that will attract the maximum of customers (Kellner, 1995, 16). Giant corporations oriented primarily toward profit control television in the United States and thus it is dominated by specific marketable genres. However, the need to sell means that the products of the television culture must resonate with social experience to attract large audiences, and must thus offer attractive products. These products must shock, break with conventions, contain social critique, or articulate current events that may be a product of progressive social movements (Kellner, 1995, 16). Television representation straddles this thin line of supporting and appealing to the status quo while at the same time challenging it and hoping to appear forward-thinking and dynamic.

Thus, while television largely advances the interests of the class that owns and controls the large media conglomerates, its products are also involved in social conflict between competing groups and articulate conflicting positions, sometimes advancing forces of resistance and progress. Consequently, media culture cannot be simply "dismissed as a banal instrument of the dominant ideology but must be differentially interpreted and contextualized within the matrix of competing social discourses and forces which constitute it" (Kellner, 1995, 17).

The commercialization of race, gender, and sexuality is an oft-discussed topic in television studies. Ideological analysis of representation aims to understand how a cultural text like television specifically embodies and enacts particular ranges of values, beliefs and ideas (White, 163). To study television representation, we must keep in mind that the main purpose of television production is to sell audiences to advertisers and it will use whatever methods are deemed necessary to do so. At the same time, we must

keep in mind that these cultural representations help to govern our perceptions and behaviours. For this reason it is important to study and take seriously these representations.

Part 1.4: Three sites of television

Television studies is a broad and complex field, and a thorough study of the televisual requires multiple perspectives. At its strongest, cultural studies contains a comprehensive approach for analysing three dimensions: 1) production, 2) textual analysis, and 3) audience reception. These categories are large and connect in complex ways and thus are difficult to isolate. A study of all of them would have to draw from several different disciplines and to take into account many diverse factors. My project on interracial couples on television is too small to thoroughly explore all three of these sites. However, examining what they are in more depth will outline the scope of conclusions I can reach and the limitations of my project, so I can direct future research on this topic.

The first site of television studies, production, looks at television as an institution at the structural level in different historical contexts. Television is a corporate capitalist enterprise and how identity is imagined and represented in the "mind's eye" of the TV industry has everything to do with the historical distributions of jobs, money, and power (D'Acci, 381). The network airing a show frequently has a say in important production decisions, as do the advertisers who want their products to appear in the best possible light. The sphere of production must be rigorously examined for all the ways it depends on conventional gender, race, sexuality, and class demarcations for its production of audiences and programs. The reasons it draws on and circulates particular conceptions of

these identity markers as opposed to others must be also be examined (D'Acci, 383). Television must also be studied, however, for the ways it may produce variations, differences, and innovations in its representations. The system of production often "determines what can and cannot be said and shown, and what sort of audience effects the text may generate" (Kellner, 2005, 12). This is a study of political economy, history, and the social world and how these affect what appears on the screen.

As discussed previously, giant corporations oriented primarily toward profit control television production in the United States. This has an incredible effect on the types of shows that are produced. Television shows of specific narrow genres that are formulaic, cheap and easy to make, and that have already proven popular with audiences dominate the television screens. This economic factor explains why there is "a certain homogeneity in products constituted within systems of production marked by rigid generic codes, formulaic conventions, and well defined ideological boundaries" (Kellner, 2005, 13). Phenomena related to the political economy of television like the corporate conglomeration of the media, political environment, and marketing strategies, to name a few, must be analyzed to help determine the limits and range of political and ideological discourses represented.

The second site of television studies, textual analysis, accounts for television's various forms of discourses, ideological positions, narrative strategies, image construction and effects. There is a wide range of critical, quantitative analysis which dissects the number of occurrences of a word or act. On the other hand, qualitative researchers examine programs and "[apply] various critical theories to unpack the meanings of the texts or explicate how texts function to produce meaning" (Kellner,

2005, 14). A qualitative reading of television is performed in the same way that textual analysis has traditionally been done in literature or film. This form of analysis "explicates the central meanings, values, symbols, and ideologies in cultural [products] by attending to formal properties of imaginative literature texts – such as style, verbal imagery, characterization, narrative structure and point of view, and other formal elements" (Kellner, 2005, 14). Literary-formalist textual analysis can also be enhanced by methods derived from semiotics. This is a crucial approach for investigating the creation of meaning not only in written language but also other, nonverbal, codes such as the visual and auditory languages of film and TV (Kellner, 2005, 14). The textual analysis of cultural studies thus combines formalist analysis with a critique of how cultural meanings convey special ideologies of gender, race, class, sexuality. Ideological textual analysis "should employ methods to fully explicate each dimension and to show how they fit into textual systems" (Kellner, 2005, 14). More on semiotics and ideological textual analysis will be explained in the next chapter.

A textual analysis is only one possible reading from one critic's subject position and it is impossible to predict the preferred reading of the audience. Because of the split between textual encoding and audience decoding, there is always the possibility of a multiplicity of readings (Hall, 1980). However, there are limits to the openness or polysemic nature of any text. Textual analysis can "explicate the parameters of possible readings and delineate perspectives that aim at illuminating the text and its cultural and ideological effects" (Kellner, 2003, 15). Such analysis is also helpful because it provides the materials for criticizing readings that are incomplete.

Audience reception is the final site of a thorough critical television studies. All texts are subject to multiple readings depending on the perspectives and subject positions of the reader. Members of distinct genders, classes, races, nations, regions, sexual preferences, and political ideologies are going to read texts differently, and "cultural studies can illuminate why diverse audiences interpret texts in various, sometimes conflicting, ways" (Kellner, 2003, 15). A standard way to discover how audiences read texts is to engage in ethnographic research, in an attempt to determine how texts affect audiences and shape their beliefs and behaviour, help to create identities, or to discover the ways individuals use cultural forms.

However, audience reception studies have a few limitations. There is a tendency to romanticize the "active audiences," by claiming all audiences produce their own meanings and deny that cultural products may have powerful manipulative effects (Kellner, 2003, 17). The audience should be given credit as active producers of their culture, but at the same time this opposition should not be considered as totalizing.

My focus for this project is mainly on the textual analysis of television. I take scenes from *Heroes* that represent the subject I wish to find out about (interracial couples) and analyze them carefully within those examples. Programmes must simultaneously win support of their audiences and carry out the kind of ideological work which does not ultimately threaten the status quo. I talk about the ideologies depicted on the show and what values they attempt to promote or naturalize (texts), but will be limited in the types of links I can make to society outside of the shows, before (production) and after (reception). However, in order for something on television to appeal to a mass audience, the portrayals must follow a certain logic and assumptions

about the world that must be understood by the audience on some level. Theorizing about these assumptions in the text can prove fruitful in linking the production and context in which a show is produced with the audience receiving these texts. I have gathered some supporting evidence from interviews with the producers, actors, and creator of *Heroes*. I have also researched of the network and other relevant industry sites, to explore the first site of meaning production. Also, I explore some audience reactions through reviews, online forums, and demographics to draw limited conclusions about the third site of audience reception. For a fuller and more complete study on this topic, I would suggest a more in-depth look at the two sites of production and audience reception, which I do not cover thoroughly in this project.

Chapter 2: Methodology: Textual analysis of television

For my project of exploring the ways interracial couples are represented on mainstream television, I use textual analysis to critique how television, specifically the show *Heroes*, conveys specific ideologies of gender, race, and other related identity markers. As discussed in the previous chapter, television requires multidimensional textual analysis to account for various forms of discourse. I use a wide range of methods, including semiotics and narrative analysis, genre studies, and an exploration of visual techniques and stylistic elements in order to explicate each dimension of the show. These methods are used to develop a rich analysis of the representation of interracial couples on *Heroes*.

Recent trends in television research focus primarily on television's social reach or cultural impact – what I called audience reception studies in the last chapter. Many scholars are most interested in investigating television's "effects" on individuals (psychology) or social behaviour (sociology), but at the same time it is clear that texts, reaching millions of people at one time, increasingly cross national as well as domestic demographic boundaries, are also interesting in their own right (Hartley, 2002, 31). What is their appeal? What values do they convey? What textual devices does television use – visual, verbal, filmic, or behavioural – do they use to claim these effects?

Textual analysis of television cannot predict what individual viewers might make of any given show or sequence, but it does begin to elaborate on technical attributes of the "television text" and their ideological function. It is not a scientific method with falsifiable hypotheses, testable observations and generalizable, predictive results. It is instead a type of discourse in which observers who are also participants in the cultural

process under investigation can "talk about questions of power, subjectivity, identity and conflict in the non-canonical context of everyday life, popular culture and widespread dissent from the official cultures and politics of the day" (Hartley, 2002, 31).

Because television textual analysis begins with the viewer, it has an important function of educating and urging people to think critically about what they watch. In a way, it can "'train' aspects of citizenship – critical, self-reflexive engagement with the structures and processes of modern associated life" (Hartley, 2002, 31). The usefulness of such readings extends to anyone who watches television.

Basically, the analysis of a television text begins with isolating objects and actions and attaching particular significance of meaning to these using the framework derived from analytical tools like semiotics, genre studies and formal and visual critique. The final step is setting them in relationship to one another in order to make claims about the ways the object of study is represented. In my case, this object of study is interracial relationships. To understand how significance is attached, it is important to have at least a basic understanding of what these analytical tools are and how they may be employed to draw these conclusions.

Part 2.1: Semiotics

Semiotics is a critical approach for investigating the creation of meaning in written languages traditionally, but also in other, nonverbal codes, such as the visual and auditory languages of film and TV. Semiotics analyzes how linguistic and non-linguistic cultural signs convey systems of meanings. Ellen Seiter (1992) gives an overview describing the vocabulary and rationale of the application of semiotics to television

analysis in her article, "Semiotics, Structuralism, and Television." This influential work has inspired many television scholars and I would like to summarize it here. Those interested in a more sophisticated understanding of the use of semiotics to analyze television texts should refer to this article.

Semiotics is the study of everything that can be used for communication, and is concerned with the way "signs" communicate and the rules that govern their use (Seiter, 31). Seiter describes the separation between traditional criticism which interprets an aesthetic object or text in terms of its immanent meaning and semiotics which first asks how meaning is created, rather than describing what the meaning is (Seiter, 31). This structural, more scientific perspective clashes with assumptions about what criticism in the humanities are, but this method in conjunction with others has allowed for an enlarged understanding of the conventions that make up our cultural products.

Drawing from de Saussure, Seiter outlines the smallest unit of meaning in semiotics as the *sign*. Semiotics begins with this smallest unit and builds rules for the combination of signs. The sign is "composed of two distinct parts, although these parts are separable only by theory, not in actual communication. Every sign is composed of a *signifier*, that is, form – and the *signified*, the concept it represents" (Seiter, 33). This smallest unit of meaning is combined with other signs into systems, which compose texts. These signs are understood in terms of how they interact with other units of meaning or sign systems. A semiotic analysis tries to understand the sign systems in a text and postulates how these systems generate meaning.

To use Seiter's example, the sign *rain* in written language is composed of four letters (the signifier) and the idea or concept of rain (the signified) – that is, the category

of phenomena we reserve for water falling from the sky. The relationship between the signifier and the signified in verbal language is "entirely conventional, completely arbitrary. There is no necessary connection between rain and the concept for which it stands" (Seiter, 33). All signs are cultural constructs that have taken on meaning through repeated, learned, collective use.

So talking about the sign *rain* as "water falling from the sky" is its denotative meaning, but considering how "rain" interacts with other signs in the system will lead allow us to discuss connotative meaning. This leads us into the domain of ideology. In images, "denotation is the first order of signification: the signifier is the image itself and the signified is the idea or concept – what it is a picture of. Connotation is a second-order signifier and attaches additional meaning, another signified, to it" (Seiter, 39). Referring to Roland Barthes, Seiter explains how connotation fixes or freezes the meaning of the denotation; it impoverishes the first sign by ascribing a single, and usually ideological signified to it. This explains why "it takes many words to describe the signifier at the first level – we must include camera angle, color, size, lighting, composition, and so on. But connotations can often be described in just one word (noble, romantic, gritty, patriotic, humorous)" (Seiter, 39). Here we see that deconstructing signs from television texts using semiotics helps us to understand the way signs are understood and also the way television communicates ideology using these signs.

Semiotics stresses that meaning and signification are achieved largely through the combination and contrast of signs. A word does not mean as much in isolation as it does in the structure of sentence. Likewise, a frame of television does not mean as much without the context of a scene. A scene means more within the context of a show. Even a

show means something based on what time it airs, what day of the week it airs on, and the other shows airing before and after it, or the channel it is on and the other shows playing on other channels. All these signs can be interpreted to generate meaning from the contrast of signs within the grammar of the television system. It is from this opposition that meaning arises.

There are two principal ways that signs can be combined: the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic (Seiter, 46). The syntagmatic structure is the way that signs are ordered linearly or temporally. A primitive sentence provides an example of a syntagm: "Girl eats apple." If the linear order of the words was changed then the meaning of the sentence would change: "Apple eats girl" or even "Apple girl eats." Each of these versions expresses a different meaning using the same words. This can also be applied to the temporal order of shots on television and this syntagmatic structure can be analysed to elicit meaning.

The paradigmatic structure is organized vertically and consists of the associations we make with a particular signifier that give meaning to that signifier. A paradigm is a "group of signs so similar that they may be substituted for one another in a syntagm" (Seiter, 46). Using the sentence from above, we can substitute signs to show how readers contrast different associations with certain words. Some examples of the sentence above, but with a change to the paradigmatic sign in each: "Girl eats *hamburger;*" "*Bird* eats apple;" "Girl *throws* apple;" A researcher might ask, for example, why does the girl eat an apple and not a hamburger? What are the implications of this choice? We can study a wealth of paradigms such as this operating in television – for example, settings, props, camera angles and types of shots, and characters, to name only a few. This is the

substance of television which is used to make meaning. Then the researcher draws conclusions about this in their analysis.

It is best to think of semiotics and structuralism as useful exercises for making sure we identify our object before venturing into other models of study. As a descriptive method, "it makes sure we have spent sufficient time with a text before moving on to a series of questions regarding ... the play of television discourse" (Seiter, 63). Semiotics is good starting point, but should be used in conjunction with other techniques.

Part 2.2: Narrative Theory

Narrative theory is used to study television because narrative is the principal storyteller in contemporary American society (Kozloff, 67). Approaching television as a narrative art can help deepen our understanding of individual shows and the medium itself. "Narrative" refers to the way that texts are constructed in order to tell a story. Narrative structures content in a particular order, so that words and images do not appear arbitrarily, but in an order that makes sense to audiences. This structure allows ideas, themes or characters to develop and move forward in a coherent fashion.

Narrative theory is a field concerned with general mappings of this narrative structure. It is "inescapably and unapologetically 'formalist' (that is, it concentrates on describing or analyzing the text's intrinsic formal parameters)" (Kozloff, 68), and therefore it is up to the individual practitioner to use insights gained about narrative structure to analyze a text's content or ideology. However, the usefulness of narrative theory as a critical vantage point should not be underestimated. The world that we see on television is a world that is shaped by narrative discourse (Kozloff, 69). I will explain the

most basic tenets of narrative theory, but again, I would suggest looking at other sources to achieve a fuller understanding of how narrative theory is practiced.

For the purpose of analysis, narrative can be split into two parts: the story, that is, "what happens to whom," and the discourse, that is, "how the story is told" (Kozloff, 69). Put most simply, the story is a series of events arranged in chronological order. The story is the causes and effects; it is what happens on a television show. In narrative theory, each of these plot points are defined as having particular functions to move the story along. I will not go into these various definitions here, but will elaborate on these points in my analysis. Defining these elements and their function individually allows the researcher to pinpoint various causes and effects connected to ideology.

The other part of narrative, discourse, describes the methods through which the story is told. Narration can be described as "a communicative act: to have a narrative, one must have not only a tale, but also a teller and a listener" (Kozloff, 77). Particular perspectives or attitudes are expressed or inscribed in television texts in the way the stories are told. Narrative theorists ask, for example, is the story being told in order? Is it slowed down or stretched out? Are there blocks of time left out? These few aspects of narrative discourse are presented to give a general idea of what is involved in narrative theory. This will be further expanded in my analysis.

I have given only a brief overview of semiotics and narrative theory of television in order to establish the theoretical framework of my analysis. I also intend this as a jumping off point for further exploration into semiotics technique. These perspectives are only two of a multiplicity that I combine for my research.

Part 2.3 Genre Studies

Genre has played an important role in the study of literature, theatre, film, television and other media forms. The output of each of these fields can be grouped into categories, and each category is marked by a particular set of conventions. These genres are recognized and shared by audiences, readers, and viewers. "For the television viewer, genre plays a major role in how television texts are classified, selected and understood" (Creeber, 2002, 5).

For example, if a show uses bright colours with a simple set design and features a family and a laugh track, the audience will expect a family situation comedy and will orientate their viewing to accept a light-hearted show with storylines surrounding issues that are not very serious and that both children and adults are expected to relate to. The conventions of the genre direct the expectations of viewers. At the same time, television shows will play to these genres to make it easy to understand and conform to expectations.

Genre studies is particular appropriate to apply to television, because of the economic pressures on the medium to make cheap, tried, and tested products guaranteed to be appealing and to not offend a mass audience, as described in the last chapter. Many definitions of "genre" incorporate the idea that texts are made specifically to be "commercially formulaic, marked by norms and conventions, and presumed to cater to consumer demand and audience expectation" (Creeber, 2002, 2).

