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## TRAGIC MULATTA 2.0: A POSTCOLONIAL APPROXIMATION AND CRITIQUE OF THE REPRESENTATIONS OF BI-ETHNIC WOMEN IN U.S. FILM AND TV

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TRAGIC MULATTA 2.0: A POSTCOLONIAL APPROXIMATION AND CRITIQUE  
OF THE REPRESENTATIONS OF BI-ETHNIC WOMEN IN U.S. FILM AND TV

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
Communication Studies

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by  
Hadia Nouria Bendelhoum  
December 2017

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December 2017

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the representations of five bi-ethnic women characters in U.S. mass media both before and after U.S. “post-racial” era, to find and expose evidence of the continuity and perpetuation of racist stereotypes against biracial/bi-ethnic women. I utilize a thematic textual analysis, supported by the theories, ideas, and critical views of postcolonial theorists Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, and Edward Said, and composed of three prominent themes which expose the nature of the representations of lead bi-ethnic characters in current mass media entertainment (TV programs and films). The themes further explored through this project are: bi-ethnicity (one Black parent and one White parent) as a) over exoticized or hypersexualized; b) inherently problematic; and c) destined for non-existence through invisibility, elimination, and even death.

In a second step, I critically examine the theme of the tragic mulatta present in *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959), a film released during the epoch of the African-American Civil Rights Movement (1954-68), and the TV mini-series Alex Haley’s *Queen* (1993) to then highlight how it becomes immortalized transmedia (across diverse media platforms and historical moments) and ever-present in current “post-racial era” entertainment media film. To examine this, I compared one modern film and that portrayed a leading bi-ethnic woman—*Dear White People* (2014)—to then compare to the film mentioned above. I then compared TV programs that portray supporting bi-ethnic women characters in *Suits* (2011), *Black-ish* (2014), and *Empire* (2015) to then compare

to the TV miniseries mentioned above. Finally, I contend that the presence of transmedia storytelling of the fixation, and manipulation of the supposed political correctness of the tragic mulatta archetype stands to reinforce its dominance in media portrayals. Moreover, the fragmentary existence is based on a lack of research and the indolent borrowing from previous archetypes.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background Information

In 1842, literary author Lydia Marie Child introduced what is now carried on as a prominent archetype known as the tragic mulatta. Pilgrim (2000) deemed that during the time of the civil war, before the emancipation of slaves, the supposed inception of the light skinned “negro child” or the mulatto– the offspring of a White slave master and a Black slave began. Historically, the mulatto was perceived as a privileged (Black) individual due to their lighter complexion and European features. Because they primarily lived on plantations they were perceived as privileged and contrasted against their darker brothers and sisters. U.S. literature and Hollywood has since dispelled the notion of their perceived privilege by bringing forth the archetype known as the tragic mulatto– an archetype of the multi/bi-ethnic individual whose life is tragic due to his or her dual identity (Pilgrim). The archetype of the tragic mulatto is one that has thrived not only in literature but in U.S. mainstream entertainment media–*The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith & Atken, 1915), *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959), *Pinky* (Zanuck & Kazan, 1949), *Alex Haley’s Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993), and *Dear White People* (Brown, et al., 2014). In particular, the tragic mulatta– the female specific to the tragic mulatto–is an archetype that was established in the early 19th century–*Quadroons* (Child, M., 1842)– and has since been reinforced through both overt and covert racist stereotypes.

The archetype is still reinforced today through more covert stereotypes that are perpetuated and conserved through transmedia storytelling, a concept coined by Henry Jenkins (2001) that explains storytelling through multiple media platforms and through historical time periods such as dime novels, literature, TV series, and films (listed below in this paragraph). For the purposes of this study, I focus exclusively on the representation of bi-ethnic women of African American and European American descent with one Black parent and one White parent—here on referred to in this thesis as bi-ethnic women—in mainstream U.S. TV and films. The media pieces chosen for this study are one dating pre-civil rights America (produced between 1954-1968, the time before Blacks were rewarded basic civil rights in America)— *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959)— juxtaposed to the film dating within the so-called “post-racial” American era (A time in which some believe racism is declining or even has been eradicated. This became popularized after the election of Barack Obama in 2008)— *Dear White People* (Brown, et al., 2014). Further, I use one TV miniseries—*Alex Haley’s Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993)— to then compare to the TV series, *Suits* (Liman & Bartis, 2011), *Black-ish* (Barris, et al., 2014), and *Empire* (Strong et al., 2015). I analyze the aforementioned media pieces to further scrutinize the minimal and one-sided problematic representations of bi-ethnic women and expose the lack of change in representation as they continue to be depicted as tragic, confused, hypersexualized, and over exoticized objects.

I add to the discourse by discussing the portrayal of bi-ethnic women in

U.S. mainstream entertainment media—pre-civil rights era to “post racial” America—and its damaging implications on bi-ethnic women. As an extension of the study done by Orbe and Strother (1996), this thesis pinpoints themes of and deconstructs the tragic mulatta archetype (to be further explained in this chapter) that has dominated portrayals of bi-ethnic women through a thematic textual analysis (TTA). To do so, the following concepts are discussed through the lens of postcolonial school of thought; the exotification and hypersexualization through the colonial gaze (Edward Said and Malek Alloula), cognitive dissonance through the dichotomous view of the racial hierarchy—Black as impure and White as pure (Frantz Fanon), and strategic essentialism (Gayatri Spivak).

Hall (2010) explained two types of racism; overt (blatant) and inferential (the naturalization of racist stereotypical representations as the true representation). The latter is the lens through which I analyze the current representations of bi-ethnic women in mainstream media. I begin with the overt racist representation of the character Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959), a popular film adaptation of the critically acclaimed novel by the same title. Despite its overt racism and reinforcement of racial stereotypes such as the mammy and tragic mulatta, the film is still praised for its cinematic storytelling. I study the portrayal of the trope of the tragic mulatta in this film because it functions as a signifier for a supposed identity of bi-ethnic women. Once defined, I compared and analyzed this function as it continues to reoccur in recent representations of bi-ethnic women. Finally, by tracing the functions of the

tragic mulatta as a signifier, I uncover just a revamped version of the same stereotype, which only appears as a transformed tragic mulatta archetype. Specifically, I analyze the progression of the tragic mulatta archetype in the character of Sam White in *Dear White People* (Brown, et al., 2014)—produced after the declaration of an imagined post-racial America— a film that gained notoriety due to its tackling of microaggressions—degrading of marginalized groups—against Black students. Further analysis of supporting bi-ethnic women characters in the following TV shows; USA network’s *Suits* (Liman & Bartis, 2011), ABC’s *Black-ish* (Barris, et al., 2014), and FOX’s *Empire* (Strong et al., 2015), will be implemented into this study. I implore a modified (thematic) analysis of Orbe and Strother’s (1996) examination of *Alex Haley’s Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993) to use as a comparing point for the signification of the tragic mulatta to then juxtapose with three TV characters. The comparative analysis of the TV series and their handling of bi-ethnic/biracial identity will add a third dimension to these ongoing representations. A detailed explanation of the films and TV shows follow in the next chapter.

Before moving forward, it is important to note the difference between bi-ethnic actors/actresses and bi-ethnic characters. This study focuses specifically on bi-ethnic women with one White (European-American) parent and one Black (African American) parent. With this in mind, only characters who either claim bi-ethnic identity or whose bi-ethnic identity is confirmed in the script have been chosen as the subjects. Many confuse bi-ethnic actresses or even light-skinned

Black women as playing bi-ethnic characters. However, this is not the case as one cannot assume the ethnic identity of an individual based solely on physical appearance. For example, Halle Berry is primarily cast as a Black character in her roles—with the exception of Alex Haley's *Queen*—despite her bi-ethnic background (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993). The identity of the actresses and the identity placed upon them brings to light another dimension in the elimination of bi-ethnic representation in media. This further perpetuates an unimportance of such characters to its viewers. Further, it communicates a combination of two very different experiences as one. This is to assume that there is one type of experience for both the bi-ethnic woman and the Black woman that is based on skin color. To merge these two experiences into one, is to ignore the intersectionality of both Black women and bi-ethnic women, thus causing the overshadowing and invisibility of bi-ethnic women's struggles.

To deconstruct and understand the tragic mulatta archetype, this study, at times, discussed race in terms of how it is primarily constructed and viewed with specific regards to U.S. mainstream media. However, this study was aware of the oversimplified and constricting nature of the construction and view of race. It is with this logic that race was sometimes used in place of ethnicity to further examine the perverse logic of race as fixed, dichotomous, pure, and unmixed. Aside from societal, cultural, and familial influences, this thesis argues that U.S. mainstream media representations, as specifically found in 20<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. films and television shows, are a major factor in the marginalization

and the eventual elimination of bi-ethnic women and even bi-ethnic identity. It is through a post-colonial lens, that I have found my experiences as a bi-ethnic woman echoed in media representations of bi-ethnic women. Further, I am able to utilize the history of bi-ethnic women and the tragic mulatta archetype and connect it to their portrayals today.

### Statement of Problem

Orbe and Strother (1996) added an important component to the discourse on the representation of bi-ethnic women. More than two decades later, the same problem is still present; representations of bi-ethnic women characters are scarce in U.S. mainstream media, and the existing ones are still problematic. The implications of such representations are an imposed fixity on what a bi-ethnic woman should be and therefore stands to marginalize any bi-ethnic woman who challenges that static image. While this may not appear so blatantly, my own experiences as a bi-ethnic woman can contribute to the following discourse. Born of a Black American mother—brown skin, black eyes— and a racially White, but Algerian father —fair skin, blue eyes— I am one out of five children whose physical appearances challenge the very notion of race as homogeneous. As a result, I resonate with the intersectionality of the several factors against me in society. I am both Arab and Black, but to most I am just Black or I am neither. I am a woman, but that is overshadowed by my race and religion. I am a Muslim, but to some this is overshadowed by my race. I seldom have control over which category I get included into, but I still receive the many forms of prejudice that

come with each and every part of my identity. I can therefore provide a particular set of insights into the bi-ethnic experience and add to the current and minimal discourse surrounding bi-ethnic women.

I aim to further the discourse by adding my own experiences as a bi-ethnic woman, along with elements of more present studies and my own analysis of recent representations of bi-ethnic women compared to past representations. This study views both protagonist, and supporting bi-ethnic women in U.S. films and TV shows. Data generated will be examined using a thematic textual analysis to further study the ways in which bi-ethnic women are represented in U.S. mainstream media. This study aims to answer three research questions by identifying and analyzing the signification process present in popular bi-ethnic women characters.

The three research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What are dominant images of bi-ethnic women in the chosen film and television series?

RQ2: How do dominant beauty standards that give preference to “Whiteness” and Eurocentric features contrasted with representations of Black women, factor into the hierarchical representations of bi-ethnic women?

RQ3: How have Hollywood portrayals of bi-ethnic women changed? Moreover, how are elements of the tragic mulatta trope modified or negotiated to simulate current apparent political correctness?

I aim to answer these questions by examining the three prominent themes found in the representations of the characters chosen; 1) over exoticized or hypersexualized, 2) inherently problematic, and 3) destined for non-existence through invisibility, elimination, and even death. A detailed explanation of the signifiers will be discussed in Chapter 2. While a study of fictional characters cannot fully explain the effects of such a representation, this analysis will certainly provide insight into these implications.

In this introduction, I begin with a critical take on the state of racism in the U.S. by questioning the state of our country when it comes to the problem of racism. I do this by briefly revisiting the Civil Rights Era and juxtaposing it to the failed idea of a post-racial era in the U.S. Then, I revisit racial identity indicators of Black, White, and bi-ethnicity as they relate to the “one-drop-rule”. Next, I present a literature review of studies dedicated to bi-ethnicity and representation by revisiting the common archetype of ‘the tragic mulatta’ within media and their historical repercussions affecting real lives. I introduce, define and explain the theoretical perspectives that support this thesis. Followed by an overview of selected media samples as well as an introduction to my method. I then present my analysis of the media pieces. To conclude, I discuss my findings in the analysis and highlight the implications that follow, along with an explanation of the importance of the concept of transmedia with which I conclude this study.

## CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

### “Post-racial America”

The year 1954 marked the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement for Black Americans in the United States. After centuries of slavery, overt racism, and downright dehumanization, Black American’s turbulent struggle to obtain basic human rights finally gained traction. 1964 marked the signing of the Civil Rights Act that garnered basic human/citizens’ rights for Black Americans. However, Alexander (2012) spoke of the racism that still exists even after the civil rights movement and posits that while this pivotal moment in history brought better times for Blacks in America, racism and dehumanization were still prevalent. On June 20 2009, approximately 37.8 million viewers (not including those who attended the actual inauguration) were glued to their televisions as America inaugurated its first Black president. For many, America’s first Black president meant that we entered a post-racial America. Parks and Rachlinski (2010) deemed that post-racial America is a concept that unofficially began in the 1970s, but became more popularized and accepted after Obama’s election. Obama’s election acted as a catalyst in deeming the end of centuries of overt mistreatment, racism and dehumanization against Black Americans. With Obama’s election, came more conversations about race and further, more films focusing on racism and social justice. With this, subsequently many argue that we are in post-racial America—a theoretical environment in which racism is no longer prevalent (Parks & Rachlinski, 2010).

Although there are films that tackle racial issues, there is still the overrepresentation of stereotypes with racist undertones that only perpetuate racism. Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee and Kuscera (2014) argued that we are far from a post-racial America with schools being more segregated than they were in 1968, the wealth gap between Latinos, Blacks, and Whites (Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013) and of course police brutality and mass incarceration as stated by Alexander (2012). The idea that we are in post racial America is manifested through both overt and covert forms of racist stereotypes that are unquestioned and even expected in mainstream media.

Though people refer to Barack Obama as a Black man, he is not only Black, but bi-ethnic born of a Black Kenyan father and White American mother. He was not deemed the first bi-ethnic or biracial president of America he was the first Black president of America. This can be attributed to lingering racist perceptions inherited from the one-drop rule also known as the hypodescent, a social rule that identified anyone with a drop of Black blood as Black and only Black (Jordan, 2014). Barack Obama, like many other bi-ethnic individuals, was visible only through his Blackness and his bi-ethnicity was made invisible. Obama's representation in mainstream media speaks volumes to America's perceptions of race and mixed-race individuals. It speaks volumes to America's dichotomous view of race, the continuance of the one-drop rule, and the imposed fixity of racial and ethnic identity. In *Black skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon speaks of a cognitive dissonance that is present in colonizers. Cognitive

dissonance is defined as holding inconsistent beliefs and attitudes relating to one's behavior and attitude. The cognitive dissonance that exists in mainstream media representations of Black, White, and bi-ethnic characters today is summed up perfectly in the following quote.

Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted. It would create a feeling that is extremely uncomfortable, called cognitive dissonance. And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalize, ignore and even deny anything that doesn't fit in with the core belief (p. 27).

This cognitive dissonance represents Hollywood's one-dimensional portrayals of minority groups. The core belief is the cultural superiority of Whiteness, a concept that Hollywood has invariably perpetuated. In terms of race, Whiteness signifies normalcy, whereas Blackness signifies difference (Bernardi, 2008).

This idea will be further discussed in the theory section at the end of this chapter.

While Obama's election did not bring a post racial America, it brought to the fore-front meaningful conversations about race and racial identity, especially for mixed/bi-ethnic/biracial individuals. In 2000, the U.S. census finally gave census takers the option to identify with more than one race/ethnicity. It wasn't until 2008-2009 that a rise in multiracial/multiethnic identities became prominent. In a PEW research study (2010), 9 million Americans chose more than one race to identify with. Despite this, bi-ethnic individuals are still a primarily invisible

group and the inclusion of such individuals in media and overall academia is still rather minute. The academic discourse surrounding bi-ethnic individuals is centered primarily on identity formation and socialization. Very little to no research focuses on the representation of such individuals in mainstream entertainment media. The minute representation of bi-ethnic individuals keeps character tropes alive, and in turn, they continuously reinforce stereotypes. This results in the ultimate dehumanization of bi-ethnic characters. The most common character trope for bi-ethnic individuals is referred to as the tragic mulatto, or tragic mulatta for women.

