Discursive (Re)Productions of 'Post'-Race Schooling:

Glee and the Post-Racial Gaze

A thesis

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how the popular primetime television series *Glee* adopts a "post-racial gaze" to reproduce inequality through its representations of institutional practices and its cultural representations of racial difference. The thesis argues that *Glee* maintains a gaze on both youth and racialized bodies, which reproduces racial power structures under the guise of equality. This universalizing discursive strategy of post-racialism erases important intersectionalities and (re)produces "post-racial" ideologies that ultimately serve to redeem and restore dominant identities. This becomes important as a national ideological project, as the show both implicitly and explicitly advocates for increased diversity and tolerance, yet its methods and underlying messages largely serve to bolster the status quo. The thesis focuses on the storylines of the three main female characters of Color, while also comparing their written experiences to those of their counterparts in dominant positions, in order to better understand the process of racialized difference.

Keywords: post-racialism; intersectionality; post-racial gaze

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"[P]ractices of resistance are always deeply compromised by their willingness to make major concessions to other hegemonic conventions" (Wallace, 1993, p. 261).

In "Heart," episode 13 of the third season of the popular Fox television series *Glee*, the members of the newly formed Christian "God Squad" are discussing their plan to deliver singing telegrams to their classmates on Valentine's Day. Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera), a Latina female and out lesbian, requests a telegram for her girlfriend, Brittany Pierce (Heather Morris), a White female peer. Although three of the four God Squad members have no objections to the request, they want to make sure Joe Hart (Samuel Larsen), a new male student and very observant Christian—as evidenced by his Bible salesman father, his Bible verse tattoos, and his knowing only Christian songs—feels comfortable with singing for a gay couple. Mercedes Jones (Amber Riley), a Black female and the de facto leader of the group, explains why she feels the need to get Joe's approval before they deliver the telegram: "I don't want to hurt Santana's feelings, but I also don't want to make someone do something they're not comfortable with."

In the world of *Glee*, Mercedes' explanation serves to equate Santana's ostensible right to express her sexuality—at a public school, itself a popular symbol of American democracy and opportunity (Collins, 2009)—to Joe's right to freedom of expression and religious choice. Lost in the discussion is that Joe's right to exercise religious freedom becomes collapsed with the exercise of denial

of others' freedom. In the process, these actions re-privilege dominant power structures and ideologies. By allowing one individual's religious beliefs about homosexuality, and thus level of comfort, to carry the same weight as another's expression of sexual identity, the show adheres to a framework of formal equality (Crenshaw, 1988; Guinier, 2004) that gives both parties the same rights to individual freedom, at least on paper. However, as Crenshaw (1988) explains, formal, or restrictive, equality "treats equality as a process, downplaying the significance of actual outcomes" (p. 1342), and exists alongside an expansive vision of antidiscrimination, which "stresses equality as a result, and looks to real consequences for [in this case] African-Americans" (p. 1341). The post-racial, post-power framework of *Glee* is more concerned with the process than the results of equality, as it adopts the goal of formal equality across all lines of identity, and collapses multiple rights in its effort to portray a world where formal barriers to full participation have been removed. In the above example, Crenshaw's concept of formal equality can be extended from race to sexuality and religion, as well, explaining the position of the series that all individuals are seen to be on an equal playing field. In *Glee*, Joe and Santana are positioned equally, such that his potential discomfort with her homosexuality is not portrayed as discriminatory or prejudiced; it is a view grounded in his religious beliefs that deserves as much protection as her own right to send her telegram. In spite of her legal right to be free from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, race, and other individual and institutional identities, this exercise in "equality" effectively dismantles equity and legal protections. Laws and rights protecting religious

freedom are discursively placed on the same level as those protecting

discrimination on the basis of sexuality. While this ostensibly points toward

equality—treating everyone and everything as objectively "the same"—it actually

dilutes the legal protections afforded Santana in her already marginalized position

by effectively allowing religious freedom the power to trump her expression of

sexuality. Thus, this exercise in equality ultimately ends up perpetuating the very

uneven power terrain that it purports to equalize.

This brief storyline provides a powerful example of my argument that

Glee reproduces the same dominant ideologies it, on the surface, claims to

counter. It adopts a liberal and "progressive" image, but in fact contributes to the

production and reproduction of social inequality through the images and messages

presented in the series. Significantly, these images and messages are presented via

the mise en scène of a high school with teenaged characters, playing off the trope

of the American school as the locus of equal opportunity and democratization.

Although the above example focuses on the show's discursive formal equation of

sexuality and religious rights, Ferguson (2000) provides a useful explanation of

the ways that racial inequalities are reproduced today, which can be extended in

application to other forms of individual and institutional identity:

One is through institutional practices, and the other is through cultural

representations of racial difference. Both operate in a covert and informal

manner. … [T]hese two modes [include]: how institutional norms and

procedures in the field of education are used to maintain a racial order, and

>how images and racial myths frame how we see ourselves and others in a

>racial hierarchy. (p. 19)

This thesis will investigate the dual mechanisms of reproduction within a popular

television show by asking the key question: How does *Glee* adopt a "post-racial

gaze" to reproduce inequality through both its representations of institutional

practices—with the school as the institutional setting—and its cultural

representations of difference? The post-racial gaze, which I will explicate in depth

in the next chapter, draws on the work of Foucault (1995), Mulvey (1975), Kaplan

(1997), and others to argue that *Glee* maintains a gaze on both youth and

racialized bodies that reproduces racial power structures under the guise of

equality. This becomes important as a national ideological project, as the show

both implicitly and explicitly advocates for increased tolerance and equality as

outgrowths of diversity, yet its methods and underlying messages largely serve to

bolster the status quo.

Based on this central research question, I will argue in this thesis that

Glee, like other media and popular culture, produces and reproduces ideology.

Particularly, through representations of institutional practices and of cultural

difference, and despite its claims to progressivism, *Glee* produces and reproduces

a post-racial ideology that serves to further, rather than remedy, racial inequality

and inequity. As Cho (2009) explains, and upon which I will elaborate later, post-

racialism makes use of the popular belief that we as a nation are "beyond race" to

decouple race from power; without deconstructing the underlying power

structures, however, Whiteness is able to maintain its dominance and is able to

continue with increased immunity from criticism. I will problematize the neutrality and normalization of dominant identity categories, which are attached to power and resources both in the show and in society, and will argue that although *Glee* frequently positions members of dominant and subordinate groups as equals and analogues—e.g., through the shared experience of being social outcasts in glee club, a youth, school-based organization—it consistently draws on unnamed dominant identity tropes. This universalizing discursive strategy erases important intersectionalities (Crenshaw, 1991) and (re)produces "post-racial" ideologies that ultimately serve to redeem and restore dominant identities (e.g., Whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality) to their full value atop their respective hierarchies by ignoring and denying them as power categories. That this is being constructed inside a popular media narrative about school and students is particularly complicated, as it is functioning within a front of liberalism and rights.

The show's setting is not insignificant. The public school in a U.S. context represents both the symbolic and material opportunities afforded by education, and thus the ideals of democracy, equality, and freedom. By setting the series within a public school, the writers are able to draw on this popular conception of a democratic institution to create a narrative fact—that is, common sense and faith in the U.S. public education system become truth, such that equal rights and opportunity are instituted as baseline characteristics. This, in turn, makes the actions of the characters easy to manipulate, because they exist in a specific context where equality has ostensibly already been established. Moreover, the

school is understood not as a fixed context of equality, but as a producer of it, the heart of the opportunity for equality. As such, any "inequality" must come in the form of individual prejudice or bias, a lesson to be learned or a hardship to be overcome, because the institutional context is equally navigable for all. And, indeed, *Glee* takes pride in its Very Special Episodes—its direct confrontations of topical social issues in which the characters learn important moral lessons by the end of the hour—to show that increased tolerance and awareness are the key to enlightenment and social harmony. *Glee*, with its school setting, is certainly not the only series to communicate heavy-handed moral messages, but that setting lends the messages greater credence. Because the American public school is often invoked as the beacon of democracy and equality, the messages that are conveyed to the youth within *Glee*'s school are positioned to be not only "correct," but also fair and just. The implication is that the explicit and implicit lessons being learned by the fictional students at McKinley High School are the same ones that youth in the audience and at schools across the country should take away from the program. For the purposes of this thesis, if post-racialism is established as a necessary aspect of a democratic public institution, characters and storylines will be written to reflect that context. With the public school representing democracy, and the characters and plots embodying post-racialism, a further link is drawn, positioning post-racialism and democracy as complementary and inextricable. These discursive practices ultimately both reflect and help shape a national ideology.

Returning to the example above, not expressed by the show is the fact that deciding against Santana would be supported by a dominant ideology that subordinates homosexuality. If Joe were to declare his discomfort with Santana's request, he would be expressing not only his personal sentiments, but also those of dominant society, which systematically privileges heterosexual relationships. Thus, "one message [Santana's] challenges bias against one group of people in society, [while] the other message [Joe's potential one] reinforces and justifies that bias, and therefore has a significantly different impact" (Kumashiro, 2008, p. 65). In this case, Santana may be denied her right to express her sexuality, as a challenge to the status quo, which serves only to reify and support a dominant discourse subjugating homosexuality. However, this context is absent from the discussion. The issue becomes situated on an individual level, because structural power dynamics have been discursively equalized. Santana and Joe become the foci of the debate, rather than the heterosexist school and society, because *Glee* has taken for granted institutional equality and the school as the locus of democratization, where all ideas and ideologies are viewed as equally valid and worthy of protection. The effect is that a formal equality narrative, which "seeks to proscribe only certain kinds of subordinating acts, and then only when other interests are not overly burdened" (Crenshaw, 1988, p. 1342), is presented as fair and neutral, protective of all people's various rights, while masking the inherently inequitable effects of that framework.

Furthermore, that Mercedes is the character mobilized to create this false equality is especially problematic, and contributes to the overall post-racial

discourse produced by *Glee*. Mercedes embodies many of the controlling images of Black women that Collins (1990) describes, which have been used historically to "Other" women of Color in order "to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (p. 69). Yet, her race in the context of the show is rarely referenced, and if it is, it remains an individual identity marker rather than part of a broader institutional power dynamic. Her role here as the negotiator and power broker, and as the sole Black female in the group, accomplishes the dual goals of the larger post-identity discursive project: 1) placing a person—here, a woman—of Color in a position of power, to demonstrate the supposed elimination of institutional barriers; and 2) redeeming dominant identities and ideologies by having Mercedes' "fairness" actually be a vehicle for the continued oppression of Santana and, ultimately, LGBTQ-identified people. The implication is to bolster a post-race narrative through the placement of a Black female in power, distributing justice in a fair way. Yet, from a critical viewpoint, by being the one who actually creates false equality Mercedes simultaneously falls into the controlling image of the unfit and overly assertive Black matriarch (Collins, 1990), as she is shown to have the decision-making power in the group and uses that power to perpetuate Santana's marginalization. The show ends up protecting Whiteness by instead mobilizing Blackness as the arbiter of inequity. Thus, in both superficial and critical analyses, dominance is redeemed through Mercedes' narrative placement. Whether one views Mercedes as the show does—having done the fair thing by promoting equality between Joe's religious rights and Santana's right to freedom

of expression—or through a critical lens—having promoted inequity through the false equation of rights—the effect is the same: dominant power categories are protected at the expense of those that are already marginalized.

A discussion of the context and methods of my research will complete this chapter. Next, I will explain my guiding theoretical frameworks, beginning with Critical Race Theory—particularly the conceptual frame of post-racialism—and the ways in which *Glee* reduces power to a purely interpersonal, de-powered level. Then, within that same theory chapter, I will examine the field of cultural studies, to provide a theoretical understanding of the practice of representation and a deeper explanation of the ways in which media also function as mechanisms for the reproduction and promotion of dominant ideologies vis à vis schooling. For the three main body chapters, I will provide an analysis and critique of *Glee*, focusing on the storylines of the three main female characters of Color, while also comparing their plots to those of their counterparts in dominant positions, in order to better understand the process of racialized difference in a post-racial context. Finally, I will offer implications of the ideological and political project of post-racialism and the post-racial gaze for students and schools, particularly students of Color and other marginalized youth. This is important, as it aims to disrupt the assumption that schools are fundamental sites of democratization, where equality is meant to grow and flourish

Context, Methods, & Text

In this thesis, I conduct a cultural studies textual analysis, which aims, as McKee (2003) explains, not to determine how accurate or correct a text is, but

rather to understand how to make meaning of a particular text within a specific temporal, political, historical, and cultural context. In performing a textual analysis of *Glee*, I "make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text" (McKee, 2003, p. 1), considering the current post-racial ideological and discursive context. My method for analysis is to identify and track specific characters in specific storylines across episodes of the series. Specifically, I will pay attention to women of Color in storylines that possess at least three of the following features: 1) a woman of Color in a central role; 2) stereotyped cultural practices; 3) intersectionalities, particularly between race, gender, and sexuality; 4) characters in the dominant groups who can serve as analytic counterparts; 5) interactions between the characters and institutional structures and/or practices of the school.

By also investigating the characters' interactions with the institutional structures and functions of the school in the *Glee* universe, I will able to analyze how institutional practices also contribute to the reproduction of racial inequality and post-racialism. Most of the action of the series is set in McKinley High School in Lima, Ohio, and the main characters include students, teachers, coaches, administrators, and parents. Thus, the show, even when not explicitly discussing classes or school procedures, is inherently about schools and the schooling process. Again, *Glee* uses the school as a trope of democracy—as an abstract context to communicate messages of tolerance, equality, and freedom, and to establish an assumed level playing field for all students. However, my analysis will include a deconstruction of that context, as I understand schools to

systematically privilege dominant forms of knowledge and identity, often along lines of race and ethnicity (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990; Ferguson, 2000; Giroux, 2001; MacLeod, 2008), but to do so through seemingly neutral means. "[By] dealing in the currency of academic credentials," MacLeod (2008) explains, "the educational system legitimates the entire process" (p. 14). This contributes to the hegemonic understanding of the purpose and function of schools, and is thus important to challenge. My analysis will move beyond the interpersonal domain of power—i.e., the feelings and experiences of individuals (Collins, 2009)—to include the school policies, disciplinary actions, and systematic responses demonstrated in the show, in order to form a deeper understanding of the ways in which schools as institutions act and are structured to reinforce racial inequality. Additionally, and more importantly, I am also analyzing the mechanisms and systems of racial and other power to explain the ideas of rights and law that the show reflects and reproduces.

Although both the racial images/myths and institutional practices under investigation are fictional representations within the world of *Glee*, rather than actual sites of analysis as in Ferguson's (2000) study, this does not make them less important or less valid. These representations may not have meaning in and of themselves, but "they are the vehicles or media which *carry meaning* because they operate as *symbols*, which stand for or represent (i.e. symbolize) the meanings we wish to communicate" (Hall, 1997, p. 5, emphasis in original). Media and popular cultural texts function as pedagogical tools because they "naturalize these [political and ideological] positions and thus help mobilize

consent to hegemonic political positions" (Kellner, 1995, p. 59). Thus, *Glee* provides a look at both the mainstream ideology about the structure and function of American public schools and the dominant conceptions of race, while also further cementing these ideologies as hegemonic—in Gramscian terms, a form of social control that positions a particular worldview as common sense in order to "convince individuals and social classes to subscribe to the social values and norms of an inherently exploitative system" (Stoddart, 2007, p. 201). By asking how *Glee* operates to reproduce racial inequalities through institutional practices and through cultural representations of racial difference, I am really interested in investigating how *Glee* functions as a mechanism of reproduction itself, embodying interpersonal and post-racial ideologies to further normalize racial inequality.

The choice of *Glee* as the primary text is not arbitrary. It is one of the few primetime shows currently airing on a major broadcast network to be largely set in a school and to feature a cast of primarily high school students, but it also has high ratings and a place in the cultural zeitgeist that allow the show to communicate its messages to millions of viewers and pop culture consumers each week. It was the highest-rated new scripted series when it premiered in 2009 and went on to win multiple awards, including a Golden Globe for Best Television Series, Comedy or Musical, for each of its first two seasons (FOX, 2010). It has also garnered critical acclaim, particularly during its first season, and the attention of the entertainment press, with multiple *Entertainment Weekly* covers including one heralding *Glee* as "leading TV's gay-teen revolution" (EW Staff, 2011).

Thus, the value of *Glee* as a "popular" text lies in its position as a piece of popular culture—"a set of cultural practices that [are] both influenced by and influencing everyday culture and the culture industries that market and co-opt this culture" (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2007, p. 188)—like any other television show, but it also fits the more literal definition of popular, in that it is widely consumed by audiences. However, while the show engages issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability in a unique manner in primetime television (in that it engages them at all), and its regular cast is currently one of the most diverse on the air (ignoring, for now, the relative positioning and screen time of different characters), it nonetheless works toward its notable goals in a superficial manner.

Theoretical Frameworks

[H]ow does 'their view' become 'your view' without provoking any protests? The film's world appears to open up in front of you as if seen through a window. The cinema, in that sense, represents a perfect example of how a culture naturalizes ideology: it makes social constructions into natural facts. (Saper, 1991, p. 33)

My central argument is that *Glee* adopts a "post-racial gaze" to present a message of diversity, tolerance, and inclusion, all the while producing and reproducing racist narratives and images, which contributes to a discourse and ideology that diminishes the role of race and power in U.S. society. To understand what I mean by post-racial gaze, however, it is first necessary to understand both "post-racial," coming out of the body of Critical Race Theory scholarship, and

"gaze," which has roots in post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and film theory, among others.

Race Theory & Post-Racialism

My analysis is largely guided by Cho's (2009) conceptualization of post-racialism as a contemporary ideology that makes use of the popular belief that we, as a nation, are "beyond race" in order to ignore racial power contexts, thus reifying existing power structures in more invisible and insidious ways. While this certainly deserves further explanation, as it is the bedrock of *Glee*'s problematic functioning, it is first important to establish an understanding of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the body of scholarship from which post-racialism emerged.

CRT itself developed from critical legal studies as an interdisciplinary field focused on the understanding and challenging of the ways in which race and racial power are organized in American society. In their introduction, Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas (1995) explain that CRT scholarship is organized around two primary desires: to understand how race has been constructed over time, and how a system of White supremacy retains its superordinate power over people of Color; and to challenge and change that system of racial domination (p. xiii). Additionally, CRT holds a number of tenets central to its intellectual and activist project, including, but not limited to, that racism is permanent and endemic to U.S. society, that knowledge is not and cannot be "neutral" or "objective" and claims to the contrary should be challenged, that the voices and experiences of people of Color should be valued and privileged through counterstorytelling, and that structural change must be radical, not incremental, in

order to disrupt pervasive racism and oppression built into the very foundations of our society (Bell, 2004; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Guinier, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lawrence, 1990; Vaught, 2011).

Particularly since the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008, one year before *Glee* premiered, the idea of "post-racialism" has been popularized. It claims that U.S. society is now "beyond race," and that any explicit consideration of race is itself racist. However, under a CRT framework, post-racialism must be a fallacy: racism is endemic, and the election of a Black president is not the kind of radical, systematic change to which Critical Race scholars were referring. Many scholars and researchers have investigated and deconstructed post-racialism as it has played out in popular culture (Esposito, 2009; Joseph, 2009; Rossing, 2011; Squires et al., 2010; Thornton, 2011), which is of particular interest to this thesis, as I have undertaken a similar project with regards to *Glee*. However, Cho's (2009) theorization of post-racialism, using CRT as a guiding framework, is perhaps the most essential to understanding how this new ideology operates. As Cho explains, post-racialism is,

> a twenty-first-century ideology that reflects a belief that due to significant racial progress that has been made, the state need not engage in race-based decision-making or adopt race-based remedies, and that civil society should eschew race as a central organizing principle of social action. (p. 1594)

It is defined by four distinct features: a belief in racial progress and transcendence; a race-neutral universalism that refuses to link race to power; a

moral equivalence that places those who draw attention to racism on the same moral footing as those who practice it; and conscious distancing from civil rights activism, political correctness, and Critical Race scholarship, which are seen as regressive. While a single instance of post-racialism does not require all four of these features to be present, they work in interaction to produce a complex ideological system that has grown increasingly popular.

