

## **Interracial Intimacy: Hegemonic Construction of Asian American and Black Relationships on TV Medical Dramas**

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*This article examines the representations of Black and Asian interracial relationships on prime-time television dramas, ER and Grey's Anatomy. Interracial relationships are still a very small percentage of relationships depicted on television, and Black and Asian couplings represent an even smaller fraction, which makes examining the discourses surrounding these relationships valuable and illuminating. Using a close textual analysis of the discursive strategies that frame the representation of the Black and Asian characters in general, and the representations of their relationships with each other in the dramas specifically, I argue that the narrative arcs and racialized tropes maintain hegemonic racial hierarchies. The representations have the potential to be progressive and/or transgressive, but the death and destruction meted out to the couples ensures no couple reaches the dominant culture's idea for romantic relationships: marriage and a baby.*

*KEYTERMS African Americans stereotypes, Asian television characters, Blasians, interracial relationships, television dramas*

Less than 50 years after the Supreme Court of the United States overturned the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals' judgment to uphold the conviction of Mildred Jeter and Richard Loving for violating Virginia's ban on interracial marriages in *Loving v. Virginia*,<sup>1</sup> the demographic increase in interracial relationships and bi- and multiracial<sup>2</sup> people has generated a great deal of

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interest. With Barack Obama's successful campaign for the presidency of the United States, Halle Berry's Oscar win in 2002, multiracial and multinational collaborations and successes in music, and a visible rise in ethnically ambiguous models and celebrities, interracial relationships and their multiracial progeny have become a popular area for research and criticism (Beltran & Fojas, 2008; Gaines & Leaver, 2002; Kwan & Speirs, 2004; Paulin, 1997; Root, 1992, 1996; Zack, 1993). It comes as no surprise that many want to, and do, celebrate this "new generation [that] doesn't blink at interracial relationships" (Jayson, 2006).

Only recently have interracial relationships become mainstream enough to be represented on various prime time television shows.<sup>3</sup> Scholars and students studying Asian Americans or Blacks on television might be surprised to find out that a handful of the most recognizable Asian and Black actors on television have been paired together on these shows. Research on interracial relationships is not novel, but the focus has been mainly on Black/White, sometimes Asian/White, or Latino/White relationships (Bramlett-Solomon, 2007; Bramlett-Solomon & Farwell, 1997; Chito Childs, 2009; D'Emilio & Freedman, 1998; Gaines & Leaver, 2002; Guerrero, 1993; Kang, 1993; Mehta, 2002; Moran, 2001; Nemoto, 2006; Orbe & Harris, 2001; Paulin 1997; Seshagiri, 2003). The research on interracial relationships on television between people of color, especially Black and Asian relationships, is nonexistent. This article examines interracial relationships from seasons 9–12 of the now-canceled television show *ER*, and seasons 1–3 of current prime time show, *Grey's Anatomy*. These shows were chosen because they were the first shows to depict emergent Black/Asian interracial relationships, and the only shows for some years. Furthermore, the relationships on these shows offered up Asian American women and Black men as mediating figures by which race, gender, sexuality, and desire could be analyzed and understood as separate and apart from interracial White–Asian and White–Black relationships.

Historically, Black–Asian pairings are not new or anomalous, especially when contextualized around U.S. military interventions in Asian countries, and domestic U.S. policy toward Asian immigration—still analyses of popular mass-mediated images have been few (Kim, 1999; Kim, 2000; Prashad, 2001; Raphael-Hernandez & Shannon, 2006; Sharma, 2010), emphasizing the need for examining the politics of desire within Black–Asian interracial relationships. Cross-racial relationships on television and in films have been heralded as the progressive evolution of racial representations and race relations (Jones, 2005). However, the implications of progress are a façade and operating underneath them are the same longstanding tropes of racialized sexuality already familiar to television and film audiences. Although the narrative of the United States as a bastion of postracial ideology has become increasingly popular through its dissemination to countless media outlets, the uneasiness of society over interracial unions comes out in popular culture. As couples, Blacks and Asians on prime-time dramas are always relegated to one of two

story arcs: either having sex without love, or being in love without the sex. Interestingly both storylines fall short of the heteronormative ideal for romantic couples on television: marriage and a baby. Whereas the reliance on stereotypical tropes by these programs shows the United States is nowhere close to being a postracial utopia, it also reveals society's anxiety over the products of interracial, specifically Black–Asian unions—Blasian (mixed race Black & Asian) babies. For both Blacks and Asians, “segregation in sex, marriage, and family [has been] a hallmark of intense racialization and entrenched inequality” (Moran, 2001, p. 18). To study representations within popular culture it is necessary to look at interracial relationships, particularly because it provides both a foundation and frame for understanding the issues around sexuality and race, while simultaneously highlighting popular culture's conflicted stance on mixed-race people. Although my future research aims to analyze multiracial Blasians, in part because that is how I identify, this current project examines the rhetorical frames of representations of Black and Asian/American characters in general and the representation of their interracial relationships in these dramas specifically.