#### Race and the Birth of the Tragic Mulatta

Sollors (1997) stated that the tragic mulatta archetype has thrived since 19<sup>th</sup> century literature and is certainly still prevalent today in U.S. mainstream media. Originally introduced by author Lydia Marie Child in two short stories, *The Quadroons* (1842), and *Slavery's Pleasant Homes* (1843), the tragic mulatta was a product of the rape of a Black slave woman by her White slave master. The mulatta is a light, olive-skinned woman with primarily Eurocentric features who is sought after by the White male as a sexual, exotic object. In pre-civil rights era, the mulatta experience was represented as tragic because she would face rejection from her White lover following the discovery of her Black heritage and she would ultimately succumb to this tragedy because she failed to pass as White—Patricia “Pinky” in *Pinky* (1949). Similarly, she fails to fit in with the Black

community because of her perceived privilege as a light-skinned woman—Queen in *Alex Haley's Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993).

Before delving into media representations of bi-ethnic women, it is imperative that we look at the history of both race and the ill-treatment of individuals due to slavery, racism, and the salience of race in the U.S. in order to understand the birth of the tragic mulatta archetype. The following section delves into the myth of race, specifically the dichotomous treatment of Black vs. White, followed by the inception of the tragic mulatta beginning with literary context to film context. Race is a long-debated topic in the U.S. and has become a particularly hot topic since the election of Obama. It is most commonly defined as a grouping of individuals based on different biological attributes. However, this is something that has been disproved by many anthropologists and many argue that its very existence is to create not only a divide but also a hierarchical class system meant to oppress certain groups (Byrd & Hughey, 2015). Despite this, many still hold race, or rather the physical attributes of race, with much certainty.

Henry (2004) organized modern concepts of race into four broad categories; the first group is comprised of scholars who argue that race does not exist. The second and third group pertaining to scholars who maintain race as biological, and scholars who also support race as biological, but are divided into two subcategories; “melanists” and “essentialists.” Melanists view Whiteness as a genetic deficiency that causes an inferiority complex among Caucasians, while essentialists argue that Africans are bound together throughout time, by their

characteristics and values. Lastly, scholars who see race as “a contingent and variable social construction that is nonetheless real” (Henry, p. 140). Although these scholars differ greatly in ideas about race, most scholars agree that race has been used as a tool of dominance and oppression (Bernardi, 2008; Jordan, 2014).

Racial categorization has been used as a power tool much like class, and gender. Race as a category began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century during the enlightenment movement for slave masters to claim Black slaves on their taxes (Nagai, 2010). In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the U.S. government created the census and used categories such as gender, class and race as a classifying system. Such classification has led to decades of racialization towards certain groups which has led to the categorization of superior vs. inferior races (Henry, 2004). The creation of racial categorization with the census began a social caste system that only benefited those who were at the top of the food chain. Moreover, this further essentialized race as homogenous without agency and in turn marginalizes multi or bi-ethnic identities. A rule known as the one-drop rule was created to further dismiss individuals of mixed African and European races. Jordan (2014) stated that this was a law unique to the U.S. and was made official in 1962. This law postulated that any individual—mixed with European/African heritage—with a drop of Black blood, even less than a 16<sup>th</sup> was only Black, but never the other way around. Americans view themselves and others in a “bi-colored fashion—either/or—Black or White” (p. 99). This outlook on race and skin color proves

problematic for anyone unable to benefit from such a system. Further, it alienates those who do not fit into such categories, ergo multi/bi-ethnic individuals.

Orbe and Strother (1996) spoke of the impending doom into slavery that most bi-ethnic individuals fell into. They commonly became the property of their own fathers, but were denied any wealth, inheritance and even acknowledgment. Additionally, they were eventually sold into slavery, and were typically chosen more because of their lighter complexion. Korgen (1998) addressed the difficulties that bi-ethnic women faced during the time of slavery in the U.S. In particular, bi-ethnic women slaves were highly sought after as mistresses—in the worst sense— by the White man/ slave owner. Bi-ethnic individuals have had a long period of being tortured in heinous ways much like African slaves. They have also experienced the exclusion from both their White side, via the one-drop rule, and their Black side, via perceived light-skin privilege (Korgen, 1998, and Orbe, & Strother, 1996). Although not all bi-ethnic women were treated the same, some were able to pass as White and therefore lived a better life and some lived in free-slave states, the majority were still brutalized and sold in slavery.

While society has come a long way from slavery, these heinous acts have repercussions today. These repercussions are evident in the continued marginalization, the dehumanization, and the hypersexualization of bi-ethnic women. As a result, these have become engrained in the minds of individuals so much so that it has become second nature to portray bi-ethnic women as such.

Furthermore, it is almost inherent for them to typecast bi-ethnic roles, such as the tragic mulatta, because they know of nothing different.

The imposed bi-ethnic woman's inherent tragedy can be traced to the one-drop rule becoming a law. Bi-ethnic individuals were forced into one identity, an identity that put them in the position of inherent tragedy. Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, and Ward (1986) posited that during the civil war time in the South of the U.S. "...Blacks were forced into segregation, and White men were free to rape enslaved defenseless Black women" (p. 14). Through this came the bi-ethnic offspring—the mulattos/mulattas. While they were at times given social advantages—better housing, actual education, and other benefits, they still lacked real inclusion/ acknowledgment from their White side. Whereas their half brothers and sisters would receive the inheritance of the father, the bi-ethnic daughter would receive little to nothing and would often be sent back into slavery (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1986). She is represented as tragic because of her unpleasant conception, further because of her marginalization for both sides of her heritage and the law.

Literature and mainstream media from the 19th and 20th century have romanticized the relationship between the slave owner and slave. They have portrayed that relationship as a "forbidden love" and not what it truly was, rape (Raimon, 2004). It has been portrayed in such a way that the Black slave woman had agency; a way in which she chose to love the man who enslaved her and her people. It was as if she willfully served he, his wife, and children during the day

only to be exploited sexually at night. Fanon speaks of something similar in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961),

...colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverse logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts it, disfigures and destroys it (p. 166)

The truth is that none of these relationships between a slave master and slave could ever be mutual, nor as romantic as they are portrayed, not when one individual has no agency whatsoever.

One of the most talked about relationships in comparison to this is the Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemingway relationship. This is one that has been long denied by Jefferson's family and the majority of the public (Raimon, 2004). Two concepts appear in the story of Jefferson and Hemingway; 1) the racism or discontent of Jefferson having impure–mixed– children and 2) Hollywood's romanticizing of their relationship.

Indeed, the very persistence and intensity of the debate signal more than a concern over the reputation of the former president himself. Rather, they suggest the lasting nature of the fictions of race and racial hierarchies in American life and culture. More than that, they signify the enduring imbrication of race and American selfhood dating back to the nation's founding (p. 147)

The difficulties surrounding Jefferson's bi-ethnic offspring speaks volumes to the discontent of any type of interracial relationships in both familial and societal contexts. This further posits the incredibly perverse notion that "Blackness" is a deficit that must be overcome; an idea that is explored extensively in most of Fanon's works. Aside from U.S. literature, both U.S. film and TV have contributed greatly to the design and perpetuation of the tragic mulatta archetype. Orbe and Strother (1996) argued that Queen was a seminal character in furthering the typification of bi-ethnic women characters as tragic mulattas. At the time, Queen was the only character of her kind, a bi-ethnic woman, and she was the protagonist. Therefore, her character was the only representation of a bi-ethnic woman in a critically acclaimed series.

### Bi-ethnicity and Media Representations

Historically, women in media have been objectified, hypersexualized objects that lack multidimensionality. As a society, we'd like to think that Hollywood has moved past its misogynistic ways, but that isn't entirely the case. While we do have more strong-willed and leading women characters with substance, the majority of lead women characters still fall into hypersexualized stereotypes. Undoubtedly, women of color are more apt to be cast as hypersexualized characters, but there is a certain uniqueness in the representations of bi-ethnic women. Bi-ethnic characters as a whole are underrepresented, more so than mono-racial characters. Orbe and Strother (1996) posit that "bi-ethnicity has been made invisible through a 'spiral of silence'

(Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and is signified as problematic by its omission” (p. 116). In the rare instances in which bi-ethnic characters are represented, they are portrayed in problematic ways that perpetuate the imposed tragedy.

When bi-ethnic women are presented in media, it is primarily through the male gaze with the primary focus being their sexuality. Paula Patton, Thandie Newton and Halle Berry are contemporary actresses who are bi-ethnic; their characters seldom claim bi-ethnic identity. The most prominent of these three is Halle Berry, an actress who has famously taken the role of leading Black and bi-ethnic women. Her most famous roles are in the films *Catwoman* (Novi, Mcdonnell, 2004), *Monster’s Ball* ((Daniels, 2002), *Swordfish* (Silver, & Krane, 2001) and as a Bond girl in *Die Another Day* (Wilson & Broccoli, 2002). While Berry is bi-ethnic herself, her characters rarely claim bi-ethnic identity (aside from Queen) and therefore could not be part of this study (Streeter, 2012). Mask (2009) analyzed a few of Halle Berry’s films and mentions the film *Swordfish* (Silver, & Krane, 2001) in which Berry’s character exemplifies perfectly the hypersexualization of bi-ethnic women in film. Her character never claimed bi-ethnicity in the film; however, this character is a perfect example of hypersexualization in film. Berry’s nudity served no purpose other than the exotic fantasy object, moreover the object of White man’s desire. Further, Berry’s roles in a few of her most noted films have less substance than that of her lesser known films (Mask, 2009).

Unquestionably the objectification and hypersexualization of women is problematic for all women. However, when the main and only representation of a particular group of women is a tragic, hyper-sexualized, exotic being/mostly object, then soon their appearance acts as a sign to this symbol; they are perceived just as that and seldom anything else. Historically, and even still today, fair-skinned Black or bi-ethnic women were desired to play what was known as the “cinnamon-colored gal.” Similar to the tragic mulatta, and often used interchangeably, the cinnamon-colored gal was an exotic sex object torn between her loyalties and her own inner thoughts. Each of these roles remains problematic in their own way (Streeter, 2012). The “cinnamon-colored gal” and the tragic mulatta are still apparent in these roles; it is however normalized under society’s romanticization of sex and lust. Lyman (1990) analyzed the career of Dorothy Dandridge –a true cinnamon-colored-gal with a thin frame and Eurocentric features– whom he deemed as Hollywood’s first Black (bi-ethnic) woman to be eroticized as a sex object. He attributes her role as the tragic mulatta character to the demise of her career. She rose to fame in the early 1950s, and was type casted in the same roles, never really given the chance to expand her talents. Dandridge was portrayed as nothing more than an object of failed mimicry, meant to serve as a revalidation of racial hierarchy and Eurocentrism. Ultimately, she died being remembered only as a tragic sensual actress (Lyman, 1990). Dandridge in true tragic mulatta nature served almost as an allegory for the elimination of bi-ethnic women through their inherent doom.

Joseph (2012) examined the archetype present in four media pieces: *The L Word* (2004), a TV series; *Caucasia* (1998), a book; *Mixing Nia* (1998), a film; and season four of *America's Next Top Model* (2005), a reality TV series. Through her analysis, she found a persistent "problem-special dichotomy"; that is, the bi-ethnic woman is problematic but at the same time seen as special and a reminder of the supposed progression of America's diversity. Further, the bi-ethnic woman character fell into two categories, "the new millennium mulatta" and the "exceptional multiracial." The new millennium mulatta is aware of her dual identity, but is self-conscious of her impending tragedy and therefore falls into the tragic mulatta stereotype. The exceptional multiracial transcends race, but in turn transcends her Blackness, to then disavow both of her races (2012).

Joseph's analysis found that the more persistent stereotypes reinforced the tragic mulatta. However, she points out that the "exceptional multiracial" was deemed the more accepted representation of the biracial woman. Although I do not fully examine the exceptional multiracial in this thesis, there is something to be said for what the term suggests. The exceptional multiracial is one that transcends race; Joseph (2012) deemed this as an emblem for transcending Blackness. Ergo, the multiracial/multi-ethnic is exceptional and therefore accepted only when he or she eradicates his or her Black side. She deems this as problematic for this reason. Whereas the exceptional multiracial is put in a separate category as the tragic mulatta, the two go hand in hand. The exceptional multiracial is simply an extension of the tragic mulatta. To avoid her

impending doom, the bi-ethnic woman eliminates her Blackness to then fit into society. This in itself is tragic, as she must eliminate part of herself to avoid exclusion from society.

Joseph (2012) does a good job in bringing forth the tragic mulatta into more modern times; however, she does so using different genres and media. She utilizes reality TV, cable TV, a novel, and a film to analyze representations of biracial women. This still fails to take into account more modern representations. To further provide an understanding of bi-ethnic women's' representation in media, I use an excerpt from Caton-Garcia's dissertation (2008). She argued that most media representations and specifically media texts continue to reinforce the idea of mixed-race individuals as problematic and confused. According to Caton-Garcia (2008), in an interview with *Essence* magazine in 2006, rapper Kanye West told the interviewer, "If it wasn't for race mixing there'd be no video girls... me and most of our friends like mutts a lot. Yeah, in the hood, they call 'em mutts." This statement perpetuates and reinforces hypersexualized and exoticized generalizations regarding mixed-race identity, yet it barely caused any sort of reaction, even amongst the mixed-race community. She states that "If 'video girl' implies beauty, then (Kanye) West voices the old sentiment that 'Blackness' alone is not beautiful or desirable, descriptors that apply only to those Black women with the 'benefit' of non-Black ancestry" (p. 300). Not only does West demonstrate exoticization and objectification of the bi-ethnic woman, but he also demonstrates the involvement of the prominent figures in the Black

community in perpetuating it. His use of the word “mutt” serves to further dehumanize bi-ethnic women and impose inferiority on them. Not only does this paint them as objects, but essentially it paints them as impure adding to the bi-ethnic woman’s “tragic identity.”

Filmmakers have contributed largely to this idea of tragic mulattas since the 1940s. Orbe and Strother (1996) argue that while there have been plenty of attempts at depicting interracial relationships, rarely has there ever been a discourse about their children; bi-ethnic individuals. In 1996, Orbe and Strother’s semiotic analysis of *Queen* began an important discussion surrounding bi-ethnic individuals. *Alex Haley’s Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993) was one of the first TV mini-series to focus exclusively on the life of a bi-ethnic woman and the difficulties presented with that distinction. The story begins with Queen as a young child, the illegitimate daughter of a White slave master and a Black slave in a time in which society was clearly divided by color. Queen is taunted by other Black kids because she looks too White, something her European grandmother warns as problematic to her “master” father (Orbe & Strother, 1996). Because of her strong European features, Queen grew up in and lived in the master’s house and was able to benefit from its privileges. Engaged to a European White man, Queen believed she could tell the truth about her bi-ethnic identity to her betrothed without compromising the love they shared. Upon learning the truth her fiancé brutally beats and rapes her and puts her to the streets and “gives her what she deserves.” Now living with the notion that she does not belong to the

master's house-due to her impure identity and not being able to relate to her African counterparts, Queen feels the isolation that many bi-ethnic individuals feel. Later in life, Queen is able to find some acceptance from the African American community, but unable to receive any form of acceptance from the European American community (Orbe & Strother, 1996).

Orbe and Strother discussed three factors in relation to Queen and what signifies the tragic mulatta archetype: bi-ethnicity as (1) beautiful, yet threatening; (2) inherently problematic; and (3) leading to insanity. While the attempt was for Queen's character to transcend the tragic mulatto character, she only perpetuated the imposed inevitability of said character. Queen is beautiful, yet threatening as we see in the beginning of the movie when her European Grandmother warns her "master" father that she looks as White as anyone else (Orbe & Strother, 1996). Queen attempts, and almost succeeds, to pass as White, but when she is punished for being part African and "impure", she comes to her own realization that she cannot fit in with her White side and is simultaneously casted away. Similarly, she is somewhat rejected by her African community because of her "Whiteness." "Not White enough for the European Americans, and Black enough only for some African Americans, Queen experiences rejection from both worlds" (p. 120). Angered by the exclusion from both communities, Queen attempts to disassociate herself from both the European American community and the African American community. In true

tragic mulatto nature, Queen goes insane, trying to claim her identity (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993).