Post-racialism is, in many ways, an outgrowth of the ideology of colorblindness, which has been the target of CRT scholars (Gotanda, 1995) for its reliance on supposed neutrality. The two ideologies share many of the same features and objectives, especially around the "retreat from race imperative" (Cho, 2009, p. 1599), but post-racialism also diverges from colorblindness, addressing some of the logical fallacies inherent in the claim of not seeing color, and distancing itself from the conservative legacy of political colorblindness while appealing to "moderate-to-liberal whites who suffer from 'racial exhaustion'" (p. 1599). Additionally, whereas colorblindness was and is largely aspirational, post-racialism is set apart in that it actually uses a transcendent event to authorize the retreat from race. Under post-racialism, race may be "seen" and acknowledged, but it assumes a level playing field in which any racial discrepancies are due to individual choice, reducing issues of power to the interpersonal level.

The "retreat from race" and racial progress narrative are made even more believable due to the increased presence of people of Color in the public eye. However, rather than signify a truly more equitable society, this increased diversity reflects that, as Collins (2009) argues, "we've gone from politics that

protects racial privilege through maintaining all-white spaces to a multicultural, colorful politics that relies on allegedly color-blind mechanisms to reproduce the very same racial privilege" (p. 47). Colorblind practices of the past, by nominally not seeing color and framing policies and legal decisions as "universal" and "neutral," have assumed Whiteness as the standard (Collins, 2009; Cho, 2009; Gotanda, 1995), which allow it to become more deeply entrenched while going unmarked. At the same time, any challenge on racial grounds about the false neutrality of colorblindness was easily dismissed because it would require the explicit acknowledgement of race. Under the ideology of post-racialism, it is now acceptable to acknowledge race as a characteristic of people and culture, if not an organizing principle of society. Thus, when Collins writes, "To function, color-blind racism needs *visible* representations of blackness and brownness simultaneously to claim the universal, social justice ethos of the *Brown* [*v. Board of Education*] decision while deflecting attention away from the *Brown* decision's failures" (p. 70), it perhaps makes more sense to think of her "color-blind racism" as post-racialism. Under this ideological system, people of Color *must* be visibly represented in order to prove that racism is no longer a barrier to full enjoyment of society. *Glee* does just this, presenting characters that vary along lines of race and ethnicity as a demonstration of diversity, multiculturalism, acceptance, and tolerance. And while race is acknowledged—though only among students of Color, allowing Whiteness to continue unmarked—it is never pointed to as a reason for differential treatment. Race may become fodder for a joke or an

ostensibly comedic storyline, but it is never handled as a serious topic that actively plays a role in constructing students' lives.

The goal of my research is to interrogate the cultural representations of racial difference, i.e., the characters on *Glee* and how they are written and portrayed as racialized beings. These representations function within what Collins (2009) defines as the cultural domain of power. Because a post-racial ideology needs visible representations of difference (i.e., "Color"), *Glee* provides them in myriad ways—characters not only from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, but also from various positions of class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Although post-racialism takes race as its focal point, and racial representations are my primary concern, these other social identity categories are important to consider as well. As Crenshaw (1991) explains, intersectionalities—i.e., the varied and multi-contextual ways in which categories of identity and power intersect—cannot be ignored, as doing so only conflates intragroup differences and erases the diverse experiences of, for instance, men and women of Color. One is never just Black, for instance, but Black, female, straight, able-bodied, etc. A single identity marker can be the focus, but the others, and their interaction, can not be ignored or discounted. However, in having such a large cast and attempting to represent seemingly every type of "difference," *Glee* essentializes difference and reduces many of its characters tokens, pushing them to the margins of the show. Intersectional identities become tools for essentialism and marginalization, thereby reifying dominant identity categories, because simply having characters

from underrepresented groups takes the place of substantive representation and those who mirror hegemonic norms remain at the center.

In addition to its embraces of post-racialism, *Glee* also takes place within what Collins (2009), in discussing racism, calls the interpersonal domain of power: "the domain of one-on-one encounters and the area of personal choice. This domain involves ordinary social interactions where people accept and/or resist racial inequality in their everyday lives" (pp. 53-54). The focus on the interpersonal level—with the assumption that individuals just need to change their minds in order to correct social injustice—makes invisible the other three domains in which Collins sees power operating. The structural domain (institutional structures), disciplinary domain (organizational practices), and cultural domain (ideas and ideology), in addition to the interpersonal, are all necessary to keep systems of unequal power functioning. However, reflecting the dominant framework of social inequity, *Glee* reduces racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other mechanisms for the maintenance of power, to individual prejudice and bias. Thinking back to the opening example, Joe ultimately decides that he doesn't mind delivering Santana's telegram to Brittany, because he sees being accepting as part of being Christian. But his making what the show positions as the "right choice" does not negate the earlier positioning of the weight of his choice, whereby his personal feelings (backed up by religious and societal views) would ultimately allow or deny Santana her telegram—and even a denial would have only been read as "hurting her feelings," an act of individual bias by Joe against Santana. This reductive tunnel vision around issues

of power erases the role of institutions in maintaining the status quo, and ignores that individuals are actors within a larger system that both influences and reflects personally held beliefs.

The Gaze

The "gaze" as it is used in film and cultural studies largely traces its roots to Jacques Lacan's concepts of psychoanalysis. As McGowan (2003) writes,

> Traditional Lacanian film theory understands the gaze as it appears in the mirror stage and as it functions in the process of ideological interpellation. That is, the gaze represents a point of identification, an ideological operation in which the spectator invests her/himself in the filmic image. … Being absent as perceived and present as perceiver affords the spectator an almost unqualified sense of mastery over the filmic experience. In this sense, the filmic experience provides a wholly imaginary pleasure, repeating the experience that Lacan sees occurring in the mirror stage. (p. 28)

The emphasis here, as a psychoanalytic framework, is on the individual as a subject gazing upon an object. The gaze reflects conscious and subconscious desires, "the pleasure in looking" (Manlove, 2007, p. 84). When a spectator watches a film, he or she regresses into an almost childlike state, during which one's ego is built up due to the identification with the camera and the power over those on screen. But even more than having power over those upon whom one is gazing, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory focuses on the individual who is, as Sturken and Cartwright (2008) explain, "in a process of seeking out others in

hopes of obtaining the sense of self-certainty and completion in their look" (p. 122). The subject gazes in an attempt to identify with an aspect of the image, in order to gain a sense of completion; however, because the desired completion is based on a misrecognition of the self—as in Lacan's mirror stage, in which infants first see their reflections in a mirror and imagine it as an ideal, split from their selves—it is always illusory and can never truly be attained.

The most influential application of the Lacanian gaze to film studies is likely by Mulvey (1975) in her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." She adapts both Lacan and Freud for her feminist reading of film, mobilizing psychoanalysis "as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (p. 438). She concludes that film operates under the control of a "male gaze," in which "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (p. 442). This reflects the patriarchal order of dominant society, with women signifying to men the constant threat of castration. Because of this threat, Mulvey explains that the male unconscious responds by asserting its power over the female body, turning her into a fetish or voyeuristic object. The male gaze then becomes encoded in cinema by taking on this heterosexual male perspective both on-screen (in the interactions between characters, where females generally lust after a man) and off (in the way the camera focuses on women in a sexual manner), thus forcing the audience to identify with and share in the patriarchal dehumanizing of women simply by means of watching. Significantly, the gender of the viewer does not

matter in the adoption of the gaze. Although it assumes a heterosexual male, who will be attracted to the females presented on screen, females and non-heterosexual viewers are also implicated, as the entire film is constructed from a straight male perspective.

In response to the assumed heterosexuality and biological essentialism of Mulvey's male gaze, Kaplan (1983) argued in "Is the gaze male?" that, "The gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the 'masculine' position" (p. 30). The male gaze is so called not only for the supposed male spectator—in the film, behind the camera, and in the audience—who is doing the gazing, but also for the hegemonic understandings of masculinity and femininity associated with gendered power. Kaplan explains further:

> [I]t is significant that … when the man steps out of his traditional role as the one who controls the whole action, and when he is set up as sex object, the woman then takes on the "masculine" role as bearer of the gaze and initiator of the action. She nearly always loses her traditionally feminine characteristics in so doing—not those of attractiveness, but rather of kindness, humaneness, motherliness. She is now often cold, driving, ambitious, manipulating, just like the men whose position she has usurped. (p. 29)

The hegemonic need for a masculine/feminine binary ensures that the male gaze will operate even when traditional gender roles are "challenged" by female characters taking on masculine, i.e., powerful, traits and characteristics. In fact,

the male gaze is predicated on power, because "men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession which is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act upon it" (p. 31). Because societal power—culturally, politically, economically, etc.—lies with men regardless of what body is acting as the spectator, it takes more than a mere reversal of traditional gender roles to disrupt patriarchal voyeurism. If a male assumes an objectified role in a film, for instance, the power is not suddenly placed in the female gaze; instead, power still lies in hegemonic understandings of masculinity and femininity, with the man simply occupying the female role of "to-be-looked-at-ness."

The gaze structure has since been adopted to describe more than just gender relations. Kaplan (1997) has documented the use of the imperial gaze in film, and describes how "Hollywood's representations unconsciously reflect or embody the colonial imagination" (p. 61). In the films she analyzes, she argues that the White western subject is always the central figure, and that even as White characters travel abroad, they retain their western lenses and ultimately "dominate, exploit and … use the Other for their own ends" (p. 61). Similarly, Russell (1991) describes what she calls the "dominant gaze":

> the tendency of American popular cinema to objectify and trivialize the
> racial identity and experiences of people of color, even when it purports to
> represent them. Like Mulvey's male gaze, the dominant gaze subtly
> invites the viewer to empathize and identify with its viewpoint as natural,

universal, and beyond challenge; it marginalizes other perspectives to

bolster its own legitimacy in defining narratives and images. (p. 244)

The common thread between these gaze structures is that they attempt to describe

"the hierarchical power relations between two or more groups or, alternatively,

between a group and an 'object'" (Manlove, 2007, p. 84). The film or text is

always filtered through the perspective of those in power, whether along gender,

national, racial, or other lines, and the narrative and images serve their interests,

despite possible attempts to seemingly disrupt the status quo.

With this context, it is here that I wish to propose what I am calling the

"post-racial gaze." This gaze functions as a sort of new imperial and dominant

gaze, updated for a post-colonial and, now, post-racial ideological and discursive

context. It represents a reconceptualized imagination of the Other that functions as

the ultimate redemption of Whiteness through the decoupling of race and power.

It implicates Whiteness in past racism, but in doing so, redeems it in the present

by leveling the racial playing field. Past power and privilege are recognized,

unlike the gaze of the colonialist that "refuses to acknowledge its own power and

privilege" (Kaplan, 1997, p. 79), but because we are now "beyond race," racial

hierarchies can no longer exist as organizing principles of society. Similar to

Mulvey's (1975) conceptualization of the male gaze, the post-racial gaze is

accomplished in multiple ways, both intra- and extra-textual: through the actions

of characters within the narrative, through composition of frame and mise en

scène, and through the responses of the audience. This is especially significant for

this thesis considering Ferguson's (2000) understanding of the reproduction of

racial inequality through institutional practices and cultural representations. The post-racial gaze operates at the textual level, which in the case of *Glee* includes characters' joking about race and discussing it in power-neutral terms, and the technical level, which includes the literal positioning of the White characters as disproportionately front and center in the composition of frame. These both contribute to the third extra-textual level, which includes discussion of the show's diversity by the creative team and the popular press, which bolters its image as progressive and post-racial.

The post-racial gaze shares close ties with the dominant gaze, which Russell (1991) describes as having three distinct ways in which it functions:

(1) in the proliferation of degrading stereotypes which serve to dehumanize Blacks' history, lives and experiences; (2) in the marginalization or complete absence of indigenous perspectives on Blacks' history, lives and experiences; and (3) in the co-optation—or "Hollywood-ization—of ostensibly "racial" themes to capitalize on the perceived trendiness or fashionableness of such perspectives. (p. 246)

The difference, besides that I am expanding beyond the Black/White paradigm, lies in Cho's (2009) theorization of post-racialism as a tool for the redemption of Whiteness through the neutralizing of racial power. The post-racial gaze does rely on the proliferation of degrading stereotypes, but they are necessarily updated to fit the post-racial context. Similarly, the post-racial gaze also functions by co-opting "racial" themes to capitalize on their perceived trendiness, but whereas the films Russell analyzed followed a distinctly Black experience through the eyes of

a White character, *Glee* purports to tell a "universal" story due to the supposedly level racial playing field—yet, the White characters nonetheless hold central narrative positions, while characters of Color are marginalized.

Additionally, in the context of *Glee*, the post-racial gaze is necessarily tied to the gaze on youth and on the school setting. A scene set in a locker room or in the cafeteria is meant to, through the mise en scène, evoke an image of the school as a democratic institution, but also to create an identification with the viewer through an ostensibly universal experience and image. These tropes thus lend to the universalizing of the underlying ideology of the post-racial gaze. A viewer who watches a conversation set against lockers, for instance, may not have had the exact experience depicted on screen, but it is a common enough high school setting that many will likely be able to draw parallels to their own histories. By fostering an identification with the setting and broader context, then, through this gaze *Glee* can additionally foster an identification with the ideology being communicated by the characters and storylines. This gaze also assumes that this school context is the definitive one—that while certainly not every school looks *exactly* the same as McKinley High, it draws sufficiently on established tropes that the audience can be expected to understand everything from the physical setting to the mindsets and experiences of the characters. This secondary gaze on youth and school links back to the post-racial gaze here: if viewers are asked to understand and relate to the characters based on a sense of universality in the school context, there is an inherent post-racial expectation. *Everyone knows what it feels like to be in high school. It doesn't matter if you are Black, White, Asian,*

or Latino, gay or straight, male or female. We have all had these experiences. The series relies on these assumed identifications to then further promote a post-racial ideology through such methods as the aforementioned updated racial stereotypes, creating an investment in the post-racial gaze and its propagation.

In adopting this post-racial gaze as my primary theoretical frame, it is necessary to make clear that my main interest lies in racial power dynamics, not individualized racial desires; that is, the post-racial gaze is not so much concerned with the Lacanian gaze, despite its important ties to Mulvey's (1975) male gaze and the subsequent gaze structures it influenced. Many scholars have criticized Mulvey's Lacanian film theory for being, ironically, not Lacanian enough, yet my critique is that it focuses on the psychological at the expense of broader dynamics that explain how the gaze constructs and controls groups of people. Foucault's (1995) conceptualization of the gaze is particularly useful in this respect. He viewed the gaze as a way to effect disciplinary power by making subjects complicit in their own social and ideological control. Writing on the development of the modern penal system, Foucault theorized that discipline and punishment are really vehicles to assert the power of the state by naturalizing and normalizing certain behaviors and ideologies through the public punishment of some and the constant threat of punishment for others. The gaze becomes a method of systemic surveillance that produces power and knowledge.

Foucault (1995) specifically uses the concept of panopticism, adopted from Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. In this architectural model, a guard tower sits in the middle of a prison, able to see and hear all the prisoners around him,

but the prisoners are never able to confirm the presence of a guard. This constant possibility of being watched produces a prison body that conforms to rules and regulations—submits to power—without that power being forcefully imposed. Foucault summarizes the effect of the Panopticon: "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (p. 201). The post-racial gaze is not a literal prison with a possibly manned guard tower, but it functions similarly as an ideological surveillance tool. The gaze is built into the various aspects of the text, in this case *Glee*—the on-screen narrative, the framing of the various characters by the writers and directors, the perspective of the audience—and becomes internalized, such that a post-racial ideological position seems natural and normal. This post-racial gaze, as a form of surveillance built into *Glee* and other media, constructs post-racialism as "truth" and forces the citizenry to believe in its progressiveness, all the while reifying Whiteness and White supremacy. We see this play out in written interactions between characters—Mercedes is stopped from questioning whether her being Black is a hindrance to her getting solos, because post-racialism discursively disallows race being linked to power—and in discussions in the popular media about *Glee*'s messages of diversity and tolerance—which, although often centered around the show's handling of LGBT issues and characters, represents the broader belief that we are "beyond race."

By adopting a post-racial gaze, *Glee* encourages individuals to believe in a post-race imperative. The entire show, and the narrative surrounding it, is imbued with post-racialism, such that audiences are constantly surrounded by the broader

societal post-race ideology. That constant surrounding reinforces ideology and forces individuals to support it and reproduce it themselves. This represents the multidirectional flow of power that Foucault (1995) discusses:

> this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it'; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them (p. 27)

The way the show is written reflects a post-racial ideological context, but praise from mainstream media critics reinforces the "correctness" of that ideology, which in turn leads to the continued writing of the show to reflect that. Viewers also see and hear this, and it is echoed by further post-racial discourse in politics, economics, etc. The effect is mutually reinforcing, wherein the post-racial gaze helps post-racialism both take hold and retain its hold. Even those who criticize *Glee*'s post-racial ideological stance may ultimately imbue the post-racial gaze with more discursive power, as they are still reacting to the omnipresent gaze and its normalized societal position.

I recognize that my work attempts to deconstruct a post-racial gaze that is backed up by a powerful ideology that has become accepted as natural and is constantly being reinforced. However, Foucault (1995) himself noted that because power is multidirectional, and not simply a repressive tool implemented by the state upon an unsuspecting citizenry, there are always opportunities for resistance. hooks (2003) argues that there is also an "oppositional gaze" that allows viewers to break out of the victim/perpetrator binary. Although she writes specifically

about Black female spectators, as having to combat both the male and dominant

gazes, I believe the term applies to this thesis, as well. With a clear understanding

of race and racism, and the ideological power of media texts, I hope to construct

an oppositional gaze through my analyses in order to understand and deconstruct

the post-racial gaze in *Glee*.

Cultural Studies & Understandings of Representation

      Now that I have established the theoretical operating grounds of post-

racialism, and the ways in which the post-racial gaze mechanizes consent to and

propagation of the oppressive ideology, there is still the question of why this all

matters. After all, *Glee* is "just a TV show." But, as cultural studies scholars have

argued, television and other forms of popular culture can have incredible power in

their mobilizing audiences to adopt certain ideological positions. Because this

paper is an analysis of the ways in which *Glee*—a television show with a fictional

world of characters, settings, and events—adopts and activates a post-racial gaze,

it is necessary to establish a theoretical understanding of how popular culture texts

contribute to the construction and reproduction of ideology. I will be observing

and interpreting the *representation* of a school, which is based in and reflects a

certain understanding of how public schools operate. Exploring the link between

pop culture and ideology will also allow for a discussion of the ways in which

popular texts contribute to discourse around race.

      Storey (1996) defines culture "politically rather than aesthetically," and

explains that the field of cultural studies "regards culture as political in a quite

specific sense – as a terrain of conflict and contestation. It is seen as a key site for

the production and reproduction of the social conditions of everyday life" (p. 2).

Similar to Giroux's (2001) focus on agency and the dynamic involvement of

schools and individuals in his expansion on the framework of cultural

reproduction in education, Storey (1996) explains that cultural texts "do not

simply reflect history, they make history and are part of its processes and

practices and should, therefore, be studied for the (ideological) work that they do,

rather than for the (ideological) work (always happening elsewhere) that they

reflect" (p. 3, parentheses in original). Ideology, then, is a key component of

cultural studies, as cultural texts are sites for the creation of ideas and meanings.