Therefore, using television genre studies as a lens will be useful. The conventions of particular genres help to define the ideological messages present in shows. For example, situation comedies classically follow a conflict/resolution model. This

demonstrates how to solve certain social problems by correct actions and values, and thus provide morality tales of proper and improper behaviour (Miller, 2001). Another example, soap operas, proliferate problems and provide messages concerning the endurance and suffering needed to get through life's endless miseries, while generating positive and negative models of social behaviour (Mumford, 1995). These are broad categories, and definitions of genre become more focused in my analysis.

The genre of any television show can be difficult to classify under one single and "pure" genre heading because of the hybrid nature of current shows, including *Heroes*. Rather than creating "difficulty" this provides an opportunity to make analysis of genre can be quite layered and revealing. Analyzing generic cues and conventions can lead to the discovery of ideology present within shows and across other shows in other genres.

Heroes is an ensemble drama and fits under a new subset of science fiction, which is referred to as the "comic book" genre. This started with the popularity of comic book genre films such as *The Aviator* (2004), *Sin City* (2005), and *300* (2006). *Heroes* is the first to bring this formula to the small screen. The comic book genre favours stylistic depictions as opposed to realism. The comic book genre aesthetic is over-dramatic and unrealistic. In other genres, the purpose of this technique would be to create irony or to draw attention the surrealism of particular scenes (for example, a dream or memory sequence). In *Heroes* however, the purpose of the grandiose displays and visual wizardry is to reproduce the self-reflexivity of the genre, simplicity, and the flow of a comic book. This partly explains why the characters are so simplistic and the story action is so formulaic. The producers of *Heroes* employ these techniques to play with comic book conventions. I will discuss this aesthetic and rationale further in my analysis.

2.4: Formal and Visual Analysis

Visual elements of mise-en-scène, camera language, and editing can be studied to ascertain meaning in representations. Mise-en-scène comes from traditions of theatre and translated literally means, "what's put into the scene." When applied to television, it refers to everything seen within the frame of a television screen. Components of mise-en-scène like lighting, blocking, movement, costuming, and myriad other television conventions can be explored. It is a powerful component of the television apparatus and forms the basic building block of narrative in fiction programs, "influencing our perception of characters before the first line of dialogue has been spoken" (Butler, 93).

Camera work can also be studied in the creation of meaning. The view of the camera controls the view of the audience; the camera does not record images neutrally. What the television viewer sees is dependent on camera angles, camera movement, camera distance, lenses, focus, and colour. These decisions translate a three-dimensional historical world into the two dimensional "language" of televisual images (Butler, 115).

A final component of television style is editing. We are seldom aware of a program's arrangement and rhythm of shots, and yet it is editing that "most directly control[s] our sense of space and time, the medium's building blocks" (Butler, 143). Relating how these visual elements of style go together to each other makes up a show's overall visual design. The power relations of characters in a show can be seen by the way they are positioned on the screen, if they are prominently featured using costumes, colours, or lighting, focused on, or if they are dominating the frame, for example, give a character significance or convey power. The placement of shots or storylines can be

studied in relation to each other to ascertain representational ideologies presented in a show. Related to this is the way a show creates time and space through shots and editing.

Different camera movements, lenses, angles, or framing can affect how the viewer perceives a certain character and has strong effect on the storyline of the show. I will expand on this more in the analysis sections. The visual language of television creates meaning in a complex process, and these are only a few examples through which it can be studied. When analyzed, these components may convey the ideological dimensions of a television text. These are only a few examples of how the complex formal process of creating meaning on television that can be studied.

The methods of textual analysis explored in some detail here are not used in isolation, but rather the three are intertwined to explicate meanings found in television texts. The genre of a show could not be studied without using formal and narrative conventions to define the genre. Semiotics must be used with visual analysis to understand the meanings of the signs or symbols shown on the screen. Genre studies functions in a representational system where the conventions used mean nothing in isolation; without semiotics and narrative theory this concept is incomplete. And so, these methods are inextricably linked and form a multidimensional method of textual analysis that exposes the ideology espoused in the television show I study for representations of interracial couples.

Chapter 3: Representation of identities on television

Part 3.1 Gender and relationships

I am studying the representation of interracial relationships on television, so essentially I am looking at an intersection of gender and race and the ways that television normalizes these particular identity markers. In this section, I flesh out the idea of gender and gender studies, specifically on television, as they pertain to my topic and the show I examine. In the next section I will address race studies, as my analysis combines these two related, yet diverse fields. Gender is an important social marker and often the strongest way people identify themselves or the most prominent marker people use in identifying others. Exploring gender in the context of representations of relationships is very important. First I will look at feminism and give a feminist overview of television in recent history to contextualize the program I study; the theoretical impact of the feminist perspective on representational gender studies and ideology critique in general should not be overlooked. A brief overview of feminist television studies leads into a discussion of gender roles, including masculinity. Then a summary of the ideas of heteronormativity in mainstream society will follow. This overview will hopefully give sufficient background on the relationship and gender aspect of my project.

Feminist studies intersected with television studies in the 1970s. Before this, there was already a long history of feminist criticism in the areas of literature and film. There have been several different incarnations of feminist criticism that are important to understand and are especially relevant to my project of ideological textual analysis. As E. Ann Kaplan (1992) does in her article, "Feminist Criticism and Television," I will briefly detail some of these stages in feminist work, but I would like to emphasize that although

there is a rough chronological sequence, the later types of feminism do not replace the earlier ones. Feminism has changed over the years, but the earlier incarnations still have validity and that is why I am choosing to summarize all of them. Another caveat is that although I describe archetypes of feminist criticism in order to chart the terrain, very rarely will any piece of feminist criticism fit neatly into any one type. These theories are almost always fluid and combine several categories. To note these types is useful for purposes of clarification and illustration but they are not strict or mutually exclusive (Kaplan, 250). I will talk about types or categories of feminism, but also about "waves" of feminism. The difference is that the former are theoretical perspectives that give context throughout feminist history and the latter are marked temporal shifts in the socio-historical imagination that affect the popular discourses surrounding women's issues. The "waves" incorporate the categories feminist theories within.

The first type of feminism, labelled the first "wave," as it is often referred to, is largely characteristic of the nineteenth century. Historians sometimes classify this as domestic feminism in which women valorized what later feminists think of as a patriarchal construction of feminine. However, domestic feminists of this era were likely to see this feminine as natural, and they celebrated the qualities assigned to women as morally higher or better than the male values of competition and aggressive individualism (Kaplan, 254). This type of feminism came before television's widely accepted appearance in the home and not readily applied to television studies of representation.

Kaplan describes another type of feminist research as liberal feminism in that it "implicitly demands equal access to the patriarchical symbolic order: women desire equality rather than subjugation" (Kaplan, 254). The main objective is attaining equality

with men in the public and private spheres. This position envisions an ideal society in which women are incorporated into the masculine public sphere as heading families and corporations (Kaplan, 257). Basically women are not to be seen as different from men, but actually "become men," or like men. This position has a flaw in that it "fails to acknowledge that such a move demands women's complete surrender to patriarchy and its values, norms, and ways of being" (Kaplan, 257). Representational research of television in this vein is mostly quantitative content analysis to determine the frequency of certain female roles and female involvement at home and in the work place to reflect the changing status of women.

The third kind of feminist work, called Marxist feminism, looks at how television's status as an explicitly capitalist institution affects representations of women. These researchers stress the production of the female viewer as a consumer and are interested in how women as a group are manipulated by larger economic and political concerns outside of their control (Kaplan, 257). As a business, television relies upon constructing numbers of viewers as commodities by "reproducing female images that accommodate prevailing (and dominant) conceptions of 'woman,' particularly as these satisfy economic needs" (Kaplan, 257). The objective of Marxist feminists is to show how this system exploits and manipulates women workers and constructs images that either belittle women's work or tries to convince women of the detrimental effects of trying to achieve what men already have in the workplace. Thus this lens sees narratives that construct images of women in roles dictated by them being economically beneficial to society. Research resembles the liberal feminist approach of content analysis, but

"always takes place in the context of television as a profit-making, capitalist concern" (Kaplan, 257).

The fourth type of feminist research emerges from the politics of radical feminism. This position rejects the male symbolic order and celebrates femininity as better and essentially different than masculinity (Kaplan, 259). This approach perceives that popular television exploits and infantilizes women and idealizes the oppressive patriarchical family order. In this perspective, women can, and should, reject such debasing images and gain autonomy and independence from men, while bonding with other women is suggested as both possible and desirable (Kaplan, 260-1). This feminism analyzes portrayals of women that restrict them to oppressive categories and suggests individual alternatives for women's roles as opposed to the social alternatives suggested by the two previously mentioned perspectives.

In the 1970s, what is now known as second wave feminism became nationally visible in the United States. This wave is characterized by a growing awareness in the media and society surrounding particular issues of women's liberation. Second wave feminism inserts itself into the liberal, Marxist, and radical theoretical feminist types outlined above, as will become clear in the following summation of feminist representation on television.

The 1970s was also when *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* first aired. The feminist difference of *Mary Tyler Moore* established this new feminism and took it to the mainstream. It challenged traditional roles of females on American television that previously had "largely relegated lead female characters in situation comedies to stereotypical roles defined by familial relationships (wife, mother, daughter), feminine

occupations (teacher, nurse secretary), and/or feminine concerns (man hunting)" (Dow, 379). The main character, Mary Richards, was unmarried, living independently, and working in a traditionally male-dominated setting of a television newsroom.

This show is often used as a basis for the evaluation of single-woman shows and their feminist implications even now, 25 years after it left prime-time, as it is seen as a forerunner to programs as diverse as *Murphy Brown*, *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City*, and *Grey's Anatomy*, to name only a few. *This character type has been reworked continuously over the past 30 years and has come to be the most visible indicator of the influence and representation of feminism on television. The independent working woman characters are generally young, educated, White, middle-class professionals who are heterosexual and unmarried* (Dow, 380). These characteristics signify, in important ways, the visibility of certain kinds of liberal feminist arguments being circulated at a given moment, albeit watered down versions of them.

This creation of the independent working woman was part of a general turn to more progressive programming that major US networks began pursuing in the early 1970s. Many programs featuring similar characters began to proliferate on television screens. This strategy was designed not only to update the television offerings, but also to "attract a new and different kind of viewer: younger, urban, with more disposable income" (Dow, 380). Women, as primary consumers for their families, had always been a target for television advertising, and the "creation of new female characters contributed to the pursuit of new female viewers/consumers, especially upscale working women" (Dow, 380). Even though this new programming may have been meant in part to show progressive portrayals of women, it is important to note that the main reason for this was

to constitute a type of female consumer who was interested in feminist portrayals and appeal to this very lucrative demographic.

The feminism of these "independent women" is not portrayed by the way she thinks or by the presence of any explicit feminist content in the narrative, but how she lives her life indicated by the changes brought about by women's liberation (Dow, 380). Even though these women were living independently and challenging traditional norms, their role within the narratives still had traditional trappings of "womanhood." For example, Mary Richards, a single working woman, "was alternatively maternal and *daughterly: she nurtured other characters in her work family, solving their problems,* and she received guidance and protection from the sitcom's father, Lou Grant, her boss in the newsroom" (Dow, 381). These supposedly feminist portrayals of woman were still largely confined to *narrow and traditional gendered expectations.*

Another feature of these sitcoms showing feminist lifestyles is that they helped to diffuse the anxiety and controversy attached to social change. Presenting these social issues within the context of a comedy brings them "into a family ('real' or metaphorical) and personalizes those issues, making them the problems of individual characters rather than tying them to social or political circumstances" (Dow, 382). The solutions to problems, even if they are tied to larger structures in politics or society, are represented as individualistic and personal. Thus, these representations *do not threaten the carefully constructed social order.*

A second iteration of television reflecting feminist influence also emerged in the later 1970s in the form of dramas. The crucial difference between the feminist representations in sitcom and drama is that while the former are considered somewhat

progressive, the latter are almost always regarded as exploitative (Dow, 382). They were similar to the sitcoms in that they centered on single, young, heterosexual, mostly White working women. However, most of these were crime-fighting dramas, which were "dismissed by feminists at the time as simply an excuse to feature beautiful, sexy, scantily clad women in dangerous situations" (Dow, 383). These were shows such as *Charlie's Angels* (1976-81), *Police Woman* (1974-8), *Wonder Woman* (1976-9), and *The Bionic Woman* (1976-78). While most of these female characters were positioned to some degree as action heroines who were bright, active, used weapons and were quite powerful and capable of physically besting male villains, their agency and their independence from male authority varied (Dow, 383). Generally the most powerful women in these dramas were superheroes produced by a science experiment and would never be taken seriously as realistic portrayals. In cases like these it is important not to conflate the fact that these women have physical strength with the idea that they are "strong women" who have agency and independence.

In the 1980s, when the public visibility of feminism had waned and national politics in North America had taken a conservative turn, American television's earliest form for representing feminism, the single woman sitcom, was also in decline. The United States and Canada each had conservative federal governments lead by Ronald Reagan and Brian Mulroney, respectively. The politics of the day did much to stifle feminist awareness in mainstream media. However, two shows of the era, *Kate and Allie* (1985-89) and *Designing Women* (1986-93), reflected feminist values in different ways; both of these programs provide a vision of sisterhood and offered an alternative to the patriarchal nuclear family.

The fourth and most recent type of feminism is post-structuralist feminism, where "women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical or biological and aim at transcendence of categories of sexual difference – or at least a recognition of their cultural construction" (Kaplan, 261). Post-structuralist feminist scholars analyze the symbolic systems, like television, through which we communicate and organize our lives. They do this "in an attempt to understand how it is that we learn to be what our culture calls 'women' as opposed to what are called 'men'" (Kaplan, 261). Armed with this knowledge, post-structuralist feminists attempt to bring about change that is beneficial to women.

Much current research has called into question the idea of this traditional division between two distinct genders. Some advocate for a "radical reconception of both gender and sex as cultural constructions, as performances, enactments, iterations of regulatory norms that make *bodies matter* according to laws of human history rather than those of nature" (D'Acci, 378). Television is a cultural agent that produces specific significations of gender that are circulated as suggested norms to millions of viewers all around the world. These norms come from dominant interests and beliefs. This brings to light the power of television representations and thus the importance of studying them.

The emergence of post-structural feminism coincides with third-wave feminism or what is sometimes referred to as postfeminism. Postfeminism is a term coined by the popular media to refer to the period after the second-wave of feminism. Postfeminism presumes that "feminism [is] over, having achieved its goals of integrating women in public life, a process that, according to these shows, was relatively painless" (Dow, 385). This occurred in the 1980s, when the image of the "superwoman" character type in

popular family sitcoms proliferated. These were married women with children who had a professional career and yet seemed to combine the two effortlessly (Lotz, 141). To give some examples, this type appeared in *The Cosby Show* (1984-92), *Family Ties* (1982-89), and *Growing Pains* (1985-92). The appearance of these characters signalled a change in attitude; feminism was no longer needed because women were now completely equal to men. Although these programs did not necessarily include storylines linked to feminism, they clearly featured the gains of previous feminist activism in their portrayals of female characters (Dow, 385), even if those supposed gains were highly exaggerated in their representation.

The other side to postfeminism was television programs began to portray in their narratives the idea that the feminist movement brought problems to women's lives. Television programs like *Hill Street Blues* (1981-87), *L.A. Law* (1986-94), *St. Elsewhere* (1982-88) and *thirtysomething* (1987-91), gave an unbalanced amount of attention to "issues of infertility afflicting women who had put off child bearing in favour of careerism, the dangers of daycare, the difficulty of marrying after thirty, and the conflicts of women who 'chose' to work" (Dow, 385). These shows featured women in their thirties in powerful professional roles who were often coded as "feminist" through career focus, single status, and their traditionally masculine occupations. Yet, at the same time, they were often portrayed as characters with evident anxieties related to being taken seriously at their jobs, to their lack of satisfying personal lives, and to their desire for children, reinforcing the conflict between careerism and personal health and happiness (Dow, 385).

The 1990s saw the continuing representation of competent professional women in ensemble dramas such as *ER* (1994-present), *The X-Files* (1993-2002), and *The Practice* (1997-2004), in which the portrayal of working women was arguably more complex and balanced (Dow, 390). During the 1990s, large casts of both genders predominated and generally a lack of female character led casts on television.

In the late 1990s, media attention to feminist representation galvanized around a new entrant to the single-woman tradition: *Ally McBeal*. The main title character possessed the familiar markers of feminist representation with its focus on White unmarried, professional working women living in an urban area. There are several reasons why *Ally McBeal* was seen as engaging with feminism: it had storylines that dealt with issues like sexual harassment or gender discrimination, and its characters were consistently embroiled in different skirmishes in an ongoing battle of the sexes (Dow, 389). But it is the character of Ally herself that received the most attention from those who wished to analyze the show's relationship to contemporary feminism. *Ally McBeal* is a post-feminist vision in which feminism is no longer necessary because it accomplished what it needed to do. Ally and the other female characters on the show are young, thin, and attractive in a classical way. This shows basic feminist message is to show the women who benefited most from feminism – "young, white, heterosexual women like Ally – feel discouraged because their pursuit of professional success has somehow diverted them from finding the perfect mate" (Dow, 389).

A new kind of womanhood on television emerged with shows like *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). These programs departed from the tradition of representing women's progress through placing female

characters in formerly masculine professional contexts, instead offering female figures with supernatural powers who used those powers in the fight against evil (Dow, 390). *Xena* and *Buffy* were a far cry from *Wonder Woman* or *The Bionic Woman*. These new characters "exemplified what some reviewers labelled 'tough girl feminism,' in which women's physical strength and 'take-no-prisoners' attitude were taken as indication of their enactment of feminist ideology" (Dow, 390). Ultimately, portraying feminism through fantasy characters makes them unrealistic; moreover, the exercise of physical power to triumph over your enemies is not the same as social or institutional change.