In one of the final scenes, consumed by her thoughts and emotions, Queen diverts her attention from cooking and allows her dress to catch fire. She runs out of the house into the yard and only sustains minimal injuries, but is found crunched up like an animal in a manic state. Orbe and Strother related this to a bi-ethnic person “trapped in a world divided along color lines” (p. 121). Queen is then admitted into a mental institution, which only adds to her troubles.

The lack of controversy over the stereotypical (self-destructive) portrayal of Queen indicates an ignorance of what constitutes a true depiction of bi-ethnicity. In a country where race still matters, bi-ethnic individuals present an enigma for many Americans who embrace the illogical categories based on “race.” Bi-ethnic/biracial people do not fit neatly into any of the racial categories that have become so consequential in the U.S. The result of these perceptions (and other factors, like the legal and societal acceptance of the one drop rule) is a lack of understanding of the diverse life experiences of bi-ethnic/biracial people. Media representations that perpetuate the tragic mulatto stereotype only add to this stupefaction. As “biracial baby boomers” come of age and create multi-ethnic families, the need for holistic, positive images is crucial to understanding the life experiences of millions of Americans (p. 123).

Orbe and Storther (1996) wrote their article in the late 90s; it is fair to say that we are living in the age in which “biracial baby boomers” are of age and have

created multi-ethnic families. Passel, Wang, and Taylor (2010) conducted a study through the PEW Research Center in 2006 and found that 22% of Americans have a relative in a mixed-race family. In a more recent study, a record of 14.6% of all new marriages in the United States were between spouses of a different race or ethnicity from one another (2015). Due to the rise of biracial or rather bi-ethnic individuals, there should be more roles that accurately represent them. However, this is simply not the case and the representations of bi-ethnic women has not transcended the tragic mulatta trope, rather it has been manipulated to fit the standards of political correctness while still presenting racist and perverse undertones.

#### Racist Stereotypes in Media and Discourse on Bi-ethnic Women and Identity

With regards to literature and U.S. mainstream media, race is thought of as pure and binary, thus the biracial/bi-ethnic woman is impure and or a “mutt” (Sollors, 1997). Bi-ethnic women are depicted as victims to their dual identities doomed for tragedy, e.g., Peola in *Imitation of Life* (Laemmie, 1934). Moreover, they are portrayed as exotic and sexual objects— Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959)—and or as confused characters that are in constant conflict with their dual identity—Queen in *Alex Haley’s Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993). These characteristics/stereotypes, produce a character archetype that is continuously portrayed as the dominant representation of bi-ethnic women. Behnken and Smithers (2015) asserted that one of the highest forms of pop culture that shaped historical awareness of twentieth-century Americans was

motion pictures. They listed Hollywood's representation of "conniving and diseased Asians, feckless 'negroes,' savage and bloodthirsty 'injuns' and the bandido" as the most persistent of the racial stereotypes in film and TV. This reliance on such stereotypes further perpetuated preexisting prejudices and helped to reinforce White supremacy and patriarchy against marginalized groups such as African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, etc... (p. 47). Media are readily available to many, be it television or film, ergo media representation for many is the sole representation of many cultural groups. Feminist scholar Phelan (2003) explained that media representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. To clarify, Phelan speaks of representation in two important ways, specifically the way in which the excess that is conveyed fails to capture reality. Moreover, it is never totalizing in that representation fails to fully encompass the multi-dimensionality of such individuals. As a result, we can see numerous negative implications emerge from limited and one-sided representations of bi-ethnic women present in mainstream media.

As Orbe and Strother (1996) demonstrated bi-ethnic characters are practically invisible in TV and Film. Those who were visible primarily fell into the tragic mulatta archetype. Although this study was done over two decades ago, this is still largely a problem. When researching statistics on bi-ethnic or even multi-ethnic characters in U.S film and TV, not much exists. In studies that displayed statistics of the portrayal of different race/ethnicities, mixed

race/ethnicity was grouped in a category titled “other” along with “Middle Eastern, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander” (Smith, Choueiti, Pieper, Gillig, Lee, DeLuca, 2015, p. 15). For example, of the 4024 characters evaluated in the top 700 U.S. films from 2007-2014, 1.5% to 4% were categorized as other (Smith et al. 2015). This is one example of the invisibility of bi-ethnic representation in media. Whereas many groups had their own category, bi-ethnic individuals were grouped together with other marginalized groups and still had a small percentage. Bi-ethnic individuals are still relatively invisible in media, and while this percentage is incredibly minute and insubstantial, there are still some representations of such characters.

Films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith & Atken, 1915), both the 1934 and the 1959 versions of *Imitation of Life* (Laemmie, 1934; Hunder & Sirk, 1959), and *Pinky* (Zanuck, 1949) are ones that have contributed greatly to the tragic mulatta archetype as argued by Streeter (2012). These films are the more dominant Hollywood films, which reigns as particularly problematic for an already underrepresented community. Representation is powerful, but it is important that representation is positive. And while there are more representations of marginalized groups, including bi-ethnic women, the representations follow the same archetype over and over again.

Undoubtedly, visibility is not always positive, and can in fact become detrimental as it perpetuates negative stereotypes through such archetypes. The implications of such portrayals result in a forced fixity of identity (either you're

Black or White; the elimination of the bi-ethnic woman) in which bi-ethnic women undergo a dynamic process to find their identity and their place in society. Gillem, Cohn, and Thorne (2001) postulated that the effects of such a binary approach to viewing and constructing racial/ethnic identity are that bi-ethnic women face many forms of discrimination that include racism as Black Americans, an exclusion from both of her races, a perceived privilege as a White American that belittles her understanding of the struggle of other Black Americans, and sexism as a woman in patriarchal society.

Orbe and Strother (1996) found that most research done on bi-ethnic individuals was related to identity management and came from the fields of psychology and sociology fields. Further, they found that bi-ethnic individuals were virtually invisible in mainstream media. Because the “mixed blood” was often defined as unadjusted, most literature focused on dealing with identity formation and the socialization process of such individuals (Orbe & Strother, 1996).

Since then, the number of multiracial and multi-ethnic identities grew exponentially. According to the 2010 Census Brief, between 2000 to 2010, the number of U.S. citizens who identified as both Black and White increased by 134 percent, which was more than any other combination (Fusco & Rautkis, 2010; Wallenchinski & Brinkerhoff, 2012). Surely, the identification process for bi-ethnic individuals has become easier and perhaps more accepted with the change in census options. However, what has not changed much is the research on and

the representation of bi-ethnic individuals in U.S. mainstream media. Recent scholars adding to the discourse of bi-ethnic identity and representation include: Townsend, Fryberg, Wilkins, and Markus (2012), Gillem, Cohn, and Thorne (2001), and Gaither, Chen, Corriveau, Harris, Ambady, and Sommers, (2014).

These articles highlight many important factors of bi-ethnic identity and add a lot to the discourse. However, there are very few that focus on the implications of the problematic and one-sided representation of bi-ethnic individuals in mainstream media. More are focused on the identity formation and socialization process of such individuals. The select few that focus on mainstream media representations either focus on multi-ethnic characters all together—Asian-American, Latin-American, and so on—or they focus on bi-ethnic actors/actresses who play racially/ethnically ambiguous characters. Furthermore, they tend to focus on the same films—*Imitation of life* (Laemmie, 1934), and *Pinky* (Zanuck, 1949)—as seen in Streeter (2012). They might also focus on bi-ethnic actresses whose characters seldom identify as bi-ethnic and portray racially ambiguous or strictly Black characters—as seen in Joseph’s (2012) *Transcending Blackness*.

#### Dominant Beauty Standards and the Black Woman’s Body

To further understand the portrayal of bi-ethnic women as it relates to and differs from portrayals of White women, and those of Black women, we must delve into the portrayals of Black women as compared to White beauty standards. Further, the implications of exoticizing women. If one were to describe

what he/she views as beautiful, he/she might say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. This implies that beauty is subjective, but if one were to look at most advertisements/primary characters of mainstream TV and films he/she would find individuals at the forefront with primarily European/Caucasian features. The standard for beauty has been and remains Eurocentric-based. The effects of such are hardly only privy to beauty and appearance. Rather, the effects of such are centuries upon centuries of deeming who is in power as determined by physical appearance; i.e., Europeans (White). Further, how those in power impose themselves as superior physically, mentally, and in every way.

As stated before, the repercussions of such creates a hierarchical system that has set certain policies in which those who favor European traits are rewarded for such while those who favor it the least are punished (Kambon, 2012; Amin, 1989). This concept brings to light what Fanon declared as the psychological harm that ensued as a result of colonialism. White is the standard for humanity to be achieved by everyone, while Black is almost the antithesis. Fanon argues further that the actual attempt of assimilation is what perpetuates a self-hate in the Black man, which could be applied to any marginalized group, that initiates a need to strive for something one is simply not. Moreover, it adds to the notion that anything not White is inferior and unworthy (Fanon, 1952). This brings to light the basis of the tragic mulatta, who attempts to become something (White) that she will never be allowed to due to the one-drop rule.

This is hardly anything new, moreover, this is something that was embedded in our minds so long ago, and for so long, it became essentially our “truth”. While there is not a specific date to pinpoint when exactly this “truth” was established, many have theorized its beginning was around the time of the Greeks (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward 1986). To further understand bi-ethnic identity it is important to understand the history of how a Black woman is defined by her body. To be a Black woman, one must possess a big rear end, along with curly hair. The deconstruction, or the fragmentation, of the Black woman’s body is something that has been around for centuries (Bernardi, 1996). Saartjie Baartman or perhaps more commonly known as Sara Baartman or “The Hottentot Venus” is an early example of how Black women, under the colonial gaze, became objectified, othered, and fetishized. Baartman, an African woman, with dark skin, and a large rear end, was brought to England in 1810 as a “scientific curiosity.” Like an animal, she was displayed in a cage for the public to see her exotic body. She was the “embodiment of their (Westerner’s) imagination of the savage African woman” (Werbanowska, 2014. p. 19). She was then moved to France where she was exhibited again until her death in 1815. After her death, her body was then cut into pieces, with her genitalia, spine and brain preserved and then placed in “The Parisian Museum of Man.” The exhibition of her preserved body parts was on display in France until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. “What the ‘civilized visitors’ saw in the Hottentot Venus was not a person with any degree of subjectivity or agency, but a body; and this body—both African and

female—was not merely a physical object, but also a site onto which their racialized fantasies were projected” (Werbanowska, 2014. p. 19). Baartman’s body was on display as a freak of nature, a savage juxtaposed to the civilized European woman. The Black body was the antithesis of the European body and therefore was the opposite of beauty.

Beauty is socially constructed much like race, and while the notion of beauty may not be destructive in itself, dominant beauty standards create a divide between women and in turn fuel their oppression (Robinson-Moore, 2008). When carefully examined, the majority of media portrayals of Black women are either hypersexualized objects in movies and music videos (the hoe), or they are overweight desexualized servant-like figures (the mammy). The “mammy” is further examined by Chen, Williams, Hendrickson, and Chen’s (2012) article, in which they discuss the negative impacts of media’s portrayal of Black women. The focus of this study was specifically male Black actors representing overweight, defeminized “mammy” characters. “Clearly, Black women know that being portrayed as overweight in the media violates White standards. Thin can become code for beautiful, and fat can be code for ugly” (p.120).

The defeminization of these characters directly relates to the story of Baartman. These mammy characters utilized fragmented parts of a Black woman’s body— big rear end, dark skin, and thick waist— to identify the characters as Black women. These fragmentations are exaggerated immensely to appear abnormal, thus dehumanizing the characters. The fact that they were played by

men speaks to the emasculation of Black men and, in addition serves as a form of disrespect toward Black women, furthering their dehumanization. This communicates and reinforces the notion from Baartman's story that the Black woman is identifiable only by her physical attributes. This further puts the Black woman down. In doing so, further perpetuates the naturalization of dominant beauty standards. However, when a Black woman adheres to dominant beauty standards of— thinner figure, and lighter skin—she is then sexualized (Chen, Williams, Hendrickson, & Chen, 2012). This dichotomous representation of Black women is problematic in what it communicates; i.e., European features are feminine and beautiful, whereas African features are masculine and thus not beautiful.

As we understand the identification of Black women by the fragmentation of their bodies along with the defeminization of such women as paired with dominant beauty standards (European), it is important to note the continuation of colonization. The same hierarchical structure present in colonial times can be seen here. The colonizers personify the dominant beauty standards, and the colonized personify any marginalized group—in this case Black and bi-ethnic women. The hierarchical representations of women in media along with the effects of such representations are explored below.

Although more and more films portray darker skinned characters with positive characteristics, the damaging effects of dominant beauty standards are still at play. Even in adolescence, young Black girls feel pressured by

representations of Black women in movies geared towards them. Moffitt and Harris (2014) discuss the relationship between beauty (Western standards) and Black women by examining the Disney princess movie *The Princess and the Frog*. Their focus was to gauge whether Black mothers still feel negated by movies that are geared towards their Black daughters and their culture. They first examine the source of dominant beauty standards, then went on to examine the representations of Black women on screen. They found that the women in the study felt negated by representations of Black women characters. Part of this was attributed to their perception of beauty as a European standard, something they felt they could not attain. Art historian Nell Irvin Painter (2010) showed how the concept of “Caucasian” became equated with fair-skinned people of European descent and how this then became equated with a self-ascribed higher beauty and intelligence (Painter, 2010). Currently, the aforementioned standards of White complexion as a universal concept of beauty are the most dominant in the Western world. As cited by Moffitt and Harris (2014),

Aduonum (2004) underscored how difficult it is for Black women who do challenge the Western concept of beauty. She cited the representations of Black women as some of the most destructive to her psyche because those images bore “the markers of deviance from white norms of feminine propriety and attractiveness” (p. 280). Sekayi (2003) added that when Black women are represented, their images do not affirm their Africanness but rather they are presented as aspiring White women, often negating

their beauty. She describes these Black women as slim, light in complexion, and with hair textures approximating Europeans. She further advanced that images of the slim body image dominate because the body is viewed as more easily transformed than an individual's complexion (p. 59)

Moffit and Harris (2014) took this argument further when examining Princess Tiana; Disney's first Black princess in their 75 years of production. Additionally, one of very few representations of a Black main character that is a woman in a Disney film. Interestingly, they found that Black women still felt their culture was denied even at a film representing and geared towards their Black daughters. They attributed this to Princess Tiana's body type as a European White standard body type. Similarly, the one-sided portrayal of bi-ethnic women as more Eurocentric beings can evoke the same type of emotions in bi-ethnic women.

Robinson-Moore (2008) conducted a study in which she asked Black women uncomfortable questions pertaining to skin color and hair in relation to beauty perceptions to examine the identity negotiation process of Black female beauty. In this study, she found that most participants interpreted dark skin as ugly and long hair as beautiful. They felt that the longer your hair, the prettier you were to others despite dark skin. One participant expanded on the light skin versus dark skin situation:

I think people think, because you're really dark, you are all Black. And guys now are really into mixed girls. And I think if you're really dark, and

you have long hair, then they're like, it makes them think...that you could be mixed with something...So, being dark-skinned with long, wavy hair, she would look like she was Indian (p. 15)

An unsettling message is formed here and that is the exoticization of bi-ethnic or “mixed girls” that is present. While exotic may not seem like a negative term, when it is distilled to its essence, it is the very notion of marginalization. As an adjective, exotic is defined as something originating in or a characteristic of a distant foreign country. Exotic is typically used to define objects, such as “an exotic plant or animal.” To deem someone as exotic is to deem them as foreign in their own land and to dehumanize them (Cashmore, 2004). The participant of Robinson-Moore’s study insinuates that having long wavy hair paired with dark skin may cause others to see you as “mixed,” or as an Indian, essentially not Black, but exotic. What’s more problematic than the exoticization of bi-ethnic women is the sense of necessity to fit into another group because part of their identity is viewed negatively. It was later noted that the women in this study could resist dominant beauty standards and attributed their ability to do so to their families’ support. However, their ability to resist dominant beauty standards is overshadowed by their original internalization of such standards (Robinson-Moore, 2008).