Glee does ideological work by mobilizing its viewers around liberal ideas of

diversity and inclusion. Through its portrayals of characters and the different

storylines written for those characters, *Glee* reflects and contributes to a post-

racial ideology.

As Storey (1996) explains, Stuart Hall expands this discussion of ideology

through his theory of articulation: "He argues that cultural texts and practices are

not inscribed with meaning, guaranteed once and for all by the intentions of

production; meaning is always the result of an act of 'articulation'" (p. 4). A

certain intended meaning can be attached to a text, but that meaning is changed

and adapted through the process of "articulation" depending on the audience and

the context of the message. However, the intended meaning is important and

contributes to the construction of ideology, as representations are not simply

reproductions of reality. Hall (2006) explains that "representation is a very

different notion from that of reflection. It implies the active work of selecting and

presenting, of structuring and shaping: not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning, but the more active labour of *making things mean*" (p. 131, emphasis in original). Representation is not simply a mirror image of what is being represented, but a conscious construction of meaning with an ideological purpose. Images and meaning are as much constructed around what is not visible as what is (Hall, 1997a), making it important to consider what is and is not included in any representation, and what that means ideologically.

This process of meaning-making contributes to dominant understandings of culture and society. Media and pop culture, then, are important instruments of hegemony (Hall, 2006; Kellner, 1995; Storey, 1996), which includes and contributes to the maintenance and perpetuation of racism and White supremacy. The representations presented through media "attempt to induce consent to certain political positions, getting members of the society to see specific ideologies as 'the way things are' … Popular texts naturalize these positions and thus help mobilize consent to hegemonic political positions" (p. 59). To borrow Foucault's concept of the regime of truth, knowledge that is linked to power has the ability to make itself more "true" (Hall, 1997). Considering the reach and accessibility of mass media and popular culture, there is an inordinate amount of power with which to produce knowledge that becomes accepted as natural and normal. And considering the capitalist structure of society, with a large imbalance of wealth and power, society "had much to gain from the continuous production of popular consent to its existing structure, to the values which supported and underwrote it, and to its continuity of existence" (Hall, 2006, p. 131). Those in power control the

media conglomerates, and invest heavily to ensure the reproduction and hegemonic understanding of dominant ideology. So, from a materialist cultural perspective, *Glee* reflects and contributes to the "truth" of post-racialism, which mobilizes consent around this new dominant ideology and discourse.

Thinking about television specifically, Giroux (1994) referred to the medium as one of most "potent" arms of cultural hegemony (p. 44). Fiske and Hartley (1992) explain that claim partially through their assertion that television performs a "bardic function," by which it, for example, acts as a mediator of language, organizes its messages according to the needs of the culture and not the internal demands of the text, and occupies a central role in the culture. Further, television's messages tend to assume a "socio-centrality," meaning the medium "tends to articulate the negotiated central concerns of its culture, with only limited and often over-mediated references to the ideologies, beliefs, habits of thought and definitions of the situation which obtain in groups which are for one reason or another peripheral" (Fiske & Hartley, 1992, p. 67). Despite television's large and diverse output, the messages still tend to propagate a dominant ideology in an attempt to be most accessible to the greatest number of people.

Although popular culture has an ideological function, ideological control is not monolithic, whereby the culture industries send a message from above that audiences consume passively. Individual agency and critical ability are what make culture "a major site of ideological struggle; a terrain of 'incorporation' and 'resistance'; one of the sites where hegemony is to be won or lost" (Storey, 1996, p. 4). In Hall's model of televisual communication, "decoding" is one of the key

components of constructing meaning, which is to say audiences produce

meanings and messages in conjunction with the "encoded" message from the

producers (Storey, 1996). Acknowledging the viewer's agency and critical

capacity, though, does not change the fact that the media seek to manipulate: "to

deny that the consumers of popular culture are not cultural dupes is not to deny

that at times we can all be duped" (Storey, 1996, p. 6). So, while interpreting

cultural messages can be a site of resistance and challenges to hegemony, there

are still larger structural forces constructing ideologies, of which the culture

industries contribute to the production and reproduction. Specifically, the purview

of this paper will be to examine the production of cultural messages and not to

explore the resistance to them.

To critique hegemonic ideologies, Kellner (1995) argues it is not enough

to simply deconstruct the ideology presented within a cultural text, because

ideology itself "contains discourses and figures, concepts and images, theoretical

positions and symbolic forms" (p. 59). Some of these images and symbolic forms

include the racial representations that are of particular import for this paper.

Esposito (2009) explains that "racial formations occur through links between

structure and representation," and that "popular culture texts … are discursive

practices that have material consequences on real bodies" (p. 526). The

representation of race contributes to the construction of racial ideology, but that

ideology is played out not only in the text, but also in real life. It is important,

then, to consider how popular culture representations reflect and contribute

further to dominant understandings of race as an identity and an organizing concept.

Foucault (1995) argues that representations are discursive productions that contribute to racialized understandings, i.e., "knowledge," which are closely tied to power. To return to his discussion of discipline and punishment, Foucault explains that, "Punishment has to make use not of the body, but of representation. Or rather, if it does make use of the body, it is not so much as the subject of a pain as the object of a representation: the memory of pain must prevent a repetition of the crime" (p. 94). Individual bodies stand in for larger groups, wherein the representation of one serves as a guide for others, delineating certain appropriate conduct. Nixon (1997) further explains Foucault's assertion that power "subjects individuals through the government of conduct. By this, Foucault means the prescribing and shaping of conduct according to certain norms which set limits on individuals but also make possible certain forms of agency and individuality" (p. 315). Power, such as that found in the post-racial gaze, which normalizes post-racialism such that Whiteness may be subtly and quietly redeemed among a sea of "diversity," produces knowledge, as well as subjects who view that knowledge as truth, which in turn bolsters the dominant power.

However, Nixon (1997) takes issue with Foucault's drive "to see the identities inhabited by historical individuals as simply the mirror-image of the subject-positions produced within particular discursive regimes," as it does not sufficiently address the possibilities for individual resistance or potential failures in "attempts to regulate or govern conduct" (p. 316). Nixon prefers Foucault's

later writings on the "techniques/technologies of self," which allow for more
personal agency and move away from strict reliance on discursive constructions
of subjects. While I tend to agree, as it is important to recognize and value agency
within powered and oppressive systems, I view my work here as an important first
step in the deconstruction of the post-racial gaze and post-racial representations in
a single popular television series. So, while analytic attention to resistance is
important, it is beyond the purview of this thesis. Representations in the show
dictate certain "acceptable" behaviors and beliefs, and while I do not believe that
all individuals necessarily accept and reproduce those beliefs, my charge is to
break down those representations in order to better understand how a post-racial
ideology is being communicated and what, exactly, that ideology is in the show's
terms.

An important part of that understanding comes from what Hall (1997b)
calls a "racialized regime of representation," which is largely made up of the
racial stereotypes that have long existed, and still persist, when representing the
Other. While this reflects the dominant desire to naturalize ideas of the racial
Other as inferior, and thus of Whites as superior, it also reflects broader uses of
cultural power, "including the power to represent someone or something in a
certain way" (p. 259). Thus, power is mobilized not only in the representation,
which typically relies on stereotypes to assert differential societal positions, but
also in the act of representing itself. Just as images are never neutral, neither are
the decisions regarding which images to include in a work. In the case of *Glee*,
post-racialism is bolstered by the positioning of characters from dominant identity

groups at the center of the narrative. Even if the characters did not embody racial stereotypes (though they do), their positioning is still part of the regime of representation and demonstrates the power of the post-racial gaze.

Julien and Mercer (1996) remind us that inversely proportional to representational power is the need to be representative. They explain,

> Where access and opportunities are rationed, so that black films tend to get made only one-at-a-time, each film text is burdened with an inordinate pressure to be 'representative' and to act, like a delegate does, as a statement that 'speaks' for the black communities as a whole. (p. 455)

This highlights the ways in which representation and the various gaze structures rely on more than just on-screen representations to assert and retain their power. Whites do not need to worry about being "properly" represented because they have inordinate access to resources as actors, writers, directors, producers, etc. As the group in power, they are both determining how they are represented, and are being represented in myriad ways so repeatedly that it feels proper and real. The increased number of opportunities, and the fact that a White representation does not need to speak for the entire race, reduces the risk of essentialism or the need to get the representation "right." For people of Color, though, and members of other marginalized groups, there is much less access to resources and fewer opportunities to create representations, which translates to less power. The post-racial gaze is particularly dangerous, then, because it gives the false sense that representation is increasing for people of Color, and thus there is simultaneously less pressure to be "representative." Of course, the mere idea of being

representative is problematic, as it implies an essential truth that *can* be represented. Julien and Mercer recognize this, and explain that "the restricted economy of ethnic enunciation" (p. 456) is a problem because a single Black subject is expected to speak for an entire racial group with its own internal diversity, and that this reinforces the idea that all members of a racial group are alike. But while the post-racial gaze certainly accomplishes this essentialism and restriction, it is doing so within a post-racial ideological context that decouples race from power. Thus, a show such as *Glee* may present characters in essentializing and stereotypical ways, but under post-racialism, there is no weight or power to those decisions, which allows them to proceed without the need to be accountable to any criticism.

This solitary representation, in which racial tokens are expected to stand in for larger groups, is not only objectifying—a single subject becomes "[a]estheticized as a trap for the gaze, providing pabulum on which the appetite of the imperial eye may feed" (Mercer, 1997, p. 287)—but also returns to the sexual fetishization the Other. Mercer (1997), discussing the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, argues that Mapplethorpe's focus on the nude Black male body disrupts the traditional male gaze, as the object of the gaze is a man rather than the traditional woman, but despite this change and the "momentary admiration," the photographs nevertheless trade in racial stereotypes to objectify and fetishize the Black male subject and turn him into the object of the gaze. The fetishization comes not only from the erasure of interference between observer and observed, but also from "effac[ing] the material process involved in the production of the

image, thus masking the social relations of racial power entailed by the unequal and potentially exploitative exchange between the well-know, author-named artist and the unknown, interchangeable, black models" (p. 287). The Black bodies in the photographs both literally and figuratively become Mapplethorpe's, representations of the mythical Black male with only his name attached, and reflect "more about the desires of the hidden and invisible white male subject behind the camera and what 'he' wants-to-see" (p. 286) than about those who are depicted. The gaze, then, is a reflection of both the seer and the seen. The post-racial gaze in *Glee*, while different in many ways from Mapplethorpe's photographs, still operates around the objectification and fetishization of the racial Other. It uses representations of a diverse group of teenagers to win liberal brownie points, allowing the show to congratulate itself for such diversity and progressiveness without substantively challenging the status quo. *Glee*'s success has probably most impacted the success of co-creator Ryan Murphy, who has since launched the Emmy-nominated anthology series *American Horror Story* and another "progressive" comedy, *The New Normal*, loosely based on his own experience having a child with his partner via surrogate. The success of *Glee*, then, has turned "diversity" into a commodity with ample exchange value, increasing Murphy's Hollywood stock by trading on the post-racial gaze and the marginal inclusion of those from historically underrepresented groups.

What follows is an analysis and deconstruction of the post-racial gaze in *Glee*, specifically as it applies to the characterizations and narratives of the three main female characters of Color. Armed with these theoretical understandings of

post-racialism, the gaze structure in film studies, and the ideological and

hegemonic impact of popular culture, I aim to provide an analysis of the ways in

which *Glee* constructs youth post-racially in order to communicate an ideology

and discourse that makes claims to progressiveness while, in fact, reifying

existing unequal racial power structures.

Chapter 1: Mercedes Jones, *"Why Is It Never Me?"*

"the bodies of black women [are] represented in certain domains of the 'beautiful' where they were once denied entry … Reinscribed as spectacle … [t]hey seem to represent an anti-aesthetic, one that mocks the very notion of beauty" (hooks, 1992, p. 71).

Mercedes Jones, played by Amber Riley, is the sole Black female character on *Glee*. She joins the McKinley High School glee club, New Directions, in the series pilot, gaining a spot after her audition performance of Aretha Franklin's "Respect." Immediately, the show establishes Mercedes' power and control as a singer and as a force to be reckoned with, while also drawing links to the Queen of Soul beyond vocal ability, positioning her as another in a line of full-bodied Black divas. Despite her talent, her place in the club over the first three seasons is tenuous. Frustrated by her lack of recognition and solo performances, Mercedes temporarily joins the cheerleading squad in season one, and later splits off to form an all-female rival glee club in season three. Her talent is never in question, yet she is consistently denied a leading role in both New Directions and *Glee* itself. In this chapter, then, I will examine how the post-racial gaze functions to keep Mercedes on the margins of the show, by refusing to link race with her relative lack of opportunity and by portraying her character in ways that ultimately serve to justify her own marginalization.

As the creation of three White writers/producers, Mercedes represents an amalgamation of several stereotypes and controlling images (Collins, 1990) of

Black women, but in her post-racial construction, those stereotypical characteristics are made to appear as mere consequences of personal actions and decisions, where her race is decoupled from any power structure that would systematically subordinate her, both in her character construction and in a broader societal context. Thus, for example, Mercedes is not sassy because she is Black; rather, she is a Black female who happens to be sassy, because that is simply her personality and "who she is." In other words, as an object of the post-racial gaze, the inherent racial-gender stereotypes that operate through and in her are positioned as natural and become stripped of a powered context. I will argue, additionally, that the post-racial representations of institutional—i.e., school— actions toward Mercedes and of her cultural "difference" are actually tools to redeem Whiteness and reify racial social and institutional inequality. By comparing Mercedes' characterization and position in various storylines to those of Rachel Berry (Lea Michele), the lead White female and Mercedes' closest counterpart, I will demonstrate the discursive work of *Glee* in subjecting Mercedes to the post-racial gaze, which reifies existing institutional and social inequity and reproduces a post-racial ideology that effects and justifies a "retreat from race" (Cho, 2009).

Marginalization through Centrality

Mercedes' marginalization is immediately apparent when considering her position as the only Black female both among a cast of primarily White characters and within the school setting portrayed in the series, which represents the traditional White, middle-class, heteronormative U.S. schooling environment.

Before even considering the quality and substance of her representation, it is important to understand the positioning of Mercedes—specifically, her Black female body—as an Other (Collins, 1990; Hall, 1997b). Collins (1990) explains that the "Others" of society can never really belong, as they are constantly marked by their difference, yet they are "simultaneously essential for its [the moral and social order's] survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries" (p. 68). Despite Mercedes' talent, she is never guaranteed a central spot in the glee club, and her presence serves more to provide a foil to Rachel, rather than to establish and define herself as a fully-dimensionalized character. Mercedes, then, is actually a very important character on *Glee*, but not in terms of the centrality or substance of her role. Instead, her marginality as Rachel's counterpart helps to *define* Rachel as the pinnacle of White womanhood, and womanhood generally, while simultaneously increasing the "diversity" and liberal inclusion quotient of the series. In their post-racial constructions, Mercedes' Blackness and Rachel's Whiteness may be acknowledged, but they are stripped of power, as the show engages race merely on the level of individual identity without links to institutional power structures. The effect is the setting up of a neutral binary opposition, even though such an opposition almost never exists (Hall, 1997b). The result, then, is that Mercedes' marginality in *Glee* and in New Directions bolsters Rachel's own centrality, not because of a racial power structure, but because of individual differences in personality, ambition, and drive.

In this sense, *Glee* can have its proverbial cake and eat it, too. There could be no Rachel without Mercedes, since, as Hall (1997b) explains, *"we need 'difference' because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the 'Other'"* (p. 235, italics in original). However, the post-racial gaze—the ways *Glee* filters its characters and storylines through a post-racial lens to position such an ideology as natural and normal—on the two characters is defined by a post-racial context in which race is now neutral and cannot be claimed as a systematic hindrance or help. Difference becomes nothing more than just that—not better or worse, dominant or subordinate, but simply *different*. Rachel occupies a central role, and thus Mercedes occupies a marginal role, because, while they are matched in talent and ability, the former is characterized as simply more ambitious and driven, her racial privilege never examined or even questioned. At the same time, though, even though Mercedes is kept in a marginal role for much of the show's run, she is still a Black woman on a popular primetime network television series. This is significant not because of a need to be "politically correct"—indeed, as Cho (2009) argues, the distancing move of post-racialism requires a dissociation from "new-school political correctness" (p. 1604)—but because diversity and racial inclusion are signs of having "arrived" in a post-racial era when race and racism are no longer concerning issues. Mercedes' presence on *Glee* is just one step in the show's attempt to represent everybody from every identity group, in order to prove true racial progress and transcendence, but her marginal position ultimately justifies Rachel's centrality. By making Rachel's higher position a natural consequence of her own superior ambition—and thus

Mercedes' failure to attain the same level a consequence of her own shortcomings and lack of ambition—*Glee* redeems Whiteness in the form of Rachel. The two characters are ostensibly positioned on an equal playing field with the same opportunities, yet one consistently finds greater success, more screen time, and more narrative thrust, signaling that they ultimately deserve their respective positions.

Mercedes' narrative placement in the series makes her marginality readily apparent. During the second season, for instance, her most memorable storyline involves her efforts to restore Tater Tots to the school cafeteria after they have been banned under a healthy eating initiative. While one could argue for this story's asinine nature, regardless of the character at its center, that it is Mercedes is significant. The fact that Mercedes is at the center of this storyline matters because it is one of the few where she occupies the main role. Not only is Mercedes the central character in a subplot that characterizes her as a food-obsessed girl passionate about petty causes, but she is also *only* given this storyline. This reinforces the stereotypical nature of her character, playing off multiple controlling images (Collins, 1990) of overweight Black women and Black people's love of fried food, and further essentializes her role within the narrative, as it reduces Mercedes to these few characteristics and completely defines her by them. Rather than use a Mercedes-centric storyline to develop and deepen the character, the writers instead chose to use it as a way to post-racially racialize Mercedes as the "new mammy," which I expand on below.

This storyline updates stereotypical portrayals of Black females and applies them to Mercedes in a post-racial context. Because Mercedes is a full-bodied woman, a plot about Tater Tots engages the stereotype of larger women being obsessed with food. Indeed, this point is made even more concrete when Mercedes' friend and fellow glee club member Kurt suggests she is overeating to fill a void left by a lack of romance in her life. This clearly accomplishes the work of stereotyping, which, as Hall (1997b) describes, "reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature" (p. 257). Mercedes is portrayed as little more than the overweight Black girl who can't stop eating because she can't get a man. This characterization draws on the mammy image that Collins (1990) describes as "overweight, dark, and with characteristically African features," communicating the message of "being an unsuitable sexual partner for white men" (p. 78). But even more so, the mammification of Mercedes is occurring within a post-racial context and therefore necessitates the decoupling of race from power and history. Her body type is implied to be a product of over-eating, which itself is suggested to be a consequence of her lack of a romantic relationship. Thus, her being overweight and romantically/sexually undesirable—being the mammy—is portrayed as a result of her own choices. She does not have a boyfriend, but not because of the racialized conceptions of beauty that define large Black women as undesirable (Collins, 1990). Instead, her lack of a relationship is her own fault, because she is simply spending too much time eating Tater Tots, instead of actively looking for a boyfriend. By invoking race-neutral universalism (Cho, 2009), in which all races

are on a level playing field, as well as ignoring other historical and cultural standards of beauty and body image, *Glee* turns Mercedes into the post-racial mammy—the Black female who may resemble that particular controlling image, but does so because of her own personal choices and shortcomings. This accomplishes the work of the post-racial gaze, in that it draws on past stereotypes to present a reconceptualized imagination of the Other and invites viewers to identify with the dominant, post-racial viewpoint by decoupling race and power and portraying Mercedes' body type and romantic situation as results solely of her own choices. According to Cho's (2009) arguments, the show's reducing Mercedes' position to that of her own making is a tool of White redemption under post-racialism. In this level playing field, Mercedes has the opportunity to overcome her own racial proclivities, but ultimately cannot escape her shortcomings. By decoupling race and power, then, the post-racial gaze reinscribes White narratives that Black people fail to take advantage of equal opportunity. The result is the depiction of Mercedes as not merely a failed woman, but a failed Black woman in a racially equitable society. The Black female body remains marginalized, but the method of doing so is updated, so that the baggage of "old-fashioned" racism and stereotypes is gone and the show can claim not only neutrality, but also progressiveness in its racial politics.