In 1998, a drama-comedy about the professional and personal lives of four women characters appeared on the cable network HBO. *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) was considered quite innovative in its non-conventional structure. Because it was broadcast on a pay-channel, it had a unique ability to address sexual issues in a frank fashion. *Sex and the City* had characteristics which refer to feminist ideals, as seen in its depiction of women's sexual agency and its emphasis on the strong friendship between its main characters, particularly when contrasted with their generally less successful relationships with men (Arthur, 317). This program was extremely popular and its influence has crossed into the mainstream as shows on the non-pay networks try to recreate its huge success.

The current television articulation generally equates feminism "with the practice of individualism by women, eliding the importance of collectivity in feminist movements, ignoring the complexities of race, class, and sexuality in women's lives, and disregarding the structural problems that impede women's progress" (Dow, 392). Within the limits of US commercial TV, these programs offer a version of feminist ideology

suited to television's commercial needs, rather than the needs of a feminist politics committed to collective action. And so women portrayed on television are arguably only allowed to be "feminist" or "independent" as long as the purpose is to create lifestyle portrayals to attract viewers and promote consumerism. Their character representations usually do not challenge the narrow confines of the hegemonic order.

Much of the initial research on gender and television focused on representations of femininity, followed by work on representations of masculinity. It became apparent that to study gender in isolation was incomplete because it excludes or represses the myriad other social identities which notions of masculinity and femininity rely on for their production: identities of race, ethnicity, class, age and sexuality (D'Acci, 379). For example, there is an inherent racism in the use of analysis and practices that assume White experience to be the norm and use it as the basis from which to generate concepts and theories to apply to all women. The nature of subordination that individual women face is qualitatively unique depending on each one's social markers and scholars must acknowledge this differentiation.

Something should also be mentioned of portrayals of masculinity on television. Men are also constructed in certain ways on mainstream television that I explore in the representation of the interracial couples that I am studying. Because of the White, straight, middle-class, aged 15-35, able-bodied male's position atop the hegemonic order, his constructed identities are considered to be the norm against which all other identities are compared. Any identity which does not correspond is labelled "other" in contradistinction. In the cultural attitude, males are typically considered the "oppressors," but this does not mean they do not also have gendered identities constructed in the media.

Indeed, as I stated in earlier chapters, all gendered behaviour is socially constructed. However, because of their hegemonic dominance, males typically and reasonably have not been the focus of studies of ideological subordination. I study the representation of men within a feminist framework, as it accounts for the socially constructed nature of any behaviour that can be accounted for based on gender roles.

When I decided to study interracial relationships on television, I looked for examples of these on television. One thing stood out immediately about the few interracial couples that I was able to find on mainstream television: they are all in heterosexual relationships. There is a long tradition of scholarship that links portrayals of sexuality with issues of power. Studies have found that portrayals of "normal" sexuality on television favour traditional ideals, while sexualities of difference are shown to disrupt the functioning structures of society (Kellner, 2005, 38). Sexuality and relationships on television are typically heterosexual. Within the context of a heterosexual relationship gender roles are strictly drawn. Jennifer Brayton (2006) points to the traditionally dominant ways that sex and gender roles, sexuality and sexual identity, and sexual orientation are reproduced. Her analysis finds that men are portrayed as superior and in control, with women in subordinate or objectified roles; female sexuality, desire, and pleasure are negated in favour of male sexuality; and monogamy and heterosexuality dominate as the appropriate forms of sexual relationship (Brayton, 78). These patterns play out on television screens over and over again and the way we see romantic and intimate relationships is restricted to this narrow category of heteronormativity within a hegemonic context.

Many theorists have studied how media representations promote homophobia by portraying gay sexuality as negative. For example, Larry Gross (1989) argues that corporate media culture defines and frames sexuality in ways that marginalize gays and lesbians, and symbolically "annihilate" their lives. Stereotypic depictions of lesbians and gay men as "abnormal" and the suppression of positive portrayals serve to maintain the boundaries of the moral order (Gross, 136). Only recently have portrayals of gays and lesbians appeared more frequently and, as with most subordinated identities television, these representations must walk a fine line of appearing progressive to make profit while not challenging the mainstream sensibilities.

Thus, showing same sex relationships, even with two people of the same race, is rare. Showing an interracial gay couple would be exposing two taboos. There is one example of a mixed-race same sex relationship on HBO. *Six Feet Under* (2001) features David (White) and Keith (Black) in an interesting and layered relationship which deals with issues of race and the performance of sexuality. However, this show is outside of the scope of my project which is limited to the study of mainstream representations, since pay channels are afforded more flexibility than broadcast channels. For the sake of focus, I believe it is more thorough to concentrate on only mainstream depictions; however, this would be an interesting example for future study.

Part 3.2: Race

For the purpose of my research, I define an interracial couple as two people involved with each other in some type of romance and represented as belonging to different racial backgrounds. In this section on race, I will first give a definition of how I use the term "race," a discussion of stereotypes will follow, and then I will give a brief history of Black representation and Asian representation on television to contextualize the analysis of my shows.

It is virtually impossible to embark on any discussion of "race" without first drawing attention to the problematic nature of the term. It has long been recognized that races do not exist in any scientifically meaningful sense (Maynard, 122). Race is not a biological reality, but a social construction. Therefore, using terms like "Black," "Asian," "White," or "interracial" run the risk of making these categories appear more stable and concrete than they really are. Nevertheless, these terms have social meanings that help construct people's understanding of the world and shape their reality. In many societies, including ours, people have often acted, and continue to act, as if "race" is a fixed objective category. In society we notice "otherwise arbitrary differences on the surface of the human body and imbue these differences with social meaning" (Hunt, 3). Within the academy, the concept of "race," as with "gender," has been subject to a process of deconstruction for over thirty years. As a result, it is understood to be the product of social and historical discursive formations (Harris, 66-67). I recognize that race is socially constructed and assume a position where I speak about it on that level. I treat the definition of race as it is commonly used, on the level that we as a society "see" and

understand it, while also recognizing the inherent problems attached to this conception. Indeed, these problems are the reason for looking at race more closely.

My research includes a study of stereotypes. I look at portrayals of race, gender, and sexuality to determine if they enforce, encourage, breach, or violate the typical dominant portrayals. A stereotype is the reduction a group or individual to a few fixed, unchanging characteristics that are used to make a quick call to the audience's attention and understanding. Portraying a character as a stereotype is common on television. Instead of going deeper and showing the personality traits of a character, a program can include a stereotype which automatically cues the audience's recognition. Some stereotypes that are common in television shows that take place at a high school, for example, are the cheerleader, the football player, the foreign exchange student, or the nerd. When we, as an audience, see poms-poms, a team jacket, accented English, or thick glasses, we are invited to quickly identify these signs. Upon recognition of these signs we know what to expect from the character. The show may want to exploit stereotypes to make fun of a character, or they may want to work against them, to thwart expectations associated with stereotypical images. Outlining the purpose of using a stereotype within a narrative will be helpful in drawing conclusions about ideology.

Looking at stereotypes is a small aspect of my research because even though modern television studies often account for stereotypes, it is not as important as it once was. There is now more diversity in representations of race, gender and sexuality on television, so essentializing character portrayals as "good" or "bad" stereotypes develops only shallow conclusions (Torres, 406). The analytic focus on the stereotype may produce as many conceptual problems as it solves. The focus on "negative images"

ignores the complex and often resistant spectatorship produced by the egregiousness of such stereotypes among subjects (Torres, 406). Also, as a mode of reading, the exclusive attention to stereotypes tends to flatten textual objects to such an extent it almost always under-reads their complexities. It tends also to sever particular texts from the televisual flow which overdetermines and complicates even the most blatantly offensive TV moments. Finally, by taking stereotypes, the most obvious form of televisual racism, "as the medium's singular or even dominant form of racial ideology, stereotype-focused accounts risk drastically underdescribing other problematic representational modalities in which racial types figure marginally, if at all" (Torres, 403). Such forms are more subtle and may be just as insidious. Stereotypes are important in small ways, but characters should be analyzed with more depth. Sasha Torres (2005) argues that current television portrayals are less likely to take stereotyped forms, but instead downplay the political context of white dominance to construct racialized figures as consumers. Instead of representing bodies of colour as stereotypes, recent trends in television will use portrayals to appeal to certain audiences to advertise to them and show consumer lifestyles as appealing and normal.

Race studies in the humanities and social sciences have emerged because of structural inequalities which position Whites as the most powerful racial group of the hegemonic order. Throughout its history, US television has mobilized the markers of racial and ethnic difference: in terms of its elaborate deferral in the service of a white normativity in the 1950s; as a symptom of social conflict in the 60s and the early 70s; as an index of integration in the late 70s and 80s; and as a lucrative part of audience segmentation and niche marketing from the mid-80s through the present (Govil, 120).

Whiteness represents the cultural norm, the implicit standard from which Blackness (or

other forms of non-whiteness) deviates. Underlying social structures have always

"privileged whites and continue to subordinate non-white others" (Hunt, 4). Critical race

studies have engaged representations on television to analyze how they construct this

notion of "other."

There is a long history of debate regarding the representation of racial minorities,

especially Blacks, on television. Racist representation of Blacks started as far back as the

18th century; American popular theatre and literature created standardized images of

slaves and their masters. These initial representations were used to "rationalize the

enslavement of African people and to justify the institution of slavery in the South"

(Dates & Barlow, 6). North American society is still fraught with the consequences of a

long history of racial discrimination and inequality that started with slavery. Struggles of

equality continued throughout American history in different forms and remain salient to

this day. The Black American's "experience in society differs from the average

American's experience because prejudice and discrimination have profoundly affected

almost all Americans of African ancestry" (Dates, 253).

Throughout history, Whites portrayed Blacks as inferior to legitimate and

rationalize their enslavement, and after that their inequality, in the United States.

According to Stuart Hall (1996), what has emerged is a system of meaning in which the

terms "Black" and "White" are anchored in meaningful opposition to one another;

"Black" equals "African," "savage," "emotional," "inferior," "slave," and "bad" as

opposed to "White" which equals "European," "civilized," "rational," "superior," "free,"

and "good." Believing that Blacks are all these things arguably makes it easier for the

majority of society to support, or at least accept, the vast inequalities between the two races that exist to this day.

The psychology of the Black-White binary plays a particularly significant role in this ongoing meaning-making process. Numerous scholars have revealed how representations of the Black other simultaneously provoke attraction and aversion in Whites throughout history (Hunt, 5). The Black body is equated with "primal sexuality and has evoked an ongoing literary, scientific, and popular preoccupation with the bodies of Black men and women" (Hunt, 6). Black people's bodies are often objectified in representations as physical, hypersexual, and objects of desire for Whites while at the same time they are portrayed as being mentally inferior and subhuman.

Television is significant to this discussion because it has effects that extend beyond the domain of representations and into the realm of African Americans' material well-being, which comprises among other factors, the social relations through which Black people's status is conditioned (Harper, 62). Because Black people come from a marginalized position, the way they are portrayed on television is should be nuanced and authentic. However, "the mainstream values and beliefs of African Americans seen on primetime commercial television have not revealed unique African American experience but rather the perceptions of White producers, sponsors, writers, and owners" (Dates, 253). The portrayal of Black people on television has been filtered through the interests of the White middle and upper class who control the representation.

Early studies of television in the 1950s revealed that Black people were rarely represented on the small screen, and if at all they were mostly stereotypical, hollow, and racist depictions (Daniels, 133). They were never shown in roles comparable to those of

White people. Programs such as *Amos 'n' Andy, Beulah, The Jack Benny Show, and Life with Father* presented Blacks in stereotypical and subservient roles as maids, cooks, "mammies," and other servants, or as con artists and deadbeats (Gray, 2005, 158). In the racially stratified and segregated social order in the US at the time, these representations both comforted and offended. At the time, Whites did not see these shows and the representations they presented as offensive because the US was so racially stratified and to most Whites, this racist discourse was naturalized (Gray, 2005, 159). Meanwhile, many middle-class Blacks were outraged by these shows, particularly *Amos 'n' Andy* (Gray, 2005, 159). In 1953, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) successfully organized a campaign to remove the show from the air.

By the late 1950s, and throughout the 1960s, the few representations of Blacks that did appear on network television offered "more benign and less stereotypical images of African Americans" (Gray, 2005, 159). Shows such as *The Nat "King" Cole Show* (1965-67), *I Spy* (1965-68), and *Julia* (1968-71) attempted to make Blacks acceptable to Whites by containing them or rendering them, if not culturally White, invisible (Harper, 67). No one on these shows acknowledged race and the cultural and social implications of "Blackness" were contained.

The representations of Blacks that appeared on television in the 1970s were a direct response to social protest by Blacks against American society and the media for the general lack of Black representations in the 1960s (Gray, 2005, 160). Shows like *Good Times* (1974-79), *Sanford & Son* (1972-77), and *What's Happening!!* (1976-79) were all set in poor urban communities and populated by Blacks who were all unemployed or underemployed. They were largely representations of what White liberal middle-class

television program makers assumed (or projected) were "authentic" accounts of poor Black ghetto experiences (Gray, 2005, 160). Gray (2005, 160) explains that "these Black folk were good-humored and united in racial solidarity regardless or their condition... [which] idealize and quietly reinforced normative White middle-class construction of family, love and happiness." These shows reaffirmed the commonsense belief that such ideals and the values they promote are the rewards of individual sacrifice and hard work.

Black-oriented situation comedies of the late 1970s and early 1980s like *The Jeffersons* (1975-85), *Benson* (1979-86), *Webster* (1983-87), *Diff'rent Strokes* (1978-85), and *Gimme a Break!* (1981-87) had "Black upward social mobility and middle class affluence replac[ing] Black urban poverty as both setting and theme" (Gray, 2005, 161). These shows were set in different types of families – single-parent households, homes with cross-racial adoptions – that were supposed to "represent an enlightened approach to racial difference, in that they too were anchored by and in dialogue with familiar themes and emblems of family stability, individualism, and middle-class affluence" (Gray, 2005, 161). Although Blackness was explicitly marked in these shows, White status was considered the privileged status; the status everyone should hope to attain.

As scholars and the general public first realized television's great implications for society, media commentators suggested that an improvement to the television representation of African Americans might be an important step toward real integration (Harper, 62). According to the argument, Black actors should be seen on television more often and featured in roles comparable to those played by White actors. Even though very few Black people in real life actually lived comparable lives to upper-class White people, some theorists thought this would show a situation that Black people could believe

possible and aspire to. Phillip Bryan Harper calls this type of representation "simulacral realism" (Harper 64). This strategy might also help eliminate racism by showing White people that Black people are not different from them and vice versa.

This way of portraying African Americans is exemplified on *The Cosby Show*. In the 1980s "much was made of *The Cosby Show*'s challenge to Black 'authenticity.' With its doctor-lawyer parents and college-bound kids, *Cosby* was a controversial attempt to uncouple blackness and poverty" (Zook, 15). In simulacral realism, the Black people portrayed on television act not like Black people, but White people with dark skin. They live middle-class lives surrounded by White people, and no attention is paid to their skin colour or the cultural and social differences this implies. In these shows, the television establishment "attempt[s] to give to the world an image of an integrated society, which is all well and good except that it is a colossal lie, because America is not an integrated society. It is a segregated society" (Harper, 81). This is hiding the truth of inequality in order to placate people and gloss over the difference so it encourages them to believe that Blacks and Whites are perfectly integrated in society, when this is not the case.

The positive effect of *The Cosby Show* towards encouraging Black people to realize a life portrayed by the Huxtable family is questionable, but Harper identifies a need for a different type of representation of Black people. He argues that they should be portrayed with what he calls "mimetic realism," "whereby television should 'reflect' the social reality on which it was implicitly modeled" (Harper, 80).

However, this mimetic reality has the potential to be harmful and can go too far as to depict Black people in a negative light. Starting in the 1970s, with the exception of a few sitcoms like *The Cosby Show*, American television has tended to anchor its depiction

of Blacks to particular social conditions which are both undesirable and inextricably linked to racially marked communities (Torres, 396). These conditions have included racist oppression and life in the "Black ghetto," with its attendant signifiers: poverty, unemployment, substandard housing, female-headed households, drug trafficking, abuse, and violence. Torres (369) argues, "whether African Americans are represented as falling victim to such conditions or bravely rising above them, such representations attaches them inexorably to a social problem" (Torres, 396).

Television should remain true to reality, but portraying Black people as a problem is also not helpful. The insistence that television "faithfully represent a set of social conditions... as composing a singular and unitary phenomenon known as 'the black experience' runs smack up against a simultaneous demand that it both recognize and help constitute the diversity of African American society" (Harper, 81). Representing Black people as all being middle-class and completely integrated with White society is untruthful and can be harmful because it brackets serious social problems that should be addressed. Conversely, representing the real inequality and disparity that Black people experience is limiting and implies that Black people cannot rise above their circumstances.

A nuanced approach to Black representation is required that shows realistic depictions of Black experience and acknowledges the problems of racism and inequality, but at the same time shows that by virtue of being Black one is not inextricably linked to problems. More complex and diverse representations on television are needed to alleviate the burden of representation on the few images of Black people that we do see.

Although there is much focus on this Black/White binary and the oppressive ways that Blacks are portrayed in the media, there is much less information found on the portrayal of Asians in the media in general, and even less in television studies. This may be because there have been fewer people of Asian descent than even the small number of Black people seen on television. Asians have not been completely invisible in the history of American popular culture, "but what visibility they possess has taken delimiting and disempowered forms" (Kim, 125). This representation is tied to the American socio-historical context and I will briefly outline this, as well as how this is evidenced in television representations.