### CRITICAL TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

This article uses critical textual analysis to examine both *ER* and *Grey's Anatomy* to lay bare the ideologies operating in and through these shows. Using poststructuralism and semiotics as influencers, and situating my analysis within the field of cultural studies allows me to consider every cultural product, in this instance television shows and news discourse, as analyzable text. *Textual analysis* is a qualitative method of analysis that “focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text” (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240). In doing a close textual analysis, which required repeated viewings of the television shows, I watched each episode of the aforementioned seasons of both *ER* and *Grey's Anatomy* four times. The first time I viewed the episodes when they aired on television. The subsequent viewings were spent looking specifically for the narrative arcs involving Black and Asian interracial relationships, noting when the characters and their storylines appeared. I rewatched sections making sure to pay close attention to dialogue, mise-en-scène, and diegesis in particular scenes for both television shows. This allowed me to compare representations across episodes and programs, and create an analyzable archive out of which I could consider alternate interpretations of the interracial relationships. Although the end result would certainly be richer and more nuanced, the purpose of this piece is not to trace out how and which meanings are encoded in the production phase and whether or not the audience decodes those particular meanings, but rather to use these two texts as sites of ideological potential and interpret its mediated impact. I position myself as a “political actor, picking up

fragments from the ongoing political struggle over meanings and rearticulating them, becoming another voice in that struggle, thereby bringing different sets of issues and identities to bear" (Ono & Sloop, 2002, p. 11) in the study of the discourses framing interracial relationships. As such, my approach is informed by rhetorical studies, and I present key selections of scenes and narrative arcs from *ER* and *Grey's Anatomy* as important pieces as evidence to support my argument that Black/Asian interracial relationships fall short of the idea hegemonic relationship of marriage and baby.

In examining representations of interracial relationships, this article recognizes that these characters and their couplings do not offer a true and stable reflection of culture. Rather, they provide particular examples of such relationships and allow for consideration of what Black and Asian American interracial relationships signify within contemporary culture. Studying interracial relationships has the potential to disrupt the discursive boundaries between Black and Asian American identities and to expose the racialization and historicization of gender roles within both groups. Indeed, their very appearance on television marks a shift away from an era in which such images did not exist. However, on the two television shows examined, the representation of interracial relationships is not disruptive nor transgressive, particularly because they rely on traditional Black masculine and Asian feminine tropes and also because they adhere to traditional gender roles. Thus, they are not the progressive representations lauded by critics and fans but are instead stagnant, if not regressive, depictions of race produced and distributed by the dominant discourse. That the dominant discourse continues to play subordinate groups against each other is not a new concept, however, racial triangulation is especially helpful for understanding why these Black and Asian American relationships, in which Whites are not members of the romantic coupling, nevertheless reproduce power relations that support the White privileged racial hegemony. Within the structural interrelationships among Black, Asian American, and White racial structures and identities, Asianness and Blackness are positioned in relation to each other, resulting in representations that serve Whites, rather than serve Asians and Blacks. Both medical dramas use racially triangulated hierarchies to represent characters and plots in such a way that a progressive evolution of racial representations is implied. The narratives however quickly unravel to reveal these storylines rely on longstanding racial stereotypes that are ultimately comforting, instead of disruptive, because of their familiarity.

### Interracial Utopia, or Continuing Color Neutrality on *Grey's Anatomy* and *ER*

On first glance, these Black and Asian American interracial relationships on *Grey's Anatomy* and *ER* might imply television is changing, race relations are improving, and media are in the process of moving forward to a

newfound celebration of racial diversity and interracial romantic utopia. However, in analyzing the discourse surrounding the shows, it becomes clear that a “color neutral” standard, one that ignores race and racism and celebrates the invisibility of racial identity, a standard that has been part of U.S. multicultural racial discourses at least since the racial politics of the film, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967), persists, despite the façade of racial progress. Without an extended look at how the writers and directors are conceptualizing the episodes it is impossible to adequately draw out the motivations and machinations occurring on the microlevel, though the few interviews of producers for both shows provide a great start. For example, in an interview for the March 2007 issue of *Marie Claire* magazine, Shonda Rhimes, creator, writer, and executive producer of *Grey’s Anatomy*, answered the question “Even though there are a few interracial relationships, race is never discussed on the show. Is that a conscious decision?” with this reply:

I think that issues of race are a larger conversation that people project on a relationship, but for the two people in it, that’s not the primary thing on their minds. I also wanted to do something that felt modern in terms of the casting. Part of a truly diverse world is not needing to make a statement about the fact that it’s a diverse world. When we get to that point, we’ve gotten somewhere. (Oakley, 2007, p. 150)