Robinson-Moore (2008) cited writer James Baldwin by stating, “The root of African-American difficulty is directly related to skin color” (p. 2). It’s clear that there is a “colorized beauty hierarchy” that not only shapes the identity of African

American individuals, but also identity of bi-ethnic women. Indeed, we have come a long way since the civil rights movement; with a seemingly more inclusive outlook. Some might even go as far to affirm that it is generally a “colorblind” society. While it could be argued that progress has been tremendous since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to imply that colorblindness in the sense that race is invisible is far from the truth. The term colorblind is problematic as it implies that individuals erase the ability to see diversity rather than embrace it and understand it. “The companion colorblind rhetoric is in fact a form of racism that had facilitated the re-articulation of once-defeated justification for racial stratification as a statement in support of social justice” (Zuberi, 2011, p. 1587). U.S. society has only slightly progressed from its blatantly racist ways and has tremendously progressed in the subtlety of racism. Zuberi further stated;

The “conservative project of associating colorblindness with racial enlightenment and racial justice advocacy with grievance politics” is a blatant right-wing move, however, the so-called “universal programs” and “universal politics” advocated by liberals and many progressives alike are equally conservative. A more radical perspective views race as a problem to be overcome. From this point of view, consciousness of race is necessary. This consciousness is fundamental in order to arrive at racial change. The elimination of racial consciousness should be accompanied by the abolishment of racial discrimination, exclusion, and domination (p. 1588)

Comparably, the tragic mulatta trope has only progressed in its subtlety, rather than progressed in its ideology. Racism, colorism, sexism, and classism are all alive and present in our narratives and especially in mainstream media. This is apparent in movies that reinforce racial stereotypes like *Big Mommas: Like Father, Like Son* (2011), and even songs that objectify and hypersexualize light skinned Black women like Eric Benet's song, *Redbone Girl* (2012). Maxwell, Abrams, and Belgrave studied the use of the phrase "redbone girl" and other forms of objectification used in rap music. The connotation of the phrase "redbone girl" is something that is deeply rooted in colorism. This phrase serves to further objectify or rather over exoticized light-skinned Black and bi-ethnic women. There appears to be a light-skin privilege that is rarely talked about in relation to bi-ethnic females. The lighter your skin, the more likely you are to have an elevated status, in an article written over 75 years ago, Steward (1927) claimed that dark-skinned females are "relegated to the rear economically" and are also "shunned socially" (p. 103). Whereas Steward claimed this in a study done 75 years ago, this is something that is still applicable today. There is a clear hierarchy of skin color, and this is especially apparent in mainstream media representations of dominant beauty standards.

Maxwell, Abram, and Belgrave (2016) interviewed 30 African American young girls to see their perception of skin color. They found that there was a clear hierarchy of skin color especially among African Americans. They found that this was partially due to the positive representation of European or White

features as paired with the negative representations of African features. This is something that has been perpetuated through advertisements, film and TV representations, and in this particular case, music. They concluded that the majority of rap music lyrics excluded dark-skinned women and praised (objectified) light-skinned women. Moreover, they found that the use of nicknames—such as redbone girl—were prominent and served to objectify and exoticize light-skinned/ bi-ethnic women. What’s interesting about this study is that the objectification of light-skinned women is seen as something positive. Moreover, this is something these young girls appeared to strive for (Maxwell, Abrams, & Belgrave, 2016).

As stated earlier, part of the tragic mulatta archetype is that she is exoticized (Sollors, 1997). This idea is further examined by Cashmore (2004), specifically how this very exoticization is a factor in the marginalization of these women. Similarly, in the story of Sarah Baartman she was not displayed because of her beauty but rather as an anomaly to European standards and an example of the otherness and hypersexualization of Africans. This exoticization further perpetuates the representation of particular groups as sexually promiscuous, seductive, and mysterious vixen-like women. For example, Cashmore stated that Asian women have been portrayed as “alluring and dangerous” in the 1920s then soon after shifted to hypersexual but submissive. Latinas have been represented as beautiful but hot-blooded firecrackers since the 1930s and not much has changed. Black women were mammy characters until the 1960s when they were

occasionally the sexual, at times dangerous stock characters as well. Cashmore (2004) explained that White women were represented in many different ways, some were sassy, some dangerous, but primarily they were the “chaste but appealing girl next door” (Cashmore, 2004).

Due to the character stereotyping of women of color, Black women in particular, this manufactured a higher sense of beauty for them. Beauty was associated with goodness and humanity and something only White women have primarily been depicted as. Men and women of color have used attestations of beauty as a way to make claims about the value of the racial or ethnic group. This strategy was particularly important for African Americans who were so categorically excluded from dominant images of beauty. Depending on the prevailing racial order and the range of available political responses, communities of color advanced claims to racial beauty through separatist or integrationist efforts (Cashmore, 2004, p. 2).

Although this particular stereotyping may not be as apparent as it was before, much like many other microaggressions, these are manipulated and negotiated to fit into the standards of political correctness today. In the early 1900s women of color, or non-White women, were omitted from mainstream media (TV, magazines, Films, etc...), including beauty contests. It was not until the 1960s that non-White women were featured in such outlets. This was seen as a pivotal moment for Black women in particular. At this time, the notion “Black is beautiful” became prominent and politicized, and Black women began to

publicly embrace their natural hair and skin color. This phrase was an attempt to resist White beauty standards and to celebrate their own beauty (Cashmore, 2004). Eventually, mainstream producers and publishers began to include women of color as an initial response to the antiracist social movements occurring at the time. However, this inclusion was more of a profitable marketing ploy.

Feminist literary critic Ann Ducille (1996) argued that the inclusion of Black women in beauty venues should be seen as the strategic inclusion of specific indicators of Blackness such as brown skin rather than the recognition that Black women are beautiful. Difference, signified as dark skin or strikingly non-European features, has been included as an attention-getting novelty. Advertisers have also increased their use of non-White women in order to appeal to non-White consumers in national and international markets. Often this has meant the inclusion of women who are identifiable as non-white but whose hair, facial features, and body types resemble contemporary Euro-American beauty ideals. Cashmore (2004) concluded that the international urban beauty standard's conformity to dominant European beauty standards in the U.S. was due to the following: 1) the global marketing strategies that favored models who were "ambiguous" but conformed to White norms; and 2) the national prestige gained by winning international beauty pageants. Regardless of the intention behind this strategic marketing, the dichotomous positioning of White women and women of color in relation to dominant beauty standards raises many issues. This very

inclusion fails to diversify the standards of beauty and instead places a dichotomous image of dominant beauty ideals. For women of color to be included in dominant beauty standards, they sacrifice respect and become objectified. That is, in order for a woman of color to feel beautiful or to be accepted as part of beauty ideals, she must exude her sexuality (Cashmore, 2004; Ducille, 1996).

The very notion of dominant beauty standards as Eurocentric (White) and the perception of women of color— particularly Black women— as less brings to light the very essence of the tragic mulatta; that is, the character’s inner struggle or rather inability to belong to either of her races/ethnicities. In the time of slavery bi-ethnic women were perceived as inferior by way of both her proposed unnatural dual identity and her objectification (Raimon, 2004). She was the object of the White man’s desire, but only sexually (hypersexualization or over exoticization). However, her very existence challenged the norm and further threatened “purity” of White, therefore, she is inherently problematic. She is therefore destined for elimination or death be it by invisibility in society, or overall exclusion from both of her races/ethnicities. The dominant portrayal of the tragic mulatta in literature has resulted in the fetishization of the bi-ethnic woman as nothing more than a sensual helpless damsel in distress (2004). Further, this portrayal has manifested itself in the current portrayals of bi-ethnic women in films. For example, the film and TV series that will be developed further later in my analysis. The implications of such portrayals are either scarce representations (erased from society or grouped with others), or problematic

representations resulting in the perpetual fetishization and ultimate dehumanization.

Studies in the field of bi-ethnic representation and identity highlighted important aspects of race and race history, the fluidity of multiracial identity, and the invisibility of bi-ethnic individuals in media. While the aforementioned studies do not directly answer my research questions, they are all important aspects of the discourse and lay down an important foundation for discourse and research. Although, many of the studies focusing on media representations were either on monoracial/mono-ethnic individuals and characters, or multi/bi-ethnic individuals and characters of many different descents, they still prove as useful in understanding the way in which identity is formed. The studies on racist stereotypes in media, such as mammies, when paired with the historical representation of the bi-ethnic woman are important in understanding the portrayal of bi-ethnic women in media. As all of these studies are an important part of the discourse surrounding bi-ethnic women, there is something to be said for all that is missing from this discourse, which is about film and TV representation and studies privy to specific ethnicities. As stated before, the number of multi/bi-ethnic individuals is on the rise; therefore, it is incumbent that more discourse surrounds the representation of such individuals by taking into consideration theories that can support new theses on the subject

## Postcolonial Theory, and Thematic Textual Analysis

Postcolonial theory allows for a perspective on identity that relates to power structures. Furthermore, it allows for an expression of historical context in relation to the way in which dominant groups (Western-European) have played a role in the marginalization of minority group in our society. One cannot truly discuss the marginalization of a people without first understanding the origin of such treatments of said group. To best understand the bi-ethnic woman's experience and moreover the birth of the tragic mulatta trope, it is incumbent to understand the present hegemony of White over Black. Postcolonial theory provides a foundation for understanding this. No two experiences for bi-ethnic woman are the same; however, the colonization of Africans into slavery established a system that has since been deeply embedded into society and further perpetuated the marginalization/oppression of both Black and bi-ethnic individuals. And while we have moved past the days of blatant slavery and blatant racism, it is important to note that the racism back then has now only shifted to subtle forms of oppression (Loomba, 2015).

Postcolonialism is a discursive resistance of colonialism discourse, hierarchical power structures and social hierarchies (Gilbert & Tompkins, 2002). Post-colonialism aims to deconstruct the way in which colonialists construct the world by offering a voice to the subaltern to minimize and ultimately get rid of the us-versus-them between the colonizers and the colonized (Spivak, 2013). In her 1985 study *Can the subaltern speak?*, Spivak spoke of the imposed and

assumed inferiority of a group of people by the colonizers that has left them without the right to express themselves. Moreover, she argued that the subaltern is seldom the subject of discourse and instead are in fact the object. This is a concept that is discussed in Fanon's works as well, to be discussed further in the next paragraph. Further, post-colonialism provides insight into the one-sided relationship between the colonized and colonizer. In terms of representation in both mainstream media and literature, the colonizer's viewpoint is usually the primary viewpoint and has been for centuries.

One cannot speak of postcolonial theory without the mention of Franz Fanon and perhaps one of his most famous works, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Fanon used transdisciplinary approaches when writing, taking from psychology, literary criticism, and so on. In doing so, he became one of the first noted writers to speak of White colonization through the eyes of the colonized. Written in different time, his writings still hold truth as they act as a foundation for present scholars and theorists. Fanon focused primarily on the psychological effects racism has on the Black man. He noted that in Western cultures (specifically European), Black skin is associated with impurity and the result of this is to erase Blackness. Fanon conjectured that the very notion of Blackness is through the eyes of the White man/woman. He further posited that the Black person only comes to realize his or her Blackness when reminded by the White person that he or she is not White. This concept may not be as applicable today and it does possess some limitations—one being the focus is primarily on the

Black man, and it fails to take into account the idea of other Black experiences. There is, however, something to be said for this particular argument in terms of media representation. Fanon's idea of Black identity is not as simple as it seems, but it does provide insight into the reasoning behind the perpetual strive towards assimilating into the dominant European culture.

This is where Fanon uses cognitive dissonance to further analyze the Black vs. White dichotomy. According to Festinger (1957) one of the ways in which an individual reacts to dissonance is by accepting the new ideology as the truth and as a result alter their own beliefs to fit this. With this in mind, it is apparent that the need to assimilate is rooted in an imposed inferiority complex over Black people that was brought to surface during the "colonial moment." This imposed inferiority is what increases the notion that White is at the top of humanity, whereas Black is at the bottom (Fanon, 1952). Therefore, in order to reduce cognitive dissonance, in order to be human, one must embrace Eurocentric standards. The assimilation Fanon speaks about can be seen in one of two ways; first, the Black man assimilates because he is invariably told that his Blackness is unhuman-like. Second, the Black man temporarily assimilates strategically to advance himself—a concept known as strategic essentialism to be further discussed below. I deem cognitive dissonance as useful in understanding the internal struggle present in the bi-ethnic woman as she is consistently presented with an imposed fixity to conform to one side of her identity. Because

of the persistence of the tragic mulatta archetype, the bi-ethnic woman is reminded of her impending tragedy.

Fanon examined bi-ethnic women or as he states in his writings “mulattos.” He analyzed Abdoulaye Sadjji’s novel “Nini” (1954) in which he made a clear distinction between the way a Black woman and a mulatto woman is perceived. “First of all, there is the Black woman and the mulatto. The Black woman has only one way open to her and on preoccupation—to Whiten the race. The mulatto woman wants not only to become White but also to avoid slipping back” (Fanon, p. 37). While this perverse concept of both Black women and bi-ethnic women is not a reflection on them, it is noteworthy to explore this idea Fanon has presented and relate it to the concept of the tragic mulatta. Milton A. Cohen in *Black Brutes and Mulatto Saints: The Racial Hierarchy of Stein's 'Melanctha'* (1984), assigned one of the markers of the tragic mulatta archetype as the bi-ethnic woman who is the object of the White man’s affection and furthermore, the one who desires to both pass for White and desires the White man. There is something to be said about the way in which this idea of the bi-ethnic woman is prevalent. Fanon, although his analysis of these women is rooted in what he says are the effects of colonization, presented a disturbing image of what were perceived to be the goals of both Black women and bi-ethnic women as. However, this idea is the direct result of the hierarchical logic of colonization (the Eurocentric social/political order) and imperialism. Moreover,

this is an idea that has since been perpetuated and further engrained through media representations.

In addition to his analysis of both the Black woman and the bi-ethnic woman, Fanon provides an essential foundation for the discourse of the colonizer and the colonized. In particular, he effectively pointed out the discrepancies and inequalities between the two. Furthermore, he sheds light on the reasoning behind the need to assimilate to dominant (White-European) standards in every sense. The need for any group to assimilate into these standards is still very prominent today. In most studies done on bi-ethnic identity, the individual would identify more with the ethnicity that was more marginalized, or they would identify with the one they that were perceived to be a part of. However, this was something that was ever changing based on the situation-e.g. their ethnic/racial identity was more fluid. Herman (2004) found that this fluidity of identity based on the situation was often due to the desire to reduce cognitive dissonance (2004). The desire to reduce cognitive dissonance—e.g. the discomfort of holding two supposed conflicting identities—present in bi-ethnic individuals stems from both the need to assimilate to dominant standards, and to avoid the discomfort of one's identity being seen as unnatural.

For close to three decades, mainstream entertainment media banned the very relationships through which bi-ethnic individuals are born of. In doing so, this reinforced the un-naturalization of not only interethnic/interracial marriages, but the un-naturalization of bi-ethnic individuals. Courtney (2005) alluded to the

Hay's code; Hollywood's ban of "miscegenation", or any interracial relationships between a Black individual and White individual in film from 1930-1956. Again, in this case, think of mainstream media (Hollywood) as the colonizers, and bi-ethnic individuals as the colonized. Just as in the time of slavery in the U.S., miscegenation was strictly forbidden and the offspring of such relationships deemed unnatural and stripped of their identity, Hollywood's temporary (26 year) ban on the portrayal of such relationships reinforced this notion of bi-ethnic individuals as unnatural. This very notion has aided in the continuation of the marginalization and unnaturalization of bi-ethnic individuals, demonstrated in the scarce portrayals or even mention of such individuals in mainstream media.