Throughout American history, Asians have occupied a subordinate position compared to those of Whites. The Asian experience can be epitomized as "a process of assimilation into American culture, from Asian immigrants' ordeal when they first arrived here to their adaptation to racial domination" (Shim, 402-3). As immigrant labourers, Asians have suffered from racist attacks whenever they have been seen as a threat to (White) nativists' livelihood and whenever their motherlands and the United States have come into conflict. To undermine and attempt to control this threat, in a similar way as Blacks, contrasting images of West and East were developed: "strong," "rational," "virtuous," "mature," and "normal" for the West and "weak," "irrational," "depraved," "childish," and "abnormal" for the East (Shim, 389). As a comparatively small racial minority in America, Asians have been "inexorably entangled in a web of economic, political and social complexities and conflict" (Shim, 403). The inequality of Asian people and the negative images attached to them persists in our society to this day.

The lack of multiculturalism on television breeds misunderstanding of racial reality, racial stereotyping, and racist violence against the minorities. Asians do not all share a common origin. For example, Chinese, Koreans, and Filipinos are distinct in language, religion, and culture. However, the public does not usually distinguish among Asian subgroups and so anti-Asian violence and discrimination concerns the entire group, crossing class, cultural, and generational divisions (Shim, 405). Asian America is a distinct and discrete entity. It is "not a sub-set of China, Japan or Vietnam, but a constituency that has lived, breathed and contributed to the nation for over a century" (Pham, 2). In addition, not all Asians are recent immigrants, as many assume. Many Asian families have been in North America for more than 100 years. Despite this, Asians who consider themselves North Americans are still considered foreign and "other" (Shim, 205).

Westerners have tried to control and stereotype non-Whites' sexuality as a form of racial domination. The ideology of "white racial domination directs ... presentation of Asian females as under white male patronage" (Shim, 390). Sexist and racist stereotypes of "subservient and sexual" Asian women satisfied the needs of Western colonialism. Two archetypes have emerged that are still prevalent in our society to this day: the "lotus blossom" or "China doll," a "sexual-romantic object" who are utterly feminine, delicate, and submissive, and her opposite, the "dragon lady" who is cunning, manipulative and evil (Sun, 659). Both of these types are hypersexualized, but the former is passive and subservient while the latter is aggressive and dangerous.

Asian women characters in popular culture do not often have love relationships with men of their own race. On-screen romance between Asian men and White women is

scarce because it ruptures White hegemony (Hamamoto, 1994, 39). In fact, for Asian men, the sexual stereotype is much different than that for women. Asian males are seen to this day as sexually deviant, paradoxically either asexual or as a rape threat to White women. (Sun, 657). The emasculation of Asian males continues today in the form of nerdy adolescent math geniuses and brainy scientists who speak fortune-cookie English (Sun, 658). Asians were portrayed as effeminate and comical, so that they would not be rejected by the audience (Shim, 391). Martial arts masters, mostly played by Chinese actors and not Chinese Americans such as Jet Li and Jackie Chan, can physically best their opponents, but almost never play romantic roles (Sun, 658). Regardless of the direction of sexual distortion, these stereotypes ultimately serve the same goal, as abnormalities that show us that minorities should be contained.

Since the 1960s, Asian representation on television has been practically non-existent, and when they are depicted, they are always portrayed as foreigners. There were three shows that portrayed Asian faces during the 1960s, *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (1969-72), *Bachelor Father* (1957-62), and *Bonanza* (1959-73). In all three of these the Asian characters are subordinated literally as servants, but also conceived of as foreigners and effeminate (Kim, 131).

In the 1970s, the most visible Asian face was that of actor Pat Morita, who played Arnold on *Happy Days* (1974-84). The third-generation Japanese American actor played "a spewing, spatula waving cook who could not even pronounce his own name" (Kim, 133).

Asians on television were still virtually non-existent by the 1980s. One notable program, *Gung Ho* (1986-87), which only lasted one season, was a show about Japanese

auto-workers who move to the US to operate an American plant. While a seeming attempt as a gesture off outreach to Asian audience members, "there was an underlying tension concerning competition with Japan in a strained, even failing American economy" (Kim, 134).

In 1994, the ABC sitcom *All-American Girl* (1994-95) was a break-through in Asian representation on television because it was the first television show that featured an Asian family as the primary characters. Its star was the young stand-up comic, Margaret Cho. Her material included stories, impressions, and jokes about what it was like for her growing up as an Asian and an American, her Korean grandparents, and immigrant parents, especially her mother (Kim, 135). Thus the main narrative structure is based on a binary opposition between old country values and American values, indicated in the struggle between a mother and a daughter who are intolerant of each other's ideals. Through the emphasis on the differences between the two sets of values, Asians are seen as all the more alien (Shim, 400). Asian viewers had a mixed reaction to this show: "elation and shock that the show was even on, and disappointment to the point of embarrassment that the show was bad" (Kim, 135). What might explain this failure is that this show was meant for a White audience, and not an Asian audience which comprise only a small part of the television viewing public.

As infrequently as Asians appear on television screens, the few representations from the 1990s to the present can be summarized as stereotypes that always reinforce their perceived "otherness." Asians are used as "ethnic background scenery" to convey mystery, their "inscrutability" is featured in the way they are always attached to mystical,

ancient magic and martial arts, and these perceived differences are emphasized for comic relief (Shim, 400-1).

In the past few years, there have not been many successful prime time network programs that have Asian characters in recurring roles. Since 2000, some key configurations of Asian representations have emerged. First, Asian females are in the vast majority – Asian men basically do not exist in popular media culture. Second, Asians are seen mostly in programs that air on smaller networks like Fox, WB, HBO, UPN, and MTV. (Kim, 137).

The most prominent Asian character is Ling Woo (Lucy Liu) on *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), a both critically and commercially acclaimed show which revolves around workers at a law firm. Ling Woo is described as tough, rude, candid, aggressive, sharp-tongued and manipulative (Sun, 661). She breaks the "China Doll" stereotype, but Ling is a "dragon lady" of sorts. She is hypersexual and she stands out for her kinky sexual preferences and (Asian) techniques. Consistent with a history of representation that scarcely ever shows Asian men as sexually desirable, Ling has romantic involvements with both White men and a Black man, "but no 'yellow' man" (Sun, 662). Ling, the most visible Asian character on television in recent history, is highly stereotyped and cannot rise above the typical narrative tropes associated with Asians.

There have been other successful recurring roles for Asian women on primetime. One is Dr. Jing-Mei Chen (Ming-Na Wen) on *ER* (1994-present). Appearing in the 1994-95 season, Dr. Chen was a competitive, hard-working, insecure, wealthy American medical student. She returned as a physician in 2004. Upon her return she is pregnant, unmarried, and the father of her unborn baby is Black (Kim, 137).

Another prime-time program with an Asian American character is the *Gilmore Girl* (2000-present). As a secondary character, Lane Kim (Keiko Agena) is the young friend of main White character Rory Gilmore (Alexis Bledel). Through her friendship with Rory, viewers see Lane's struggles for independence not simply as a teenager, but as a Korean American teenager (Kim, 137). Lane's conflicts with her mother when trying to balance her "Americaness" and her "Koreaness" are similar to Margaret's from *All-American Girl*. Lane feels pressure to be obedient and traditional.

On *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-present), Sandra Oh plays a Korean American surgical intern, Cristina Yang, who has a large role within the ensemble cast. Cristina's character contradicts the "lotus flower" type, as she is competitive, bossy, and crude. She does not exactly fit the "dragon lady" character either. She dates and was engaged to a Black attending surgeon with whom she works with. Even though this is a much different incarnation of an Asian woman on television, Cristina's character often provides a foil for the lead White character and Cristina's relationships and stories are always compared to the "normative" ones of the White leads.

Asian women, though few, outnumber men on television. A main character on *Martial Law* (1998-2000), is Asian, not American, and though capable and charming, he fulfills an expected martial arts trope (Kim, 138). The short-lived *Vanishing Son* (1994) is about a Chinese man who flees the US; performing martial arts is his key attribute. Harry Kim, a character on *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001), is a meek scientist, but was allowed range on the show past the one-dimensional stereotype of his racial predecessors. Very recently there have been three Asian American men who have materialized on primetime: John Cho in *Off Centre* (2001-2002), Eddie Shin in the very-short lived *That 80s Show*

(2002), and Bobby Lee who joined the cast of the late night sketch comedy show, *Mad TV* (1995-present) in 2001. Only Bobby Lee is still on the air, but his roles on the show are limited in comparison to the rest of the cast (Kim, 139). Moreover, he plays "strange" characters like communist leader Kim Jong Il, or often silent, lurking characters like the demon child from the Japanese horror film *The Grudge*. The new serial drama *Heroes* (2006-present), which I will discuss in greater detail later, features a Japanese male character in a main role as part of a large ensemble cast in a top-rated show, a first for mainstream television.

Even after 150 years of Asian presence on US soil, on TV they are still portrayed as "foreigners" who speak pidgin English, preserve their "old country traditions," and refuse to assimilate into American culture (Shim, 400). They appear in designated sexual stereotypes and they fulfill tropes associated with mysticism or martial arts. Aside from all these stereotypes of Asians, it is difficult to find them in the media. This phenomenon reflects the fact that the White-dominated media ignore the history of Asians living in North American; they are regarded as foreign and "other," and media corporations are mostly uninterested in appealing to the Asian public because they do not comprise a large enough audience segment.

Part 3.3: Interracial Couples

I look at couples on three couples on *Heroes*, a popular television show airing on NBC. For my study, I am interested in analyzing the portrayals on shows that many people watch, and so I have chosen *Heroes* because it is mainstream, airs weekly on major networks, and enjoys good ratings. All of these characteristics speak to its popularity and accessibility.

Significant in the selection of this show, is that it portrays three mixed race couples as characters, and its cast is multi-ethnic. Showing mixed-race couples on television is quite rare, but I was lucky to come up with this recent popular example. Outside of *Heroes*, there are only a few other interracial couples who are regular characters on shows still airing on *Scrubs* (2001-present), *Lost* (2004-present), *My Name is Earl* (2005-present), and *Grey's Anatomy*. The fact that portrayals of mixed-race couples are so lacking on television and when they do appear they are almost always secondary characters is in itself significant and thus the topic lends itself to further study. Why is there so little popular representation of this common cultural phenomenon? In the future, I would suggest further studies of these other representations of interracial couples.

Interracial relationships, like same sex relationships are considered outside the realm of heteronormativity. Interracial relationships are emerging recently as a phenomenon in social science and they are becoming more accepted. Still considered a taboo subject that might scare off conservative viewers, television shows have not been eager to show people of different backgrounds in intimate relationships and mixed race couples are rarely visible on television. One of the first examples took place on *Star Trek:*

The Original Series (1966-69). A 1968 episode showed a kiss between Lieutenant Uhura (Nichelle Nichols), a Black woman, and Captain Kirk (William Shatner), a White man. Although in the show's narrative this kiss was not voluntary or forced by alien mind control, it was considered quite groundbreaking for its time and provoked some viewer protest. Even less visible and less prominent than same sex couples, interracial couples have only become visible on mainstream television very recently.

When Black actors are featured on television, it is often as objects as sexual desire. Moreover, contact between Black or Asian actors and other White characters (hugging, caressing, kissing, implied sexuality) is "nearly taboo" which works effectively to disconnect images of Black and Asian sexuality from romance ideals (Hunt, 20). Even when a person of colour is in a relationship with a White person in a storyline, this romance is not often physically enacted on television.

As opposed to fictional television representations of mixed-race couples, in real life, interracial relationships are becoming more common, but still are more rare than intraracial relationships (Childs, 5). During the days of slavery, interracial relationships were highly taboo and anti-miscegenation laws kept interracial mixing from acceptance and awareness in the mainstream, although it did happen very often in secret. It was not until 1967 that the United States abolished all laws against interracial marriage (Childs, 1). This was also the year that the Academy Award winning *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, a film that features a series of conversations between a White daughter, her Black fiancé, and her parents, was released. Since then, significant changes have occurred in the realm of race relations; however, racial boundaries still exist.

Fear of racial mixing resulted in miscegenation laws in the post-slavery United States. Prohibiting interracial marriages while condoning interracial sex between White men and Black women reinforced gender as well as racial hierarchies. White men were "protected from any legal responsibilities for their mixed-race children, while White women were given the burden of upholding 'racial purity'" (Childs, 5). Preventing relationships between Black men and White women became the responsibility not only of the state, but more immediately of White men, who in their role as fathers, brothers, and husbands were expected to control the behaviours of women in their family. Segregation laws were linked to the "the maintenance of racial purity, implying only rigid segregation of the races could protect White women from 'bestial' black men" (Romano, 30).

Current trends in trade journals and the common assumptions of the day use the appearance of interracial couples as a sign to herald that racial borders or barriers no longer exist. This "color-blind discourse, or color-blindness, has been identified by various scholars as the dominant ideology based on a belief that refusing to see or acknowledge race is politically correct and humanistic" (Childs, 2). This modern discourse insists that by not acknowledging race or racial difference, the problems of race disappear. However, Erica Chito Childs (2005) argues that interracial couples enable us to see how racial borders still exist and should be acknowledged in order to overcome them. She asks, "If love erases racial borders and racial borders are eroding, then why are black-white couples capable of eliciting stares and still so uncommon?" (Childs, 3). Society is still stratified by race, and interracial couples exist on this racial divide. I study the representation of interracial couples to explore and make visible the racial borders in which Childs speaks about. Television attempts to smooth over the inequalities of race

and gender in our society, and so I hope to search them out and expose them. Maybe this will help, as she suggests, in overcoming them.

Many studies have found that Whites, especially, consider an interracial relationship involving a Black person to be much less acceptable than one involving a Latino or Asian person (Childs, 4). This points to the fact that Black-White relationships represent a far greater transgression than those between other ethnic and "racial" groups. In fact, the use of the descriptor "interracial" in the media used to describe a relationship usually denotes a White person with and a Black person or a White person and a person of any other race except White. However, interracial relationships with different configurations of race besides the Black-White binary are considered taboo as well. The way that any identity is portrayed on television is politically and culturally significant. This is important to keep in mind as my study includes Black-White couples as well as other mixed configurations.

Opposition to mixed-race relationships still exists; but as with contemporary racism, it is also more subtle and harder to see. This has been studied in the everyday social interactions of people (Romano, 5) and should be explored in the media as well. The fact that relations between races are becoming more common in both the personal lives of people in society their appearance on television means it is important to consider the various discourses of race that figures into interracial representation.

The importance of studying the representations of race, gender and sexuality has been well established in the field of television studies. Newer studies on multiracial representation on television have also been undertaken. However, the ways interracial relationships are portrayed on fictional mainstream television have never been

considered. Because the topic of my study is original, and the television show I examine is recent, there is a possibility that my research will yield results not yet considered before. In addition to covering this new site of interracial relationship portrayals, my study will add to the existing body of ideology and identity studies of television.

The tradition of television studies has always been one of looking at the relationship between social phenomena present in the real world, especially at groups who have traditionally been oppressed or placed lower in the social hierarchy and those represented on TV. These studies are very important because of the prevalence of television in our society and the potential effect of representation on our social world. As outlined in previous chapters, studies of portrayals of women were spurned by the feminist movement of the 1970s and studies of race representations were born out of the inequality of Blacks in America. Television is a unique medium in the sense that it tends to interpret and reflect back issues in our society, however distorted these representations may be, and point to small truths within our culture from a new perspective. In the age of postmodernism and globalization, issues surrounding multiculturalism and mixed race relationships are at the forefront. This is a timely issue and so a study of the portrayal of mixed race couples is the next logical step in the study of representations of race, gender, and sexuality on television.

Chapter 4: 'In his own image': Confining identities of race, gender and interracial relationships in *Heroes*

Part 4.1: Introduction to *Heroes*

Heroes is a show that appears progressive on the surface, but with critical analysis it becomes apparent that its representations are conventional and cater directly to mass audiences in order to entertain, but not challenge hegemony or the status quo. Even though *Heroes* showcases a culturally diverse cast and versions of physically strong women, which appeals to progressive audiences, on closer inspection it reinforces race and gender in stereotypical and superficial ways. *Heroes'* version of interracial romance is shallow, despite an effort to make visible experiences that are often lacking in mainstream media.

Heroes is an hour-long ensemble serial drama about "ordinary" people who find out they have super powers. The first episode, "Genesis: In His Own Image," aired on September 25th, 2006 at 9:00 pm on NBC. According to a NBC press release (September 2006), it premiered as the night's most watched program among adults aged 18-49, attracting 14.3 million viewers overall in America and receiving the highest rating for any NBC drama premiere in five years. In the remaining twenty-three episodes of the first season, *Heroes* continued to gain massive audiences and at this date is NBC's top rated scripted show in their 2006-2007 primetime line-up. It ranked twenty-first in the season's ratings, with an average of 14.3 million viewers in the United States (Hollywood Reporter, 2007).

As well as being a popular success, *Heroes* has received high critical acclaim. The American Film Institute named *Heroes* one of the Ten Best Television Programs of the year, and the Writers Guild of America nominated the program for Best New Series of

2007. *Heroes* was nominated for a Golden Globe Award for best television drama and Masi Oka (Hiro Nakamura) was nominated for Best Supporting Actor on a TV Series. Neither the series nor the actor won; the show lost out to ABC's popular medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*. The NAACP nominated *Heroes* for an Image Award in the Outstanding Drama Series category, but the show again lost to *Grey's Anatomy*. *Heroes* was nominated for eight categories at the 2007 Emmy awards, including Outstanding Drama Series, but *Heroes* was unsuccessful in every category. The Television Critics Association awarded *Heroes* with the prestigious Outstanding Program of the Year title.