Additionally, Rhimes pointed out as a “post-civil rights baby I’m not trying to make a point,” choosing not to have racial identity and identification shape her life and the lives of her characters (Eli, 2007, p. G4). She later declared, “It’s incredibly encouraging that our viewers haven’t gotten hung up on the race thing. It’s not about the fact that she’s Asian and he’s black. It’s about the fact that she’s a slob, and he’s a neat freak. That’s what the whole relationships is all about” (Barney, 2006, p. F4). Here Rhimes triumphantly praised audiences for not thinking about race as it relates to these interracial relationships. Executive producer of *ER*, David Zabel, like Rhimes, suggested the construction of the characters takes place on a race neutral production field. In discussing Drs. Neela Rasgotra (Asian) and Michael Gallant (Black) (and later Drs. Jing-Mei Chen [Asian] and Gregory Pratt [Black]), Zabel said, “honestly, we don’t even talk about it or consider that it’s an interracial couple” (Oldenburg, 2005, p. 1D). Additionally, one of the actors on *ER* draws attention to the race neutral grounds on which the show’s interracial romances occur by saying, “romance sweeps viewers away, making them forget about race” (Oldenburg, 2005, p. 1D). The trend in these television dramas is to claim ignorance about race and racial differences when coupling the characters despite being set in the large, richly diverse cities of Seattle and Chicago (Pennington, 2006). These interviews provide a rare glimpse into how two different producers, one a Black woman and the other a White

man, similarly conceptualized their respective shows; resulting in near identical treatments of some their main characters and the accompanying story arcs.

In addition to the theme of color neutrality embedded in the discourse around these shows is a promise of racial progress. Not surprisingly, with the slowly increasing numbers of interracial relationships on television, critics are giving “points” to shows that feature prominent characters in more racially inclusive relationships, where the relationships and not the pairings are a part of the story line (McFarland, 2006a). Media outlet after outlet has offered stories proclaiming a postracial, tolerant America, based on observations gleaned from “the state of race relations by most scripted entertainment” (McFarland, 2006a, p. 1E). The press declared America officially a melting pot because television shows featured integrated casts and interracial relationships.<sup>4</sup> Other stories applauded Hollywood for being “more progressive” in their portrayals of interracial relationships, and for not repeating the formula of old Hollywood (Barney, 2006, p. F4). Nagra, who plays Dr. Rasgostra on *ER* sums up this theme of progress best when she asks “why wouldn’t these two people get together? They’re very passionate about life and each other. On a bigger level, it gives people hope.” (Oldenburg, 2005, p. 1D).

In their quest to keep color out of the conversation, and to welcome a racially progressive present, these discourses ignore the way race matters and thus erase the very real significance of color (race) on bodies and peoples. Critics like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) have taken issue with the term *color-blind* and its tendency to combine elements of liberalism with culturally based antiminority views to justify the contemporary racial order. By refusing to talk about color, Whites avoid being labeled racist and use color neutral rhetoric to preserve an illusion of antiracism. Combining these discourses with a critical reading of the representations of race within the shows themselves reveals not progressive representations of race and interracial mixing, but representations that are deeply rooted in historical stereotypical representations of Black masculinity and Asian femininity and those representations simultaneously fail to break out of the White hegemonic narratives that continue to structure contemporary race relations.

### Stereotypes Refashioned to Look Like a Racially Progressive Costume

Both racial triangulation and the color neutral discourses work through the deployment of specific Black and Asian stereotypes in the two shows, which allows race to be in the picture without explicitly addressing it. The tropes used are the same reductive, stereotypical portrayals viewers are familiar with, complete with the labels film/television critics have used before. Again, these tropes are not new; in fact some might bristle at the thought of trotting out these banal stereotypes to talk about contemporary television. Yet, they

continue to be relevant, accurate, and appropriate to this discussion because they highlight just how little representations of Blacks and Asians have changed on television. For instance, there are several images of Asian American<sup>5</sup> women that signify both sexual and racial otherness that continue to persist on the screen (Kang, 1993; Wong, 1978). One of the most persistent stereotypes is the dragon lady, who is always depicted as being calculating, cold, and mean with a sexual alluring side used to seduce and corrupt men (Marchetti, 1993; Shah, 2003). The dragon lady—the hypersexualized Asian contemporary of the jezebel—is, despite (or maybe because of) her fiery temperament, explicitly constructed for the pleasure of men. As Kang (1993) noted, “her body [is] available without emotional or economic demands” (p. 7). Being already situated within the almost permanently sexually charged atmosphere of Seattle Grace, the hospital featured in *Grey’s Anatomy*, Dr. Cristina Yang is television’s newest incarnation of the dragon lady. Yang is, according to the bio listed for her on the *Grey’s Anatomy* website, “aggressive, cutthroat and arrogant.”<sup>6</sup> Her character is a brilliant, über-competitive, ranked first in her class at Stanford medical school, intern, whose abrasive and cold personality makes her unable to relate to her patients on an emotional level. Sex, especially in the beginning, is very much the focus of the relationship between Dr. Burke and herself. She is often shown unable, or unwilling, to control her sexual urges—which results in numerous sexual episodes with Burke in the hospital during the workday.