Bi-ethnic women's invisibility in media has only reinforced their marginalization and further complicated the identity process of such individuals. If one were to view the timeline of mainstream films or even TV series that have portrayed bi-ethnic women in pivotal roles since the 20th century, the representations are sporadic to say the least. Orbe and Strother (1996) criticized the portrayal of Queen as one that both directly falls into and reinforces the tragic mulatta archetype.

The discursive formation of bi-ethnicity is thus ignored, made invisible, and ultimately contributes to the hegemonic notion of the tragic mulatto myth as natural, inevitable, and eternal. Although Haley created the character of Queen using his own family history, he signified her as destined for

insanity because he himself negotiated his understanding as a result of how society defines bi-ethnicity (p. 123)

By purposefully portraying this character the way society directs, Haley essentializes the character Queen to follow into the representation of a bi-ethnic woman to date—the tragic mulatta. Whether or not this was a strategic essentialism, Orbe and Strother argued that Haley only reinforced the character archetype through his understanding of society’s view of bi-ethnic individuals (1996).

The conflict of identity (Black vs. White) for bi-ethnic women and their need to reduce cognitive dissonance further perpetuates a supposed inherent problematic nature. The oppressed navigate through life by temporarily conforming to such standards in order to survive. This is what Gayatri Spivak calls strategic essentialism. Elisabeth Eide in “Strategic essentialism and ethnification” (2010) explains it as a tool used by members of a group, often marginalized groups, in which they “may engage in an essentializing and to some extent a standardizing of their public image, thus advancing their group identity in a simplified, collectivized way to achieve certain objectives” (p. 76). For example, the marginalized are aware of this hierarchy, they are aware that they are playing into the hand of their oppressor. However, they do so willingly as a way to navigate through the world better. Spivak stated that in doing so, marginalized groups might be playing into the hierarchy of those who are in power (colonizers, politicians, etc...). I use strategic essentialism as a concept to further understand

the portrayals of bi-ethnic women. I relate this back to the persistent stereotypical representations of minorities, in particular Black women falling into one of two categories; hypersexualized objects, or desexualized mammy characters (Chen, et al. 2012; Behnken, & Smithers, 2015).

Minority groups represent themselves through these stereotypes in order to obtain visibility. Ergo, bi-ethnic women utilize strategic essentialism in two ways; first, bi-ethnic actresses use this as a means to represent themselves as they are invisible in media. Secondly, these bi-ethnic women characters seem to utilize strategic essentialism as a means to fit in. However, as Spivak later mentions in several interviews about this term, she deems the use of the concept problematic in that the temporary essentializing is used as a means to fully essentialize (Eide, 2010). This concept is further discussed and related to portrayals of bi-ethnic women in the analysis and discussion.

The last of ideas through the postcolonial school of thought is, orientalism, which was first introduced by Edward Said in his book, *Orientalism* (1978). This is defined as the view Westerners have of the East, specifically, I take the notion of the colonial gaze. Said posited the colonial gaze as the sexualization and the exoticization of the “other” (Agzenay, 2015). While this theory focuses primarily on the relationship between the East and West, I utilize it in this study. More specifically, Malek Alloula in *Colonial Harem* (1986) uses Said’s theory to capture the sexual notion in what is called the colonial gaze. He delves into the history of the colonial gaze to contribute as evidence of its prevalence in U.S. mainstream

media. Although Alloula's focus is on the West's (colonizer) view of Algerian women (colonized), I relate this to the way in which Hollywood depicts bi-ethnic women. The colonial gaze can have a sexual connotation, as seen historically through the objectification, and obsession with the exotic nature of non-Western women. Alloula's book acts as a biography of the French colonization of the Algerian people in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; it features photos of Algerian women taken by Western photographers. In the first photos, the women are covered head-to-toe in a white garment (true to the Algerian tradition); "The Whiteness of the veil becomes the symbolic equivalent of blindness: a leukoma, a white speck on the eye of the photographer and on his viewfinder" (p. 7). This explains the colonial gaze through which the Western photographer was attempting to "uncover" those women; the exotic sexual beings that non-Western women were and are perceived as. Therefore, in the next round of postcard photos, the subjects (Algerian women) are more exposed and give off a personality. This photographer, unable to attain what he desired out of the female subjects, staged his photos and models to reflect what he felt they should look like. "He must stage it. In doing so, he literally decomposes the very thing that propels him: his scopic instinct, which, by definition, pure relationality by means of gaze" (Alloula, 1986, p. 68). This historical relation parallels the U.S. mainstream media's portrayal of bi-ethnic women. Media have constructed and enforced their idea of what a bi-ethnic female is; an exotic, light-skinned, wavy-haired, sexual character doomed for tragedy. It is with these four concepts from

post-colonial thought that I both signify and analyze the tragic mulatta trope to reinforce my argument.

### Thematic Textual Analysis

To further understand the themes that I will be critiquing and analyzing, it is important to understand Orbe and Strother's (1996) use of semiotics. They used semiotics as a critical method, and while this is not used as my analysis, I use a semiotic approach. Semiotics is defined as the science of signs; furthermore, a semiotic approach is concerned with the ways in which meaning is created (Silverman, 2014). The role of semiotics here is primarily signify the tragic mulatta archetype, to uncover the connotative meaning behind seemingly straightforward signs (Barthes, 1972, in Orbe & Storther, 1996). Orbe and Strother (1996) affirmed the significance of using such an analysis was to explain the notion that seemingly blatant signs adopt a deeper meaning. Moreover, a semiotic analysis made it possible to identify the characteristics of the tragic mulatta trope. One of the primary models of how a sign is structured is the Saussurian model. This posits that a sign consists of three elements; the signifier (name/image), the signified (concept/meaning), and the signification—the relationship between the two (Chandler, 2001). Barthes (1977) speaks of the importance of semiotics as it relates to creating dominant narratives.

According to Orbe and Strother (1996), "Pierce's (1958) notion of signification allows researchers to deconstruct the indexing functions of signs—how particular interpretants come to stand for (define) something else" (p. 116).

A thematic approach will be used to deconstruct the representations that have been maintained not only within a single TV show or character but through a transmedia (storytelling through multiple media platforms) lens. This will shed light on how this process enforces a stereotype/archetype that is deeply embedded and recreated from the ideological racist systems of the status quo. These representations are not of a single character, rather they are the representations of an archetype that is consistently present as the same character but recurring transmedia. Whereas a single theme cannot connote an ideology, when combined altogether the signs create a deeper meaning. Further, the recurrence of such signs throughout time creates dominant images that become myths that then perpetuate dominant ideologies. The reinforcement of such ideologies is what reinforces the hierarchical structure of media representations.

Scolari (2009) introduced semiotics as it relates to “transmedia storytelling” a concept coined by Henry Jenkins in 2001. In doing so he examines the ways in which transmedia narrative structures constructs a narrative world. He deems that semiotics can be taken further than just the study of signs. Rather it studies objects to help better understand complex cultural processes (2009). Whereas transmedia storytelling is typically associated with marketing and public relations, it can be used otherwise. It’s the process of using multiple media platforms to a narrative across time. Jenkins (2006) used the example of the matrix trilogy in that it was the trilogy film, an animated series and a comic book

series. However, this can be applied to this study as follows; the Matrix serves as an example of the character trope– the tragic mulatta– that is told not only through different media outlets–literature, music, film, and TV– but it is also told through time. Transmedia is further exemplified as a large puzzle in which each piece/narrative serves as part of larger narrative (Scolari, 2004).

Lastly, a textual analysis is used to further analyze the characters as it is an all-encompassing approach to analyzing data, and is particularly useful in analyzing media content. It can even go as far as to interpret various aspects of the specific research area. It allows for flexibility in uncovering the underlying meaning in media texts and bringing them to the forefront. This allows the researcher to pick apart media pieces scene-by-scene, thus exposing covert meanings behind narratives, casting, and attire of characters. Deacon, Pickering, Golding, and Murdock (1999) briefly discuss semiotics as it relates to textual analysis. They asserted that by using the two together, it allows the researcher to uncover patterns in tone, depiction, and plotline. In the case of this study it will allow for a look into reoccurrence and prominence of the tragic mulatta archetype. Further, it allows for researchers to take that information to understand how other human beings make sense of certain phenomena. McKee (2003) argued that researchers use textual analysis to make an educated guess about the most probable interpretations of a text. Therefore, as I attempt to expose the euphemistic forms of racism in representations of bi-ethnic women characters, semiotics and textual analysis allows me to do so and trace these

recurring representations.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

This chapter details the research design, and methodology choices for this research. The design and methodology decisions are intended to accomplish the selection of data and its analysis to answer the three research questions posed. It is important to note that no single study can illuminate all varying factors potentially involved in the phenomenon discussed. However, this study intends to add an important component to the discourse on this subject. The following section will explain the process in which I have detected themes for this analysis. Further, it will outline the first decisions made to curate achievable goals and methods for this study. I use the following markers as a guide to pinpointing and examining the themes; the characters' relationships with their family and those close to them, the attire of the character, and her sexual visibility- the number of scenes in which the character implores sexual connotations explicitly as compared to other characters in the media pieces.

#### Film and Sample Selection

To answer the three research questions, I focused my analysis on popular films that portray a leading bi-ethnic woman character. To study the prevalence of the tragic mulatta archetype in such characters, it was incumbent to identify films or media artifacts in which the characters were strictly identified as bi-ethnic, or identified themselves as bi-ethnic. Further, it was important that the characters chosen did not possess any outside factors that could have

overshadowed or make it difficult to attribute her bi-ethnic identity to her overall treatment/portrayal (i.e. if she had a disability, or so on). This proved rather difficult as there are limited representations of leading bi-ethnic women characters, especially in the more recent years. It is with this logic that I have added a supplemental analysis of supporting/secondary bi-ethnic women characters in popular U.S TV series. Along with the limited representations of bi-ethnic women in mainstream media, a second factor impacted the search for finding such characters.

When conducting a search for specific demographics in mainstream media entertainment, one can check several websites and even see reports conducted on Hollywood's diversity per year. For example, GLAAD.org allows for users to see the number of films or TV series that portray LGBTQ characters. What one cannot find is a list of bi-ethnic characters portrayed in media. As mentioned earlier in chapter one, bi-ethnic characters are grouped into a category titled "other" that also includes Native Americans, and Middle Easterners. Further, the percentage of "other" is meek in comparison to other representations (less than 4%). Because of this, the film and TV selection came down to personal knowledge (as a bi-ethnic woman), and mainly, Internet searching (bi-ethnic actresses, the films in which they in fact portrayed bi-ethnic characters, and then popularity). From that list, I narrowed down the films by both popularity (box office numbers) and prominence (ratings based off of Rotten Tomato), then chose the film that focused less on other varying factors. For

example, the film *Beyond the Lights* (Allain, Bythewood, & Kavanaugh, 2014) was considered, because the lead character is identified as a bi-ethnic woman (White mother and Black father). However, this film was ultimately eliminated because a major factor in her character's representation is the fact that she is a rising pop star. Much of her difficulties stem from her rise to fame and so on, therefore each of the themes presented most likely would stem from the fact that she is a popstar. This fact overshadows any part of my analysis and therefore was deemed inapplicable. Therefore, I narrowed them down to one film from pre-civil rights era—*Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959)— and one from “post-racial” America— *Dear White People* (Brown et al., 2014).

Using the same logic, for the TV series, I utilized supporting bi-ethnic woman characters as there were no main characters to be found. Furthermore, the following characters were chosen as part of the study for the following reasons; claiming bi-ethnic identity/distinctly bi-ethnic (one White parent and one Black parent shown), and popularity in mainstream U.S. TV. It was important to find the most popular TV shows that portray bi-ethnic women, because this is what the majority individuals will see. Lastly, because past research was primarily done on older films before the proposed beginning of post-racial America, I focus primarily on more recent films while using one film from pre-civil rights era as a comparison. Doing so provides a more accurate and complete picture of current portrayals of bi-ethnic women.

The first film is *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk ,1959), a classic and one of the first and most popular representations of the tragic mulatta archetype– Sarah Jane. It was an instant box office hit with both Juanita Moore (Annie) and Susan Kohner (Sarah Jane) receiving academy award nominations for their roles. Sarah Jane was hated by audiences (both Black and White) and was deemed the epitome of selfishness for the way she treated her mother (Pilgrim, 2000). While Sarah Jane never claims bi-ethnic identity, it is stated in the film that her father was of European descent, and her mother was Black. The story revolves around two single mothers; one is White, Lori, and one is Black, Annie. Lori, along with her young daughter Susie, take in Annie and her light-skinned daughter, Sarah Jane. The film centers on the struggles these women face including Sarah Jane’s attempt to pass for White.

I juxtapose *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959) with the modern film, *Dear White People* (Brown, et al., 2014), which became a well-recognized film for its apparent forward thinking and pinpointing of everyday microaggressions against minorities. This was the perfect choice in representing what we believe our society is like today– forward-thinking and free of racial stereotypes and microaggressions. The film was deemed groundbreaking as it delved into the underbelly of the racism and White supremacy that still exists today. It’s riddled with Black stereotypes, however, the movie’s objective seemed to attack the very notion of unconscious racism. The film follows four Black college students: Coco, a self-hating aspiring female reality star interested in White men only; Troy, the

upper class handsome popular guy with a White girlfriend; Lionel, the outcast, nerdy journalist; and finally, Sam, the outspoken bi-ethnic spokesperson for the Black community. While this film was critically acclaimed by many, little discussion went around the problematic representation of Samantha White— a bi-ethnic woman conflicted by her dual identity. The characters in the two films were chosen as the primary subjects of this analysis because of their popularity and the fact that they both portray leading bi-ethnic woman characters.

For the supplemental analysis, the character Queen from the TV miniseries *Alex Haley's Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993) was chosen based on its popularity within the Black community and as a popular TV series by critically acclaimed author Alex Haley. This series was a period drama and the first to focus primarily on the life and experiences of a bi-ethnic woman. Moreover, as Orbe and Strother (1996) already conducted a semiotic analysis of this character, I use this as comparative piece to the other three characters to further uncover the progression of the tragic mulatta throughout time. Queen, played by popular bi-ethnic actress Halle Berry, has a light- barely tan skin, with dark wavy and long hair, and a thin frame. The series follows Queen from her inception to her adolescence and adulthood.

The character Rachel Zane from the TV show *Suits* (Liman & Bartis, 2011)— a popular drama on the cable network channel, USA, was chosen for this thesis based on the show's popularity— nominated for two people's choice awards, and on her claiming of bi-ethnic identity. This analysis will focus only on

the first two seasons of the series since this is when she first claims her identity and struggles with it the most. *Suits* tells the story of two big time lawyers, Harvey Specter and Mike Ross (both White males), in New York city at a prestigious law firm, Pearson and Hardman. Among the supporting characters are Louis Litt, a fellow associate, Jessica Pearson, a successful Black lawyer and managing partner of the firm, Donna Paulsen, Executive assistant to Harvey, and of course Rachel Zane, a paralegal at the firm. Mike, unbeknownst to everyone except Harvey, had never been to law school and therefore is a fraud. The series follows the characters and their attempt to keep his secret. Rachel Zane is bi-ethnic and is in an on-and-off relationship, later a serious relationship, with Mike.

The second TV character is Rainbow from ABC's TV show *Black-ish* (Barris, et al., 2014), popular for often pushing the boundaries of race, racism, and microaggressions for Black people. The comedic series follows the story of an upper-middle class all American Black family consisting of a Black father (Dre) and bi-ethnic Black/White mother (Rainbow) and their four kids. The show revolves around the quarrels of raising Black kids in upper-middle class suburbia while still maintaining their identity. The analysis will focus only on season one of the series for reasons of brevity and because this is when her identity is established. Rainbow claims biracial/bi-ethnic identity several times and is often praised as a progressive character.

Lastly, the character Anika Calhoun from the TV show *Empire* (Strong et al., 2015)—a critically acclaimed drama known to draw upon racial stereotypes

and exhibit them in hyperactive ways. The series centers around the Lyon family—music industry moguls and their struggle to stay on top. As the show begins Anika is the long-time girlfriend of Luscious Lyon the father and head of the family. Other characters include, Cookie Lyon (Luscious' ex-wife and mother of his children), and the three sons Andre, Jamal, and Hakeem. Anika is a bi-ethnic woman, and a debutante who is in an on and off relationship with Luscious and his youngest son Hakeem. Anika's identity is affirmed when her parents appear on the show—White father and Black mother— and it is further implied by others throughout the series. The analysis will focus only on the first two seasons of the series since these were the only seasons that premiered during this analysis. Anika never claims bi-ethnic identity per se, but her identity is implied by others much like Sarah Jane's.