Heroes follows about fifteen characters in several interconnected story lines. The plotline is ambitious; there is one overarching plot that unites several smaller plots and these smaller plots are often intertwined, allowing the characters from the ongoing storylines to meet and interact. The storylines are complex and fluid so for the purposes of exploring mixed-race relationship representation, I will only be focusing on a few of these involving specific characters.

The premise of the show is that certain people in the world have been granted super powers through some mystery of genetics. These powers are telepathy, instant regeneration, manipulation of the time-space continuum at will, flying, and predicting the future (through painting pictures), to name a few. The show jumps from story to story to show how each character deals with finding out they have a super power and learning how to use it. Even though there are characters in the story from India and Tokyo, the bulk of the story action takes place in various locations in the United States and is centered in New York City.

Tim Kring is credited on press releases, websites, and press material for *Heroes* as the "creator." In the opening introduction sequence of every episode, the credits show only "HEROES" and "CREATED BY TIM KRING," with no other information about the cast or crew is included. Instead this information is superimposed on the bottom of the screen after the commercial break as the episode action begins. Thus, the cast and crew is downplayed in favor of crediting the creator. Kring's name is essential for branding and for the audience's understanding of the show. His name as the creator brings about certain expectations. Although the other writers, crew, cast and multiple others greatly affect the show, Kring can be considered the main force behind *Heroes*.

Kring has a wealth of experience developing and writing television in the past and is no stranger to creating commercially successful television shows. Before he created *Heroes* he was a writer and creator of the mainstream television dramas *Chicago Hope* and *Providence* in the 1990s and *Crossing Jordan* in 2001, all popular successes. He seems to have the television formula down to a science and this has culminated in the success of *Heroes*.

According to an interview with ComicCon 2007, Kring created *Heroes* because it was part of his *Crossing Jordan* development deal with NBC to also create another show. He explains that he "wanted to do something that was a large ensemble serialized show because they were the ones that I found to be the most exciting and interesting shows on television" (ComicCon, 2007). He freely admits that his show was partly an attempt to recreate the success of *Lost*, which explains why "*Heroes* follows a similar formula: a dozen central characters, a touch of the supernatural, and an overarching mystery with clues dribbled out gradually" (Kushner, 2007). Every week, the show advertises a new

plot point or surprise event to draw people in to watch. Whether for example, a new "hero" is introduced or a regular character is killed off, the audience is told ahead of time and they must tune in to find out who the new hero is and what is his/her super power of which main character is killed off. This method is used not to enhance the plot, but to promise a juicy piece of information to entice audience members to their television screens.

Another reason to make a show in the long-form, multi-character format is the recent financial success of DVD sales of TV shows. Kring says of this trend, "From a financial standpoint, there is now a whole revenue stream that wasn't there ten years ago. The normal model was you did these quasi stand-alone episodes and then sold the entire package into syndication" (ComicCon, 2007). The DVD revenue stream has replaced the idea of a big sale into syndication, so it is becoming more common to make continuing serials in order for a television show to be lucrative in DVD sales. The motivation of the format of *Heroes* was mainly to create a financial success, but this has unintended effects on the representation of identity.

Tim Kring effectively generates a big audience and thus big revenues through *Heroes* by guaranteeing both a large mainstream audience as well as a cult following. Other TV creators who bridged the mass/niche divide – *Lost*'s JJ Abrams, Ron Moore of *Battlestar Galactica*, Joss Whedon of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – were intimately familiar with the sci-fi and horror genres they reinvented. Kring, however, had to compensate for his ignorance of the genre by hiring a team of comic-savvy writers counterbalance his mainstream sensibilities. *Heroes*' writers include writing veterans of *Smallville* (2002-present), a popular show also of the comic book genre. As a result,

Heroes is a show that straddles two worlds, bringing "geek sensibility to the masses and mainstream TV polish to the caped-crusader crowd" (Kushner, 2007). Despite a lack of knowledge about specific sci-fi genres, Kring created a show that used a popular formula that was guaranteed to appeal to everyone and thus make a lot of money, for himself and NBC.

When asked about writing a show with nine main characters and so many story arcs, Tim Kring says he thought it would be tough "trying to figure out how to cut between these stories and wondering if people would remember what's going on if you come back twenty minutes later" (Elliot, 2007). This is a common concern for serialized shows with many characters. Like many shows of this genre, Kring uses a classic television formula to get around this problem. He uses stereotypes and powerful cultural tropes which are quickly and easily recognized by the audience. The characters on *Heroes*, he explains, "are real archetypes. They are big block characters. There's a cheerleader, and a cop, and a dreamer, and I think it's why the show was successful. It didn't take a long time to get to know who these people were, like a lot of serialized television" (Elliot, 2007). As a result, the characters are shallow depictions meant to play and build upon cultural biases. They are created so that the audience can understand easily, while not breaking with conventions to challenge norms of behaviours for these "types." The effect is a show with many likable characters that are easy to understand and identify with. People watch the show mainly for the surprising plot twists, special effects, and comic book and super hero allusions, but *Heroes* does not rely on characterization to attract viewers like so many other television dramas.

This show appears progressive because there is a racially diverse cast, several interracial relationships, and several "strong" female characters, but this is superficial. Looking deeper into the show, these characters present contradictory messages. Because *Heroes* has to accommodate so many characters and story lines, the show must lean on stereotypes and stock characters to fit a lot of information into the 43-minute limit of each show. Because of the comic book genre conventions used, none of the characters have any real depth, especially not the women or people of colour. A so-called "normal" sexuality is reinforced as being heterosexual and monogamous and any sexualities that do not fit into that narrow type are implied as deviant. Women are portrayed in a way that downplays their agency or free will, and if they do possess these qualities, they are punished for them. To show this, there are three interracial couples on *Heroes* I'd like to focus on.

Part 4.2: Simone Deveaux and Peter Petrelli
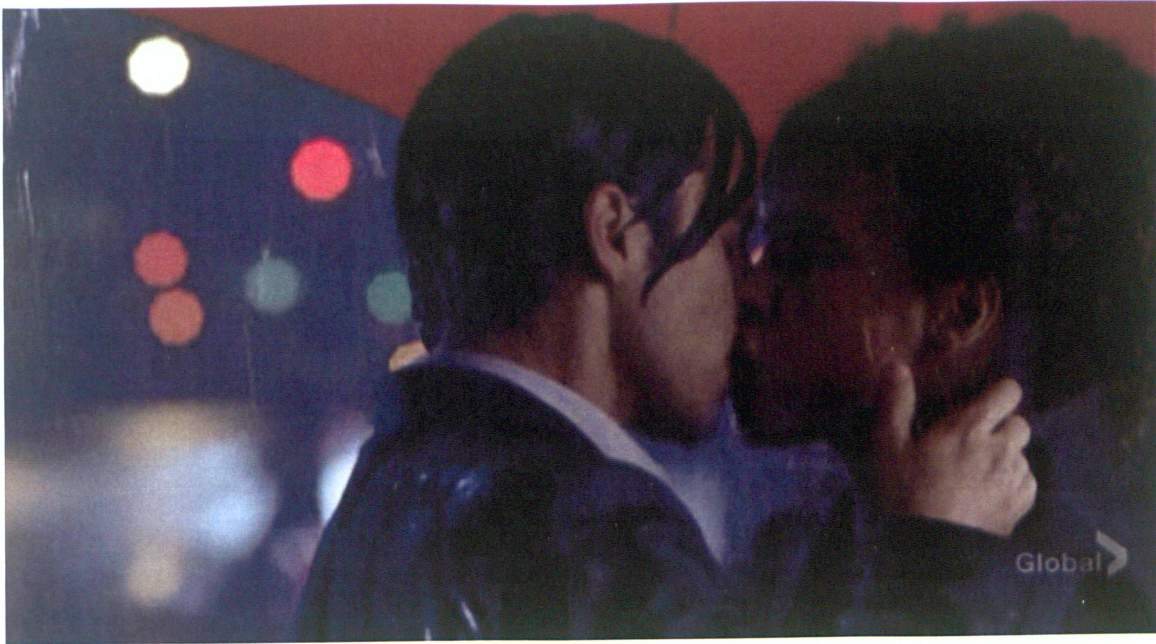
Heroes ignores racial difference within the storyline of Simone Deveaux (Tawny Cypress), a Black female character. She and her father are rich and hire a White male nurse to care for her father as he dies of an undisclosed ailment in their lavish penthouse in Manhattan. She is an art dealer, a typically elite occupation signalling her class and taste. She is coded to be very well off through her dress and manner; she wears expensive, trendy clothes and jewellery and carries herself in a refined demeanour. At the start of the series, her White boyfriend, Isaac Mendes (Santiago Cabrera), is an artist and she sells his art. They have problems because he is a heroin user (he can paint the future, but only while "chasing" i.e. using heroin), but she is portrayed as caring and fair in helping him get over his addiction and strong enough that in the end when he cannot quit, she will not abide his drug use. She leaves him for her father's nurse, Peter Petrelli (Milo Ventimiglia), when he professes his love for her. She is shown to be a caring and concerned daughter and stays by her father's side until his death.

Simone has a small part in the show and her character is actually killed off in the middle of the series in the fourteenth episode. Until this point, Simone is portrayed as a typical "good woman" with no complications. In the world of *Heroes*, class is a more important social marker than race; class trumps race. All this takes place with no mention of her race or any cultural difference. This sort of racial representation is akin to the type seen on *The Cosby Show*, where racial inequality is ignored so the audience does not have to deal with an unpleasant reality. She is a well-off female who just happens to have dark skin. This character is partly a token to appeal to a superficial "colour-blind" ideology where viewers and critics can look to Simone Deveaux as a positive character portrayal against stereotype as a rich Black woman who dates White men. This can work to allay any worries on a shallow level that this show is not being progressive or even more significantly, that there are no racial inequalities in their society. In this representation and more generally, *Heroes* presents as reality a world where Blacks and Whites live in perfect harmony and it is common and accepted by all that they can even date each other. Simone is also portrayed as slim, conventionally beautiful, and subservient to the men in her life which further supports hegemonic notions regarding women regardless of race.

It should be noted that Simone and Peter Petrelli are shown kissing passionately several times. In one episode the couple wake up naked in bed in a very tender scene. Showing this type of relationship in a mixed race situation is quite new and daring. Simone's Blackness or sexuality is not fetishized in any way as is often the tendency of mainstream media in representing women of colour. However, I would argue that this is done mainly to create controversy and appeal to viewers who are aware that this is quite risque to portray. Simone also serves as a narrative evidence to show that Peter Petrelli,

one of the shows star characters, is "colour-blind" and is capable of falling in love with a Black woman (also demonstrating his heterosexuality). Indeed, he is shown to be sensitive, morally upstanding, and altruistic.

Peter is juxtaposed to his cheating, selfish, conventional politician older brother, Nathan Petrelli (Adrian Pasdar) who has a typical White family with a wife and two kids. Simone's story is not important on its own and her character is in part a foil for Peter, the more important character. She has no significant plot of her own nor any connection with the other characters or storyline except to facilitate a relationship between Peter and Isaac and also Peter and Nathan. She does not even have a super power. Although an interesting an innovative example of an interracial couple, there is not much to say about it on any deeper level because Simone has such a small and undeveloped part on the show. This does, however, say something of the tokenism that *Heroes* uses in this portrayal of a woman of colour.

Part 4.3: Niki Sanders and D.L. Hawkins
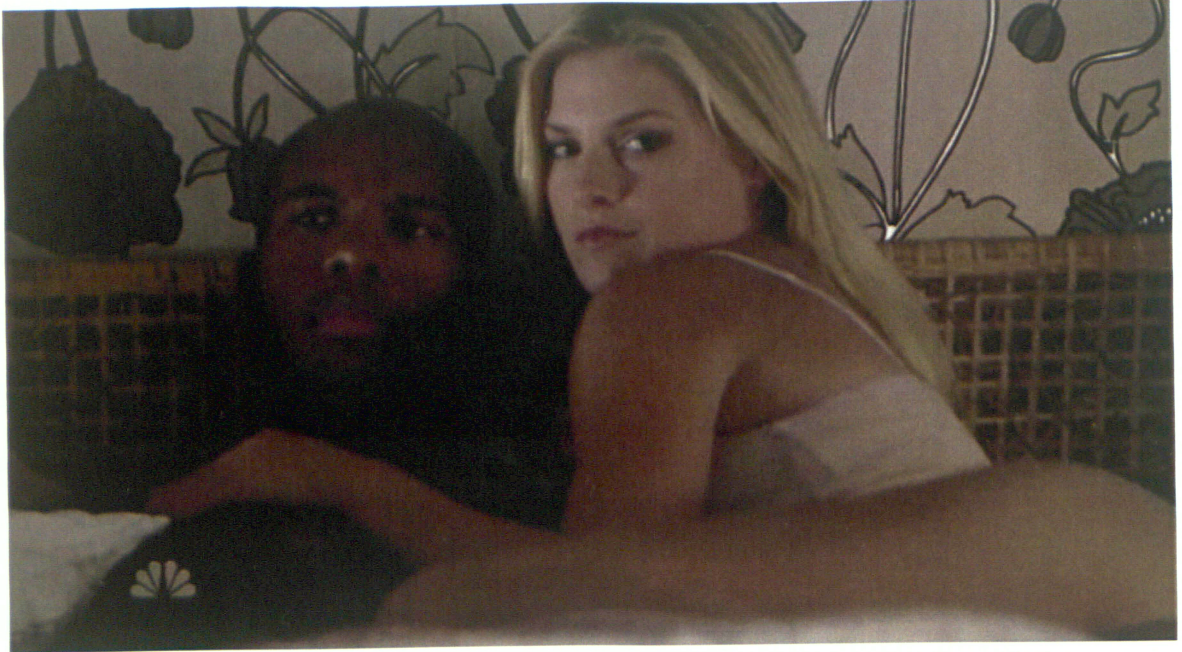
One of *Heroes*' main storylines revolves around a character named Niki Sanders (Ali Larter). Niki is introduced to the audience in a scene in the first episode where she is strips and writhes alone on a makeshift bed in what appears to be a garage in front of a web camera. "Mustang Sally" by Wilson Pickett is playing in the background to highlight Niki's provocative dancing. She undresses for about 45 seconds of the scene with the camera angles exploring her body as a voyeur. From the outset, this female character is highly sexualized and objectified.

An alarm goes off just as Niki, clad in only her lingerie bottoms, takes off her bra and is about to reveal her breasts. At the sound of her alarm, she stops and gets up to inform what we can now assume to be her client by way of computer instant messaging that, "Time's up." The client – we see the screen name "Huggerz69" – asks for more. She is an internet stripper, charging people to watch her take off her clothes via a webcam. She refuses to continue the show without more money, to which Huggerz69 messages to

her that she is a "BITCH!" Niki replies "pervert" out loud to herself as she closes the computer program. This indicates that she believes that taking off her clothes for money is "wrong," as are the men who pay her for it. She does not enjoy stripping and she must have a reason for doing it, most likely to make money. Thus she does not participate in her sexuality by stripping. Niki appears only for the male gaze in an obvious, unsophisticated way.

Seemingly done with her internet stripping for now and wrapped in a robe, Niki enters her house calling, "Time to get up, Micah." There is no answer and the camera pans across an empty and untidy house as Niki starts to call out for "Micah" frantically, unable to find him. The camera movements are sweeping and the cuts are fast to convey Niki's panicked state of mind. She comes to a room where Micah is calmly sitting, working over a disassembled computer.

"Damn it, Micah, don't do that to me!" Niki exclaims as the camera returns to smoother, less dynamic movements and settles on a young boy about ten years old. "Do what?" he asks calmly and with a vague hint of condescension. Micah (Noah Gray-Cabey) has black curly hair and medium dark skin, which contrasts with Niki's blonde hair and very light skin. Niki continues to scold Micah irrationally as he politely dismisses her with sound reasoning. Even though he is only a child, Micah is calm and in control while Niki seems panicked for no reason. She chides him, anxiously asking him to hurry up because they do not want to be late.

> Micah: Mom, I'm already dressed and I've packed my own lunch. That's what I've been doing this morning. What about you?
>
> Niki: Don't get smart with me, alright? I've been working to pay our bills.
>
> Micah: Yeah, that's why they turned off our gas again?

Micah acts very dismissive with his mother as she tries to scold him and assert her power and she ends up seeming irrational. Clearly, he has awakened and got ready for school on his own while his mom was in the garage stripping on the internet for money. He also hints that he knows about what she does for a job. This scene codes Niki as an irresponsible mother. Despite his age, it also codes Micah as the responsible, rational man. He is the male authority in this relationship. He is working on a computer, which is shown to impress and bewilder his mother. This verifies the hegemonic assumption of how men are masters of technology and scientific thinking. This is a clue to his super power as we find out in later episodes; Micah can "talk to" and control computers and machines. As the man, he is portrayed as rational and civilized to contrast his mother's womanly emotion and wild sexual nature.

Before they leave, banging is heard at the front door. Niki and Micah leave out the back to avoid two big, tough-looking men who break into the house. Later, Niki confides to one of her friends that those men are mobsters to whom she owes a lot of money. She borrowed money from "the mob" to pay bills and pay Micah's tuition "because I just needed them to think we had money." She admits to her friend that she is in over her head, and she almost breaks down crying because she is under a lot of stress. It is Niki's fault that she and her son are poor and in danger and she has no idea how to handle their situation or to go about being a "proper" mother. All these narrative points point to hegemonic notions that women should be mothers and self-sacrificing.