The loyal and loving lotus blossom, also known as the China doll, Indian princess, or geisha, is typically passive and like the dragon lady is constructed to serve men and is another stock depiction of Asian American women still very popular on screen (Feng, 2002; Tajima, 1989). The lotus blossom serves as the personification of the “East,” offering her exotic and submissive nature (or perhaps more fittingly, nations) up for Western subjugation. The racial and sexual otherness of Asian women is used here to construct their bodies as exotic objects complicit with the sometimes colonial, always patriarchal, gaze that desires their bodies. This character has typically been portrayed as virginal, submissive, and/or meek, and the two doctors on *ER*—Drs. Jing-Mei Chen and Neela Rasgotra—are indeed modern-day lotus blossoms. Rasgotra is a Yale medical school graduate, who, although obviously intelligent, is portrayed as indecisive and weak. She at one point has an identity crisis after her proficiency as a doctor is challenged and quits, working as a store clerk but eventually finding her way back to the hospital. Chen is also portrayed as indecisive and weak. Not only does she question her competence, but others—her medical colleagues and sometimes patients—question it as well. When issues arise in the emergency room, her character is almost always accommodating and acquiescent, very rarely does the character of Dr. Chen behave assertively.

The last stereotype is that of the Asian American as the model minority, and it applies to all three doctors. The model minority myth, as with racial

triangulation, allows White society to pit Asian Americans against Blacks and other groups of color. These women serve as proof on their respective television shows that hard work provides countless opportunities for attaining the American dream, and race is not a hindrance at all. In fact, their cultural distinctiveness is indirectly referenced when attempting to locate the key to their success. The model minority stereotype is used on these shows as the “ultimate ticket toward gaining social acceptance...[to] gain the full approval of White Americans” (Tuan, 1998, p. 8). It is important to note in both shows, *ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy*, the audience is made aware that these women graduated at the top of their classes at some of the top medical schools around the country. In addition, as doctors, their level of education and career choice/positions, which are beyond the population average, showcases their success even more. Both shows use these women to mandate how Asian Americans should conduct themselves in order to fit into White society. So although some of the other non-Asian characters have storylines that mention their particular struggles to make it through medical school or to pass examinations and complete their internships or residencies, these women did not have those struggles. These characters make no references to instances or feelings of marginalization and/or racial discrimination, playing into the mainstream audience’s belief that race no longer matters. Ironically, in playing up the model minority stereotype both shows allow “sexual and racial stereotyp[e]s to be mutually implicated and embedded in discourses of Asian cultural inferiority” (Feng, 2002, p. 10).

Originating in minstrel shows popular in the late 1800s/early 1900s, the Black male doctors in *ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy* represent two of the most enduring racialized stereotypes: the tom and brutal Black buck. The most obvious stereotype embodied by two of doctors is the tom, getting its name from the main character in Harriett Beecher Stowes’, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Bogle (2001) described *toms* as “always chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, [yet] they keep the faith, n’er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind. Thus they endear themselves to white audiences and emerge as heroes of sorts” (p. 6). On the medical shows *toms* are used to remind Blacks that they need only to obey their White “masters” to solve all their problems. Dr. Burke in *Grey’s Anatomy* epitomizes the tom stereotype, as he is stoic, selfless, kind and submissive. Even after the promised chief of surgery position is taken away from him, he remains loyal to the hospital. The audience rarely sees Burke angry, but when they do his anger is controlled and contained, never menacing or threatening—in contrast with the White male doctors on the show. He does not lash out violently—physically or verbally—and is always composed, always shown as remembering his place. The Dr. Gallant character in *ER* is perhaps the essence of the tom stereotype. Despite the constant questioning of his abilities and competency, he remains good-natured and cordial—even to those who directly challenge him. He

is always depicted as selflessly concerned about others, whether they are family, patients, other doctors or even Iraqis—whom he treats when he is goes on another tour of duty. His military service results in his death, which perhaps serves as the ultimate symbol of this particular tom's loyalty, to his country. The story lines featuring both characters always portray the men as denying their sexual selves in exchange for their class privilege.

The other stereotype, the definitive symbol of Black masculinity, is the brutal Black buck, also sometimes referred to as the Black male rapist. The brutal Black buck is constructed as being "a barbaric black out to raise havoc . . . his physical violence served as an outlet for a man who was sexually repressed. [They] are always big, baadddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh" (Bogle, 2001, pp. 13–14). The brutal Black buck is the most dangerous and threatening character to the White audience. In the contemporary entertainment media, the brutal Black buck is still a menace, which is reflected in the scarcity of opportunities for relationships, especially nonsexual ones, between Black men and women, especially White women. *ER*'s Dr. Pratt is portrayed on the show as a lascivious, hot-tempered, aggressive, oversexed prowler looking for his next conquest.