While the romantic relationships of these characters are not the primary focus of this study, they are an important component in signifying the tragic mulatta as seen in prior literature of the archetype. Although each of these women are indeed bi-ethnic, each show is from a different genre that targets different audiences. The biographies of these characters are further detailed in the analysis section. The physical attributes of the characters—including the way they dress— along with their romantic relationships are mentioned because they are part of the prominent themes of the tragic mulatta and therefore deemed important. Ultimately, the goal of this study is to integrate the theoretical concepts mentioned above from postcolonial school of thought into a thematic textual

analysis to examine and critique the representations of the aforementioned characters. Throughout my analysis, I will be using the themes I have pinpointed through the guidance of the signifiers concluded by Orbe and Strother (1996). I begin with a comparative analysis of the themes found in the character, Sarah Jane from *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959) to themes found in the character Sam White from *Dear White People* (Brown, et al., 2014). In a second comparative analysis, I compare a modified analysis of Orbe and Strother's (1996) semiotic analysis of *Alex Haley's Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993) with the themes I have chosen for this study to then compare to the three TV characters; Rachel Zane, *Suits* (Liman & Bartis, 2011); Rainbow Johnson, *Black-ish* (Barris, et al., 2014); and Anika Calhoun, *Empire* (Strong et al., 2015). In addition, an analysis of some of the elements of the political economy of production of these characters would be provided. Taking the aforementioned methods into consideration as a foundation, the following chapter details the analysis of each character as she relates to the three themes and further critiques the representations of bi-ethnic women.

### Procedure

The foundation for which I have chosen the themes are adapted from Orbe and Strother's 1996 semiotic analysis of *Alex Haley's Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993). They employed semiotics as a critical method and used a textual analysis of the TV miniseries to determine three signifiers to identify bi-ethnicity; (1) beautiful yet threatening, (2) inherently problematic, (3)

leading to insanity. I utilize these signifiers to further examine the ways in which they exist, sustained and manifested in representations of bi-ethnic characters today. Moreover, I use these signifiers as a guide to pinpointing common themes throughout these media pieces. I propose these updated themes as they have been enhanced through the theoretical framework of postcolonial thought. The purpose of using postcolonial theories is to connect the way in which bi-ethnic women are treated and represented today (“post- racial” America) to the way they were treated and represented before (pre-civil rights era) to propose that representation only appears to be more progressive.

I utilize an inductive approach to pinpoint the most prominent themes as guided by my research questions. I use Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six steps in conducting a thematic analysis. I first familiarized myself with the content; for the films, I watched both twice while taking down notes each time. As watched the films for the second time I had in mind specific scenes to focus more closely on. I then listed common themes the characters implored both covertly and overtly. For the TV shows, it was important that I did not put forth much bias in terms of which episodes to highlight. It is with the reason that I chose a more general approach to the episodes. I chose the first seasons (some were one season and some were the first two seasons) I watched each episode of the chosen seasons once, while taking down extensive notes of dialogue and of course, themes. The list of themes originally found included: 1) a conflicted identity; 2) a forced homogenous identity; 3) a transcendence of race (Blackness); 4) vindictive and

manipulative; 5) over-exoticized or hypersexualized; 6) an inherent problematic nature; 7) a failure to adapt to one identity; 8) favoring of one identity while dismissing the other; 9) conforming to standards of Whiteness; and 10) an impending doom for non-existence (bi-ethnic identity). Some of these themes seemed to overlap whereas others were not as prominent in each of the media pieces. Because of this, I refined the themes and narrowed down the ones that connected seamlessly. Some themes were merged together while others were discarded as they did not relate to each of the characters.

Finally, I polished the themes that I chose and proposed the following: a) overexoticized and hypersexualized; when the character's features are predominantly European and/or she is sought after or rather lusted after by a White man (via colonial-gaze). Before moving forward, it is important to further note the definition of overexoticization and its implications. The very definition of the word exotic is something foreign, and unusual and therefore automatically marginalizes its subject, and typically has a sexual connotation to it (Snell & Tsai, 2017). The bi-ethnic woman is seen as exotic because she is perceived as looking abnormal or unnatural. Therefore, her over exoticization is what further leads to her hypersexualization. Whereas all women are typically hypersexualized in media representations, it is important to note that this hypersexualization as paired with the over exoticization stands to dehumanize her even further. The more her physical features favor European traits (as European is the standard of beauty) the more she is sought after sexually and

portrayed as a sexual object. This relates to perceiving the tragic mulatta as a foreigner, someone who does not belong, nor have the same rights as other, Americans.

The second most prominent theme, b) inherently problematic; She is perceived as problematic through the eyes of those around her because they do not understand her. Rather, she is unnatural, the very notion of her birth was through something that was once illegal. She is the product of miscegenation, the imagined to be prohibited and unknown, therefore she exists, and her presence is threatening. Further, her “complicated” identity brings discomfort to those around her because of the dichotomous representation/view of Black and White identity. This causes a cognitive dissonance and she becomes problematic to either herself or those around her because of the treatment she receives. This treatment in media, feeds her marginalization in society, creating a vicious cycle of ill-representation and the social repercussions of being imagined to be stuck in an identity limbo. Thus, the first two themes lead to the last and most blatant theme, c) destined for non-existence through invisibility, elimination, and even death. She is suppressed and made invisible, this further justifies her marginalization. What is the wrongdoing in dehumanizing bi-ethnic characters, when they are not supposed to exist anyway? The mulatta becomes the embodiment of these signifiers, their existence across diverse media platforms through time results in the fragmentary existence of her identity, and the suppression of her existence as a complete human being.

Gallegos (2013) explains in her dissertation *Ay Tijuana mi Tijuanita, una iconografía de ciudad, desde las formas breves literarias y extraliterarias* (*Oh Tijuana, my tijuanita, an iconography of city from its literary and extraliterary short forms*), how the city of Tijuana is understood as perpetually marginalized, fragmentary, and chaotic due to an embodiment of signifiers built from ill-representations of the city across time; transmedia. The city has come to embody these signifiers in order for it to compete economically as a tourist port for Anglo visitors. The logic behind Gallegos' study shows how signifiers or themes used to represent an archetype—in my case the tragic mulatta—can be collected and studied to comprehend the discrepancies in power maintained, not only by a single media representation, but by a collection of representations that are perpetual transmedia, which ensure the survival of such media signifiers and the perpetuation of racism, classism and sexism (pp. 29-31). The example of the city of Tijuana, runs parallel to this study, specifically when speaking of the dehumanizing effects of such representations. The representation of Tijuana, like the representation of bi-ethnic women presents the hierarchy of both social class and of race. These fixed and unquestioned representations serve to this hierarchy of White above all else.

The elimination of the bi-ethnic woman in mass media representations, comes to signify a wish for the death of her complex, diverse, and true identity. This happens at the microcosmic level even through more passive means such as, exclusion from community, not procreating, invisibility, becoming insane, or

conforming to one identity and completely disregarding the other. In turn, it has repercussions at the macrocosmic level with issues with the minute and ill-representation of bi-ethnic individuals, and the scarce number of studies on the topic within academia; hence, the need to dedicate this project to the topic through a postcolonial, even decolonial, lens. In Spivak's notion of the subaltern; she pointed out the imposed inferiority over the colonized who were stripped of their own voices and excluded from their own discourse. Bi-ethnic women are perceived as inferior by way of their objectification (hypersexualization and exoticization). This is apparent in the dominant portrayals of bi-ethnic women in which they are lusted after by a White man. This serves to racialize her, and create an immediate connection between the color of her skin and her sexual openness.

Through the pinpointing of themes of the representations of bi-ethnic women and the tragic mulatta archetype along with a textual analysis of the selected films and TV series, I aim to demonstrate that while more recent characters might be praised for their progressive more modern attributes, there are still themes that convey the original tragic mulatta archetype. Moreover, as I use Orbe and Strother's (1996) study as a foundation, I aim to continue the discourse surrounding representations of bi-ethnic women in mainstream media.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In a time in which we are seemingly more diverse, inclusive, and culturally tolerant than ever before, racism, sexism, and blatant stereotypes should not be present in mainstream media. According to the PEW research institute, 68% of Americans believe openness to foreigners is essential to a better America (Neal, 2017). While bi-ethnic women are certainly not foreigners, they are often treated as such. Mainstream media have only become smarter in manipulating problematic representations to fit supposed political correctness as a way of pacifying the “problematic” others. Such representations are not as blatantly present as before. Upon first glance, the uncovering of the tragic mulatta archetype in all five characters proved difficult because of this. While each of the characters shared similar characteristics, as expected, they were more difficult to pinpoint because of the dates on which they were created/released and due to their genre.

Immediately apparent is the difference in physical appearance between the earliest film to the later film and TV shows; Sarah Jane from *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959) was played by an actress who was not of African descent. She was played by Susan Kohner, a woman of Latin/European descent, who later went on to win a Golden Globe for her portrayal of Sarah Jane; yet another example of the erasure of bi-ethnic women. Needless to say, this film was

created in a very different time in which Black actresses were only given the roles of mammy characters (Cashmore, 2004). Regardless, Sarah Jane's character possessed primarily European features—fair skin, thin nose, and straight hair—and was portrayed by Euro–Latin actress. Whereas Rachel, Sam, Rainbow, and Anika are played by actresses of multi-ethnic Black and White descent

### Film Comparative Analysis

This analysis began with a comparative analysis between the themes of the tragic mulatta archetype present in the characters, Sarah Jane (*Imitation of Life*) and Sam White (*Dear White People*). The same themes were later analyzed in a second comparative analysis of Alex Haley's *Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993) and the three chosen TV characters. This analysis encompassed three prominent themes and each of them were examined within the representations depicted by each of the characters discussed below. The following themes, a) overexoticized and hypersexualized, b) inherently problematic, c) destined for non-existence through invisibility, elimination, and even death, were unveiled through the guidance of the following markers; the characters' relationships with their family and those close to them, the attire of the character, and her sexual visibility- the number of scenes in which the character implores sexual connotations explicitly.

#### Overexoticized or Hypersexualized

*"Poor thing. She was light skinn-ded and everything"*

– Colandrea "Coco" Conners (*Dear White People*)

This signifier is more prevalent in some characters than in others and appears merely only in part for some characters. While each of them embodied the same signifier to portray the tragic mulatta archetype, each character is different in the way it was employed.

Sarah Jane, from *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959), is a leading character whose presence in the film arguably gained the most distinction. She is portrayed in her adolescence as well as her teenage-adult years. She and her mother, a Black mammy character named Annie, live with Lori, a single White woman, and her daughter Susie. True to tragic mulatta nature, Sarah Jane faces “tragedy” after “tragedy” due to her mixed heritage. She is bitter and self-hating from a young age as she understands the benefits that come with being White. Because she favors her European side, she feels that she should not have to suffer the consequences that came with being Black at the time. Throughout the film, she discounts her Black heritage while attempting to pass as fully White. She grows up living in the shadows of her White counterparts, and despite being part European, cannot reap their same benefits. While she is constantly trying to dismiss her Black heritage, when she is the presence of her mother there is an apparent internal conflict she has.

Sarah Jane is portrayed in two parts of her life; adolescence and teenage/adult years. In one scene, the hypersexualization is first apparent when Steve, an old friend of Lora’s—the woman with whom Annie and Sarah Jane live—comes to their home after being away for years. He first sees Susie—Lora’s

daughter (the same age as Sarah Jane)– dressed in a pastel-colored long and loose fitting dress. He greets her innocently with a quick hug and talks about how much she has grown. As the two are talking, Sarah Jane comes down to the room in a tight-fitting dress, accentuating her curves and showing cleavage. Steve is immediately distracted by her and quickly locks eyes with her. Gawking at her looking her up and down in shock he almost breathlessly questions if that is her. Sarah Jane replies seductively as she locks eyes with him and draws closer, “Hello, Steve.” Steve, in shock and completely enamored by her says, “It can’t be, why, you were all legs!” Sarah Jane laughs and affirms she still has them. This scene is sexualizing their reunion given that Steve, a man who has known her since adolescence could not keep his eyes off of her. Sarah Jane is further hypersexualized as she becomes an exotic dancer at a nightclub. This happens after her White boyfriend discovers that she is not White and beats her in an alley leaving her to die. As she works for the nightclub she completely disassociates herself from her mother to keep others from discovering her heritage. Despite her looking White, Sarah Jane came to believe she would be denied opportunities for a better job than the one at the nightclub. In this case, her hypersexualization and over exotification holds her agency hostage because she feels that her only choice is to resort to her sexuality to make ends meet (Hunder & Sirk, 1959).

Contrastingly, the character Sam, in the film *Dear White People* (Brown, et al., 2014) is portrayed as highly intelligent and well-spoken. Sam White is a main

protagonist of the film and the host of a radio show titled “Dear White People.” Although she never claims bi-ethnic identity herself, others impose it on her throughout the film. She does possess some European traits, as well as other traits; a wider nose, full lips, soft curly/wavy—but not kinky— hair, light brown—almost tan—skin, and a thin frame (as most leading actresses in Hollywood have). Throughout the film viewers are given insight into her internal conflict with her dual identity. Sam, in contrast to Sarah Jane, attempts to pass as Black and wants to be “as Black as possible.” She has a strained relationship with her White father, and not much is known about her relationship with her Black mother. She attempts to hide her European traits, one being her long wavy hair that she pins up in big curls under a silk scarf or hat. Further, she hides her relationship with Gabe—a White man— out of fear that her Black friends would see her as a traitor. Because of this, she entertains the idea of a relationship with Reggie— a fellow Black student whom she has little interest in. She deems him as the only single eligible Black man on campus. Sam is constantly seen as a problem/threat to the higher ups on campus and as a result her bi-ethnicity is used against her.

Her hypersexualization is presented in one particular scene, in which she is in an intellectual debate with her class teaching assistant (TA)— Gabe, who also happens to be her secret lover. The two argue as they walk across campus to her dorm room. Once in her room, Gabe begins undressing her while disregarding everything she says and criticizing aspects of Black culture. As she

continues the conversation passionately, he shuts her up by kissing her and the scene ends with them sleeping together. While showing a sex scene is not uncommon in films nowadays and especially not in this film, two problems arise in this scene. Here, we begin to see the colonial gaze come into play, Gabe is projecting onto Sam what he believes she should be. Alloula (1986) refers to the way in which the French photographers dealt with the Algerian women not living up to their standards. He specifically talks about the violence in their reaction; they eroticized the Algerian women to fit their sexual perception of the "other." Gabe does this in a subtle manner, particularly when Sam advocates for Black culture and presents intelligent arguments, yet he criticizes her for doing so and imposes himself on her. Although Sam and Gabe seem to have a relationship, this scene perpetuates that Sam is nothing more to Gabe than a sexual conquest. Sam is an outspoken character, but when she is around Gabe, he shuts her down. Gabe does not become overtly violent with Sam, but in this scene when he does not agree with her, he forces himself on her sexually and she complies. Sam's character is further dehumanized as a sexual object who must adhere to sexual conquest. Although Gabe somewhat redeems himself later in the film, in this scene, hypersexualization is seen through the pacifying of Sam's opinion by sexual conquest. After the two sleep together, Sam gets out of the bed to get dressed and the scene ends showing her naked rear-end. Much like sex scenes, nudity is not uncommon in films, however it should be noted that Sam is the only character in the film to appear naked (Brown, et al., 2014).