In another scene in this first episode, Niki has a meeting with Micah's principal at his private school. The principal explains that Micah may not be right for the school. At first, Niki acts seductively to try to convince him to keep Micah at the school, "His

father's not around and sometimes I think he could use a stronger hand, you know? I work nights a lot, but umm… [biting her lip] we can both work harder." This approach does not work – the principal keeps it professional saying, "I'm just not sure this school is the right fit for him." It becomes clear that he means that Niki and Micah are not wealthy enough or of the right class to attend the private school, especially when he tells her that the tuition cheques have bounced. Sex, the only "weapon" or form of currency we have seen her use so far cannot be exchanged here. Niki begins to argue with him and becomes increasingly emotional. At one point she calls the school a "snobfest," while the principal remains composed. Finally, she leans over his desk and grabs him by his tie, and with her face inches from his she says angrily, "I want my money back." The principal answers firmly, "That's not possible." This scene works to contrast Niki's low-class status with the high-class of the principal. He acts polite and treats the situation in an impersonal manner despite Niki's loss of composure many times. She uses colloquialisms and seems powerless next to the principal. She leaves in a huff and takes Micah from the waiting room declaring, "C'mon baby, we're too good for this lousy school. Let's get out of here." This scene shows that it is Niki's low-class that defines her and her unfortunate situation. Again, the traditional notions of the male-female binary of shown in the way the principal and Niki are juxtaposed, but with the added marker of class. The principal represents rich, White, middle-aged male authority; he is articulate, measured, and rational. As a low-class woman, emotional and irrational, she is no match for his masculine power. She is able to earn money because of her looks and sexual appeal as a woman, but still this currency will not allow her to transcend her low class.

Niki is struggling and does not have authority over her son, her sexuality or her financial situation. The argument with the White principal represents her failure to fit in with the rest of high-class White or "proper" society. Her lack of money, morals, and knowledge of societal codes designates her to a low spot in the class hierarchy. She is having trouble raising her child on her own. We find out later, her husband D.L. Hawkins (Leonard Roberts) has escaped from jail and has been missing for over six months. Thus, Niki fits the conventional type of a low class, single mom. She is constructed as sexy to appeal to straight male audience members, one of the most lucrative demographic, yet she is powerless in the world of the show.

As the episode progresses, the audience sees that Niki's super power is an odd one that does not fit with the rest of the super powers on the show; she has a multiple personality and when her second personality is activated she has superhuman strength. She can lift heavy objects like cars, break handcuffs holding her, or when she kicks or punches someone they fly several feet on impact. In the first episode, Niki drops Micah off at her friend's to look after him, and goes back to her house. The two mobsters are still there and they force her into the garage and throw her on the bed we saw her use for her internet stripping show in the first scene. They force her to strip and when she stops because she is obviously not happy about doing it, one of the mobsters hits her. As the sound of the slap is heard, there is a cut to one of the other unrelated storylines. When the plot returns to her, she is passed out on the bed.

A phone rings and Micah is heard on the answering machine asking when she is going to pick him up. She gets up and looks around and then rapid, disconnected cuts portray her disorientation. Not only that, but these cuts show that the two mobsters are

lying bloodied and dead. One is on the floor and one has a large shard of glass sticking out of his neck. Niki seems scared and looks into a shattered mirror where we see her reflection glaring defiantly back. Niki's figure in the mirror puts her finger to her lips to signal a secret, and smirks. The Niki who is not reflected only stares back in horror, frightened and confused. Niki and her mirror image are disconnected; they are different people. When Niki came under threat and cannot protect herself, her alter-ego Jessica takes over her body and takes care of the problem with a physically and violent solution.

In later episodes, we find out about Niki's twin sister, Jessica, who died in a car accident. Apparently, their father used to beat Jessica, who would take the beating to protect Niki. Although it is never explained, their father is hinted at as being somehow responsible for Jessica's death. We are led to believe that Jessica is a distinct personality living inside of or haunting Niki's body or mind. Sometimes Niki or Jessica, played by the same actor, appears to the other in a mirror or in the flesh (although only she can see this figure). At times they talk or even argue with each other. Jessica often takes over and does things that Niki would not do. For example, she kills the mobsters when she is in danger, or in later episodes Jessica takes over to try to murder D.L. when he runs away with Micah. Jessica comes alive to save Niki's son. Jessica also becomes a paid assassin because the family needs money and she is bored with staying home with Niki's family. Jessica also has sex with a man for money. Niki comes back to cognition after Jessica takes over and finds herself somewhere else, hours or days later, with no recollection of the events that took place within that time frame. Niki has no control over her body when Jessica takes over. Jessica only comes alive to protect Niki or when Niki wants to protect Micah when they come under threat.

The dichotomy between Niki and Jessica is worth examining. When Jessica takes over, besides exhibiting "superhuman strength," her personality is the opposite of Niki's. Tim Kring has described this character's super power as "the most complex to wrap your brain around. I've always thought that if you looked at it like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde or like the Incredible Hulk, then you really weren't too far off" (ComicCon 2007). It reveals the classic cliché of the "virgin" or "good girl," whom Niki represents, versus the "whore" or "bad girl," whom Jessica represents. Niki is often seen wearing white while Jessica always chooses red and attire which is more revealing. The audience can tell if Jessica has taken over, because Jessica has a tattoo on her shoulder; this is an unimaginative cliché denoting "bad girl." Jessica, coded as "evil," enjoys violence and sex, and she will enact either of these things for money.

Niki does not have any control over Jessica unless it involves protecting her son. In the eleventh episode, Jessica is in control and shoots Niki's husband with a long-range sniper rifle, wounding him. D.L. and Micah flee to the forest. We see Jessica chasing them, running confidently through the forest when she spots D.L.'s bloody jacket. The camera reveals the tattoo on her shoulder signifying that it is Jessica. She starts to blink and her face becomes frightened as she looks around and down at the jacket as if seeing it for the first time. When the character acts in this way it often signifies the transformation of Jessica to Niki. "D.L.? She... did I...?" she whispers, then drops the jacket and begins to run away frantically; however, she trips so she is on the ground peering into a reflective pond. We now for sure that this is Niki because her back no longer has the tattoo. She is still on the ground when she sees Jessica's reflection standing over her, glaring, with her arms crossed. Niki looks up and the camera cuts to Jessica as if they

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were two different people. As a result of this camera trick, they proceed to have a conversation:

Jessica: Get up!

Niki: What did you do?

Jessica: What I had to do to get Micah back.

Niki: If you cared about Micah you wouldn't have taken those shots. You could have missed!

Jessica: I don't miss. You saw D.L.'s jacket.

Niki: D.L. is Micah's father.

Jessica: D.L.'s a criminal. He brought danger into our home. You want Micah to end up like that?

Niki: You're wrong about him. You're out of control.

Jessica: What do you know about control, Niki?

Niki: You're part of me. You do what I say!

Jessica: It doesn't work like that. Not anymore.

Niki: Why are you doing this?!

Jessica: Because you're not strong enough.

This conversation, besides being derogatory towards D.L. (and slightly racist as will be discussed shortly), shows that Niki is very weak and Jessica is irrational and violent. Niki's character is constructed as one-dimensional single mother and not as a complete person; she only acts to protect her son. Jessica is a strong female character because she is bold, fearless, she can use a gun, which is atypical of females portrayed on television, and she is physically strong. This was the version of so-called feminist characters used in the 1970s. However, Jessica is dangerous and only fearless because she is irrational and

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has no sense of herself or others. Also, Jessica only comes out when Niki is not strong enough but must be a mother to protect Niki's son, to overpower Niki for Jessica's selfish gains, or when Niki is under threat. Niki's power is an interruption because she has no control or prior knowledge of when Jessica will take control. The other heroes on the show use their powers to save people and have agency over their super powers. Niki's power is more of a confinement than something she can ever uses to help others, or even to help herself.

The conversation in the forest between Niki and Jessica is interrupted when Micah is heard calling for his mom off-screen and Jessica follows his voice. When she sees Niki's husband and son, she immediately goes after D.L. Micah grabs her arm and tells her to "stop fighting!" but Jessica pushes him over yelling, "It's for your own good!" Micah falls against some rocks on the ground and cries out in pain. Jessica's action against Micah finally gives Niki the strength to take back her body. Niki apologizes to Micah and D.L. and when the newly reunited family walk together out of the forest, she leaves them to turn herself in to a nearby police officer, confessing that she is a murderer. Her reasoning is that she must sacrifice herself because she poses a threat to her son in the form of Jessica, whom she cannot control. Niki is a mother first and foremost and must forfeit herself and her independence to keep her son safe.

Niki's weakness is highlighted. One example is in the twelfth episode when D.L. and Micah visit Niki in jail. In an emotional exchange, Micah and D.L. tell Niki how much they miss her and need her. Niki talks to Micah and tearfully tells him through prison glass, "I need you to be the strong one because I'm not strong right now, okay?" She is continually featured as whiny and weak in contrast to her alter ego, Jessica.

However, Jessica is punished for this strength. The character of Jessica is not an example of a feminist woman in terms of her independence and power, but at the same time she does fight against men and hegemonic structures by using her sexuality to control men and physically hurting men when they try to confine her. As usually happens on television, when such patriarchal structures are challenged in any truly threatening way, women are punished for this out-of-control (of men) strength.

While Niki is incarcerated, she wakes up in a strait-jacket because of something Jessica did while Niki was unaware. Although it is not shown, Jessica fights with the male guards and gives them visible markings such as black eyes and broken noses. The guards are verbally and physically aggressive towards Niki, which is brought about by what Jessica has done to them. They fear and punish this woman who cannot be controlled. Indeed, Niki is pays the price for Jessica's behaviour which cannot be contained by a hegemonic society. Niki also believes that women who cannot not be controlled should be punished, as she is the one who turned herself in, and she does not want to be let out of jail even when she is pardoned. Again, Niki's character portrays expectations of the mother, who would rather sacrifice herself than put her child in danger.

In the fourth episode, a character named Mr. Linderman (Malcolm McDowell) offers to let Niki out of her $50,000 debt to him if she has sex with Nathan Petrelli, a politician previously referred to who is running in an election for congressman. Linderman, we find out later, is the mob boss and although he is only mentioned and never seen until the last few episodes of the season, he has connections to many of the characters. Linderman, or his "people," plant a camera in the hotel room where Niki and

Nathan meet, so they can get proof of Nathan's infidelity and thus grounds to blackmail him. Niki spends the evening with Nathan and seems to develop a genuine connection with him. When he propositions her, she will not sleep with him and leaves his room. A "good girl" like Niki is not promiscuous and would not have sex with a married man for money so someone can bribe him. Promiscuity for women, and to some extent for men, is coded as improper. In the elevator, Jessica takes over and goes back to Nathan's room. She is sexually aggressive and seems to enjoy seducing him.

This binary of Niki and Jessica codes acceptable and unacceptable behaviours for women. Niki, the "good one," is a mother first and would sacrifice anything for her son, but can't fight for him without Jessica. She is nothing but a mother and she has no aspirations outside of caring for Micah. Even the disembodied voiceover used at the beginning of *Heroes* episodes to talk about the characters refers to her only as "the single mother" or "the mother." She uses her sexuality as a tool, for example, when she strips or tries to seduce the principal, but only when she has to in order to care for her son. She is weak, irrational, confused, cannot take care of herself and loses control of her body when Jessica takes over. Jessica, the "bad one," is promiscuous and likes sex. She only cares about money and her morals are completely fluid based on whether or not she is getting paid for her actions. *Heroes* constructs these narrow representations of women that do not allow, for example, a "good" woman to enjoy sex without guilt or a single mother to be anything else besides a mother. And yet, both Niki and Jessica's main attributes, even though their personalities appear on opposite ends of the spectrum, surround their sexuality. This fits the hegemonic notion of woman as objects that cannot be considered outside of their eroticism or desirability.

In interviews with the popular press, Tim Kring and Ali Larter (the actor who plays Niki/Jessica), talk a lot about how she is a complex female character who is somehow empowered. In an interview for the website theTVaddict.com, Tim Kring says, "Ali's character is a strong female character. Women can really relate to her, especially mothers. They can own their sexuality and that's a powerful thing." This is a superficial assessment of the character. Yes, Niki is an attractive single mother. However, she does not "own" her sexuality. She is an internet stripper, but she does not enjoy this and does it only because she has to, for her son. Jessica has sex with Nathan, seemingly because she wants to (and also for money), but this is coded as evil and shameful because Jessica is "bad." Promiscuity is immoral and "evil" behaviour for women according to *Heroes*.

Both Niki and Jessica use their sexuality to manipulate situations, whether they like having sex or not. While Niki does not have ownership of her sexuality, Jessica does because she has sex with whoever she wants, enjoys it, and is not punished for it, but at the same time this trait is coded as evil and undesirable for women. Niki/Jessica is strong in the physical sense because when Jessica takes over she has superhuman strength, but this physical strength should not be conflated with power or independence. Besides, this only occurs when Niki, who is weak and helpless, loses control. This is not a complex character; these are two one-dimensional characters that may appear to be empowering on the surface, but really aim to show traditional roles of acceptable behaviour for women.

In the first few episodes, Niki's husband and Micah's father, D.L. Hawkins, is absent and apparently in jail. He appears in the sixth episode as a fugitive and comes to Niki's house. D.L has super powers too: he has the ability to move through solid objects

and this explains his escape. D.L. is Black, which is significant, as not often are Black men portrayed on television in relationships with White women. This representation is quite innovative for a television show to feature this type of relationship. However, television must make concessions in the way it shows progressive relationships like this one. He is depicted as a criminal, an absent father, from the working class, and his strong and muscular body is featured. He is represented using these are tropes of the classic Black male.

D.L.'s part in the show is small and he is portrayed as a stereotype for the most part. He is an ex-con, as Niki confides at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. He is involved with the mob, works a blue-collar construction job by day, and he is a young parent who has been absent from Micah's life because of serving jail time. To further the Black stereotype, he is muscular and is always seen wearing sleeveless shirts to show his strong body.

However, D.L. is portrayed in some ways that go against stereotype. For example, when D.L. escapes from jail, he becomes fiercely protective of Micah. He takes him away from Jessica to protect him. Jessica retaliates by trying to kill D.L. to get Micah back for Niki. In a few episodes, Niki is in jail and so D.L. is left as the sole caregiver of Micah. Although he tries to take care of him, D.L cannot get a job or earn any money and cannot seem to please his son. Micah constantly criticizes D.L. for the way he does things in contrast to his mother. D.L. often acknowledges his shortcomings and even visits Niki in her jail cell (because of his power is to phase through walls) in desperation to talk about how he cannot care for Micah on his own and they really need her back at home. This enforces the belief system that they need to be a "whole," traditional, nuclear family

ideal of a household lead by both a woman and a man. Single parenting does not work in the world of *Heroes*.

Another example of D.L.'s acknowledgement of his failure "as a father" takes place in a heartfelt scene in the thirteenth episode. D.L. says to Micah, "I'm having a very hard time here. I can't get a job, I can barely pay the rent. I never felt like much of a man in my life. My papa never taught me. But I want to be a good dad to you." This goes against the stereotype that Black men are willingly irresponsible fathers. Also, this patriarchal expectation of a man – to be a breadwinner for his family – is a limiting message to show what a "real" man "ought" to be, regardless of race. It is significant that when D.L. cannot fulfill this role he feels like he has failed as a man. And finally, this also serves the hegemonic notion that valorizes motherhood as the ultimate paradigm of parenting and shows that a woman's most important and all-encompassing function in life is to be with her kids.

Heroes is especially invested in trying to come across as a progressive show and part of this is appearing to be "colour-blind," as is the trend in the mainstream television and film of contemporary times (Childs, 3). In the first season, the fact that D.L. (or Simone) is Black is never mentioned explicitly, even though this fact would be very obvious to the creators and writers of the show as well as the audience living in the context of a racially stratified society where images of interracial couples are few and far between on fictional television. This goes unmentioned because it is more pleasing to mass audiences and profitable to promote "colour-blindness," and thus this is ignored. The result is that racist and stereotypical signifiers (ex-con, low class, unstable family

growing up, bad influence, muscular body) are attached to D.L. as the sole Black man on the show. These associations are used to dance around this issue.

He is only ever referred to explicitly as Black once in the entire first season. In the nineteenth episode, D.L. and Jessica are having an argument. D.L. is upset at Jessica because she is working as an assassin for Linderman and he thinks this is endangering Micah.

> D.L.: He is not safe as long as Linderman owns our lives. Not as long as you're around. Look at what you've brought into our house!

Jessica: What? Money? Rent? "Poor me! Nobody wants to hire a Black ex-con." In the world of the show, Jessica says this because she is "evil" and not "colour-blind" and thus if she is racist, the ideology of the show is seen as discrediting her for it. However, in the world of the show, her racist statement is true! As is bound to be the case in a show produced in the context of a society so charged with awareness of racial issues, a huge aspect of his character, for better or for worse, is the fact that he is Black. This comes up implicitly in the narrative, but is never allowed to be mentioned, except in the context of a "bad" character, Jessica, mocking him because of it. However, this just makes clear what is already present, but ambiguous in this narrative world.

Much of D.L. and Niki's relationship is sexual. This plays on the way Blacks are usually portrayed as powerful sexual objects, an idea that relies upon myths of miscegenation, spanning back decades to the days of institutionalized slavery, where there was a prevalent fear that a White woman would not be able to control herself around a Black man's potent sexuality. In the fifth episode, the police come to Niki's house looking for D.L. after he escapes from custody. At this point, the audience has not

met D.L. and it is understood that Niki has not seen him for months. Niki is visibly scared and pleads with the White police officer.