### Marriage Without Sex and Sex Without Marriage: The Fate of Interracial Romance on TV

The result of a television show bent on color neutrality, yet espousing racial progressive representations, despite constructing standard, historical representations of Asian American women and Black men is a romantic context in which intimacy that leads to marriage with children is rendered impossible, either because it culminates in a marriage without sex or in a sexual relationship that cannot lead to marriage. The relationship on *ER* between Drs. Rasgotra and Gallant is an example of the safe, non-threatening marriage without sex trope. The doctors become a pair when Gallant, ever the selfless tom, saves Rasgotra from being fired due to a mistake she made when she gave a patient the wrong medicine, resulting in the patient's death. Almost immediately after declaring their feelings for each other, Gallant is called up for a tour of duty in Iraq. Letters are written back and forth, and he returns to their hospital with an injured Iraqi (who for some reason unbeknownst to the viewer, or probably writers, can only be treated at County General), and then leaves again to finish his tour. Upon Gallant's return from the first tour, they rashly decide to get married, buy a house, and begin to start their lives together. Gallant admits he has an overwhelming desire to return to Iraq for a second tour and leaves his new bride. As a military man, Gallant is shown foregoing his own happiness with Rasgotra to fight for his country, emerging as a hero for the audience when a roadside bomb kills him during his second tour, leaving Rasgotra a widow. *ER* makes sure the relationship between

Drs. Rasgotra and Gallant is lacking sexually, by making sure the audience is hardly ever treated to any physical displays of attraction or affection between these two characters. Although their relationship is always portrayed as sweet and romantic, it is never passionate (even after he returns from Iraq) or even intimate. When compared to the other relationships going on between other (read: White) doctors, their relationship is noticeably lacking. Although these relationships involving the other doctors are conspicuously sexual yet still romantic, Gallant and Rasgotra's relationship is not.

The depiction of the connection between Drs. Chen and Pratt centers on physical attraction, making sex the only and most important element in their relationship. Dr. Chen's relationship with Dr. Pratt is not her first foray into a Black and Asian intimacy, and her previous relationship explicitly addresses popular culture's discomfort with multiracial, specifically Blasian, people. Chen previously had a baby with a Black male nurse but decides to give the baby up for adoption. This particular narrative aligns nicely with Seshagiri's (2003) observation that "when characters assert sexual desire outside of their own communities the mutual support system built on shared racial oppression quickly falls apart" (p. 186). Parental disapproval provides a convenient out for this particular narrative arc, enabling the show to ignore exploring what this multiracial baby means in the color-neutral world of *ER*. In addition, both of Chen's interracial relationships fit within the sex without marriage narrative. Chen's relationship with Pratt is offered as the antithesis to the relationship between Gallant and Rasgotra. Chen and Pratt leave romance out of their relationship, focusing solely on their physical attraction to each other. When Pratt tries to maintain their relationship on a purely sexual level, even flirting with other doctors and nurses, Chen ends it. If Kim had a romantic relationship in mind while writing on racial triangulation, it would have been very much like this one between Chen and Pratt. The combination of both Pratt and Chen's hypersexualities are located opposite the normative sexuality shown via the White doctors and their relationships with each other. Through their interpellation into their familiar and acceptable roles, they are both positioned as mainly sexual beings—especially when read against the fully developed relationships the White characters have with each other.

The relationship between Drs. Burke and Yang could have almost become a transgressive combination of the physical and romantic connections portrayed in the two aforementioned relationships. As the predatory dragon lady, Yang is continuously depicted throughout each season as cut-throat, cunning, and willing to do to whomever and whatever is necessary to become a leading cardio-thoracic surgeon. She is also always the one in control of their relationship, which plays out nicely against Burke's portrayal as the genial tom. They begin their relationship on a purely sexual level, much like Pratt and Chen, when Yang seduces Burke. In the beginning, her move on Burke was meant to showcase her erotic and exotic body

and how her “sexuality is a source of her power and of her pleasure” (Watts, 2005, p. 196). The audience in the beginning is unsure of the motivation behind Yang’s seduction of Burke. It is unclear if there are true feelings involved or if she is attempting to benefit from a relationship with a resident as the White title character, Meredith, does. One of the most pivotal moments in their relationship occurs when Yang becomes pregnant. Though she tells the other characters (except Burke) that she plans on terminating the pregnancy, she does not actually take any action to do so. It appears, for a few episodes at least, that she will end up having her Blasian baby until she ends up miscarrying. When confronted by her colleagues, she appears relieved to be no longer pregnant but mourns in secret for the loss of her baby. It isn’t until Burke learns about the miscarriage that he is prompted to take their relationship to a more romantic level by asking her to move in and eventually marry him. The way the pregnancy/miscarriage and subsequent marriage proposal are represented in *Grey’s Anatomy* (as well as the similar narrative in *ER*) demonstrate that race is integral to defining marriage and family building, not independent of those things.