Her over exoticization is displayed after she ends up snapping at Reggie and he calls her out for it. He insinuates that she knows the way he feels about her (he cares for her romantically) and yet she still treats him badly. “I’m around you 24/7 like a lapdog and I don’t even really be messin with redbone chicks like that.”—Redbone chick is in relation to the song “Redbone Girl” by Eric Bennet— a song that exoticizes multi-ethnic women of African descent. As stated earlier, the term “redbone girl” refers to light-skinned or multi-ethnic Black girls and is deeply rooted in colorism. This term serves to exoticize bi-ethnic women and in turn to objectify them; Reggie used this term to do just that. Sam is hurt by Reggie’s proclamation and tells him not to call her that. Reggie replies saying that when he met her he thought she was Puerto Rican. When she turns away in annoyance, he tells her that he sees something in her; “something folks like me can get behind.” He then kisses her softly and says to her “tell me you’ll set up the rally.” Sam agrees. Reggie marginalizes and exoticizes her by deeming her exotic-like (red-boned) and different. He further deems her problematic and resorts to name-calling—redbone girl— to express frustration (Brown, et al., 2014).

Whereas Sarah Jane’s hypersexualization and over exotification is seen through her apparel (tighter fitting, and revealing clothes) and her occupation as an exotic dancer at a nightclub, Sam’s hypersexualization is seen through her interaction with her lover. Sam is a highly intelligent character but in her scene with Gabe she became nothing more than an object of his desire. Here we see the subtlety of Sam’s hypersexualization juxtaposed with Sarah Jane’s

hypersexualization. Sarah Jane is more explicitly hypersexualized by those around her, such as Steve and patrons at the nightclub she works at, and by her choice of clothing and seductive mannerisms (Hunder & Sirk, 1959). Sam does not dress in a sexual way nor does she present herself seductively, which then gives the illusion that she is not hypersexualized. Her hypersexualization and over exoticization is manifested through the subtlety of how she is treated by her love interests, Gabe via colonial gaze and Reggie, and her nude scene (Brown, et al., 2014).

#### Inherently Problematic

*“I don’t even really be messin with ‘redbone’ chicks like that...” – Reggie*

*(Dear White People)*

Sarah Jane brings discomfort to those around her when her identity is known. In her adolescence, she sees the way in which Susie is treated better and lives more luxuriously. In one scene, we see the beginning of Sarah Jane’s struggle with her racial/ethnic identity. The two girls are playing with Susie’s dolls, tension arises when Susie attempts to give Sarah Jane one of her dolls that her mom had just gotten it for her. Sarah Jane refuses, and proceeds to take the other doll, Susie’s White doll. “I don’t want the Black one” she says demonstrating her angst with her racial identity. The scene ends later in the night when Sarah Jane and Annie retreat to their room, when Sarah Jane proclaims “I don’t want to live in the back. Why do we always have to live in the back?” This brings discomfort to Lora later.

The next day Lora comes home to find Susie in bed with a bandage around her wrist. Lora asks Annie what happened, to which she replies “Oh, nothing serious. Just a little experiment. Sarah Jane’s fault. After class one of the kids said that Negro blood was different. So later this evening Sarah Jane wanted to compare her blood with Susie’s. Well, I spanked her good.” While Sarah Jane was at fault for attempting to test Susie’s blood, this begs the question, what drove her to this in the first place. Sarah Jane is a child who is denied half of her identity (Hunder & Sirk, 1959). To her, she genuinely cannot understand why it is more befitting for Susie to have the fair-skinned doll when they both have the same skin color. In this case, Sarah Jane is being denied part of her identity and as a child that causes confusion. Sarah Jane’s imposed problematic behavior directly related to the cognitive dissonance she is experiencing. While her behavior should not have been condoned, when you distill it to its essence, there is such innocence in her actions here. Despite this, Sarah Jane’s behavior was deemed problematic rather than being treated as genuine lack of understanding. Some may argue that Sarah Jane’s intentions behind wanting to be White are rooted in her self-hatred toward her Black heritage. However, her intentions could very easily be rooted in being denied of part of her identity. Instead of understanding this, she is deemed problematic which leads to her further problematic behaviors.

Later, in another scene, Annie finds out that Sarah Jane is trying to pass as White at school. When Lora asks what’s wrong as there is clear tension

between the two, Annie replies that Sarah Jane has been pretending she is White. Sarah Jane interrupts proclaiming, "I am White! I'm as White as Susie!" Lora is indifferent to this situation and becomes increasingly uncomfortable around Sarah Jane so much so that she further isolates her (Hunder & Sirk, 1959). Sarah Jane's imposed problematic behavior stems from her being denied part of her identity. While it is inarguable that Sarah Jane acts selfishly in many ways, she is driven to this behavior due to years and years of exclusion and attempts at reducing cognitive dissonance.

Similar to Sarah Jane, throughout *Dear White People* (Brown, et al., 2014), Sam gets into the most trouble with the school. Her outspoken nature seems to threaten those around her and she is called out for it more often than her counterparts. She hosts a radio show titled "Dear White People" where she speaks out against racism and injustice. Because of this, she is a threat to the school's squeaky clean reputation. In one scene, Sam's professor calls her up after class to discuss a paper she wrote. The professor was skeptical of her analysis of *Gremlins* as a film representing White suburbans fear of Black people. Sam explains herself very clearly yet is still written off as being angry and "reaching too far" in her analysis. This pinpoints her perceived problematic nature, despite having a clear argument, her hard work is discredited. This paper is what sparked the argument between Sam and Gabe mentioned earlier. She is being perceived as problematic because it is easier to portray her that way rather than explore the complex components of her identity. Anglo-centric ideology

gives it closure in the film, and rather than exploring the conflicts that create this representation, they project the problematic characteristic onto her without a critique or explanation of the reasoning behind it: thus, enabling and further reinforcing hierarchical thinking.

Whereas Sarah Jane's behavior is visibly problematic as she acts very selfishly, Sam's problematic behavior is less visible. Sam's inherent problematic nature is more so apparent through the eyes of those around her: that is, her behavior is perceived as problematic by those around her because it brings discomfort to them. In this case it is the cognitive dissonance of others that projects a problematic nature onto Sam. She challenges the status quo, and therefore is threatening. This is demonstrated when the Dean of the college—a Black man, and Sam's ex-boyfriend's father—confronts her and accuses her of being racist and the cause of problems on campus. When Sam tries to leave the conversation, he stops her by saying "I'm sure it was tough growing up. Wondering which side you fit into. Feeling like you have to overcompensate perhaps?" Sam is caught off guard by that statement and appears distressed. In this case, her identity is not only used against her, but it is also used as a means to put her in her place.

#### Destined for Non-existence through Invisibility, Elimination, and even Death

*"How do you tell a child that she was born to be hurt?"*

*– Annie (Imitation of Life)*

Each of the characters fell into this category faithfully as if it were a prerequisite to being bi-ethnic. Whereas the other themes are more muted, and had to be uncovered through rich detail, this one was blatant. A major component in this is the imposed fixity of identity or rather the binary way of viewing racial/ethnic identity and moreover the coercion of choosing one side over the other resulting in the elimination of her bi-ethnic identity and sometimes the elimination of her Black identity.

Sarah Jane publicly passes for White, but when she gets home, she is treated as anything but. She yearns for the attention of Lora and further seeks to be treated just like Susie. As she gets older she only becomes further isolated. In the earlier mentioned scene with Steve, Susie and Sarah Jane, the three are laughing together in the kitchen enjoying themselves when Lora interrupts to bring them into the party in the living room. Sarah Jane must stay behind and watch from the kitchen as she is unable to join the party (Hunder & Sirk, 1959). They all live under the same roof, but when it comes to public events and parties, Sarah Jane and her mother are reminded of their place in society. In reality, it did not matter that she grew up with them because she is not one of them (White). As she attempts to erase her Black heritage she is also being excluded from her White counterparts.

Sarah Jane later begins seeing a White boy who is unaware of her ethnic background. Upon finding out about her bi-ethnic heritage, he beats her half to death. She later blames her mother—Annie—for exposing her identity and

disassociates herself from her mother. During this time, she runs off to become an exotic dancer to escape her life with her mother. As a result of this disassociation, Annie passes away due to heart problems. Sarah Jane rushes back for her funeral, and in the final scene of the film, she pushes the crowds and weeps on top of her mother's casket. Lora and Susie hold Sarah Jane and console her reassuring her that she was not the cause of her mother's death (Hunder & Sirk, 1959). However, in this moment, Sarah Jane is orphaned, with no true ties to her identity. The film ends with ambiguity; Sarah Jane is now free to live as a White woman because her mother is not there to expose her. However, Sarah Jane expressed remorse at the funeral and can therefore honor her mother by embracing her Black heritage. It is unclear to the viewers what Sarah Jane does, or whom she chooses to identify with after that. In this case, her dual identity did not lead to her death, but rather to her mother's death, and with her, possibly her African identity. Sarah Jane's destiny for elimination is therefore displayed in her loss of her identity and ambiguity of her future. The final scene shows Sarah Jane in despair, and the ambiguity of her future only reinforces her possible doom and therefore communicates her overall elimination. She does not die at the end of the film, but in the closing scene, we see that her identity has died along with her mother.

While each of these themes is apparent in the character Sam, this one in particular is perhaps the most prominent yet subtle one. Her Blackness is represented by her limited Black-only friends, potential love interest Reggie, her

standing up to White supremacy, and speaking for her Black community. However, her discomfort with her White heritage comes to play with her dying White father and with Gabe. Sam's struggle with her identity is displayed in the following sequence of scenes that lead to her overall elimination. As Sam and the other students from the Black Student Union (BSU) are getting ready for the rally, she begins to hesitate as she sees the signs. Reggie and the rest of the students begin to question her and accuse her of having cold feet. She then receives a text from her mother, which causes her anxiety as she is afraid to hear that her father's condition is worsening. Sam appears disgruntled, and reluctant to answer in front of her peers (Brown, et al., 2014). In this climactic scene, Sam is in the middle of a grass field on campus. In front of her is her BSU cohort, and behind her is Gabe watching her from a distance. This scene displays the very struggles of bi-ethnic identity and the dichotomous treatment of dual racial identities. In a sense, the placement of characters in this sequence of scenes acts as an allegory for the imposed fixity of her identity. Either she chooses to confide in her cohort— conform to her Black side— or she chooses to confide in Gabe—choose her White side.

Sam is in between her two worlds, conflicted as to which side she should choose. Viewers are unable to see what Sam's mother has texted her, but it is clear that she is distraught. Reggie and the rest of the cohort continuously ask her if she is getting cold feet. Completely unaware of her clear distress, they pressure her to speak. In this moment, distressed, Sam turns towards Gabe as

she calls her mother on the phone. When she hangs up, she turns to Reggie on the verge of tears. She begins to say something when she is abruptly cut off by Reggie asking her if she is ready for the rally or not. She looks at him disgusted and hurt and runs away toward the direction of Gabe, who immediately follows her. Reggie yells out at the end of the scene “You have our protest permits” (Brown, et al., 2014). This scene portrays the lack of support she received from her cohort that she has been identifying solely with. In this moment, she is let down by the very community with which she identifies, the Black community, thus, leading her to run away from both at the moment.

In the following scene, Gabe is in Sam’s dorm room attempting to comfort her, much to her dismay. Simultaneously, Reggie and the cohort are profusely knocking on her door asking to talk. Comparably to the earlier scene, Sam is in the middle with embodiments of her two different identities. Sam turns down Gabe’s efforts and tells him to wait until they leave and to sneak out. This angers Gabe and causes him to go off on Sam. He asks her what she sees in Reggie, and Sam replies that he is “the only eligible single brother on campus.” This deeply offends Gabe and Sam further offends him by claiming that he just wants to prove to the world that he is “down”— a state of awareness of current social and political affairs. Gabe refutes that statement and the following dialogue takes place:

Gabe: I want to be down? How long does it take you to get your hair like that?

Sam: You don't understand! Girls like me...

Gabe: What? Have to pick a side? I'm sick of your tragic mulatto bull, Sam  
(Brown, et al., 2014).

Sam gets offended by him calling her a tragic mulatto and tells him he can't say that word. Gabe proceeds to yell it multiple times for everyone to hear. He then ironically apologizes for not being her Nubian prince, and tells Sam that this isn't her. And in a moment of sheer sincerity she asks him "who am I?" (Brown, et al., 2014). Sam, in this moment, communicates her sincere confusion with her identity. Gabe begins listing all his favorite things about her. In his list are things that are viewed as more White; things that she tries to hide. In this particular scene, Gabe is juxtaposing her Black side with her White side when presenting this list by noting her true likes, hobbies, and characteristics that are viewed as more Anglo-centric and juxtaposes it with what she falsely pretends are her likes, hobbies, and characteristics that are more Afro-centric. "Your favorite director is Bergman. But you tell everyone it's Spike Lee. You love bebop, but you've got a thing for Taylor Swift... You're more Banksy than Barack. But you've been co-opted as some sort of revolutionary leader or something. But really, you're an anarchist... a beautiful filmmaker. And beautiful in general" (Brown, et al., 2014). In this scene, Gabe is attempting to prove to her that she is more White than Black and that he loves her for that. This is when Sam actively begins to question her identity and who she associates herself with.

Towards the end of the film, Sam sits in front of her mirror and gazes at herself, almost as if she is contemplating who she is. She then unwraps her hair to reveal her wavy long-locks, the “typical” bi-ethnic hair. This scene is paired with similar scenes in which each character is staring at themselves in the mirror. Each character is preparing for their climactic moment in which their character develops into their true form. For Sam, her climactic moment is letting go of the person Gabe claims she is pretending to be. In this moment, as Joseph (2012) explained, Sam is transcending race, and in reality, transcending her Blackness. This is further examined when fellow student Lionel realizes that there is a Black-face party on campus and he rushes to Sam looking for her help. Sam refuses to help Lionel and proclaims that she is “tired of being everyone’s angry Black chick.” Whereas Sam is portrayed throughout the film as an outspoken and driven character, in this moment, she portrays a defeated attitude and an overall desensitization toward Lionel’s plea.

This moment further affirms Sam’s choice in her identity, she no longer wants to be identified as the “angry Black chick.” While it is not clear whether or not she is choosing her White side, this can be compared to Sarah Jane’s disassociation with her Black side. Certainly, Sam is not disassociating on the same level as Sarah Jane; however, what is communicated in this moment is that she no longer wants to associate with who she has been. This is apparent in her choice of apparel, she no longer has her hair pulled up—it is down and in loose curls— and she is dressed in lighter neutral colors as opposed to her darker

colors. Further, her unwillingness to join her BSU cohort to stand against something she would normally stand against communicates her decision to leave that part of her life behind.

Although she later attends the party, she does so only to film heinous acts being carried out. She does so passively to then use this footage and present it as her film to her class titled "Black faces." When she shows the class her film, the entire class applauds her, contrasting their earlier reaction to her first film. In the last scene of the film, Sam finds Gabe on campus. In this scene, Sam's look is completely changed; her hair is down in loose curls, she is wearing brighter and preppier clothes, and is smiling more. The two begin a conversation formally. Gabe asks her "How is papa White?" She tells him that he is better and that the two have grown closer. In this moment, Sam opens up to Gabe about her past and her relationship with her White father. She proclaims that she used to be embarrassed of her father, because people would often wonder why they were together. She tells him how she used to hide the fact that her father is White and says to Gabe "How awful am I to do that to him... or anyone?" She then confesses her feelings to Gabe and the two walk off together holding hands as her Black friends stare at her in confusion (Brown, et al., 2014). Similar to the earlier scene, Sam is in the middle as Gabe is beside her on a bridge with her BSU cohort in front of her. Once again, the three act as an allegory for her dual identity. Sam is in the middle and her two world/identities are presented in front of her. Ultimately Sam choose Gabe and the two walk past her BSU cohort thus

communicating to viewers that she has chosen her White side and eliminated one side of her identity, her Black side.

In this scene, Sam embraces what seems to be her true self and in doing so seemingly disassociates herself from the Black community, further perpetuating the notion that one can only choose one race and cannot be both Black and White. Although this might be perceived as her ridding herself of her extreme dichotomous self-identification, Sam's character simply reinforces racial hierarchy. The cognitive dissonance that Fanon (1952) speaks about is presented here; Sam realizes throughout the film that she isn't getting far conforming to her Black side. Therefore, she decides to assimilate to her White side. Throughout the film, when she embraces her Black side and acts as an activist, she is seen as problematic even by her lover Gabe. However, once she lets down her wavy locks, dresses more preppy and walks off with Gabe, her character is happier and constantly smiling. Not only does this communicate that the bi-ethnic woman must choose one fixed identity, but it also reinforces the hegemonic principles at play here. Sam is happier when she embraces her White side.