Niki: D.L. Hawkins is a killer. He has been following me. Doing things…

Police officer: What things?

Niki: Look, if he's here and he wants something, I won't be able to stop him. You need to protect us.

As TV audience members, we know that no one has been following Niki and she is confused and disturbed at this point because she often hears Jessica's voice in her head and sees her appearance in reflections instead of herself and she does not understand and is frightened by this. The other piece of irony is that the crime that D.L. is on the run from, murdering his gang, was actually committed by Jessica, who then framed him. Niki knows this because in the second episode, Jessica led her to where she buried the bodies of D.L.'s gang.

Nonetheless, Niki is absolutely terrified of her husband and pleads with the White cop to protect her. Later that night, D.L. shows up at the house unexpectedly. Niki wakes up in the middle of the night and gets up to investigate a noise. D.L. appears behind her and says, "You look beautiful, Nik," and then grabs her shoulder with his hand draped across her chest and with his other hand holds her so her shirt lifts up and leaves her stomach exposed. This is a rather sensual way of reuniting considering their relationship at this point. Niki does not pull away or struggle. The lighting of this scene represents prison bars as thick shadows are cast over the couple from the living room windows. D.L., having just escaped is not yet free, and has brought the "prison" to Niki. However, she is not confined by literal bars, but she is confined by her class station in life and her relationship with a Black man. The police who are waiting outside guarding the house

from D.L. interrupt by knocking on the door. Before she answers it, D.L. leaves and says, "I'm going to check on my son. I'll let you get the door," implying that the choice to turn him in is her decision. This is Niki's opportunity, but she covers for D.L. and does not tell the police officer that D.L. has broken in.

Niki gets ready for bed and tells D.L. to sleep on the couch, explaining, "You think you can just strut back in here like nothin's ever happened?" She tells him that he can stay there tonight but he must leave in the morning. D.L responds, "If that's what you want," and tries to lean in to kiss her on the cheek, but Niki turns away looking very concerned, as if she is trying to resist her own urge to kiss back. D.L. does not push his luck and leaves the room to retire to the couch. The next series of shots juxtaposes D.L. preparing for bed, taking off his shirt and lying unassumingly topless on the couch and Niki alone in her room looking worried and pensive and playing with her wedding ring. This signals that Niki is insure about her decision to sleep alone. While D.L. may not be happy about it, he has accepted it. The juxtaposition of scenes where D.L. is shirtless, lying with his hands behind his head in a sexually suggestive position while Niki gazes forlornly into space in the next room highlights D.L.'s sexual appeal for Niki. She comes out of her room and tells D.L. to "come to bed." Her fear of her husband seems to be unfounded as his will does not seem to pose much of a threat. Instead, even against her better judgement, she cannot seem to resist him; perhaps this is what she is really afraid of. This scene reinforces the myth that Black men have special sexual power that this White woman cannot resist and White men ultimately cannot protect her.

Niki and D.L. were "just kids" when they were first married, as Niki says to him in a sad tone after they spend this first night together upon his return. The implication is

that they entered into an interracial marriage and had a child while being young, foolish, and lustful and now neither of them are prepared financially or mentally to deal with the consequences. In the tenth episode, Niki's estranged father comes to visit. Although he is portrayed as a selfish and angry old man, he is very wealthy and if he was still in Niki's life, she would not be poor or the mother of child she cannot properly care for whose father is a Black criminal. However, in other episodes we see that her father is a "bad" man – abusive and an alcoholic – and this is perhaps why he failed to protect her from miscegenation. As Childs (2005, 5) states, in the days where fear of miscegenation ruled, much responsibility was placed on the male members of a White family whose female member (daughter or sister) participated in an interracial coupling. It was as much the father or brother's fault as it was for the woman and would cause huge dishonour to the males in the family as well. Hegemonic values dictate that it is a male's responsibility to take care of his female family members. Her father's failure to live up to expectations as a "man" and protect her, may explain why Niki has fallen into a low class standing and why she is under the spell of her Black husband.

Niki and D.L. are the only couple on this show that are portrayed as having trouble handling their children or have any trouble with money. Again, Blackness is linked with out-of-control sexuality as well as poverty. D.L. has "ruined" this White woman, because she could not control herself and ended up having a child with him and wrecking her life. It is the classic warning induced by the fear of miscegenation about what happens when Black sexuality enters into the lives of White women. This seemingly outdated prejudice is shown to have some lasting resonance in society as it is seen on *Heroes*.

The final climax with Niki/Jessica and D.L. is very revealing of the ways in which *Heroes* constructs race and gender. In a confrontation with Linderman, who has kidnapped Micah, Jessica and D.L. demand their son back. Linderman is an elderly White man whom D.L. can easily overpower physically. However, Linderman has the power that matters. He has the socio-economic power; he is rich and White. D.L. pins Linderman against the wall and asks, "What gives you the right to ruin our lives? Take our son away from his home? Your money? You think being rich makes you better than us?" The class divide is brought out on this show through the characters of D.L. and Niki being coded as "poor" and Linderman being coded as "rich." These social designations explain the reasons for their actions. D.L. and Linderman continue their argument:

Linderman: You'll never see him again you know.

D.L.: How's that?

Linderman: Jessica's going to kill you for me.

D.L. lets Linderman past him and over to Jessica. Linderman empties out a bag full of rolls of money on the table and he says to her, "Consider this a deposit with more to follow."

Jessica: How much more?

D.L.: You can't be listening to this!

Linderman: Of course she is! Like most women whose lives have been ruined by men, all Jessica really wants is security. Money buys that. Money's all she ever really cared about.

D.L.: She cares about our son.

Linderman: How much? Five, ten million?

D.L.: Think about Micah. You saw that painting, you came here to save him.

Linderman: Alright, twenty million dollars to kill your husband and walk away.

Jessica: He's right, D.L., I want to take the money. I really do. I would even kill you for it. But Niki wouldn't. [She closes her eyes and opens them, breathes deep, apparently "transforming" back into Niki.] D.L.! [She runs over and hugs him.]

Linderman: You can't love him.

Niki: Everything I've done, I did for them.

By Linderman trying to appeal to Jessica by blaming men for her behaviour, *Heroes* presumably means to appeal to women viewers with a misunderstood and warped version of feminism that still feeds into hegemonic structures and fulfills dominant ideals. The rationale here is that men have ruined Jessica's life. According to dominant ideology, men offer women security in terms of supporting them financially. The men in Jessica's life have failed her in this way, and thus she never received security in the form of money. It is men's fault that Jessica has become a murderous, sexually deviant, money-hungry, insecure beast-woman willing to kill her husband. Blaming this on men seems like feminism to one who understands feminism as simplistic "blaming men for the problems of women" and agrees with dominant ideals that men are supposed to take care of women.

D.L. and Linderman stand over Jessica, trying to convince her to choose a side, while she just gazes at the money, smiling. Niki ultimately only has two choices about who she is allowed to be. She can be the "bad," violent, bitter woman whose life was ruined by men because they failed to take care of her, or she can be the weak, powerless mother who sacrifices everything for her family. It is men who offer her these two, her only, choices. In the end she makes the "right" choice to be the mother, but either way, she is still trapped within the strict and narrow confines of a patriarchical society.

And so in the relationship of Niki and D.L., *Heroes* offers a portrayal of gender, race, and interracial relationships that appear progressive on a superficial level, but follows dominant codes of ideology. Niki/Jessica's character is traditional and stereotypical. The stereotype assumes women exist in the simple binary of the "good" woman who cannot handle her independence and the "bad" woman who is independent because she was failed by the patriarchal order, but must be punished for it. In this portrayal *Heroes* use a convenient fabrication of feminism to appear enlightened while not challenging patriarchy, as is feminism's purpose. There are also traditional stereotypes of race, which never challenge hegemonic notions which privileges whiteness and white culture. *Heroes* offers shallow concessions to these feminism and race correctness that appear to be progressive, but actually work within the same narrow boundaries of hegemony.

Part 4.4: Charlie and Hiro Nakamura

One of the main characters in the show is Hiro Nakamura, who is an office worker from Tokyo. His super power is the ability to control or "bend" time and space as we see in Japanese sci-fi, anime, and manga. His sidekick is Ando Masahashi (James Kyson Lee), a friend and fellow office worker. Ando has no super power, but follows Hiro to the US on his journey. On the one hand, the character of Hiro is a breakthrough in television's representation of Asians. He is an Asian male main character with as much screen time as the other White stars. Conventionally, this is extremely uncommon on mainstream television. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Asians are very rarely portrayed on television, and the very few times they are, they are never featured as a main protagonist. On the other hand, however, Hiro and the other Asian character on *Heroes* possess the same tropes and stereotypes that characterize the few Asians characters that do appear on television. Like the other portrayals of minority race on *Heroes*, the portrayal of Hiro, Ando, and Hiro's interracial relationship is contradictory in the ways

they shows progressive values while at the same time undermining them. These characters are innovative to attract viewers, but at the same time these representations cannot be too daring or challenging as to turn off mainstream viewers.

In Hiro's introduction in the first episode, the scene opens with a shot of a desk. There is a computer with a Japanese anime-style cartoon of a monster on the monitor, several figurines sitting on the desk (Godzilla, a sword wielding anime girl, for example), and a large round clock with Japanese numbers on it. The shot cuts to the face of Hiro, a chubby Asian man wearing glasses, a white collared shirt, and black tie staring at the clock with concentration. A line-up of other office cubicles is visible behind him. He looks around to make sure no one is watching and begins to focus on the clock with more intensity. He glares through his glasses, grits his teeth, and stares so hard his cheeks begin to shake. The camera zooms in on the second hand of the clock, and the ticking sound becomes louder and echoing. Suddenly the second hand stops and moves backwards. The scene cuts to a wide shot of the entire office, and Hiro jumps up with his arms in the air and yells in Japanese. The subtitles, "I did it!" appear on the screen.

Hiro runs out of his cubicle and down the hallway, shouting and carrying on in a high-pitched voice. He spins around in circles, waving, shouting in Japanese, and occasionally yelling "Woohoo!" He stops at Ando's desk, who quickly closes his computer window to hide something and looks guilty. Hiro says to him, "I've broken the space/time continuum!" Ando is unimpressed and mocks him sarcastically as Hiro continues to explain how he has "discovered powers beyond any mere mortal."

Ando: Right. You and Spock.

Hiro: Yes. Like Spock. Exactly.

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Hiro is naïve and when Ando mocks him, he does not catch on to the sarcasm. At this moment, a man in a full black suit, assumed to be Hiro's boss, looking so angry as to be a caricature, grunts and grabs Hiro by the collar, picks him up and carries him away down the hall by the scruff of his neck. Ando calls out behind him, "Use your 'death grip,' Spock. The 'death grip'!" Ando goes back to his computer, types something, and a video of Niki stripping appears on his screen and "Mustang Sally" is heard. This first introduction of Hiro and Ando lays out patterns of behaviour they follow for the rest of the season. They are portrayed with the complexity and realism of cartoon characters. Each of these characters confirms a particular stereotype that borrows from racist depictions of Asians.

First, Hiro is portrayed as giddy, excitable and slightly effeminate. He does not seem to understand social protocols about yelling and jumping around in public places. This behaviour is so ridiculous it is usually used for comic relief. This is especially true when Hiro goes to America and acts foolishly in settings the North American audience would be well-acquainted with. No other character on *Heroes*, especially not the male characters, would ever shriek, jump up and down, or be so lacking in composure, even in private moments, let alone public places. Hiro also talks with a thick and exaggerated Japanese accent, which the actor who plays him does not actually have. Many jokes are made at the expense of Hiro for his mispronunciation of English, as he is the only character who acts as comic relief on this show. This Asian male is structured in direct opposition to so-called proper masculinity; that is masculinity that is White.

Hiro is exceedingly geeky and plays into the comic book nerd stereotype of Asians. This reference to "Spock" is one of the many references to Star Trek and other

sci-fi culture, video games, and comic books associated with "nerdiness" that these are associated with Hiro and Ando.

The other shallow trope Hiro fits into is that he is attached to martial arts and ancient Asian mysticism. In the twelfth episode, Hiro sees a painting (by the "future-painter" character, Isaac), which is supposed to depict an event in the future. It shows Hiro battling a dinosaur with a sword. He becomes insistent that he must find this sword and spends the next eleven episodes on this quest. Hiro goes to a museum to track it down. While a visual montage of museum displays of ancient murals and armour artifacts are superimposed, Hiro tells Ando about the ancient legend of the sword; it is a story told to Hiro as a child at bedtime by his father.

In the twenty-second episode, Hiro's father (played by famous Star Trek alum George Takei, presumably to appeal to sci-fi buff audience members) comes to New York and teaches Hiro martial arts. They talk about Hiro's power as a "legacy." It is a ceremony surrounded by the mystery usually associated with the East and the stylized composition and lighting from martial arts films. Hiro and his father, wearing black robes and scarves tied around their heads, practice their martial arts. This montage features scenes of Hiro and his father dueling, a young Hiro playing on his bed with toy dragons while his father reads to him from a story book, and pictures from this book of samurai and dragons. During this montage, Hiro's accented voiceover is heard telling a story about "Kensei and the Dragon." This story is typical "filler." There is no story information in the 45 seconds it takes to tell it, just some clichéd elements about a dragon who lives on a mountain, swords, a palace, and a princess which seem thrown together to create a mysterious, ancient legend from the East. This scene seems superfluous, but it is

not meant to be a parody. *Heroes* again leans upon the excuse that it is meant to "read" like a comic book, and this is indeed an apt adaptation of a comic book. *Heroes* again relies on the cultural tropes that can easily be associated with Asians to make the story more colourful. It seems fairly convenient that almost all Asian characters on television repeatedly lean on the martial arts trope and must always be attached to ancient mystery. This is a short-cut to creating inauthentic portrayals of characters who do not need depth to be understood.

Interviews with people involved in the show and stories about *Heroes* in the press often rationalize that Hiro is the main character because he is the only person who fully embraces his super powers. In some ways he epitomizes the themes of the shows because of his familiarity with comic books and sci-fi culture. Indeed, his knowledge of the myths surrounding super heroes gives him the clearest sense of what to do with his powers. Even with this advantage, he is consistently thwarted in becoming what he imagines to be a hero. He considers being able to manipulate time and space a gift, and uses this ability to try and save the world and become a hero. However, he consistently misses his chance to do anything "heroic." Hiro transports to New York from Tokyo and witnesses Isaac Mendes' murder and a bomb blowing up New York City. He goes back in time to make it his mission to stop these events from happening. In the end, Isaac Mendes is still murdered despite Hiro's best efforts. The bomb (or what unfolds to be an "exploding man") that is destined to go off in New York City is the one large overarching storyline that brings all the "heroes" together to try and stop it. This culminates in the twenty-third and final episode of the first season, "How to stop an Exploding Man." Although Hiro is present during the final climax where New York is saved, he is not the one to prevent the

explosion. He travels back in time to facilitate the plot; in episode ten, entitled "Six Months Ago," the show takes place in the past. The other characters' stories are shown six months prior, filling in some gaps about their history and the things that contributed to their current state of affairs. However, Hiro is absent in this episode, his life before now is not revisited as it is with the other characters. His role in the show as the only Asian character is downplayed at the expense of the rest of the mostly White main cast. He is mainly used as a plot device and comic relief, but does not have the full range of back-story or action in the narrative as the others.

In time travelling back to the past, he was in the end not actually successful in changing anything. He also appears to Peter Petrelli from five years in the future to "Save the cheerleader, and save the world." He had planned to help Peter do this, but Peter prevented her murder by himself. Hiro was absent because he travelled back in time to try and save Charlie, a waitress he meets in a diner, from murder. However, she also ends up dying. Hiro is never around when any of the action takes place. The lead White men on the show perform all the actual "heroics." Nathan Petrelli, the character who is in denial and is most ashamed about his powers – but the most masculine in the patriarchal sense of the word, ends up saving the day and stops the exploding man in the last episode. As an Asian male, Hiro's position and usefulness on the show is consistently downplayed in favour of the other leads.

Hiro's companion and other Asian character, Ando, although equally geeky, is portrayed as a different Asian sexual stereotype than Hiro; Ando is heterosexual, as is normative, and his character corresponds to the sexually depraved trope. In the first episode, Ando is seen watching Niki's website and later she is displayed on Ando's iPod.

In the fifth episode, Ando and Hiro split up in Las Vegas. Ando finds Niki and goes to her house, letting himself in through the back door. The police have him in handcuffs and Niki recognizes him as her client from Japan. He is "Huggerz," whom Niki calls a pervert in the first episode. She tells him he should not have come to her house. She asks, "What did you think was going to happen?" Ando says, "I'm sorry. We chat so much online, I thought that you could maybe help me." Niki softens and smiles in a way that shows that she feels sorry for him and says, "You've got the wrong girl. That person you see on the internet, that's not me. You see the difference, right? Do you understand?" Ando never responds, but Niki takes pity on him and tells the police not to press charges. So Ando is shown to be a pervert who pays money to see women strip online. He also cannot differentiate between sexual fantasy and reality.