Her placement in the storyline also represents an attempted shift from what Gray (2004) describes as an assimilationist discourse of invisibility toward one of multiculturalism/diversity in television. However, rather than actually "position[ing] viewers, regardless of race, class, or gender locations, to participate

in black experiences from multiple subject positions" (p. 90), this storyline invokes race-neutral universalism to revert back to an assimilationist discourse, while simultaneously updating it to a post-racial context. Like other shows "embedded in an assimilationist discourse … the privileged subject position is necessarily that of the white middle class" (Gray, 2004, p. 85), as we see with the relative positioning of Rachel to Mercedes. But unlike the old assimilationist television discourses, *Glee* in this story arc is not being "framed almost entirely through codes and signifying practices that celebrate racial invisibility and color blindness" (p. 85). Instead, Mercedes is front and center, her race apparent but not commented upon because in a post-racial, race-neutral era, it cannot be the reason for her centrality or, more typically, her marginality. The audience is thus implicitly instructed to gaze at the sole Black female character with an awareness of race as a facet of identity, but to simply applaud her inclusion rather than consider the implications of Mercedes' narrative placement vis-à-vis her race. The post-racial gaze positions Mercedes as a beacon of diversity and proof positive of a post-racial reality, without regard for the tropes perpetuated in her characterization and storylines. The race-neutral universalism invoked by this plot reflects the dominant post-racial perspective of the series, and by not commenting on it or explicitly inviting any analysis or commentary, the writers further imbue the show with the idea that Mercedes' treatment is objective and fair.

Race-Neutral Universalism & Redemption of Whiteness

As a Black female, Mercedes occupies a marginalized position within the world of *Glee*. The Tater Tots storyline provides an example of that

marginalization, but her placement within a major season three arc offers an illustration of the ways in which institutional practices and cultural representations of racial difference work together to reproduce racial inequality (Ferguson, 2000). The McKinley drama club stages a performance of the musical *West Side Story*, and Mercedes decides to audition for the main role of Maria. However, she competes against Rachel, her friendly rival from glee club, for the part. The institutional response to the two girls' auditions (i.e., the *West Side Story* directors' deliberations and ultimate choice), as well as the post-racial portrayal of Mercedes throughout the process, serve to reinforce the hegemonic racial hierarchy, albeit through the constant force of the purported objectivity and race-neutrality of the post-racial gaze.

In relation to Rachel, Mercedes is at a distinct disadvantage for the part of Maria from the very beginning of the audition process. Neither Mercedes nor Rachel matches the ethnic identity of Maria, who in the original production of *West Side Story* is Puerto Rican. However, as a White female, Rachel is more easily able to pass as Latina on stage, due to the fact that "whiteness and white notions of beauty (*blanqueamiento*) still reign supreme, as most clearly exemplified in the representational privileging of lighter-skinned Latinas" (Molina-Guzmán, 2010, p. 5). It follows, then, that what Maria certainly is not is Black. Rachel's advantage over Mercedes is an embodiment of post-racialism, particularly the central component of race-neutral universalism. As Cho (2009) explains, this aspect of post-racialism holds that "[r]acial remedies in the United States are cast as partial and divisive, and benefitting primarily those with 'special

interests' versus all Americans" (p. 1602). The directors of the musical cannot search for an actress of a particular racial/ethnic background because of the "political necessity" of race-neutral universalism, and instead must simply seek the "best" actress for the part. However, this post-racial stance reflects "the history of failed and 'false universalism'" (p. 1602) and serves to reposition the dominant White identity as "neutral." As a White female, Rachel has racial privilege over Mercedes, but the placement of the storyline in this particular post-racial era makes it even more difficult for Mercedes to disrupt that privilege. To do so would require not only a recognition of Mercedes' race, which in post-racial ideology and discourse "does not matter, and should not be taken into account or even noticed" (p. 1595), but also a conscious repositioning of her racial identity over Rachel's, which would be seen as equally unfair and in fact racist itself.

The role of Maria is set to go to Rachel until Mercedes decides to audition at the last minute thanks to the encouragement of her boyfriend, Shane (LaMarcus Tinker), a Black football player at McKinley. Her performance of the song "Spotlight" impresses the three White co-directors—guidance counselor Emma Pillsbury (Jayma Mays), football coach Shannon Beiste (Dot-Marie Jones), and student Artie Abrams (Kevin McHale)—and causes them to schedule a callback between her and Rachel to decide which actress will ultimately receive the role. Both girls perform the same song, "Out Here On My Own," and while both are very good, Mercedes' rendition is clearly superior; Rachel even privately admits to Mercedes that the latter's performance was the better one, and that she deserves to get the part. However, when the co-directors announce their final decision, they

reveal that they have double-cast the role and extended the musical's run,

allowing both Rachel and Mercedes to have a chance to play the lead by equally

splitting the number of performances as Maria. Upon hearing the decision,

though, Mercedes decides to decline the role entirely, not wanting to share the

spotlight with Rachel when she knew she gave the better audition. The effect is

the redemption of Whiteness, as Mercedes turns down what is positioned as a fair

compromise due to her own pride and sense of entitlement. Rachel and the White

directors ironically become the victims when an angry Black girl rejects their

post-racial decision.

In this case, the *West Side Story* casting decision represents the

institutional practices reinforcing racial inequality. Although it is never stated

explicitly, it is implied that, for whatever reason, the directors feel they cannot

solely cast Mercedes in the lead role and, in turn, cannot deny the role to Rachel.

While this expands on the idea of race-neutral universalism discussed above (Cho,

2009), in that the implications for having a Black and/or a White female play a

Puerto Rican character are never discussed within the show, the casting decision

also rests on the perceived, implicit superiority of Rachel as the White female. As

the embodiment of the "cult of true womanhood," which Welter describes as

defined by four key virtues, "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (as

cited in Kitch, 2001, p. 10), Rachel is simply expected to be the lead. Because she

represents what the ideal woman is supposed to look like, she is seen as the better

"fit" for the role. The fact that the *West Side Story* directors had to come up with a

way to offer the part to both girls shows that they expected Rachel to win the part

all along; Mercedes' audition was little more than a formality. When she outperformed Rachel, though, they could not strip the preordained Maria of the part she was "meant" to play. The open auditions and ultimate double-casting were both ostensibly equal methods of participation, allowing Rachel and Mercedes to have an equal chance at winning, and then playing, the part. However, the entire process was founded on the assumption of Rachel's racial (not musical) superiority, rooted in racialized conceptions of femininity, which meant that Mercedes never really had an equal chance of being cast. Even once she was co-cast, the "equal" distribution of performance time may have fit a definition of formal equality (Crenshaw, 1988), in that she had the same objective opportunities as her White counterpart and was not limited in any explicit way by her race, but it was inherently unequal in the sense that her superior performance had been undermined by her own racial location. Mercedes' Blackness put her at a distinct disadvantage in relation to Rachel from the very beginning of the audition process.

Furthermore, when Mercedes turns down the role altogether, it serves as the ultimate redemption of Whiteness. The three White co-directors of the musical offer the lead role to Mercedes, who to this point has existed as a counterpart to Rachel, mainly to define Rachel's centrality through her own Otherness. However, when the directors offer Mercedes the role, the show is portraying the White people in power as equitable and fair—due to racial progress, they are able to offer the lead role of Maria to a Black actress, where there is no power attached to any racial position and she is getting the role because she earned it through

merit and not any race-based affirmative action. When Mercedes declines the role, though, she is quickly pulled through other controlling images (Collins, 1990) that communicate that her turning down the role is due to her own arrogance. She becomes the matriarch, the aggressive and assertive Black woman who is ultimately punished and abandoned because of that very aggression, and then the welfare queen who "unjustly" demands the lead role all to herself. In the post-racial context, though, these controlling images are all collapsed and stripped of any historical perspective or power, turning them into natural, fixed characteristics that Mercedes as a Black, female individual has chosen. She is ultimately written as the angry, entitled Black woman who refuses to recognize and appreciate the White directors' act of fairness and equality, which turns her into a tool for post-racialism and the redemption of Whiteness. Seen through the post-racial gaze, Rachel, as well as the three White directors, retain their purity and moral standing by offering what is portrayed as a fair compromise, and their position is ultimately bolstered when they become victims of an angry Black girl's ego.

The various operating levels of the post-racial gaze are illustrated throughout this storyline. At the textual level, race is never discussed by any of the characters involved in the casting decision, implying a colorblind casting process that assumes Whiteness as the norm and neutral; Mercedes is portrayed as a number of stereotypes, albeit in updated ways that reflect the post-racial context; and the White characters are positioned on the moral high ground, due to their "equal," if not equitable, treatment of Mercedes and Rachel. At the screen

level, Mercedes and Rachel are given roughly equal screen time, reinforcing the idea that they are equals and that double-casting was the fair decision; the composition of frame also shows Mercedes as visibly angry when she is offered the co-leading role, which highlights her aggression and compounds the action she has already taken. Finally, on an extra-textual level, the show is able to get credit for advocating a colorblind casting method, which as Brook (2009) explains is currently a popular symbol of progressiveness in Hollywood. Taken together, these levels of the post-racial gaze work to bolster *Glee*'s image as a beacon of diversity and equality, yet they both are founded on and propagate deep structures that promote Whiteness at the top of a racial hierarchy. Ultimately, the result is the redemption of Whiteness through the decoupling of race and power, such that historical context and institutional barriers have no bearing on any decisions or actions. Mercedes is shown to be self-sabotaging, a victim only of her own arrogance and pride.

Updated Stereotypes & Loss of Subjectivity

Of course, as Ferguson (2000) has argued, it is not only institutional practices—such as the *West Side Story* directors' casting decisions based in racial assumptions—that produce and reproduce racial inequality; the cultural representation of racial difference is also a necessary component of the reproduction process. To illustrate the ways in which Mercedes is represented as a racialized object who is consistently defined by others, as opposed to a self-defining subject (Collins, 1990), it is useful to think about another example from the same episodes as the *West Side Story* arc. As the New Directions students are

auditioning and preparing for the school musical, they are simultaneously attending "Booty Camp," established by glee club director Will Schuester (Matthew Morrison) to help the New Directions members get in shape and improve their dance skills. Although Mercedes has never been portrayed as a particularly deficient dancer up to this point—the beginning of the third season— she is all of a sudden struggling to keep up with her peers in learning the new dance moves. At one practice, she arrives late and is still eating a snack. She begins to feel sick, and Mr. Schue starts yelling at her. She tells him she is doing her best, but he demands even more than her best. At a later practice, Mercedes is the only student not to accomplish a particularly difficult move, which she claims is due to a hurt ankle. When Mr. Schue calls her out in front of the group, Mercedes says she is quitting New Directions, and Mr. Schue's reply is to issue an ultimatum: if she leaves the auditorium, she is officially out of glee club.

This storyline is problematic on multiple levels. For one, it is simply lazy writing from a narrative standpoint, as the entire conflict is more plot-motivated than character-driven. The *Glee* writers seemingly needed a way to split Mercedes off from the rest of the group so she could create a rival glee club within the school, and they did so by creating heretofore unknown character traits for her that would supposedly explain her actions. More importantly for this paper, though, is the consideration of those character traits and their racialized implications. As mentioned above, Mercedes is largely represented through aspects of various racial stereotypes. Her body type draws on the mammy image, which Collins (1990) explains, "buttresses the ideology of the cult of true

womanhood, one in which sexuality and fertility are severed" (p. 72).

Historically, the mammy acted as the surrogate mother for White families, with a large, overweight, desexualized body, with the White woman retaining her purity by downplaying her own sexuality. In the context of *Glee* and the positioning of Mercedes in relation to Rachel, Mercedes is the full-bodied Black female without a significant relationship for the first two seasons, whereas Rachel, a petite White female, has been one half of a central couple for the series' duration. Thus, to borrow Collins' terminology, Mercedes' body acts as a buttress to the ideology of the cult of true womanhood represented by Rachel. From the post-racial vantage point, however, this buttressing is accomplished through seemingly neutral and ahistorical means. Mercedes briefly dates "bad boy" jock and fellow glee club member Noah "Puck" Puckerman (Mark Salling) in season one, for instance, which distances her from the traditional mammy image by displaying her sexuality and desirability, and, furthermore, explains any other romantic difficulties as her own fault. But despite diverging from the traditional, i.e., stereotypical, script in certain ways, the audience is nevertheless left with the image of an overweight Black girl juxtaposed with that of a skinny White girl. Left with only these two images, the post-racial gaze positions the viewer to view Rachel, and thus White womanhood, as simply more desirable—based not on racist ideals, but on merely "objective" markers. The seeming objectivity of the post-racial gaze represents *Glee*'s attempts to strip Mercedes and Rachel of their historical and cultural roots through certain plot points, but ultimately the

characters still reinforce hegemonic beauty norms that are tied to a racial hierarchy.

Further, that Mercedes' "laziness" is constructed around dancing is a clear anti-stereotype move that is itself highly stereotypical. The stereotype that Black people are naturally good dancers is countered, as Mercedes is the group member who has the most difficulty learning the dance moves. Yet, by framing it as an issue of laziness and lack of commitment, the show immediately draws upon and validates other prominent stereotypes regarding Black people as lazy and undeserving, which itself is associated with the controlling image of the welfare mother. As Collins (1990) explains, the welfare mother is essentially a "failed mammy" who is "content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring" (p. 77). Although she is not a literal mother collecting welfare, Mercedes is certainly portrayed as indolent and lacking the motivation and hard work that would allow her to perform the dance moves that every other New Directions member has accomplished. However, Mr. Schue's comments that he wants more than her best makes it clear that the issue is not really Mercedes' level of effort or commitment. Even though she tells him she is putting in her full effort, it is not enough, because she is being held to the standards of the other students who do not match her position. She is *expected* to be lazy, and thus anything short of an amazing dance performance is simply proof of her laziness. This expectation is never made explicit, and likely never would be, yet it is built into the post-racial gaze. To make it explicit would be expressly racist; to point out the racial implications, under a post-racial ideology, is morally

equivalent to that same racism. Yet, by insulating itself against such accusations of racism, the show is able to subtly imbue the expectation of Black laziness through Mercedes' characterization and her interactions with Mr. Schue, all of which is observed through the gaze.

After being double-cast for the part of Maria in *West Side Story* and essentially kicked out of New Directions for her Booty Camp performance, Mercedes ends her participation in both clubs and is portrayed as angry about the way she has been treated. She acknowledges the double standards in place— though, for reasons never made clear, does not mention race as a motivating factor—and recognizes both situations for their unfairness. However, this again feeds into controlling images of Black women—this time, the Black matriarch who is aggressive and assertive, but ultimately punished and abandoned because of it (Collins, 1990; Mullings, 1994). Her anger and decision to leave the groups seem like logical reactions, yet they simultaneously support the image of the Angry Black Woman, which serves only to make that stereotype seem a natural fit for Mercedes. Indeed, that is the function of stereotyping, as it reduces Mercedes to a few simplistic and widely recognized traits, while making them appear normal and fixed (Hall, 1997b). Further, because Mercedes is the only Black female on *Glee*, her character becomes an essentializing force as a representation of all Black women. She embodies aspects of multiple stereotypes and controlling images, first reducing her to only those traits and then expanding those traits to all other Black women. As Crenshaw (1991) argued in the context of a *48 Hours* investigation of domestic violence, this type of "[t]okenistic, objectifying,

voyeuristic inclusion is at least as disempowering as complete exclusion" (p. 1261). Although there may be some benefits of increased "diversity" and numerical representation of Black women on screen, they are not humanized to the point where their presence or stories become empowering. Thus, like the sole Black woman featured in the *48 Hours* story, Mercedes "never [comes] into focus" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1261), and she is ultimately used for her Otherness, as an object, to uphold both the subjectivity of Rachel specifically, and Whiteness in general.

That objectivity is seemingly at odds with the two characters' positioning on the show: Due to their vocal power, Mercedes and Rachel are positioned in *Glee* as analogues, seeming equals due to their talent and singing ability. However, their outcomes and narrative centrality are vastly different. While there may be multiple reasons for these differences, the most salient and pertinent for this thesis is their respective racial locations: Mercedes is Black, while Rachel is White. Yet, due to the post-racial conception of difference on *Glee*, race is not and cannot actually be the reason for their disparate experiences, at least not beyond personal choices based in racial/cultural background. This means institutional action can be taken against Mercedes—double-casting her as Maria, which leads to Rachel's being the sole lead once Mercedes quits; berating her in front of the rest of the group at Booty Camp—without ever acknowledging its racial motivations or implications. Instead, the action is justified based on racialized representations that, in a post-racial era, become de-raced. So, the conclusion that Mercedes is not working hard enough in Booty Camp to learn all

the dance moves is never linked to historical conceptions and stereotypes of African Americans; it is simply taken as proof that she herself is lazy and undeserving because race is no longer a legitimate factor to consider.

In fact, during a season two episode, "A Night of Neglect," Mercedes nearly broaches the topic of race with Rachel. In a similar conflict to that surrounding *West Side Story*, Mercedes openly questions why she is consistently overshadowed by Rachel, despite their evidently equal talent: "I don't get it. Why are you a bigger star than me? You always get the big solos, the best songs, the moments in the sun. Why is it never me?" Rachel pauses for a moment, before answering, "I don't know." Here, *Glee* creates the perfect opportunity to discuss the reality of race and the ways it generates differential outcomes for its two star talents, yet it backs away from articulating that reality because the post-racial framework within which the show operates does not allow for an open discussion of something we are "past." But that is the purpose of the exchange: not to foster a racial dialogue, but to signal a post-race reality where success is due to drive, commitment, and intangibles. Instead, the institutional practices and cultural representations of racial difference contribute to an understanding of difference on a purely individual level, wherein variable outcomes are simply the result of personal characteristics or traits that are natural and fixed and not a part of a larger social, historical, and political context.

Although she is positioned as an equal talent to Rachel, Mercedes is consistently denied her subjectivity through her characterization, made up of various updated stereotypes of Black women, and her storylines, in which she

largely plays a supporting role. In fact, even in the plots in which she does not directly support Rachel, Mercedes' presence functions to buttress the ideal White womanhood represented by Rachel and to be a representative object of the diversity and inclusion of the show. The post-racial gaze naturalizes these positions to make them appear normal and, in fact, positive and desirable. Because race is decoupled from power, there can be no valid concern that Mercedes embodies the mammy image, or that she must remain subordinate in both the glee club and the show's ensemble to the White female lead; instead, Mercedes simply becomes another token of *Glee*'s progressiveness, and criticisms to the contrary can just be labeled racist in and of themselves. However, by adopting this gaze, *Glee* ultimately undermines its own purported goal—though I would question its veracity in the first place—by redeeming Whiteness and dominant ideologies through the objectification and marginalization of characters of Color.