*Grey’s Anatomy* deploys the marriage between Burke and Yang as a rhetorical strategy meant solely to highlight how ordinary interracial couples are in general, and Blacks and Asians specifically. Yet, the possibility of both sex and marriage moves them into the space solely held by same-raced, mainly White, couples in television. As season 3 of *Grey’s Anatomy* moved toward its finale, the representations of both Burke and Yang drew even more on their respective tropes. Burke assumed the role of wedding planner, being the pleasant tom character that he is, making sure to please as many people as possible—his colleagues, his fiancée, and of course his mother. On the other hand, Yang became more and more agitated with the thought of settling down with one person, and she tries to scheme her way out of the engagement. In the meantime, Yang’s former lover, her (White) medical school professor, shows up and attempts to win her back. In another explicit illustration of racial triangulation, the professor demonstrates that he is smarter and more skilled than Yang, and as such should be more desirable to Yang than Burke. When Yang chooses Burke over him, he dismisses it by pointing out that she has changed and is no longer as focused, driven, and competitive as she used to be—implying she has diminished in value to him and as such should remain with Burke who he has deemed inferior. Here the White doctor does what antimiscegenation laws did in the past, sending messages of racial inferiority. It is during this moment when hope is no longer out of place and the pairing of Burke and Yang finally has the potential to challenge the mainstream discourse that dictates only Whites are allowed to have it all. This moment and these characters had the potential to resist serving their “pedagogical function for viewers” by refusing to “affirm contemporary racial, gender, sexual [and] class hierarchies” (Ono, 2000, p. 167). Because season 3 ended with Yang finally wanting to marry

Burke and Burke leaving her at the altar, the moment has passed and these hierarchies remain unchallenged. This relationship had the potential to be the first Black and Asian interracial pairing on television to move beyond the love or sex binary and finally include both and unfortunately it failed.

#### CONCLUSION: NO INTERRACIAL FAIRY TALE ENDING MEANS THE CONTINUATION OF RACIAL HEGEMONY

All relationships, particularly interracial relationships, always involve the distribution and movement of power. In the last decade or so there has been an increase in the amount of research on Black and Asian American interactions in general; however, very little has been written about the intimate interactions between Blacks and Asian Americans. More popular, understandably, has been the discussions of interracial relationships that are either Black–White or White–Asian. The problem with thinking of interracial relationships as affairs between Whites and either Blacks or Asian Americans means the minority groups are essentialized and power is always attributed to the White half of the dichotomy. The attribution of power in interracial relationships is the source of much anxiety and fear. Because White men are the protectors of White womanhood, particularly their sexuality, White women retain their privilege only through relationships with White men. Women of color on the other hand are hypersexualized, either as wanton sexual beings or submissive and willing, in either case White men (and sometimes men of color) preserve their supremacy through the sexual expression of their power. Compulsory heterosexuality stipulates that the role expectations of all groups are racially, heterosexually, and gender bound (Allman, 1996). For instance when a White man dates or marries a woman of color, no fundamental change in power within the American social structure is perceived as taking place, because of Black women’s hypersexualization and position within the social hierarchy in society. In contrast, when a White woman is in a relationship with a Black man, the man often is perceived as attaining higher social status—White woman as a “trophy” for the Black man (Gaines and Leaver, 2002, pp. 67–68). Not surprisingly, when both partners in a relationship are people of color, the racial, gender and heterosexual imperatives are still in play.

*ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy* as popular culture texts provide a specific discourse; that is, they construct objects of signification rooted in a specific social environment. Their meanings spring from the institutions (within the television industry and outside of it) and the historical, cultural, and social circumstances surrounding their production. They are the raw material for examining ideologies of race and sexuality (Marchetti, 1993). As Marchetti explained, “like all discourses, they are concrete manifestations of the ideological sphere and share in all of the struggles for power, identity, and

influence . . . part of the construction of hegemony within any given society” (p. 7). Furthermore, these shows in general and the relationships specifically provide opportunities for the examination of the power systems based on systems of privilege, whether race, gender, ability, class, and/or sexuality. These systems of privilege merely serve to maintain and reestablish existing hierarchies of oppression (Moon & Nakayama, 2005).