Ando's sexuality is portrayed as stunted and desperate. He often makes comments which show his confusion and lack of savvy when it comes to women. For example, in the first episode, Hiro discovers his powers while he and Ando are in a karaoke bar. Ando makes off-colour remarks that he should use his powers to rematerialize in the women's washroom. When Hiro's sister, Kimiko, has a small part in the story, Ando tells Hiro, "Your sister looks hot." Every time she is in Ando's presence he starts to smile and tries to approach her, but she looks down, embarrassed.[1] When Kimiko says goodbye, she hugs Hiro, and then Ando opens his arms to receive his hug too. She looks embarrassed, and bows to him instead. As she is leaving, Ando says to Hiro, "She's really starting to

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[1] Although Kimiko has only a small part in one episode, it is clear that she is the lotus flower Asian woman stereotype: obedient, quiet, and submissive to her brother and father. Hiro needs to trick her in order for her to stand up for herself and speak firmly, yet respectfully about her knowledge of the family business. In response, her father says, "Kimiko? What's gotten into you?" *Heroes*' only portrayal of an Asian woman conforms to common stereotypes.

like me." Hiro makes an incredulous "huh?" noise because clearly she is not. Ando is absolutely clueless about "how to handle" women, which is unlike any White male character on *Heroes*. He goes out of his way to express his affection, but does not understand when he is being rejected.

A clear example of how *Heroes*' portrayal of race and gender is shallow and at times problematic when it comes to Asian males (and females too) occurs in episode fifteen, when Hiro and Ando encounter a Las Vegas stripper. Ando first sees a White woman dressed up in a stage costume crying alone in a busy restaurant kitchen and takes her name, "Hope," to be a sign that they should help her. Hope (Missi Pyle) stands up when she introduces herself and towers over both Hiro and Ando. The lighting and composition of this shot, and the fact that they both obviously gaze up at her, highlights this fact. Hope appears to overpower the other two characters in this shot. She has more light on her and she is dominating much of the frame. This plays on the societal expectations that men should be physically stronger and larger than women. The fact that they are not emasculates them and is meant to appear humorous to viewers at Hiro and Ando's expense. Asian men become figures of comedy for White audiences.

Hiro, Ando, and Hope reconvene in a dressing room among other strippers as she recounts the story of an abusive boyfriend whom she left earlier that day. Through tears she tells them about how she left her bag in his hotel room upstairs with all "my credit cards and all my money and it's even got my family photos that I can't replace." As she says this she is nearly inconsolable and looks in the mirror and wipes her eyes, but the camera shows the audience that her eyes are dry and her face changes when she checks her reflection. It is obvious to the audience that there is something untruthful about

Hope's story, but not so to Ando. As with Niki/Jessica, *Heroes* plays on the stereotype that women who are strippers or use their sexuality must also mean that they are unsavoury or untrustworthy. Hope is the stereotype of an idealized female who is beautiful and sexual, but not as helpless as she seems. She suggests that she go up to her boyfriend's hotel room to talk to him, but Ando insists that they will do it. Ando is worried about the bruises she shows on her arm – supposedly from the abusive boyfriend – and wants to protect her. An intention that is all the more comical, because Hope towers over both of them. Hiro does not want to steal her bag, but agrees when Hope tells them she will be able to help him find his sword.

Hiro and Ando gain access to Hope's supposed boyfriend's hotel room by dressing up as room service attendants. Hiro hides underneath the serving cart, while Ando wheels it into the room and then leaves. When the very large White man who occupies the room goes to take a shower, Hiro gets out and lets Ando into the room. Hiro says, "This is a terrible idea. And all because you like this girl," but Ando dismisses him and is insistent on finding Hope's bag. Hiro decides to leave the hotel room when he finds guns in the closet. Ando says that he will leave with him, but then locks the door behind Hiro as he exits to continue looking for Hope's bag by himself. He finds it under the bed and must hide just as the room's occupant gets out of the shower. Ando is made a fool of in this scene and is easily manipulated with the vague possibility of sex. He is fooled into thinking he can be a "real man" and protect this woman, and becoming this ideal is what motivates him to break into a strangers hotel room and risk his life. Already, it is clear he is out of his league. Ando is Asian, so he is not the object of desire for this White woman. Hope plays upon Ando's mistaken belief that he is a "real" man, that he

can protect her, that he can seduce her, and she knows this is not true. *Heroes* lets the audience also know this is not true and so Ando's hopeless quest to get a kiss from Hope becomes a hug joke for viewers, but at Ando's expense.

Hiro goes back to the dressing room and overhears Hope talking on her phone, "I do all the work, he gets half the profit? I'm sick of it. No, I got these two Chinese guys to help me out. Turned on the waterworks and they were mine." Before she hangs up she says, "I love you too, Leon," as Hiro takes a dramatic fall through the rack of feather boas he was spying on her through. Hiro also looks foolish in this comedic and embarrassing tumble which obviously gives away his presence. He begins his confrontation with Hope from the unequal position of kneeling on the ground. The camera points down at him and up at her in their shots, emphasizing the power difference suggested in this scene. She is smiling at first, but quickly loses patience with Hiro.

Hope: Well, Hi! I didn't see you come in!

Hiro: You were on telephone.

Hope: Uh, with my mom. So, um... where's the bag?

Hiro: We are not Chinese. We are Japanese.

Hope: Whatever. Where's the bag?

Hiro: You are bad person. You may fool Ando, but you do not fool me.

Hope: Thanks for the help, Sulu.

To the *Heroes'* audience, calling Hiro "Sulu" is an inside joke and sci-fi reference. Commander Sulu is a character from the original *Star Trek* series played by George Takei. On the level of the narrative however, this is a racist jab. The characters on the show are not aware that this is television with cameo performances. Hope is referring to

the fact that Hiro is Asian, and that Sulu is one of the few easily recognizable Asian

males present in recent pop culture. As she calls him this, she punches him square in the

face, knocking him down. Hiro is completely undermined in this scene when he falls

down and must confront her from a lower position on the floor, from his ungrammatical

English that sounds like "baby-talk," to the fact that she punches him and completely

knocks him out. Like Jessica, Hope is depicted as a "bad" woman, and thus her racism

can be excused as not being condoned by the show because they are portraying her as

"wrong." At the same time, however, her racism rings true in the world of *Heroes*. She

does not have to take these men seriously at all as any intellectual or physical threat to

her dishonest intentions and she only have to cry to easily manipulate them into doing her

bidding. The narrative in *Heroes* never disagrees with her assessment or contradicts her

assumption that there is no difference between two very distinct Asian cultures, or that

she cannot simply manipulate them by "turning on the waterworks." Hope draws

attention to her assumption that she can take advantage of Hiro and Ando because they

are Asian. In the end, Hope's racist assumptions that these men cannot be taken seriously

are depicted as true. She has physical power over Hiro and sexual power over Ando until

it is her choice to give up the charade. In the end, the narrative supports racist statements

made by a character. No matter how unlikeable the character may be who is the racist, by

supporting racist actions in the narrative, *Heroes* is racist.

After Hiro is punched and falls off-screen, the scene cuts to other unrelated

Heroes storylines. When the story action returns to feature Ando and Hiro again, Hope is

waiting in a hallway and Ando appears with the bag. She tells him that he must take her

to her mother's and that Hiro left without him. When Ando starts to question, she grabs

his head and kisses him deeply and says, "Three's a crowd, baby. We gotta go." Ando looks shocked and amazed at the kiss and follows her as she tows him by the hand. Ando is rendered completely defenseless and powerless by a kiss from a woman. Women kiss the other (non-Asian) male characters on this show all the time, but it does not make the men become so lovesick as to abandon their friends or to follow around a lying stripper to do her evil bidding.

There is then a cut to Hiro in a small storage closet repeatedly running up to a solid door, crashing into it, and falling on the ground for the sake of physical humour that makes him look silly. The camera cuts to outside the door to show a chair leaned up against it holding it shut. Hiro hears a noise and shouts, "Ando? Is that you? I'm locked in! She's an awful woman! And strong! She punched me!" The door opens and the man from whom Ando stole the suitcase is there pointing a pistol at Hiro. He shows a badge and introduces himself as Gustafson (Bill Fagerbakke), a Las Vegas gaming commissioner. Hiro makes another *Star Trek* reference, holding up the Vulcan sign for "live long and prosper" and saying, "I come in peace." This serves the purpose of showing Hiro's naiveté and foreignness when compared to the world he has bumbled into. He is a hapless geek who does not fit in and cannot hold his own in the world of the *Heroes*.

The next part of the story picks up in the next episode. Gustafson takes Hiro to find Hope and Ando. In the car Hiro hums happily in the passenger seat (why he is humming while in the car with an aggressive stranger on the way to find his missing friend is questionable) and Gustafson gives him a mean look and says, "Look, you're nothing but a Japanese mapquest for me. So until we find that girl, just sit down and shut

up." Meanwhile, Hope and Ando arrive at a parking lot and Hope is now being quite impatient with him. She unloads her stolen bag, but it breaks open and it is full of casino chips which spill out. She forces Ando to clean them up while she points a gun at him. Ando says, "But you kissed me, I thought you liked me." She answers, "Don't remind me." Ando, an Asian man, is foolish for thinking a White woman would be attracted to him, let alone a stripper who, if we follow the ideological rules of *Heroes*, uses sex to manipulate men and whose morals are completely flexible when it comes to money.

Suddenly, Gustafson's car drives up and he starts shooting in Hope and Ando's general direction. Ando gets caught in the crossfire and is wounded in the shoulder. Hiro and Ando flee to the baggage compartment of a nearby-parked bus as a gunfight and multiple explosions ensue. Just as Hope ducks into the baggage compartment to shoot directly at Hiro's face, Hiro causes time to move backwards and the bullet moves back into the gun. At this moment, the police come to arrest Hope and Gustafson. Hiro and Ando do not realize that Hiro has controlled time. They simply get out of the baggage compartment and walk around the scuffle to their car, which is still fully intact. Hiro and Ando are saved not by anything they do on their own – except for Hiro stopping the bullet with his super powers as they are already hiding cowardly in the baggage compartment – after they are both humiliated, but as a result of dumb luck that the police came in time. *Heroes* always portrays these two characters as bumbling victims or products of circumstance. Except for Hiro's time travel, which he has limited control over and is used mostly when his lack of control allows circumstances to become dire, Hiro and Ando have no ability to control their environment or their fate. They are repeatedly degraded in the narrative, and never have a chance to redeem themselves. Hiro

and Ando Asian main characters, but at the same time *Heroes* portrays these two men as unthreatening parodies. This can be explained by the dominant ideology *Heroes* imposes on representations of men of colour. They must be undermined and emasculated for a White audience's fear of myths of sexual others. This explains why Asian men are emasculated and not taken seriously or as "real men" in the world of the show.

In the eighth episode, Hiro develops a romantic connection with a White woman. The way this relationship plays out is very telling about the ideology *Heroes* constructs around gender and race in interracial relationships. Charlie is a waitress at a diner and she has a super power too; in the first scene where she is introduced we see she has the ability remember all information she is exposed to, like a "super memory." It endears her to Hiro when she speaks fluent Japanese to him. Charlie explains, "I got a Japanese phrasebook for my birthday 6 months ago and I started poking through it last week." When she speaks a simple and unassuming Japanese phrase, "One bento box... with shrimp, please," Hiro reacts by exclaiming in Japanese and grinning and clapping his hands emphatically. In heavily accented and halting English he exclaims, "Very good memory!" His reaction is so enthusiastic and giddy it is comical. When she asks for their order he speaks to her in broken English grinning and unaware that he might seem peculiar when he says, "You pick. Something delicious for me and my friend. He needs food for fat-o fat-o." He yells these last two words. She giggles at this and is very unassuming and pleasant to Hiro.

During this episode, Hiro spends some time with her teaching her how to speak Japanese. Charlie says, "You're sweet," to him in Japanese. When Hiro avoids eye contact, gets shy and checks his book, she says in English, "You're sweet, it means nice, cute." He continues looking down and says, "It's not in book." Charlie says, "No. It is

true." He looks up at her and giggles shyly. "I like the way your cheeks wobble when you concentrate," Charlie adds. Hiro shakes his cheeks in concentration for her and she giggles. She is working and so she must leave to serve an order. When she goes off-screen, Hiro turns to Ando sitting in another booth, puts his arms straight up in the air and yells, "I'm sweet!" This is a ridiculous display and none of the other characters, especially not the males, are seen getting this excited at innocent compliments from members of the opposite sex. He giggles in a way that is unthreatening and effeminate, the same way she giggles at him. Yet she does seem to like Hiro, which is interesting since women, especially White women, are rarely ever shown to be attracted to Asian men. However, their flirtation is shown as very innocent and nonsexual, which is much different than the standard relationships between White men and White women shown on *Heroes*.

Later in this episode, she is murdered by the series' main villain. Hiro decides to go back in time to "yesterday" to prevent her from coming to work and thus prevent her death. In the next episode, Ando is shown throughout the entire episode waiting for Hiro in the diner after he disappears to transport. At the very end of this episode we find out Hiro accidentally transports to 6 months in the past. This is a plot device, which facilitates the next episode, entitled "6 Months Earlier," which shows the past storylines of the many other characters in a sort of "prequel" episode.

While in the past, Hiro becomes a busboy and tries to convince Charlie that he is from the future and can bend space and time. Standing before Charlie, he freezes time and thus appears instantaneously with a bouquet of flowers to add some romance. In another scene he freezes time and one thousand colourful paper cranes appear hanging

from the diner ceiling and Hiro gives her a ticket to Japan. Charlie asks, "Just one ticket?" Hiro shows her another ticket from behind his back and says, "Just in case you said yes." Charlie says yes and they hug, but she looks concerned. The scene cuts here and the audience does not find out why she is upset until their next scene together. All of Hiro's attempts to flirt with Charlie are ambiguous gestures that are not clearly romantic in nature. These are perhaps signs of a romance very slowly blossoming between them, but the argument could also be made that they are just good friends. Despite ambiguous advances, Hiro is portrayed as asexual; according to classic racist Asian male stereotypes.

In their final scene together, Hiro and the audience find out why Charlie looked so sad when they shared a hug. Hiro wants to take Charlie to a samurai movie festival, but she is acting hesitant.

Charlie: Ever since I've met you, I don't know, you've just made me so happy.

Hiro: You make me happy too.

Charlie: Well it's more than just that. I don't get very close. There's a blood clot in my brain, inches away from an aneurism. I'm dying.

Hiro: But I'm supposed to save you.

Charlie: You did. You did. Before I got here I decided to give up. But you have made me feel more alive and more full of joy than I could ever imagine. Hiro, I love you.

They both lean in for a kiss on the lips, but then Hiro accidentally time travels. He opens his eyes and he has transported himself to Japan to a roof among a formation of people in suits, chanting and doing aerobic exercises in unison. Hiro calls out for Charlie in despair. Hiro and Charlie never consummate their love with even a kiss. Because Hiro is portrayed as "not much of a man," he cannot handle the romantic pressure and his transportation is a metaphor for premature ejaculation – the ultimate emasculation. Yet,

this scene is a breakthrough for the representation of interracial relationships. A White woman professing her love for an Asian man on television would seem quite foreign to viewers as something they would not see represented in the mainstream very often at all. Perhaps this is why there is no kiss shown between them, as it would be too much of a challenge to dominant representations. Showing a relationship like this is quite innovative for mainstream television. Still, it must be noted that Hiro's representation as asexual, giddy, and nerdy is completely stereotypical and fits in with the norms of representation laid out by hegemonic structures. Showing a fully fleshed-out Asian male character with subjectivity kissing a White woman would do too much to break with the conventions of a mainstream television show like *Heroes*. Although, it might be possible to think of Hiro is a sign that viewers can look forward to seeing more representations of Asian men in lead roles and eventually more balanced and open representation of Asian men on TV in the future.

In summary, *Heroes* constructs a world that does seem to be progressive. This attracts an audience who value multiculturalism and diversity. Indeed, the cast is multiracial and there are three interracial relationships. Thus, *Heroes* attracts a large audience of people who appreciate a cast of ethnically diverse characters. However, these representations are portrayed within a hegemonic framework typical of television. The purpose of television is to appeal to the largest amount of viewers and this means catering representations to the status quo. Thus the interracial relationships portrayed on *Heroes* is contradictory to balance representations that are innovative and challenging versus those that promote and keep in line with dominant ideologies.

Conclusion

Historically, television representation of gender and race has reflected progressive social changes, but has always absorbed those changes which challenge hegemonic structures of power. Television representations of identity seem to straddle a fine line of appearing progressive on the surface, yet often undermine these progressive gains. This contradiction is exemplified in *Heroes*, a television show that was specially engineered to attract a huge viewership and certainly this aspect of the program has been successful. It was also gained much mainstream critical praise for its diverse representation. But, while *Heroes* offers a version of reality where gender and race representations are shown in progressive configurations, they are nonetheless trapped in narrow boundaries of how these identities might be enacted considering how little they disrupt dominant ideologies. *Heroes* shows a Black woman in a relationship with a White man, yet her race is ignored and she exists only to prop up his more important character. It shows a woman who is a single mother, yet she is weak and unable to care for her child. It shows a woman who is sexy and strong, yet these qualities ruin her and are brought about by ruin. It shows a Black man in a relationship with a White woman, yet their relationship is a product of the White imagination's fear of miscegenation. It shows a main Asian male character, yet he is a parody made up of racist stereotypes.

The very fact of their existence on a primetime mainstream television show indicates that as society changes, television must also change to match. In order to thrive, television needs its viewers. Television will accommodate and adapt to keep people watching to keep profits high. Interracial relationships are becoming more common in our society and television has reflected this. More and more diverse media

representations must emerge and these will lessen the burden of representation. More interracial relationships will be portrayed, thus television's categories of how they may be represented will expand and challenge traditional boundaries. As *Heroes* is both popular and recent, it is a good snapshot of where television portrayals of interracial couples are in this moment in history. Mapping a trajectory, it can be predicted that we will see more interracial couples on our small screens in the future, even though their representation will be hindered by the directive that all such television portrayals must appeal to the status quo and maintain traditional hegemonic structures.

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