Chapter 2: Santana Lopez, *"The Only Straight I Am Is Straight-Up Bitch"*

Rarely does the dominant faction of the lesbian and gay community address the fact that one's social and cultural positioning and access to privilege prior to coming out directly affect the manner in which one's coming out is imparted and received. (Snider, 1996, p. 297)

Santana Lopez, a Latina teenager played by Naya Rivera, has appeared on *Glee* since its pilot episode, but was a minor character throughout the first season, used primarily to fill out the glee club and the cheerleading squad. In the second season, though, Rivera is promoted to series regular status, and Santana takes on a more prominent role in the show. Her key storyline over seasons two and three involves her realization and acceptance of her lesbian identity, which involves the development of a casual sexual relationship with her friend and fellow glee club member Brittany Pierce (Heather Morris) and culminates in her coming out to her friends and family. In this chapter, I will specifically compare Santana's characterization and story arc with those of Kurt Hummel (Chris Colfer), the gay White male character whose arc has largely been responsible for praise of the show surrounding its handling of LGBTQ issues (EW Staff, 2011), in order to problematize the neutrality and normalization of the White male narrative within *Glee*'s LGBTQ discourse. In doing so, I demonstrate that *Glee* positions the two as analogues—they may have different racial/gender locations, but they are both

made, simply, gay[1], by the fact that they are attracted to people of the same sex. Yet, they are not both simply gay, as Kurt's narrative consistently trumps Santana's by drawing on unnamed dominant identity tropes. This universalizing discursive strategy erases important intersectionalities (Crenshaw, 1991) and (re)produces post-racial ideologies (Cho, 2009) that ultimately serve to redeem and restore dominant identities—e.g., Whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality—to their full value atop their respective hierarchies by ignoring them as power categories. I explicate the post-racial gaze on Santana's coming out storyline by comparing it to Kurt's, arguing that, while the series has garnered praise for the latter, attempting to essentially repeat the storyline with Santana further marginalizes her as a lesbian of Color, which then reifies the hegemonic position of the gay White male. I then extend the post-racial gaze to the series on a more macro level, arguing that the discursive links between *Glee* and LGBTQ activist organizations such as It Gets Better furthers a fundamental post-racial ideology. Finally, I critique the post-racial construction of Santana as a "fiery Latina," as the show again reifies problematic ideas and images by making stereotypically racialized traits appear natural.

The season three episodes "Mash Off" and "I Kissed a Girl" are arguably the most important and most problematic in Santana's "coming out" arc. Over the

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[1]   I choose to use gay rather than queer throughout as a reflection of the show's own terminology—LGBTQ characters on *Glee* do not identify as queer, nor do others refer to them as such. Additionally, queer implies a more overt and conscious political orientation and while *Glee* as a cultural phenomenon does engage politically (e.g., It Gets Better), within the text it is more concerned with gayness as an indicator of sexual preference than as a sociocultural facet of identity.

course of the series, Santana had been questioning her sexuality, with an implied

sexual relationship taking place between her and her friend and fellow glee club

member Brittany, but she had not come out to her peers or her family as a lesbian.

In "Mash Off," she comes out, but not due to her own actions or agency; rather,

Finn Hudson (Cory Monteith), the straight White male lead of the glee club and

of *Glee*, outs her in the middle of the school hallway, telling her she is too afraid

to come out of the closet and be herself. Once Finn has outed Santana, there is a

marked tension between the two. At the end of a musical performance in which

Santana is singing the lead, Finn leans over to Rachel, his girlfriend and the

straight White female lead of the group, and whispers something in her ear.

Santana jumps off stage and angrily asks him what he just said. He claims he was

praising her performance, but she does not believe him. Instead, she blames him

for outing her, and slaps him across the face. As I will explain, this series of

events contains many of the features of post-racialism, and illuminates the broader

post-identity discursive stance of *Glee* when compared to Kurt's own coming out

arc.

"Coming Out Imperative" & Post-Racial Erasure of Intersectionality

Dominant discourses around sexuality and coming out have constructed an

in/out binary that "tend[s] to offer no moral alternative BUT to come out"

(Rasmussen, 2004), yet this strict framework fails to recognize or allow for

complexities of individual and institutional identities, instead assuming a norm

that applies to all. Rasmussen calls this the "coming out imperative":

> There is an imperative for lesbian and gay identified people to come out in educational settings, and I have argued this imperative can place people in an invidious position. When coming out discourses are privileged, the act of not coming out may be read as an abdication of responsibility, or, the act of somebody who is disempowered or somehow ashamed of their inherent gayness. (p. 146)

Santana's positioning in the "Mash Off" storyline clearly places her in this binary structure. Indeed, the "imperative" is so strong for LGBTQ-identifying students to come out, that a classmate forces her out of the closet. Finn sees Santana as "too afraid" to come out and embrace "who she really is," but because coming out is seen as a necessity for all LGBTQ-identifying students, he takes it upon himself to push her out of the closet. However, while strongly advocating for this universal coming out imperative, drawing a discursive link between the coming out process and a sense of personal empowerment and freedom, *Glee* not only fails to interrogate the different institutional and individual contexts for coming out, but also "may have the reverse effect of reinforcing heterosexuality because of its tendency to underpin the heterosexual/homosexual binary" (p. 148). By stripping Santana of her agency, and by ignoring the specificity of a Latina female coming out into a predominantly White, heterosexual school environment, the show further marginalizes Santana while claiming to do the opposite. She must follow the rules and stipulations set by those in power, yet the race- and gender-neutral context—evident through its invisibility—ensure her continued disempowerment by refusing to take non-dominant positions into consideration.

In fact, it is Santana, not Finn, who is punished under the school's zero tolerance policy against violence—yet, this erases any power differential between Finn and Santana, whether relating to sexual orientation, race, or gender. Finn's position as straight White male is placed on the same level as Santana's position as a gay Latina female. Finn's verbal outing of her and her slapping of him are both measured in a power vacuum, without consideration of the marginalization of her multiple intersecting identities within both the school and broader society. Although the situation is not explicitly or primarily about race, it is couched in post-racial ideology and discourse concerning the decoupling of race and power. Finn's actions are not just morally equivalent to Santana's, they are actually morally superior—he was "helping" her achieve the imperative to come out and she responded with violent resistance. Finn uses his multiple privileges and positions of power over Santana to effectively determine who she is, and what is and is not moral. He is presented as simply assisting her in doing the right thing, yet he is able—and, even *thinks* he has the right—to do so because of his privileged position relative to her. And by refusing to question the symbolic violence of Finn's action itself—which, as Lawrence (1990) explains in the context of racist speech, may have the effects of psychic injury, reputational injury, and the denial of equal educational opportunity—*Glee* abdicates responsibility for other forms of violence against LGBTQ people of Color and reifies the entitlement and power of the dominant group. Through a post-racial gaze, Finn's actions are characterized as "right" and even valiant, because coming out has been popularized as an action all LGBTQ-identifying people should take.

However, ignoring the differential power contexts only serves to diminish Santana's subjectivity and marginalize her by turning her into a tool for the dominant LGBTQ rights narrative.

In the imagined world of *Glee*, the power Finn holds over Santana is inconsequential because she just needs to come out and accept "who she is." Even though Santana points out to Finn that he basically forced her out of the closet, her loss of agency is not presented as problematic because she is now out. Finn's explanation to her exemplifies the show's views on coming out: "The truth is, I think you're awesome. And when you hide part of who you are, you hide your awesomeness with it." There is no power of any type attached to that statement— no reflection on institutional structures, cultural norms, or even interpersonal relations. Instead, Santana should just come out because she is "awesome," but she cannot truly be awesome until she shares every aspect of her identity with everyone. This captures the race-neutral universalism of Cho's (2009) post-racialism, which holds that race is not a power category and is no longer a significant organizing feature of society. Extended to a broader "post-power" framework that also encompasses gender, Finn's comments to Santana represent a power-neutral discourse that ultimately does little to change her subordinated position. The statements are made within the popular liberal discourse of coming out, yet Santana is not actually safer when her sexuality is forcibly made public, and the storyline is driven by Finn's and the school's respective actions. Thus, the effect is that Santana—and consequently other LGBTQ students of Color—

remains marginalized, while Whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality are redeemed thanks to Finn's "selfless" act.

Dominant discourses about coming out also tend to overlook the complexities of intersecting identities, privileging a White male position within LGBTQ discourse. Indeed, as Snider (1996) argues, the "failure to see gender and race (if you are male and White) as mitigating factors in the process of revealing sexual orientation … exposes the power differential between those who are able to discount multiple 'other' subject positions and those who are not" (p. 297). This is particularly evident when comparing Santana's coming out storyline to Kurt's, and contributes to the discursive construction of a post-racial position in the show. In the episode "I Kissed a Girl," Santana comes out to her parents, but the action happens off screen—all the audience sees is a happy Santana, telling the rest of the group that her parents were very accepting of her. Besides violating the basic "show, don't tell" principle of screenwriting, which holds that action should be shown on screen rather than simply explained through expository dialogue, this approach to Santana's coming out downplays its significance as it serves to draw parallels between Santana's and Kurt's respective processes of coming out to their parents. Kurt came out to his father in season one, with a number of scenes across multiple episodes focusing on his father's acceptance, yet Santana's coming out to her own parents is worth only one throwaway line with no visual back-up. Whatever the reasons for this approach—a runtime issue, a desire not to essentially repeat the coming-out-to-one's-parents storyline the show had done with Kurt, or something else entirely—the effect is a diminishing

of the importance of Santana's decision to come out to her family and a

privileging of Kurt's own storyline. Because his is the only one we see, it has a

universalizing effect that implies Santana's story would be only superficially

different, and thus not worth showing. But this universalizing is a false one, and

bolsters a hegemonic normalization of White gay maleness.

Indeed, the relative placement and telling of Santana and Kurt's coming

out stories serves to reinforce the dominant position of White men within coming

out and LGBTQ discourses, as Snider (1996) explains, while ostensibly placing

them on equal footing. Santana, then, becomes a tool for what Cho (2009)

describes as race-neutral universalism, as her story is written as superficially

similar to Kurt's. Her race and gender are not given as reasons she may have

resisted coming out, nor are they presented as unique challenges when compared

to Kurt. This race-neutral universalizing has the effect of redeeming and further

privileging Whiteness (and maleness), though, as it refuses to challenge racism or

sexism within LGBTQ discourses. As Snider argues, "Perhaps homophobia is the

only systemic deterrent to achievement for gay, White youth. However, without

also challenging racism, nothing has been accomplished for many lesbian and gay

youth of color except a demand to hierarchize oppressions" (p. 299). Thus, the

equating of Santana and Kurt's coming out stories serves to position oppression

based on sexual orientation hierarchically above that based on race, but does so by

neutralizing and stripping race of its power. Because of its position in a larger

discursive and ideological context where race is no longer an organizing principle,

Glee is able to focus solely on sexuality, without attention to race or

intersectionality. This lack of attention normalizes a single coming out

narrative—Kurt's—while dismissing the specificity that other identity markers

contribute.

The Post-Racial Gaze on LGBTQ Rights

The post-racial gaze is concerned not only with images and storylines

appearing on screen, but also with the surrounding context of *Glee*, including how

mainstream discussion and press coverage has constructed the show as a beacon

of diversity and liberalism, particularly around LGBTQ rigths. Indeed, the

handling of sexuality on *Glee* has been one of its few consistent sources of praise,

and in itself contributes to a discourse and ideology of post-racialism. Kurt's

coming out was one of the first major story arcs on the series—he came out to

Mercedes in "Acafellas," the third episode of the first season, and then to his

father in the following episode, "Preggers"—and his subsequent experience as an

out gay male became a recurring and, in the second season, central storyline. The

existence of Kurt as a main character who is openly gay, and his subsequent

relationship with Blaine Anderson (Darren Criss), have been cited as part of the

show's main appeal and as positive forces in raising awareness about anti-gay

bullying and coming out (Gorton, 2011). However, while these may be positive

characteristics of *Glee*, and valid reasons for its widespread embrace, they are

nonetheless problematic in their contribution to the production and reproduction

of post-racial ideology. Particularly, *Glee*'s alignment with campaigns such as the

It Gets Better Project (2010), which "was created to show young LGBT people

the levels of happiness, potential, and positivity their lives will reach – if they can

just get through their teen years," contribute to the idea of LGBTQ rights as "The New Civil Rights Movement." The latter organization, according to its website, "is dedicated to keeping you informed of all the issues in the gay rights arena, especially gay marriage" (Badash, 2008). However, by borrowing the name of the African American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, it is aligning itself with a well-known and in many ways successful campaign for legal and political rights, while simultaneously distancing itself from its predecessor by calling itself "new." The effect is the implication that the "old" Civil Rights Movement—that is, the need for political, social, and economic equity for Blacks—is over, and that the "new" Civil Rights Movement—the push for gay rights, namely marriage equality—has supplanted it. Without getting into the various colonial, heterosexist, and patriarchal implications of marriage equality, as it would be beyond the scope of this thesis, the New Civil Rights Movement rhetoric is inherently post-racial. *Glee* does not cite the New Civil Rights Movement, either as a specific organization or a discourse, but the centrality of Kurt's storyline to the series, as well as the equating of Santana's experience to Kurt's without regard to their differing racial locations, promotes the idea that we, as a society, are "beyond race." LGBTQ issues have assumed greater importance because race is no longer an organizing principle of society and this, in turn, both allows and justifies *Glee* to remove race from discussions of power and discrimination. This specifically captures the extra-textual level of the post-racial gaze, as it is less about what occurs on screen and more about what the broader ideology presented by the show represents. By positioning Santana as marginal, relative to Kurt, *Glee*

implicitly argues that sexuality trumps race, which plays into a broader cultural narrative of post-racialism. This simultaneously legitimizes the LGBTQ rights campaign and post-racial ideology, and solidifies their standings among progressives.

Furthermore, the discursive link between *Glee* and It Gets Better reflects the show's focus on bullying and homophobia within its narratives, which consequently serves to privilege heterosexism and heteronormativity. As Kumashiro (2008) argues, safety for LGBTQ students is an important area for concern and action, but there are drawbacks to making it the primary focus. First, he contends that by focusing on "the need to reduce homophobia in schools, such as the name-calling, bullying, gay-bashing, and ostracism that target LGBTQ students … [advocates] focus, in other words, on how we think about and treat homosexuality and gender non-conformity" (p. 51). This allows heterosexuality to go unmarked and to retain its normal, natural, and privileged position. Second, this focus on safety has an implicit assimilationist argument, with "the thinking being that, 'There would be no anti-LGBTQ bullying if students were not LBGTQ, or at least were not LGBTQ in uncomfortable ways'" (p. 52). By making its message one of anti-bullying and pro-LBGTQ acceptance, without also investigating the privileged position of heterosexuality, *Glee* highlights the "abnormal" nature of homosexuality. This, in turn, supports heterosexuality as "normal" (Britzman, 1995; Kumashiro, 2008), even as the show, on its surface, is a strong advocate for LGBTQ rights. Moreover, the association between *Glee* and It Gets Better erases multiple intersections and belies the fact that it does not, in

fact, "get better" for every person who identifies as LGBTQ, nor is coming out as

LGBTQ always a viable or desirable option (Rasmussen, 2004; Snider, 2006). For

Santana, it *does* seem to get better, but the improvement of her situation is more a

way to hide both the hostile school environment into which she was forced to

come out and the impacts of race and gender than a reflection on any true

universality to the claim "it gets better." That both Santana and Kurt's situations

improve reflects *Glee*'s stance that it is merely individual bullies and homophobes

who are the problem and that anyone, regardless of any other positionality or

context, can be happy and accepted as who they are once the effects of those

bullies are overcome. This focus on the treatment of homosexuality rather than

the investigation of heteronormativity not only allows heterosexuality to go

unmarked and to retain its normal, natural, and privileged position, as Britzman

and Kumashiro have argued, but it also redeems dominant identities and the

power they carry. *Glee*'s universalizing discourse around coming out eliminates

intersectionality, complexity, and specificity, continuing the marginalization of

women and people of Color—and women of Color—within a post-race, post-

gender context. And, while sexuality has supplanted race and gender as an actual

"issue," its narrative treatment under *Glee*'s post-racial gaze continues to

privilege only a specific form of homosexuality without recognition that it is, in

fact, specific and non-universal.

Representing Post-Racial Cultural Difference

Some differences that highlight intersections of identity *are* drawn

between Santana and Kurt's coming out experiences, yet they are presented in a

power vacuum and serve more to do the work of representing cultural difference
that Ferguson (2000) describes as one of the two key parts to reproducing racial
inequality. The two characters face different interpersonal levels of bullying and
discrimination. Kurt is harassed repeatedly by one particular student, David
Karofsky (Max Adler), to the point that Kurt transfers to another school for much
of the second season to avoid the constant harassment. When Karofsky kisses
Kurt in season two's "Never Been Kissed," it is revealed that Karofsky's anti-gay
bullying is, in fact, a manifestation of his own closeted sexuality, and he threatens
to kill Kurt if he reveals this secret. It is after this and several more acts of
intimidation that Kurt decides to transfer to the all-male prep school, Dalton
Academy, which some TV critics (including Seitz, 2011) and online commenters
nicknamed "Gay Hogwarts" for its seemingly idyllic tolerance and acceptance of
LGBTQ students. This storyline serves the dual purpose of buttressing the "It
Gets Better" narrative and demonstrating that Kurt is not free from homophobia
and harassment, even with his privileged racial and gender identities. First, Kurt's
situation is dramatized as so unsafe that he fears for his life and must leave
McKinley High. However, at Dalton, and upon his eventual return to McKinley,
all of the bullies are gone and he is in a completely safe environment. Although he
had to make some changes and adapt, his situation did get better, and he was
eventually able to "go back to normal" at his old school with his old friends, with
no more problems. Second, even though Kurt is a White male, he is still bullied
and harassed for his being gay. This accomplishes the work of post-
racialism/gender by indirectly arguing that bullying is a universal difficulty faced

by LGBTQ youth, while simultaneously supporting the "coming out imperative" (Rasmussen, 2004)—that LGBTQ youth should come out, even if doing so will temporarily bring more problems, because it will eventually get better and result in empowerment and greater personal happiness. The message *Glee* sends is that for LGBTQ youth, there is a race- and gender-neutral universalism—an even playing field when it comes to race and gender—and homosexuality is a uniting facet of identity that trumps all others.

The bullying Santana faces, on the other hand, is presented as much more limited, and thus more benign. After being outed, Santana is approached by a male rugby player who calls her "smokin'" and states that he views her as a challenge to "make normal." Although the other glee club girls rebut him, telling him that being a lesbian is not a choice—and that, even if it were, he would be her last choice—this reinforces essentialized notions of sexuality. As Rasmussen (2004) explains, sexual identities change and transform over time, yet *Glee* supports the dominant discourse that LGBTQ youth are simply "born this way"— a narrative reinforced in their episode "Born This Way," borrowing its title from the Lady Gaga song that has itself been called a "gay anthem." This example also underscores the heterosexual/homosexual binary and highlights that Santana never considered that she might be bisexual, even though she had many sexual relationships with men. Consequently, she is not only forced out of the closet by Finn, but also forced into a binary that denies a possibility for a sexual identity that does not fit within those narrow confines. However, *Glee* only emphasizes Santana's brief encounter with her apparently heterosexual male bully in order to

lead into a literal rendition of Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl"—a popular song, sure to sell iTunes singles the next day—and to segue into her sharing with the group that she came out to her accepting parents. Thinking back to Kurt's own experience being kissed by Karofsky, both Kurt and Santana are sexually harassed, which serves to erase any racial or gender power differentials by showing that any LGBTQ-identifying person can be equally sexually objectified. If anything, because of the cumulative effect of his bullying, Kurt's experience is positioned as worse than Santana's and a sign that White males may actually be victimized *more*. Crenshaw (1991) argues that the importance of intersectionality is not to rank oppressions, but rather to understand the complexities and interactions of power on multiple levels. But *Glee* takes the reductive approach, not only ranking, but giving the "disadvantage" to the privileged group. It is not suggested that Kurt is bullied *because* he is a White male, but because he fits the hegemonic image of a gay teen and his storyline follows the popular narrative of LGBTQ bullying—and, significantly, because Santana and her storyline do not— Whiteness and maleness retain the center. Gayness, and the harassment it entails, are presented as universalizing for LGBTQ youth, yet the gay White male character and story still take up a relative majority of the screen time and are positioned to elicit the bulk of the viewer's sympathy. The mobilization of the post-racial gaze here works by shifting the gaze onto Kurt, who occupies the dominant position along lines of race and gender. The gaze can only shift onto Kurt—and thus away from Santana—however, because of its underlying post-

racial ideology, which asserts a race-neutral universalism while in fact privileging Whiteness.