Although some hold up the Black and Asian American relationships in *ER* and *Grey's Anatomy* as examples of attempts at resisting the dominant hegemony, these shows are actually doing the opposite by playing directly into the racial hierarchy. The use of Asian women and Black men as signifiers of racial otherness in the Black–Asian relationships helps Hollywood circumvent the racialized power tensions in Black–White and White–Asian pairings; however, it still privileges Whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality through its dysfunctional, stereotypical portrayal of the characters and their relationships. Interracial relationships in television and film have generally either been portrayed as marriages without sex or sex without marriage (Gaines & Leaver, 2002). In Hollywood where interracial couples have traditionally been denied their happily ever after or shown marrying and having children (as compulsory heterosexuality mandates), within these relationships sexuality and romance usually provide the metaphorical justification for the domination of Whites over others, because Whites are the only people shown in relationships that involve both sex and marriage (Beltran & Fojas, 2008). Marchetti (1993) observed “any act of domination brings with it opposition, guilt, repression, and resistance, which must be incorporated and silenced, rationalized, domesticated, or otherwise eliminated” (p. 6). That two of the three relationship story arcs have dealt with a pregnancy and a potential Blasian child, which has either been eliminated (through a miscarriage) or silence (via adoption) seems to be in keeping with Marchetti observations. Furthermore, both of these medical dramas use colorblindness as a rhetorical strategy, taking pains to leave race literally out of the picture, it works to remove any anxieties from the mainstream audience concerning the potential shift of power away from Whites.

Examination of *Grey's Anatomy* and *ER* is necessary because they, and media in general, are sites for the production of cultural symbols that are then used to police boundaries of difference. These dramas provide audiences with a normative blueprint that points out not only who can be a doctor, but also what doctors should do and how they should behave to be successful. Furthermore, television, as a tool for socialization, depends entirely on stereotypes to quickly and clearly express mainstream notions regarding race, gender, class, and so on. Darrell Hamamoto (1994) noted “television has been the principal medium by which rituals of psychosocial dominance are reenacted daily” (p. 3). Obviously information about potential partners and relationships are also bound up in those stereotypes, and scholars like Kumiko Nemoto (2006) pointed to “racial stereotypes as significant components of racialized desires” (p. 28). Looking at both of these shows

critically allows us to see how Hollywood normalizes hierarchies of race, gender and class while proffering certain desires as deviant and/or forbidden (Marchetti, 1993).

Both *ER* and *Grey's Anatomy* continue the dissemination of basic stereotypes of Black men and Asian American women, doing very little to complicate the portrayal of the characters and challenge the typical viewing and understanding of either Black or Asian peoples. The enduring presence of these stereotypical images and relationships are what contradicts exclamations that progress is being made. In addition, these specific representations of Black and Asian American relationships in media seem natural instead of constructed (Gray, 1989). When the hypersexualization of both Blacks and Asian Americans become commonsensical, and power circulates underneath these representations unchallenged, Whiteness maintains its position at the top of the hierarchy. Through the deployment of specific rhetorical devices involving the Black and Asian stereotypes, the interracial romantic relationships in both of these television medical dramas exist within a discourse that concentrates and maintains the psychosocial dominance of the White (male) elites over people of color. The very specific positioning of these relationships within the current discourse of mainstream Hollywood very subtly “divorces white privilege from racism while producing a form of racial solidarity and white masculinity that celebrates and exploits black masculinity” and Asian femininity (Watts, 2005, pp. 203–204). Racial triangulation is served by the benefits of Whiteness to “garner its representational power through its ability to be many things at once, to be universal and particular, to be a source of identity and difference” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 302). The marking of gendered and racial differences on the Black and Asian American bodies is ultimately seized and exploited by White masculinity, which reaffirms the superiority of the White male.

These Black and Asian American interracial relationships are problematic partly because of the very celebratory response that accompanies their presence on television. Amidst praise for having finally moved past race and seeing people for “who they are,” these medical dramas have effectively ushered in the “displacement of the social by the personal and the complex by the dramatic [which] both draws viewers into the [shows] and takes them away from explanations that criticize the social system” (Gray, 1989, p. 382). Furthermore, crossing racial boundaries to forge new relationships does not result in the automatic elimination of categories and boundaries, but rather does the opposite, producing and intensifying the differences (Yu, 2003). The lack of development for any potential multiracial offspring from either narrative frames for these Black and Asian relationships further highlights the insecurity policing boundaries and racial categories. Historically the policing and governing of interracial relationships occurred only when a White woman and non-White man were involved. There were no laws governing relationships if both parties were of color, of if the man was White and the

woman was non-White. Situating the discourse historically disproves the “transgressive” nature of these Black and Asian American pairings. That television is holding up these relationships as evidence of progress glosses over the maintenance being done by the dominant hegemony and elides the fact that sexual intimacy has been marked by inequalities of power and violence (Yu, 2003). The Black and Asian American relationships are also problematic because they adhere to the norms for Black and Asian representations on television. However, although sexuality for some of these characters are not being traditionally repressed on television “the politics of [their] sexuality” are (Dow, 2001, p. 135). These relationships are a demonstration of the mechanisms of power and control at work in mediated discourse about Blacks and Asians Americans.

This article concludes that despite the notion of crossing boundaries and the possibility of breaking taboos, television continues to be a space where White supremacy reigns through continued reliance on uncomplicated, stereotypical portrayals of race and gender. Moreover, these interracial Black and Asian relationships in both *Grey’s Anatomy* and *ER*, despite their apparent racial progressiveness or the promise of breaking with convention, work to maintain and cement that supremacy through the hegemonic rule of television. The production and dissemination of the Black and Asian relationship narratives in *ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy* functions as a reassurance of the centrality of Whiteness, despite these relationships being praised for moving us toward a simultaneously colorblind yet increasingly multicultural society. Although these interracial relationships have the potential to be truly transgressive, they fail in negotiating and producing a legitimate cultural space where all relationships are equal. Interracial relationships, marriages, and families are still bound by class, gender, and racial hierarchies. Because of their deployment of raced and gendered rhetorical strategies in their depictions of both Blacks and Asian Americans, these shows effectively shut out the possibility of a more layered, nuanced representation, which could then be used to dismantle the majority/minority, White/non-White binaries. Or as Paulin (1997) noted, “it is necessary to transform and work through restrictive representations of race, class, gender, and sexual acts so that static one-dimensional constructions do not dictate the acceptability or illegitimacy of ‘outside’ or multiply informed identities” (pp. 190–191). Rather than perpetuating the curse and punishment of these interracially interrelated characters, we must confront monolithic labels and work to construct useful, nuanced and livable understandings of relationships.

Both *ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy* use the same rhetorical strategies to represent their interracial relationships. The relationships on these shows have led to death, chicanery, and/or some sort of destruction in the lives of the characters. The tragic happenings and endings for the relationships work to maintain the racialized hierarchy by ensuring the dominant ideas of romantic relationships are not available for all, certainly not for Black and

Asian interracial couples. The narratives work by relying partially on the triangulation of Blackness, Asianness, and Whiteness, where Asian Americans are valorized as model minorities relative to the positioning of Blacks as less than ideal. If these shows explored more realistic depictions, meaning relationships that can include both sex and marriage consistently, it could offer a space for the genuine appreciation of difference, respect for singularity and an acknowledgement of the subtlety between minority groups. This space, which would put aside the presence of Whiteness and the need for the racial triangulation of Asians and Blacks, would enable meaning to surface through negotiation of difference. It would also allow for the discussion of interracial relationships and multiracial peoples to finally move beyond a space where identity is constructed based on White hegemonic norms and the discourse is always based on reactions to those norms. In television, truly liberatory inter-ethnic contact, which has yet to happen, would definitely provide the progressive representations and characters that would then challenge and disrupt traditional racial, class, and gender constructions and stereotypes. Certainly that contact will come when interracial relationships and the multiracial products of those relationships cease to be constrained by hegemonic Whiteness, and that is the moment when we should celebrate.

## NOTES

1. *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1; 87 S. Ct. 1817; 18 L. Ed. 2d 1010 (1967).
2. Throughout the article, I will use *multiracial* to refer to both bi- and multiracial groups as a convenience, although aware of many different ways these terms have differing meanings.
3. *Lost*: Bernard & Rose; *Will & Grace*: Will & James, Grace & Ben; *CSI*: Warrick & Catherine; *Sex and the City*: Miranda & Robert; *Friends*: Ross & Charlie; *Life on Mars*: Sam & Maya; *My Name is Earl*: Joy & Darnell; *Cold Case*: Nick & Toni; *House*: Foreman & 13; *Supernatural*: Dean & Cassie; *Scrubs*: Turk & Carla; *Six Feet Under*: Keith & David; *The L-Word*: Bette & Tina, Shane & Carmen, Alice & Tasha, Kit & Angus, Kit & Ivan; *Ugly Betty*: Betty & Henry, Betty & Walter, Wilhemina & Connor; *West Wing*: Charlie & Zoë; *The Wire*: Daniels & Pearlman; *Grey's Anatomy*: Torres & O'Malley, Torres & Hahn, Torres & Sloan; *Desperate Housewives*: Edie & Carlos, Gabrielle & John, Gabrielle & Victor.
4. McFarland (2006a); Oldenburg (2005); Barney (2006); Jayson (2006).
5. An acknowledgement is needed regarding the term *Asian*. It is a problematic term because it subsumes the disparate identities of the various nations and peoples located in the same general geographic area under the panethnic umbrella of "Asian." Certainly for critics like Yen Le Espiritu, this label is distinctively American and it both brings together the diverse Asian ethnicities and highlights their individuality. Obviously, this article recognizes that the Indian, Korean, and Chinese identities of the actresses in *ER* and *Grey's Anatomy* come with their own unique cultural and ethnic materialities that deserve to be analyzed independently. However, the findings from the separate critiques of their characters would in all likelihood share the same conclusion; as such, they are grouped together here.
6. See <http://abc.go.com/primetime/greysanatomy/bios>.

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