Additionally, *Glee* makes the suggestion that because Santana is a Latina who is strong-willed and a self-defined "bitch"—and those characteristics are tied to her racial/ethnic identity—she is immune from greater harassment. She is still drawn from various stereotypes, as she is the hot-headed and hyper-sexualized Latina that Molina-Guzmán (2010) describes, having been known to have sexual relationships with at least two of the boys and one of the girls in glee club, but in her post-racial construction those stereotypical traits are stripped of historical context and are attached to material advantages. In *Glee*'s post-racial world, Santana may be the "hot Latina," but this works only in her favor. As Molina-Guzmán and Valdivia (2004) argue, "Latina beauty and sexuality is marked as other, yet it is that otherness that also marks Latinas as desirable" (p. 213). Santana becomes an object of desire to both men and women, though, not because she is Latina, but because she is "hot" and sexually aggressive. These characteristics are portrayed as natural, and are the reason she would receive any sexual harassment after she has come out of the closet. Her ability to also be a "straight-up bitch" is constructed as natural, as well, and it is this behavior that allows Santana to protect herself against unwanted advances. Unlike Kurt, who is shown to be scared and largely powerless against the larger jock Karofsky, Santana can use the aggressiveness and fiery personality she just "happens" to

have in order to avoid prolonged and severe bullying and harassment.[2] The post-racial racialization of Santana makes sense, then, as her ability to use her natural behavior to protect herself. She just happens to be hot, fiery, and aggressive, while also happening to be Latina. The two parts are not joined, and the individual characteristics are presented as beneficial and positive, serving to neutralize any racial or gender differences. However, this variation on the "positive stereotype," though decoupled from any systematic power, is nonetheless problematic. Rather than suggest that gay Latina women face specific forms of sexual and racial harassment and discrimination on both interpersonal and institutional levels, the post-racial gaze upon Santana's characterization and her placement in *Glee*'s narrative implies that she is able to fully protect herself, and does not face much harassment to begin with. This frees up both resources within the show's fictional world and screen time on the show as a real-world production to instead devote to Kurt, which ultimately reprivileges those identities that are already culturally privileged, despite *Glee*'s claims to equality.

The intersectional function of the post-racial gaze becomes highly relevant in analyzing Santana's characterization and treatment within the narrative. Santana and Brittany make several references over the course of the series to their sex life, from on screen kisses to mentions of "scissoring," but while this may provide increased visibility of lesbians in a TV landscape that primarily focuses on the "G" in LGBTQ, it also feeds the male gaze and, here, the post-racial gaze

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[2]   And, by not characterizing Finn's outing of Santana or Santana's near-suspension by the school administration as acts of bullying in and of themselves, *Glee* promotes the idea that only homophobic, sexually motivated individuals can be bullies.

as well. Lesbian sex, especially between two young, attractive women, is for the male gaze, to be consumed and appreciated by male viewers. Lesbian sex featuring one "exotic" Latina is for the White male gaze: Santana's Latina Otherness, as Guzmán and Valdivia (2004) explain, marks her as desirable; her being a lesbian marks her as unattainable, and thus only increases her desirability. This is accomplished under a post-racial framework, such that an interracial lesbian relationship where the characters actually have sex is intended to be viewed as edgy and progressive. However, it is founded on Santana's post-racial characterization, discussed above, which relies on the power of coincidence to justify her "fiery" and aggressive traits. The effect is that the perceived ability, and even necessity, for *Glee* to include an interracial lesbian couple ultimately feeds into a White heterosexual male gaze, while redeeming the writers—the most visible of whom (Ryan Murphy) is a gay White man—for their boundary pushing. The show operates under the framework that showing a gay relationship between Kurt and Blaine, two White males, requires showing an equivalent lesbian relationship—and that it is, indeed, equivalent. Yet, this post-racial gaze allows important intersectionalities (Crenshaw, 1991) to be erased and discursively equalized, while ultimately supporting and entrenching pre-existing power structures around race, gender, and sexuality.

Santana occupies a much more central role, especially in the second and third seasons, than Mercedes does, but her relatively greater screen time and narrative occupation do not necessarily mean lesser marginalization. Much as Mercedes exists to buttress White womanhood as embodied by Rachel, Santana

largely serves to buttress White gay maleness as embodied by Kurt. The post-racial gaze presents Santana as another symbol of diversity, along several identity lines, yet her character exists largely to serve as a counterpoint to Kurt, providing a response to or another take on one of his storylines, rather than standing on her own as a unique subject. By adopting this post-racial gaze and discursively diminishing intersectionalities, *Glee* ultimately maintains hegemonic ideas of culture, identity, and power. While some of the praise for its efforts to resist the status quo and raise awareness around LGBTQ issues may be deserved, it is also imperative to recognize that there are, indeed, power differentials associated with collective group identity that continue to exist and that, although they are both gay, Santana and Kurt are no more the same than Rachel and Mercedes.

Chapter 3: Tina Cohen-Chang, *"I'm A Beautiful Person"*

"Media images of Asians and Asian Americans, largely by those who are neither, are typically constructed in relation to others, especially whites; however, these representations are not racial alone, but use other forms of difference to construct hierarchical relations" (Nakayama, 1994, p. 162).

Tina Cohen-Chang, played by Jenna Ushkowitz, is the female Asian American[3] member of New Directions, who has been a main character—i.e., Ushkowitz has been a series regular—on *Glee* since its pilot episode. However, she is perhaps the most marginalized member of the glee club, having very few full solos during rehearsals or performances, and even fewer storylines in which she is the central character. Furthermore, the plots in which she is the principal figure tend to revolve around her romantic interests, her "Asianness," or both. In other words, she is primarily defined as a character by her various group identities, rather than by her personal struggles and wishes. While this may at first glance appear antithetical to the project of post-racialism (Cho, 2009)—which employs hyper-individualization to discursively erase institutional racial power structures—and thus a "good" thing, I will argue that in fact this treatment of Tina denies her the agency allowed other characters in dominant positions. Additionally, Tina's narrative position and her characterization reflect

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[3] While she refers to herself as "Asian," as do others in the show, I am referring to her here as Asian American due to the American school context in which the series takes place and the fact that the show never makes a distinction between Asian and Asian American in any context, which reflects the frequent conflation of Asian and Asian American identities (Nakayama, 1994).

stereotypical representation of Asians and Asian Americans as "demure, submissive, and docile" (Lee & Vaught, 2003, p. 459), and constant references to her Asian identity do the work of post-racialism in bringing that identity to the forefront. By frequently commenting on her Asianness, but in ways that decontextualize that identity from broader structures, the show is able to "prove" a post-race reality. *Glee* signals that her being Asian *is* an actual identity, but attached only to culture and not material difference through race, and that it is worthy of mention, but most often in the form of a joke or throwaway line. She becomes solely defined by her racial identity, but the show never moves beyond her simply *being* Asian American to address *how* that fact affects and shapes her experiences.

As with my analyses of Mercedes/Rachel and Santana/Kurt, it is useful to investigate the dual mechanisms of institutional practice and representation of racial/cultural difference that Ferguson (2000) explains are used to reinforce and perpetuate racial inequality These two methods, and the ways the show produces a post-racial gaze in its representations, ultimately serve to redeem Whiteness. Using a handful of specific episodes as my primary data, I will analyze how Tina is written as an individual character and how she is treated as part of a larger narrative. I begin with the idea that Tina is represented as a "post-racial model minority," yet another "reinvention" of the classic trope (Woo, 2000), in which her purpose as a character is to support Whiteness in the form of Rachel and to accept structural differences between them without critical questioning. Next, I move to a comparative analysis of Tina and Rachel in the context of racialized

beauty standards (Cheng, 2001; Lee & Vaught, 2003; Tuan, 1999), which *Glee* strips of historical background. Finally, I look at the idea of "equal opportunity offenders" in the form of institutional actors in the school setting. Ultimately, I conclude that Tina is allowed a presence in *Glee* and in glee club, and she is even given some cultural specificity—albeit stereotypical. The show's articulation of her Asianness, though, especially through her relationship with fellow Asian American glee club member Mike Chang (Harry Shum, Jr.), has the effect of leveling the racial playing field and making Tina a new model minority, updated for the post-racial era.

The Post-Racial Model Minority

The traditional model minority stereotype positions Asian Americans as the most successfully assimilating minorities, often to the point that they are seen as more successful than many Whites (Espiritu, 2008; Woo, 2000). However, Asian Americans have also been historically constructed as "perpetual foreigners" (Ancheta, 2006; Lee, 2005; Tuan, 1999), in which they are perceived and identified by dominant society as foreign-born and non-American, regardless of actual citizenship status. *Glee* updates these categories for a post-racial context by consistently featuring two Asian American characters in the narrative as evidence of diversity and inclusion. They are often marginalized within each episode, but their "belonging" is not questioned. However, because of the needs of the post-racial gaze, whenever Tina is featured prominently in a storyline it is to support the White characters and, by extension, to bolster Whiteness. Power differentials are discursively erased, so that Tina is seen as just another glee club member, yet

her function is to fulfill the role of the model minority in upholding Whiteness.

The following example illustrates the multiple ways in which Tina is used as a

tool to help accomplish the work of post-racialism and reformulate the traditional

stereotypes.

In "Preggers," the fourth episode of the first season, Tina is given her first

glee club solo, and subsequently her first main storyline. Because she has not yet

had one, Mr. Schue awards her the solo on "Tonight" from *West Side Story*—

unrelated to the season three staging of the musical at McKinley in which

Mercedes and Rachel are cast as co-leads, with Mercedes subsequently quitting in

protest. Rachel is upset, because she sees herself as the lead of New Directions

and believes she deserves the solo. During rehearsal, Tina does not manage to hit

the final high note, and actually tells Mr. Schue that he should give the solo to

Rachel. However, Mr. Schue does not reassign the song, explaining to Rachel that

he wants to boost the confidence of the other members in preparation for the

regional competition, and reassuring Tina that she is already showing

improvement due to her increased confidence.

Feeling slighted, though, and upset that she has to suffer for the sake of

making other glee club members feel better, Rachel temporarily quits New

Directions to join the school musical. By portraying such an action, *Glee* invokes

a moral equivalence—one of the key features of post-racialism (Cho, 2009)—in

direct conversation with the viewer. Although Rachel is portrayed as selfish and

petulant, by being a stand-in for Whiteness she represents the post-racial belief

that race-based remedies "pose a 'zero-sum' game that injures whites in order to

benefit people of color" (Cho, 2009, p. 1602). The show discursively positions

Mr. Schue's decision as a type of "affirmative action" that is just as bad as a

formal rule barring Tina from having a solo. Awarding Tina the solo as a form of

restorative justice is constructed through the post-racial gaze as unequal because it

hurts Rachel—and, thus, Whiteness—in the process. However, Rachel is able to

get away with her selfish decision because it is made not in isolation, but in

conjunction with dominant ideology about merit and "unfair" advantage. Such

widespread beliefs in meritocracy and the necessity of pulling oneself up by one's

bootstraps serve to mask and normalize privilege by ignoring institutional and

systematic power structures that allow certain groups and individuals to get ahead

in the first place, while placing the focus on individual responsibility. Yet, this

ideology ultimately backs up Rachel's decision—not only is she saying it is unfair

that Tina got a solo she didn't "deserve," but so is dominant society.

The post-racial gaze causes Tina and Rachel's actions to be filtered

through a post-racial lens and understood in power-neutral terms. When Tina

herself offers to give up the solo, it can be read as Tina's acknowledgement that

she did not deserve the solo and benefitted from an "unfair" advantage, and that

she only deserves to remain in her supporting role in the choir. This further

discursively justifies Rachel's complaints, which in turn bolsters the "affirmative

action" appearance of Mr. Schue's response. Under the post-racial gaze, the

expectation is not necessarily for equity or racial justice, but for "fairness."

Awarding Tina the solo, then, becomes "unfair" when she proves unfit for it.

From an analytical standpoint, there are clear racial implications in denying the

Asian American female character her only solo in favor of the established White female lead, including the establishment of an expectation of both Asian submissiveness and White dominance. However, these racial implications and patterns of giving solos are never considered, because to do so would link race with power and differential resources. The situation becomes post-racial by denying, through the refusal to engage, the role race is playing. As a "progressive" series, *Glee* uses this gaze to promote the idea that post-racial neutrality is morally correct and the proper way to conduct such an activity as selecting soloists. Those within the universe of the show may disagree with Mr. Schue's actual choices, but nobody questions the underlying directive of fairness and neutrality, which allows it to become more deeply embedded in the post-racial gaze and to reaffirm its legitimacy.

Further, Rachel and her Whiteness are redeemed when she decides to return to glee club after a bad experience in the school musical. Finn tells Rachel that her peers miss her, yet she replies by saying she was never appreciated. Finn responds, saying he appreciates her, and they kiss, after which she says she will return. As I argued above, the show discursively positions, through the post-racial features of moral equivalence and race-neutral universalism, Rachel's actions as simply in protest of an unfair situation. However, by contesting Tina's solo, Rachel is asserting her belief that she inherently deserves the lead each and every time. Rachel is certainly talented, but this sense of entitlement reflects a deeper idea that Tina is *meant* to occupy a supporting role, and when Rachel ultimately returns to the group as the lead soloist, *Glee* confirms this belief. As the post-

racial model minority, Tina must occupy a position that allows for the illusion of a level playing field, but that never actually allows for her attaining equal footing with her White counterpart. Tina may have had her one solo, against Rachel's objections, but Rachel gets to be missed and appreciated, so much that they need her to come back and take over the group once again. No substantive disruption of the status quo takes place, and Rachel is literally redeemed when she faces no consequences for her quitting the group and is able to easily rejoin in the lead role. While Rachel is not portrayed in the best light during this sequence, as her well-established "diva" side comes out, *Glee* plays into tropes of Asians as docile and submissive (Lee & Vaught, 2003), and the show's need to keep Tina in that implicitly pre-determined role trumps a need to teach Rachel a lesson in humility. The post-racial gaze never challenges the foundational intention of fairness and equality. However, while equality is the intent, the post-racial decision-making process and character actions result in different impacts for Tina and Rachel: the former is made to appear like she not only does not deserve the solo, but also deserves her perpetual supporting/marginal role; the latter is shown to be justified in her reaction to losing the solo, and everything is reduced to an issue of talent and feeling appreciated. Because Tina and Rachel are being compared in a power-neutral vacuum, Rachel's feelings of being underappreciated are given equal weight to Tina's right to be valued and represented within the group, and in this case Rachel's feelings win out, redeeming Whiteness in the form of Rachel, under the guise of neutrality.

In this situation, Mr. Schue's action is also couched in post-racial ideology, even as supporting Tina and resisting Rachel's demand always to be in the spotlight position him as doing the right thing. Even though there is a clear racial dynamic at play, as Tina and Rachel fit into established tropes of Asian American and White femininity, respectively (Cheng, 2001; Lee & Vaught, 2003; Tuan, 1999), the implications of an Asian American female having the solo instead of a White female are never discussed. In an era of post-racialism, thanks to racial progress/transcendence (Cho, 2009), race is no longer a compelling issue worth discussing in terms of its differential material impacts. Instead, giving Tina a solo is based in universalizing discourse of making the entire glee club better and more confident. Mr. Schue does not want to give Tina the solo to bring an Asian American to the center for once, or to decenter Whiteness; he wants to do it to boost Tina's confidence, so that the group will be better equipped to compete at Regionals. This universal rhetoric represents the post-racial preference for "unifying" coalitions, rather than "divisive" race-based interests. Mr. Schue is portrayed as the good White liberal who advocates inclusion and equality, but his method for doing so erases the racial power structure and instead emphasizes common goals and advantages over racial implications. Mr. Schue, as the coach and face of the glee club, becomes the conduit for the post-racial gaze. He is the central figure of authority who is repeatedly shown to always have the best interests of his students at heart, yet that universalizing discourse and post-racial ideology ultimately privileges the best interests of only certain students—those who are already in positions of relative power and privilege.

Although the preceding example comes from the earlier part of *Glee*'s run—before the writers apparently forgot about her as a character completely—perhaps the most literal example of the post-racial gaze comes in "Props," episode 20 of season three, in which Tina bumps her head and has an extended hallucination wherein she and the rest of the glee club have switched bodies and roles (e.g., Ushkowitz plays Rachel, while Lea Michele plays Tina). At first glance, the episode seems to be an attempt by the writers both to acknowledge the longtime marginalization of Tina—and, in turn, Ushkowitz—and to remedy it by giving her the spotlight in a gimmicky and much-publicized episode. While rehearsing for the upcoming Nationals competition, Tina becomes upset that Rachel will once again be singing lead, and after calling out Rachel's continued favoritism by the group, she walks out of the choir room. Following a series of confrontations, Tina falls into a fountain at the mall and hits her head, and wakes up to find herself swapped with Rachel, with the rest of the glee club having swapped places as well.

However, a number of developments within this storyline highlight the primacy of the post-racial gaze and further position Tina as the post-racial model minority who exists to support the White characters, namely Rachel. The ways in which the writers acknowledge patterns of inequality within the show, only to use that acknowledgement as an apparent carte blanche to continue that very inequality, ultimately entrenches it more deeply. After Tina storms out of glee rehearsal, but before she bumps her head, Rachel confronts her to make a case for her hard work and what she sees as her well-deserved spot as the lead soloist.

Tina responds that she is an original member of the group and just wants to receive a standing ovation to know what Rachel feels like. Immediately, the post-racial gaze positions the conflict as non-racial; that is, like Mercedes' similar issues with her constant marginality relative to Rachel, the concern is portrayed as one of fair recognition of one's talent and hard work, never considering the racial implications of the people of Color in the group continually supporting and backing up the White members. However, by ignoring these implications, *Glee* denies—and thus protects—its pattern of racial hierarchical positioning. Post-racialism "insulates white normativity from criticism" (Cho, 2009, p. 1596) by imagining a level racial playing field, which allows for the easy dismissal of claims to the contrary. Similarly, *Glee* also imagines a race-neutral, universal context in which characters' actions are measured only in relation to each other, not to any prior action or broader history. Although Tina's complaints may carry more weight if placed in the context of the continual subjugation of the students of Color in the glee club relative to the White members, post-racialism disallows that contextualization; to do so, under the moral equivalency feature, would make Tina a racist herself. Thus, positioning Tina and Rachel's conflict as one about fairness on an individual level does the post-racial work of insulating White normativity because that normativity can never be explicitly addressed.

Moreover, Mike, Tina's boyfriend at this point, tries to convince Tina that, as a junior, she should embrace her supporting role, and that her time to shine will come the following year. By having Mike be the vehicle for this recommendation, the show further positions the issue as a non-racial one: if the other Asian member

of the group agrees with Rachel and disagrees with Tina, then under a post-racial gaze, the conflict is *certainly* not about race. Mike's presence and actions thus diminish the very validity of Tina's complaints. Not only are they divorced from broader structural power dynamics, but they are also made to appear petty, because Tina should simply accept and appreciate the role she has. This ploy is both common and significant in its mobilization of a person of Color to undercut the racial-justice argument of another. Although post-racialism functions as "the retreat from white liberal/progressive deference to Black normativity on the meaning of racial equality and justice" (Cho, 2009, p. 1594), Mike's argument contributes to the post-racial idea that people of Color are also free from that deference. He no longer needs to agree with Tina on the basis of racial solidarity, but can instead advocate a position that is simply seen as "correct." In this case, Mike is, like Mr. Schue in the previous solo assignment, positioned as a unifier who wants what is best for the *entire* glee club. Unlike Mr. Schue, though, Mike's status as the other Asian American member further situates the conflict as non-racial; Mike does not have to support Tina's argument because they are both Asian, and can in fact disagree with her because of post-racialism. Significantly, gender dynamics are also in play in this situation. In allowing Mike to assert moral authority over Tina, *Glee* perpetuates male dominance that goes unmarked and uninterrupted. In their one-on-one interaction, Mike is positioned as "right" not only because he is arguing the view that is backed up by the rest of the glee club—i.e., that Tina should accept her supporting role for the good of the group— but also because he, as her boyfriend and as a male, knows what is best for her.

Once the body swapping occurs, Tina-as-Rachel gets a chance to perform a solo and wins the standing ovation she had been hoping for. Afterwards, she makes sure to thank Rachel-as-Tina for her continued support, conveying that she could not be as successful a lead without a strong and reliable backup. That fantasy becomes a reality once things go back to normal, as Rachel apologizes to Tina, but at that point, Tina brushes it off and says she has realized everyone has an important part to play. The body swapping serves an important function for the post-racial gaze, because it allows Tina, as "Rachel," to experience the spotlight as she desires, yet also maintains the status quo as a result of Tina's own realization. *Glee* gives Tina agency, but it is ultimately in service of a structure that keeps her in a marginal position. Race is never mentioned throughout the conflict, as to do so would be to link it not only to power, but to differential power; instead, the discussion is about the necessary roles to keep an organization like the glee club operational. In that sense, by having Tina embrace and appreciate her supporting role, *Glee* subtly bolsters the idea that submissiveness and non-authority are natural qualities for Tina to have, which are discursively tied to her Asian American racial identity and cement her status as the post-racial model minority. The writers are able to address certain criticisms about Tina's marginal presence on the show for several seasons, but by turning that continued marginalization into Tina's own choice, they both justify her placement within the narrative and make the argument that that role is a natural fit for her, thus further characterizing her as someone who does not need, and in fact appreciates, a relative lack of screen time.

Furthermore, in the aftermath Tina gives advice to Rachel about how to save a botched audition to a New York musical theater school, which Rachel-as-Tina had given her during the dream sequence. Tina even drives Rachel to the last-minute unscheduled audition, having embraced this supporting role. Ultimately, Rachel impresses the vocal coach and gains admission, which retroactively turns Tina into a mechanism for Rachel's literal redemption. The post-racial gaze positions Tina's actions as the consequence of the positive lesson she learned and as the reflection of her being a good friend to Rachel. Because Rachel has apologized to Tina for not appreciating her enough, Tina can then repay the kindness with the audition advice; both actions are placed on equal footing, without regard to the preceding and ongoing context of their respective positions within the glee club. By helping Rachel in such a way, Tina becomes an agent of her own marginalization, yet the gaze positions it as an action devoid of structural power. However, the result is for Rachel to redeem herself through a second audition, which redeems Whiteness in the process. She gains even higher status, thus validating her prior behavior and pointing to the importance of those who support her, like Tina, even though they remain unrecognized and see little to no change in their positions in the club.

Ahistorical Beauty Standards

The season-two episode "Born This Way" provides yet another illustration of *Glee*'s construction of Tina as a "post-racial model minority," this time revolving around racialized standards of beauty. In the episode, Santana shares a rumor with the glee club that Tina has been trying to get her eyes "de-slanted."

Tina replies, saying, "That's extraordinarily racist. … Sorry Santana, I'm a beautiful person, I'm in love with myself and I would never change a thing." However, Mike Chang quickly responds, asking her if that is why she wears blue contacts, before whispering "self-hating Asian" under his breath. Immediately, Tina's own charge of racism against Santana is undercut and delegitimized by Tina's own anti-Asian, self-hating "racism," due to the moral equivalency feature of post-racialism that places critiques of racism on the same moral footing as racism itself (Cho, 2009). Through Mike's comment, *Glee* invokes a moral equivalence between Santana's racial remark and Tina's own beautification techniques, denying Tina the ability to call out an instance of racism if she is engaging in "self-hating" behavior. The characters mobilized in this situation are particularly significant. Mike, similar to his position in the previous example where he attempts to get Tina to accept her supporting role for the time being, is again used as a symbol of post-racialism and gendered moral authority. The outcome of the situation, which lines up with his initial comments, positions him as "right" from the start and diminishes Tina's assertion of racism. And, Santana, as another woman of Color and a well-established "mean girl," is importantly deployed as the potential "racist." This allows Santana's comment to be viewed as just characteristically mean and unreflective of any broader dynamics, promotes a level racial playing field by allowing people of Color to also be racist, and also protects the White characters by not implicating them in even potential racism.

However, this discursive moral equivalency denies the existence of racialized and gendered beauty standards that position White femininity as the

pinnacle of beauty (Cheng, 2001; Kitch, 2001; Lee & Vaught, 2003). Specifically,

White women and women of Color are encouraged through media representations

to be thin and blonde with long legs and blue eyes. Thus, although Tina responds

to Mike's criticism by saying she is just trying to be "in fashion," her actions can

be read as her attempt to more closely resemble an ideal beauty, i.e., White

femininity (Cheng, 2001; Lee & Vaught, 2003; Tuan, 1999). The invocation of

moral equivalence erases this possibility, though. The social and historical

construction of racialized beauty standards is ignored and rendered meaningless,

as post-racialism strips race from its history and context, and the consequence is

that a post-racial gaze positions Tina's "hypocrisy" as just as bad as Santana's

racist comment. Here, *Glee* mobilizes multiple aspects of post-racialism to

promote the "wrongness" of Tina's actions. First, an implicit understanding of

racial progress and transcendence divorces the present era from its historical

antecedents, thus eliminating the importance or even possibility of historical

beauty standards. Second, race-neutral universalism creates a context such that all

races are meant to be situated on a level playing field; Tina should be able to see

herself as beautiful just the way she is, and by not doing so, she is in essence

violating a post-race mandate. Third, moral equivalence situates Tina's actions as

not only unfortunate, but morally wrong and as bad as any other form of racism.

Especially in the context of *Glee*'s multi-racial school, which is predicated on

diversity, tolerance, and inclusiveness, Tina's use of blue contact lenses is

positioned as unnecessary. She is resisting her true identity, which would

contribute to the "melting pot" of McKinley High, and in doing so is betraying the ideals of both the school and, by extension, the show as a whole.

Tina defends herself by decrying the lack of Asian sex symbols, and by saying she is just trying to model herself after what she sees in magazines. These points do work to address the gaze by noticing the assumed Whiteness of beauty standards. However, as it often does, *Glee* seems to mistake the brief pointing out of these structural inequalities for their deconstruction; that is, Tina's observations "simply register rather than challenge the dominant social relations reproduced" in the storyline (Giroux, 1994, p. 17). The challenges to the status quo represented by Tina's comments thus end up bolstering the post-racial gaze. Through the gaze, *Glee* is able to boost its progressive image by acknowledging the validity of Tina's concerns about a lack of Asian beauty icons, yet the superficiality of that discussion and the positioning of her as at fault for her own "racist" behavior undercut whatever came before it. This contributes to the propagation of an overall post-racial ideology because it allows the show to mention race in the abstract form of Asian sex symbols, demonstrating its conception of race solely as an individual identity marker, yet stops short of making a structural critique that is given any narrative weight. *Glee* provides a reference to race to promote the "truth" and validity of post-racialism, since race must exist as a facet of identity, just not as a power category. The show's engagement with race stops there, though, and Tina's "self-hatred" is ultimately portrayed simply as a bad behavior that she needs to fix, without a deeper analysis of the reasons for that behavior and of the possible systemic and cultural barriers to "fixing" it. By placing the

impetus on Tina to take personal responsibility for her actions, which have been discursively positioned as morally wrong, *Glee* engages in a distancing move that keeps the focus on Tina rather than on larger socio-cultural forces at play. By doing so, the show ultimately lets those broader forces go unchallenged and to maintain their ideological primacy.

In a similar vein, during the same episode Rachel then shows the glee club pictures of what she would look like with the nose job she has been considering. Tina tells her that they all think the nose job is a bad idea, but Rachel calls her a hypocrite, since Tina has already cosmetically altered part of her own body. Tina then admits that she sometimes dislikes the color and shape of her eyes, but that Rachel's own self-hatred has allowed her to see how wrong she is not to like part of who she is. This race- and gender-neutral universalism again denies the historical and cultural legacies of beauty standards, as it equates a White Jewish girl's nose with an Asian American girl's eyes, and also masks ongoing patriarchy and misogyny. The nose is often a signifier of Jewish culture and ethnicity, and has been used as a centerpiece in anti-Semitic representations (Gilman, 1994), reinforcing its deviation from hegemonic ideals of beauty and (White) femininity. However, to equate the Jewish nose with Asian American eyes[4] is to ignore their very different histories, including the social Whitening of Jews during the mid-20th century (Brodkin, 2007) and the use of caricatured slanted eyes as a symbol

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[4]   I recognize the dangers of biological essentialism when relating physical features to race, yet choose to undertake this form of strategic essentialism to make a broader point about historical treatment of racialized beauty standards; that is, I engage in this way as a commentary on this history, not my own belief that physical features are racially determined.

of Asian untrustworthiness and villainy during the Yellow Peril era (Espiritu, 2008). Thus, while both girls can be read as justifiably insecure about their beauty and physical features, because they do both differ in certain ways from the dominant standard, *Glee*'s universalizing tactic is problematic in its stripping away of history. Equating Rachel's nose with Tina's eyes denies the specificity of either, which "suppresses the history of these images and, in doing so, limits the range of meanings that might be brought into play" (Giroux, 1994, p. 17). Through this post-racial gaze, viewers are meant only to notice that each girl is unhappy with a certain physical feature, but the show does not allow for any further deconstruction of the beauty standards and underlying racism and sexism that caused that unhappiness.

In this case, Tina is the one who is portrayed as morally culpable for disliking and changing part of her body in order to be more in line with dominant ideals. As a post-racial model minority, Tina is made to feel bad about *not* wanting to be Asian. Under the traditional model minority stereotype, Asian Americans were "almost whites but not whites" (Espiritu, 2008, p. 125), and thus almost American, but not American; the result was often an attempt to become closer to Whiteness, whether through appearance or actions, to become more "American." However, in the post-racial context of *Glee*, Asian Americans should not try to be White, but should instead embrace an Asian American identity— albeit, one that is marked only by signifying physical and behavior traits and does not come at the expense of a universal American identity. The post-racial gaze does not attempt to disrupt or deconstruct beauty ideals rooted in Whiteness, but

simply positions Tina as wrong to want to participate in that culture of beauty. *Glee* needs Tina to represent "authentic" Asianness, unobscured by fake blue contact lenses, because only then can her presence contribute to the message of diversity and inclusion promoted by the series. She should be free to be who she really is—an Asian American girl with brown eyes—because, in a post-racial era, racial progress now allows for the appreciation of diverse identities, as long as it is working for a greater goal of unity. Tina's change of heart, spurred by Rachel, is reduced to individual feelings and desires, divorced from its broader structural and systematic roots. This allows the viewer both to view Tina's decision as an embrace of her identity, which post-racialism requires as a display of its decontextualization and dehistoricization, and to avoid questioning the deeper structures that prompted her use of contacts in the first place. By tipping its hat to the existence of societal beauty standards, but then resolving the issue via Tina's changed opinion, *Glee* implies that that is all there is to the issue. It not only does not encourage an interrogation of the underlying forces, but discursively argues that there are not even underlying forces to interrogate. In doing so, *Glee* allows these issues to remain in place and continue uninterrupted.

Moreover, Rachel again becomes a tool for the redemption of Whiteness by forcing Tina to recognize the error of her ways. Rachel, by calling out Tina's "hypocrisy," allows Tina to see how wrong she was and to understand that she needs to love herself no matter what. Through the post-racial gaze, Rachel is the catalyst for the equation of difference, and thus the erasure of differential power. She is positioned as the White savior, without whom Tina would have been

doomed to live in shame due to her Asianness. Significantly, Rachel is also portrayed as self-hating in some regards, seeking to assimilate to a dominant beauty aesthetic by receiving a nose job. This is an important tactic, as it allows *Glee* to simultaneously position disliking part of one's body as universally wrong, because the White female character is having the "same" issues as the Asian American female, and distance itself from Whiteness, because even Rachel is not ideal-White if she feels she must change her nose. This distancing in fact positions the narrative more securely in post-racialism by stripping it of any ties to historical or cultural beauty standards and arguing that feelings of insecurity, as they are portrayed here, are not about a rigid construction of race, but rather about self-confidence. By using Rachel as the vehicle for this realization, *Glee* mobilizes a post-racial gaze that gives her the moral high ground. Rachel also decides not to have nose surgery after talking to her peers, and is redeemed from what is portrayed as a negative decision by being the impetus for Tina to also change her mindset about the way she looks.

"Equal Opportunity Offenders" & False Equation of Difference

A further example of the institutional practices reinforcing an ideology of post-racialism, and thus racial inequality, is the creation of an "elite" glee club by cheerleading coach Sue Sylvester (Jane Lynch). In "Throwdown," episode seven of the first season, Sue forms her own group, Sue's Kids, to rival New Directions, with Tina and all of the other "minority" students: Santana (Latina, not yet out as gay), Artie (disabled), Kurt (gay), Mercedes (Black), Matt (Black, and since off the show), and Mike (Asian American). Later, Puck (Jewish) and Brittany (Dutch)

also join. Although the entire glee club often bonds over their shared "outcast"

status, the membership in Sue's Kids is perhaps an even clearer embodiment of

the post-racial equation of difference that decouples race from history and power.

The positioning of all non-White characters as "minorities" does somewhat serve

to draw attention to the existence of a dominant group, as it constructs an entire

group of "Others" in opposition, yet that dominant group is never named nor

interrogated. Whiteness, then, as the dominant group, is marked only by omission,

and the focus remains on the various "minorities," which both highlights the

abnormality of "difference" and reinforces the normalcy of Whiteness. Moreover,

the fact that being a person of (any) Color is likened to being paraplegic or Jewish

in turn draws attention away from the ways in which non-White racial identities

and groups are systematically subjugated in a racial power structure. *Glee*

references a dominant group through the creation of its all-minority sub-group,

yet Whiteness is never actually challenged. In fact, the inclusion of White

characters, deemed "minorities" through non-racial features, further protects

Whiteness by positioning the dominant group as some nebulous collection of

people and identities. Through the post-racial gaze, *Glee* makes the argument that

even if there is a social hierarchy, it is determined by a myriad of

characteristics—race is not a primary factor, or even a factor at all, as evidenced

by the minority status of several White characters.

The post-racial gaze attaches a false equality to all types of difference—

significantly, deemed "difference" or "minority" status, rather than marginalized,

underrepresented, or another similar term that would make linkages to historical

patterns and group power dynamics. The inclusion of Brittany in the group, and the labeling of her Dutch heritage as equally "minority," is perhaps most important in supporting *Glee*'s post-racial stance and the idea of a race-neutral universalism. Brittany's stereotypical ditziness is a running gag, and *Glee* takes advantage of that stereotype to mobilize a level playing field for jokes and offense. Her inclusion is done so for comic effect, a seeming commentary on the "overly politically correct" nature of the glee club and contemporary discourse. But, while the show makes fun of her being a ditz, by including her in the "minority" group it discursively positions her as the same as her "minority" peers. This allows *Glee* to then make fun of everyone else, as if the show has earned its equal opportunity offender carte blanche. Brittany's presence in this storyline cannot be discounted, as it serves as the main frame for the post-racial gaze. A potential message about coalition building, for instance, is undercut by the overall race-neutral universalism or by treating the entire set-up as an absurdity or joke. The ultimate effect is that a post-racial ideology holds sway over the storyline and Whiteness and other dominant power structures go unmarked and unchallenged, thus able to retain their dominance.

Additionally, Sue gives nicknames to each member: Artie becomes "Wheels," Kurt is "Gay Kid," Mercedes is "Aretha," Matt is "Shaft,"[5] and Tina

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[5] The nickname "Shaft" is particularly interesting in its reference to the 1971 blaxploitation film and character of the same name. Matt is more a background extra than an actual character, existing to provide New Directions with enough members and *Glee* with more "diversity." His nickname, then, is almost solely a reflection on his race, since we have few other characteristics to associate with him. The choice is significant, though, as Shaft was notably popular with Whites while fitting the image of a hyper-sexualized, aggressive Black male (Guerrero,

and Mike are "Asian" and "Other Asian," respectively. Every nickname is problematic on multiple levels, least of which is their essentializing nature, as it reduces each student to one trait that either draws on a stereotype or is simply the most identifiable aspect of their identity, and then attaches that label to them as a marker of their difference. However, the show portrays the process as a joke, and is able to do so because of the post-racial framework within which it is operating. Sue is depicted as an "equal opportunity offender" whose insults target everyone, and thus have no actual power to offend anyone. By having Sue—again, played by Jane Lynch—be the vehicle for this equal opportunity offense, *Glee* blends reality and fiction, a key maneuver of post-racialism in film and television. Sue's nicknames gain a level of irony, as they are coming out of the mouth of a high-profile lesbian and LGBT activist, which increases the sense that her narrative insults are devoid of real meaning or power. This does the work of post-racialism, as it distances Sue—and consequently, *Glee*—from the "new-school political correctness and racial obsession" (Cho, 2009, p. 1604) and invokes a race-neutral universalism, leveling the discursive playing field so that members of all groups can equally be the targets of these reductive and essentializing nicknames. Sue is able first to notice and make specific reference to the students' race or other "minority" identity marker because of the post-racial belief that we are "beyond race" as a meaningful organizing concept. Then, she is able to apply her nicknames without students actually being offended because, in a post-racial

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1993). By assigning Matt the nickname "Shaft," *Glee* is drawing a discursive link between the character and this controlling image, reinforcing this stereotype while simultaneously claiming to be post-race.

society, the labels can be nothing other than jokes, and there is no attachment of the names to any sort of power, whether institutional (her being a faculty member), interpersonal (her being consistently aggressive and critical), or both (her protected position as a White woman). The post-racial gaze allows Sue to be viewed as outrageous, but it is never clear what the audience's reaction is intended to be—are we supposed to find it funny? Shocking? Offensive? Funny because it is offensive? Ultimately, though, the intended reaction does not matter as much as the impact, which through the post-racial gaze is to retain the discursive power to name and define among those already in positions of power, and to then convey a sense to the audience that this type of post-racial, "post-P.C." attitude is not only acceptable now, but encouraged, as it expresses the belief that we are indeed beyond race, and serves to make that belief more and more "true."

Tina's "difference" is equated even more closely with Artie's, in a storyline that also attributes certain stereotypically Asian characteristics to a stutter she has for roughly the first half of the first season. An improvement in Tina's singing ability is tangibly portrayed through the reduction of her stutter, but the stutter itself turns into a tool for post-racialism. The stutter at first provides justification for Tina's quiet and aloof nature, which, in combination with her "goth" clothing and lack of sexualized characterization, distances her from traditional stereotypes of Asian American women as exotic and hyper-feminized (Chang, 2001; Espiritu, 2008; Lee & Vaught, 2003). Her being soft-spoken and reserved—qualities stereotypically associated with Asians and Asian

Americans—are explained by her apparent speech impediment and the resulting

embarrassment, rather than by her Asianness. However, in the ninth episode

"Wheels," Tina reveals to her friend and budding romantic interest Artie that she

has been faking her stutter since the sixth grade *because of* her shyness. Still,

though, this timidity is portrayed as natural and essential to who Tina is. She is

not shy because she is Asian American; she just happens to be shy and also Asian

American. As with Santana's characterization as an aggressive, self-described

"bitch," who simply happens to also be Latina, *Glee* relies on the post-racial

effect of coincidence to tie stereotypical traits to its characters of Color while

insulating itself from issues of power and cultural history. If a character of Color

just *happens* to demonstrate a stereotypical trait, *Glee* is able to absolve itself

from responsibility for perpetuating negative images, while simultaneously

reinforcing essentialized notions of racialized traits, since those traits are

portrayed as simply parts of who those characters are as people.

When Tina reveals the truth about her stutter, two steps are taken to

redeem Whiteness. First, her accompanying explanation is that her experience in

glee club has made her realize how much she has been missing by being

withdrawn and staying in the background. Thanks to the positive impact of Mr.

Schue and her mainly White peers, Tina explains, she is able to tell the truth about

herself and be fully accepted. Because of the post-racial gaze, the intent is that the

glee club will be viewed as a place where members can feel free to be themselves

and that their tolerance makes everyone feel safe and welcome. However, what

ends up happening is that Tina is shown to be able to give up her fake stutter only

because of the kindness of the White people with whom she has surrounded herself. The purported "positivity" of Tina's outcome, portrayed through the gaze, lets the White savior trope go unremarked upon, as to do so would be to demonstrate a political correctness or "racial obsession," from which post-racialism authorizes a retreat (Cho, 2009, p. 1604). Thus, Tina can credit and thank the glee club's (White) leaders in non-racial terms, allowing the show to effect a distancing move while simultaneously entrenching the White savior dynamic.

Second, Artie is offended when Tina tells him her stutter is fake, because their bond had initially been formed on the basis of a shared "disabled" identity—Artie is paraplegic, and feels he can identify with Tina because of her speech impediment. Beyond the equation of a stutter to waist-down paralysis, which again mobilizes the false equivalence and power-neutral universalism so common in *Glee*, Tina is left having disappointed Artie, which takes priority in the storyline. Despite being honest and owning her shyness as part of who she is, and not a symptom of a speech impediment, Tina is still positioned as owing something to Artie. This subtly draws on multiple racist stereotypes of Asians as threats, portraying Tina as a type of "Yellow Peril" (Espiritu, 2008) who is encroaching on Artie's "territory," both moral and physical. His offense at the faked stutter also becomes discursively positioned as more important than the reason she faked it in the first place. The performance of a stutter as a mechanism to cope with racialized expectations of being submissive and demure, for example, is never posed as a possibility. Instead, on a race-neutral playing field,

disability trumps race, and leaves Artie on the moral high ground. He is able to claim offense at being "tricked"—again positioning Tina as a greedy and calculating Yellow Peril (Espiritu, 2008)—which forces Tina to become apologetic, thus justifying Artie's feelings of betrayal. In a post-racial context, the reasons for Tina's adoption of a stutter as it relates to her racial identity cannot be examined. Instead, only the "objective" facts can be compared—Artie's feeling of betrayal to Tina's fake speech impediment—and *Glee* positions his genuine feeling above her dishonesty. Through the post-racial gaze, a rare storyline that is ostensibly about Tina is reformulated and becomes about her straight White male friend and potential romantic interest. Artie gains the power in the plot and through him Whiteness retains its moral authority.

As the sole Asian American female main character in *Glee*, Tina is continuously relegated to the margins of the show. Reformulated as a post-racial model minority, she both reflects old stereotypes and rejects them for updates on the classic tropes, yet the result in either case is her being confined to a supporting role in both the glee club and the overall show. She is perhaps the most obvious and literal tool for post-racialism and the post-racial gaze, as Sue Sylvester and others refer to her simply as "Asian," but that ostensible joke serves not to prove a racial transcendence, but rather to perpetuate a racial hierarchy with Whiteness on top. And indeed, despite the assertions that Tina's time in the spotlight would come during her senior year, she has yet to have significant screen time as of four episodes into the fourth season. So even though the post-racial gaze positions the

viewer to believe that we are truly "beyond race," Tina's role is not going to

change; she is exactly where she is supposed to be.

Implications & Conclusion

"Thus, popular culture texts … are discursive practices that have material consequences on real bodies" (Esposito, 2009, p. 526).

At this point, it is clear that the post-racial gaze works in multiple, complex ways on *Glee*. As Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2007) have argued, "It is impossible to critique or refute texts that one does not understand; comprehension is an important prerequisite to critique" (p. 184), and that understanding is precisely what this thesis has aimed to do. I have provided detailed explanations of post-racialism (Cho, 2009) and the various gaze structures (Foucault, 1995; Kaplan, 1997; Mulvey, 1975; Russell, 1991), leading to the coining of my own term and concept of the post-racial gaze. Then, with a grounding in cultural studies' understandings of ideology and hegemony in media and culture, I conducted in-depth analyses of the three female characters of Color in *Glee*, deconstructing how their characterizations and storylines, filtered through the post-racial gaze, work to promote a context in which race no longer carries any meaningful weight, while ultimately redeeming Whiteness and maintaining a racial hierarchy.

The series positions Mercedes Jones, the Black female character, as the friendly rival of Rachel Berry, of equal musical talent. However, through the updated stereotypes of Black women that make up her characterization and the supporting presence that makes up her storylines, Mercedes is consistently denied her subjectivity. Mercedes functions to buttress the ideal White womanhood

represented by Rachel and to be a representative object of the diversity and

inclusion of the show. The post-racial gaze decouples race from power,

neutralizing concerns that Mercedes embodies stereotypical image, or that she

remain subordinate in both the glee club and the show's ensemble to the White

female lead; instead, Mercedes simply becomes another token of *Glee*'s

progressiveness, and criticisms to the contrary can just be labeled racist in and of

themselves.

Just as Mercedes exists to bolster Rachel and her White womanhood,

Santana Lopez serves to buttress White gay maleness as embodied by Kurt

Hummel. The post-racial gaze presents Santana as another symbol of diversity,

along several identity lines, yet her character exists largely to serve as a

counterpoint to Kurt, rather than standing on her own as a unique subject. By

adopting this post-racial gaze and discursively diminishing intersectionalities,

Glee ultimately maintains hegemonic ideas of culture, identity, and power.

Santana is written as falsely equivalent to Kurt, which erases power differentials

associated with collective group identity that continue to exist. Additionally,

through Santana's storylines *Glee* also garners praise and support for its efforts to

raise awareness around LGBTQ issues. This—another key aspect of the post-

racial gaze—contributes to an overall discursive strategy that diminishes the

importance of race by positioning it as a thing of the past.

And as the sole Asian American female member of the glee club, Tina

Cohen-Chang represents a post-racial model minority who is continuously

relegated to the margins of the show. She both reflects old stereotypes and rejects

them for updates on the classic tropes, yet the result in either case is her being confined to a supporting role in both the glee club and *Glee*. When Sue Sylvester and others refer to her simply as "Asian," Tina becomes perhaps the most obvious and literal tool for post-racialism, but that "joke" represents the overall effects of *Glee*'s post-racial gaze: not to prove racial transcendence, but rather to perpetuate a racial hierarchy with Whiteness on top.

Although the particular characters and plots I examined are specific to *Glee*, they draw on many classic tropes and archetypes, as I examined, that make this research and analysis translatable and applicable to other television programs and media texts. While I would like to see more substantive representation of historically marginalized groups on television—pushing beyond "diversity for diversity's sake" and moving people of Color into well-developed leading roles, to start—it is beyond the purview of this thesis to provide lengthy prescriptions for an entrenched and deeply hegemonic media industry. However, before fully concluding my analysis, I wish to raise a series of questions concerning the next steps in the disruption of this post-racial gaze that will push this conversation in the directions I believe it must go.

First, why does this all matter? After all, as Leistyna and Alper (2009) remind us, "Corporate bodies take very seriously the fact that culture shapes our sense of political agency and mediates the relations between everyday struggles and the structures of power" (p. 501), so why should we invest time and energy in the disruption of a rich and powerful industry that relies and thrives on hegemony? There are a number of good answers—*Why is any social justice work*

worth it?—but here I wish to focus on the implications for social policy, and specifically education. In the realm of policy, Stein (2004) writes, "Rather than investigate—or even acknowledge—the structural conditions that favor certain members of society over others, elected officials rely on representations of individual and groups of policy beneficiaries" (p. 17). She argues that this reliance on broad representations of beneficiaries often has the effect of highlighting and emphasizing deficiency among groups who deviate from the norm, even when policies are ostensibly aimed at increasing equity. For a show like *Glee*, Stein's arguments have major implications. The series similarly reinforces deviance from the status quo while claiming to do the opposite, but more importantly provides the policymakers Stein discusses with their representations of policy subjects. *Glee* not only presents a post-racial ideological argument, but also does so via the bodies of youth in a classic American school setting—the characters are meant to be stand-ins for any number of high school students across the country. Thus, the post-racially realized characters on *Glee* are not simply characters on a television show, but reflect and reinforce dominant ideology about race—and sexuality, gender, etc.—that can be, and is, translated into law and policy.

Second, what does this mean for television? *Glee* has established itself as a model for emulation: the musical format has already been mimicked by such series as NBC's *Smash* and ABC's *Nashville,* though largely without even the token diversity of *Glee*; the high school setting and post-racial gaze can be seen in The CW's *The Vampire Diaries*, which, though set in Virginia and featuring ample Southern tropes, never references the legacy of slavery or the relative

positioning of Black characters on the show. Thus, even when the format or genre shifts, the post-racial gaze seems to be established as a constant. Some programs, most notably those from writer/producer Shonda Rhimes, one of the most powerful Black females in Hollywood, take a more race-conscious approach. But, standard operating procedure is better encapsulated by NBC's *Deception*, which stars a "diverse" (read: of Color) lead in Meagan Good, yet takes that casting as a signal of a post-race reality and a way "to sort of deal with race without actually having to talk about it" (Rosenberg, 2013). As with *Glee*'s treatment of race, the producers of *Deception* view this post-racial stance as progressive, as if casting a Black lead signals racial progress and is itself enough. By slotting in a Black actress in what was originally written as a White role, though, Whiteness remains the status quo, and a refusal to subsequently engage race ensures it stays that way.

Third, if the images and representations on television can have real effects on people and policy, how can they be improved? One immediate answer is to increase the number of people of Color on television, as the need to be representative of an entire group, and thus the risk of essentialism, decreases as representational power increases (Julien & Mercer, 1996). Similarly, the number of people of Color behind the scenes—writing, directing, producing, running networks and studios—must increase so as to add more voices and experiences to the creative process. However, these steps alone will do little to ensure an increase in the substantive and responsible representations of people of Color in media and popular culture. To do that, it may be important to move more toward what Gray (2004) calls multiculturalist discursive practices. Unlike assimilationist

television discourses, which "treat the social and political issues of black presence in particular and racism in general as individual problems" (p. 85), and pluralist or separate-but-equal discourses, which "situate black characters in domestically centered black worlds and circumstances that essentially parallel those of whites" (p. 87), multiculturalist discourses "position viewers, regardless of race, class, or gender locations, to participate in black experiences from multiple subject positions. In these shows viewers encounter complex, even contradictory, perspectives and representations of black life in America" (p. 90). This type of television discourse challenges the dominant gaze and gives agency and ownership to those who are too often represented as objects, rather than subjects. Gray acknowledges, "It is not that the representations that appear within this set of discursive practices and strategies simply offer a more culturally satisfying and politically progressive alternative to assimilationist and pluralist discourses" (p. 91). However, they do increase the scope of representation, resisting essentializing images and bringing race to the forefront not only through increased diversity, but also through directly addressing race as a powerful component of life and culture, which directly challenges post-racialism.

Finally, how can we be better equipped to challenge the ideologies embedded in popular culture, even if the images themselves do not change or do so in subtle ways that nonetheless maintain the powered status quo? Because mainstream media communicate and provide a look into mainstream ideology (Fiske & Hartley, 1992; Giroux, 1994; Hall, 2006; Kellner, 1995; Storey, 1996), it is important to promote a critical model of media literacy, or what Leistyna and

Alper (2009) describe as, "the ability to read the values and beliefs embedded in the knowledge that is circulated throughout society so as to be able to defend ourselves from propaganda and participate in its eradication" (p. 517). Ideally, viewers will be able to consume media and pop culture with a high level of comprehension and understanding of the forces at play. As Leistyna and Alper remind us, "Critical media literacy encourages us to not only think about culture politically, but also to think about politics culturally. Political consciousness and action do not take place in a vacuum" (p. 517). Equipped with critical literacy, students can both deconstruct media images, understanding the embedded political, social, and economic messages, and push back against those messages. Because the post-racial gaze encourages audiences to believe in the validity and merit of post-racialism, where race is reduced to a marker of identity stripped of any broader power context, it is vital to be equipped with a literacy that not only reintroduces power to the equation, but examines power as the primary racial currency.

These questions are only a handful of the next steps that I see as stemming from my analytical and interpretive work around *Glee*'s post-racial gaze. In these and other cases, though, it will be imperative to consider the relevance of post-racialism to ideas of youth and schooling. As Collins (2009) argued, the media make up only one domain of power. Thus, while youth and adults are both educated in this cultural domain by the mass media, there are also other ways in which ideas of schooling are manipulated—through the structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains. Beyond images and representations in television, we

must also consider, for example, how standardized testing promotes a post-racial

concept of objectivity, yet produces results that are profoundly racialized. How do

school disciplinary codes, such as zero-tolerance policies (Ayers, Dohrn, &

Ayers, 2001), appeal to common sense in their post-racial push for "safety," yet

disproportionately punish students of Color? And, to return to the cultural

domain, how does media coverage create narratives around such issues to

promote them as post-racial and necessary measures? Post-racialism has taken

hold, in part, by working through and among the various domains of power, and

the implications of these interconnections are vital to remember when considering

methods and strategies for disrupting and challenging the harmful ideology.

     Indeed, while my focus remained on *Glee*, I see the post-racial gaze as an

explanatory tool for more than just media analysis. As an operational concept, the

gaze works best when applied to cultural studies—there, we have the ability to

analyze stories, characters, technical aspects, cultural context, etc.—but as a

theoretical tool, the implications are more widespread. Used as such, as a way to

analyze and explain the workings of post-racialism, the post-racial gaze could be

applied to any number of contexts. When analyzing a Supreme Court case, for

instance: How do the opinions reflect and mobilize Cho's (2009) components of

post-racialism to ultimately redeem Whiteness? When examining a history

curriculum: How do particular lessons restrict racism to the past to promote a

race-neutral universalism today? When investigating a school funding policy:

How do seemingly objective calculations contribute to the maldistribution of

funds, and how does this mask and perpetuate race-based inequity? These are just

a handful of possible realms in which the post-racial gaze as a theoretical tool may serve a valuable purpose. At its essence, the post-racial gaze is a key is to deconstructing how assumptions are made through a certain ideological lens, and how those serve to perpetuate that ideology; as such, I see it as broadly applicable.

The propagation of the post-racial gaze in the sorts of television shows I have discussed is problematic in its own right, but becomes even more so when these ideologies—made all the more appealing when delivered by characters with whom audiences develop close relationships—become codified in the real world. A recent incident at Tufts University, in which the Committee on Student Life (CSL) ruled that religious organizations may be exempted from the university's nondiscrimination policy (Shanahan, 2012), perfectly encapsulates the danger of "post-power" ideologies when translated to concrete institutional settings. In its decision, the CSL voted to allow for religious exemption in order to protect freedom of religion, even if it came at the expense of one's legal right to nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The ruling was intended as a measure of equality that attempted to level the playing field—i.e., religious discrimination is just as bad as discrimination around sexuality, and thus one should not be allowed to trump the other. Except, that is exactly what the CSL decision did—by discursively equalizing discrimination vis-à-vis religion and sexual orientation, it allowed religious freedom to trump freedom of expression of a sexual identity. Under a post-power framework, religion and sexuality were positioned as different facets of group and individual identity that deserved equal protection; however, no consideration was made for the fact that one—here,

Christianity—already holds a culturally privileged position, while the other—non-heterosexuality—is culturally subjugated. In granting "equality" of protection by allowing religious exemption from the nondiscrimination policy, then, the CSL ultimately endorsed discrimination on grounds of sexuality. It bolstered religious protections, stemming from a Christian student group, at the expense of extending protections to an already vulnerable group. While there is no data to support the idea that the post-racial ideologies promoted in and by *Glee* directly led to the CSL decision at Tufts, both are emblematic of the ways in which ideology permeates multiple aspects of society and culture, and becomes normal, natural, and expected. The discursive practices seen in popular culture ultimately both reflect and help shape a national ideology, and the effect is mutually reinforcing, wherein the post-racial gaze helps post-racialism both take hold and retain its hold. This example demonstrates the danger posed when that ideology moves beyond the television screen and is institutionalized in the real world.

To conclude with a return to my narrower focus on *Glee*, it is certainly important to recognize that the series is not alone in its (re)production of post-racial ideologies. The same type of "equal opportunity offending" that *Glee* has embraced can be seen across the television landscape. Last January at the biannual Television Critics Association Press Tour, Michael Patrick King, the showrunner of the CBS sitcom *2 Broke Girls*, made headlines for his comments regarding the show's racial and ethnic stereotypes. After saying, "I like to say that the big story about race on our show is that so many are represented," he added, "If you talk about stereotypes, every character, when it's born, is a stereotype: A

blonde and a brunette, which has certain stigmas as well, which we've tried to defuse and grow." After being pressed further by reporters, King finally declared, "I'm gay! I'm putting in gay stereotypes every week! I don't find it offensive, any of this. I find it comic to take everybody down, which is what we are doing" (Sepinwall, 2012). From equating the stereotypes attached to people of Color to those of blondes, to the belief that identifying as a member one marginalized group—and the most privileged among that group, at that (Snider, 1996)—gives one license to say and do anything, King's comments clearly encapsulate the current post-racial ideology. While he garnered much negative press for his statements, though, it must be emphasized that they were not crazy, but were actually very much in tune with the dominant hegemonic ideas about race and cultural politics. The attention, I would argue, came rather because King spoke what is meant to remain unspoken. Ryan Murphy—co-creator of *Glee* and another powerful gay White male showrunner in Hollywood—promotes much of the same ideology and messaging on his series, though just better disguised under the cloak of diversity, inclusion, and tolerance.

Ultimately, *Glee* trades in what Giroux (1994) calls the politics of difference, which requires that cultural differences be "both acknowledged and depoliticized in order to be contained" (p. 12). This allows "issues" to be tackled, but in no meaningful or substantive way; instead, those issues become currency that allow the show to increase its cultural cache. Through the post-racial gaze, *Glee*'s dealings with race are portrayed as edgy and/or hip, while simultaneously being stripped of historical, political, and social context. As such, they "are

stripped of their political possibilities and reduced to a spectacle" (p. 18),

redeeming Whiteness and reifying the very structures the show purports to

challenge. Through my in-depth analysis of the three main female characters of

Color on *Glee*, I have shown how the writers have created this spectacle. They

have constructed characters and storylines to discursively equalize uneven power

terrain and to reformulate old tropes and stereotypes, with the ultimate effect of

perpetuating the same inequalities and hierarchies they purport to dismantle—or

that are supposedly already dismantled in a post-racial society.

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