For Sarah Jane's character, however, it is unclear as to which side she would identify with, but it is clear that her ending was one of despair. Contrastingly, Sam's ending is one of happiness as she walks off into the sunset with Gabe. Jhally and Lewis (1992) argued "...that the media, especially television, reinforce this false dichotomy by reducing the complex issue of race

into a simple either/or proposition that viewers can easily digest” (p. 114). It is easier for viewers to digest Sam’s ending as a positive ending because she transcended race (her Blackness). What this communicates is that for her character to continue to embrace her “Blackness” while also embracing her “Whiteness” would have presented the complexity of racial identity as non-binary and unfixed. While Sam’s ending brought her apparent happiness, it only added to the already prevalent dichotomy of viewing racial/ethnic identity.

#### TV Series Comparative Analysis

Before my analysis of the characters Rachel (Liman & Bartis, 2011), Rainbow (Barris, et al., 2014), and Anika (Strong et al., 2015), I first did a modified analysis Queen–Alex Haley’s Queen (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993)– with the themes chosen for this study to then compare to the newer characters. As I used this a point of contrast for comparing the tragic mulatta archetype, it is noteworthy that all three themes are present in the following characters; however, they are manifested quite differently as follows.

#### Overexoticized or Hypersexualized

Queen is the illegitimate bi-ethnic daughter of a White plantation owner and a Black slave. Queen embodies the first signifier when she grows up becoming a beautiful “Southern Belle”–a beautiful high-class woman sought after by most men. After both of her parents die, and her White family severs ties with her, Queen quickly learns that she is able to pass for White. She is often mistaken for a French belle and is sought after. She eventually catches the

affection of a White confederate soldier who sees her working in a flower shop. He becomes enamored with her and proposes quickly after they meet (their second date). After being warned against attempting to pass as White, Queen decides to visit Digby to call off the engagement. When he tells her that he wrote to her father, she then faints. When she awakes, she finds herself in his bed. Digby then offers her some medicine, much to her dismay. He then begins to make sexual passes at her, "You're like a drug to me. I only have to look at you and all the pain is gone." Then, he becomes more aggressive and says "I want you so much, I need you so much" as he begins to undress her and attempts to further initiate sex with her despite her struggle. She then pushes him off and yells, "I'm a nigger!" In a fit of rage, he slaps her and calls her a slut and then violently rapes her (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993). I relate this again to the violent sexual notion of the colonial gaze, Digby fully encompasses what Alloula (1986) referred to as the violent reaction to true identity of the "other" woman. Digby's reaction to Queen being different from what he assumed is to eroticize her and ultimately violently rape her. In this sequence of scenes, Queen is hypersexualized and over exotized as an object of Digby's desire. By comparing her looks to a drug as he makes physical advances at her, he further dehumanizes her before her ultimate dehumanization— violent rape. This communicates to the viewers that rape is the ultimate fate of a hypersexualized bi-ethnic woman. As we see in other parts of this analysis, downplayed rape is also a major theme in some characters

Queen is almost raped in another scene which is further detailed in the signifier for inherently problematic, but I want to shed light on a scene that was not brought up by Orbe and Strother (1993). Queen falls in love with a Black man—a freed slave—named Davis and becomes pregnant with his child. She is later abandoned by him and forced to fend for herself and her newborn baby boy—Abner. Several months after Abner is born, Queen finds Davis. Infuriated that he abandoned the two of them, she confronts him at his quarters. As she argues with him, he attempts to shut her up by kissing her. She profusely refuses but he does not let go, eventually picking her up and taking her to bed. The scene ends with her still struggling with him on top of her. Subsequently, Queen and Davis are as happy as ever and in a relationship (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993). In that scene, Queen was assaulted, and to say otherwise speaks to our culture's complacency when it comes to rape culture—the normalization and romanticizing of rape and violence against women. Rape is often downplayed to the point of acceptance by apparent romance. Queen, a human being who bore the child of this man attempted to have a conversation with this man. To Davis, she was nothing more than an object of his desire in that moment. Whatever he may have felt for her does not overshadow the fact that she refused his advances just like she did with Digsby before. This further reinforces the acceptance and normalcy in treating Queen, and bi-ethnic women, as exotic objects of affection.

Comparatively, Rachel Zane's (*Suits*) hypersexualization is signified through the way in which she dresses and the way she is typically treated by the men around her. The character is a bi-ethnic woman—fair-skinned with freckles, dark straightened hair, and a slim hourglass figure—born to a Black successful lawyer and a White woman. She works as a paralegal for a law firm. The complexities of her bi-ethnic identity are seldom touched upon in the series. The first mention of her ethnicity is when Mike Ross, one of the main characters, asks her about Robert Zane, a man unbeknownst to him is her father. When he reacts shockingly to the identity of her father, she defensively reacts saying, "is it hard to believe my father is Black?" Ending the conversation, Rachel asks him if he thinks this (pointing to her skin) is a year around tan. While her racial identity is rarely touched upon and perhaps even unnoticed in the show, several characteristics she employs fall into the themes mentioned in this study (Liman & Bartis, 2011).

Although Rachel's female counterparts dress similarly, they wear longer dresses/skirts—still tight—and their tops cover more cleavage. Whereas, Rachel typically wears skirts or dresses above the knee with tops that reveal her cleavage and arms. At the risk of sounding prude-like, the supporting female characters all dress in revealing clothing. This in itself represents the sexualization and objectification of all types of women in media. However, it is important to note that Rachel's wardrobe in comparison is significantly more revealing. Further, she is frequently hit on by fellow employees and is portrayed

as a haughty and sensual character in the first season. Her treatment by others around her stands to reify the treatment of bi-ethnic women as exotic objects. Rachel's character holds little substance other than her sexuality in the first season. In the first episode, Rachel approaches Mike to give him the tour of the firm. When Mike first sees her, he is stunned as he looks her up and down and says, "Wow you're pretty." Rachel immediately dismisses his attempt at flirting and tells him of the other men that hit on her to conclude the conversation (Liman & Bartis, 2011).

As the seasons go on Rachel's character gains more depth but not at the expense of her sexuality. The depth that goes into Rachel's character is often overshadowed by the relationships surrounding her. Specifically, her relationship with Mike begins with much turbulence. She tells him that she won't date a co-worker because of past experience. Despite this the two lust after each other and begin a cat and mouse type game. At one point, Mike tells Rachel the truth about his education after she confronts him in the filing room at work. In this scene, Rachel is dressed in a low cut, cleavage baring, formfitting dress. Angry and hurt by his secret, Rachel slaps Mike twice. As she attempts a third slap, Mike grabs her arm to stop her. He then grabs her arm again to stop her from leaving and the two engage in raunchy sex (Liman & Bartis, 2011). Again, as sex scenes are common on TV, this scene is particularly explicit compared to other scenes in the show. I compare this to the scene in which Queen confronts the father of her son for abandoning them. Queen is angry, rightfully so, and deserves to express her

anger. However, she is quickly stripped of that right and Davis enforces sex on her to end the conversation. Similarly, Rachel has every right to express her anger to Mike, yet he does the same thing Davis did to Queen, and even the same thing Gabe did to Sam, and he engages her in sex thus silencing her. Rachel's hypersexualization is signified through the way she dresses, the way in which her sex scene was portrayed explicitly and as lustful in comparison to other characters' sex scenes, and the way she is treated by those in close relationships with her.

Whereas Rachel's character was identified by her hypersexualization, the character Rainbow Johnson from ABC's *Black-ish* (2014) did not overtly portray hypersexuality or exoticification. A possible reason for this is her age in comparison to the other characters, her status as a mother of four children, and the comedic nature of the series. Rainbow is a bi-ethnic doctor living in upper middle class suburbia with her husband Dre—a Black man—and their four children. She is lighter-skinned with some European features, thick 4c hair that she wears naturally and a thicker and curvier physique. Her ethnic background is constantly poked fun at by others because she was raised by hippie-like interracial parents. Rainbow is trying to prove herself to those around her on a regular basis. Whether it is proving her success as a doctor to outsiders or simply proving her Blackness to her own family, especially Dre's overbearing mother, Ruby. Rainbow is the only character out of the five chosen that favors her European heritage less than that of her African heritage (Barris, et al., 2014). Additionally,

she dresses more conservatively than the other characters. Again, it is important to note the character's status as a mother for her choice in wardrobe.

Rainbow's over exoticification can be seen through her attempts to identify with her race through the fragmentation of her body parts. In one episode, Rainbow is consoling her husband Dre after a bad day at work. She utters to him words of encouragement and says, "keep it real," perplexed, Dre murmurs to himself, then says, "Keep it real? All this coming from a biracial or mixed or Omni-colored complexion or 'whatever they are calling it today' woman who technically isn't even Black" Dre, without realizing it, marginalizes his wife by pointing out her uniqueness, or in this case exoticness. Astonished by his statement, Rainbow replies, "Ok, well if I'm not 'really' Black, could somebody please tell my hair and my ass?" (Barris, et al., 2014). Rainbow counters his statement by proclaiming that she is in-fact Black and that she can, and does, claim that identity. However, it is important to note that the way in which she proclaims her Black identity is through the fragmentation of what a Black woman's body "should" be. This is also seen in the way in which the European colonizers projected the fragmentation of the Black body onto Sarah Baartman; she was identified by her exotic features and body parts. Similarly, Rainbow's over exoticification can be juxtaposed with the fragmentation of Sarah Baartman's body by way of Dre calling her skin complexion "omni-colored" and further claiming she is not Black. He strips her of her identity because of her background. Moreover, Rainbow retaliates by proving her Blackness through the

fragmentation of her body and her conformity to societal imagination of what a Black woman's body should be. She points out her 4C hair, and her thicker rear end as markers for her identity.

Rainbow's hypersexualization is almost non-existent, but the next character, Anika from Fox's *Empire* (2015), exemplifies overt hypersexualization. She is bi-ethnic, with light golden-skin, a thin hourglass figure and primarily Eurocentric features. She gives off the persona of haughtiness, however, she is very insecure. She is a debutante who comes from a very wealthy family, and was brought up in high society. This makes it difficult for her to navigate through her identity. Like Rainbow, Anika is trying to prove her Black identity to others. She cannot be both Black and White in the eyes of those around her; the fact that she grew up in high society puts her at odds with her Black counterparts in the series.

She is a successful business woman; the head of talent scouting, Artist and Repertoire (A&R), "Empire Entertainment," the company that her long-time boyfriend Luscious Lyon owns. Anika's attire is similar to that of Rachel's; form-fitting and often cleavage-baring business attire. Anika is initially seen as a powerful, successful, dignified and classy woman. However, when Luscious' ex-wife, Cookie, is released from prison, Anika becomes insecure and ultimately destructive. Anika is constantly picked on by Cookie and feels threatened by her. Anika has built herself through the eyes of Luscious. Originally a debutant and graduate of Harvard business school, after beginning a relationship with Luscious

and being head of A&R, Anika became Luscious' right-hand woman. So, when Luscious and Anika's relationship is on the rocks, due to Luscious' infidelity with Cookie, Anika becomes vindictive and begins to plot against Luscious and his company. When Anika is exposed, she attempts to and succeeds in seducing Luscious and Cookie's youngest son Hakeem. Anika's insecurities lead her to become more problematic to those around her (Strong et al., 2015). Her seduction of Hakeem speaks to her character's hypersexualization. The only way she can lift her insecurities and get back at Luscious for his infidelity is to use her sexuality on his son. This communicates that her sexuality is a means through which she navigates through her life and stands to reinforce the dehumanization of the bi-ethnic woman through her hypersexualization.

#### Inherently Problematic

Queen's inherently problematic nature is explored in Orbe and Strother's (1996) article in which she is deemed as problematic as she is an embodiment of unification during a time in which society was overtly divided by skin color. Her perceived problematic nature eventually leads to her elimination from her identity. Queen faces rejection from her European side for being Black, similarly she faces some rejection from her African side for being too White. This leads to Queen's overall elimination, she is eliminated from both sides of her identity. She is neither Black nor White, or she is too much of one and not the other. This drives Queen to insanity and thus the elimination of her identity. Unaccepted by

either of her worlds, Queen is now unidentified and defeated (Orbe & Strother, 1996).

Unlike Queen, Rachel is seldom perceived as problematic to those around her. Rachel is moreover problematic to her own self; she holds herself back from her dreams and aspirations out of fear of rejection. Rachel's hypersexualization—coworkers constantly hitting on her/ gawking at her—communicates that her role serves little purpose aside from her sexuality. This is exhibited in her own self-worth; because she is perceived as a haughty, sexually intimidating woman, she lacks confidence in her abilities. Even further, she disassociates herself from her father because she wants to make a name for herself. However, she continuously finds herself failing at becoming a lawyer, so she keeps her job as a paralegal for over seven years. At one point in the first season, Rachel contemplates hiring someone to take the LSAT for her. She somehow deemed herself unworthy of passing the exam or scoring a high enough grade (Liman & Bartis, 2011). Her overall complacency in both the way she is treated and her position further reifies her status as a sexualized paralegal with little substance. Similar to Queen, Rainbow's perceived problematic nature is seen in the way in which she is treated by her Black family members. Queen's dual identity brought discomfort to those around her as it represented mixing of ethnicities; even further her perceived privilege as a partially White woman brought discomfort to her Black counterparts. While Rainbow is certainly not treated with the same forms of dehumanization and exclusion as Queen, she instead faces a subdued

discrimination from her Black family members (Barris, et al., 2014). This discrimination ultimately leads to her perceived problematic nature. For example, the scene referred to earlier in which her own husband asserts to her that she is not really Black presents a reverse one-drop rule in which he discounts her Blackness by way of her Whiteness. Further, Dre's mother continuously picks on her and her choices and often refers to her as a "hippie child" (Barris, et al., 2014).

Whereas the aforementioned characters' problematic behavior is subdued, Anika's problematic behavior substantial part of her identity. In particular, Anika becomes vindictive when Cookie came back into town, because Cookie stands to threaten part of Anika's identity. In one episode, Luscious and Anika announce their engagement, Cookie becomes disgruntled and in a jealous fit, she walks out the room she says to Anika "Oh, and Anika." As she partially removes her coat uncovering the lingerie she is wearing under "This is an ass" as she smacks and grabs her rear-end (Strong et al., 2015). Although Cookie is not the character in question here, she does employ a similarity in the fragmentation of her body as Rainbow did. Cookie's proclamation of what a rear-end should look like is a direct attack on Anika's Blackness. Cookie brings out insecurities in Anika by discounting her "Blackness" (as seen above) and calling her demeaning names such as "booboo kitty" and further referring to her as a debutante- something that is more equated with Whiteness than it is with Blackness. As her

identity becomes threatened more and more, Anika becomes more problematic to those around her.

Each of the characters exhibit problematic behaviors, but what is important to note is that this perceived inherent problematic nature is due to their ill treatment from others. Queen is constantly being excluded from both sides of her identity; Rachel is hypersexualized with little substance to her character; Rainbow, like Queen, is poked fun at for her “Whiteness” or in this case otherness; and Anika is both hypersexualized with little substance to her character, and excluded from Blackness at times. Here we see the cognitive dissonance come into play more blatantly. Each of these characters is receiving a truth that conflicts with their own truth and their identity; Queen is caught between her two identities during a time in which the dichotomous view of race (White=pure, Black=impure) was more overtly established. Rachel’s lack of self-confidence is a direct result of her constant hypersexualization and further, her anxiety in becoming more than her sexuality. Rainbow constantly having to assert and defend her “Blackness” to her family, because of their binary thinking of racial/ethnic identity. Lastly, Anika’s similar need to defend and assert her Blackness to those around her.

#### Destined for Non-existence through Invisibility, Elimination, and even Death

Rachel does not conform to either identity. However, when Mike is confused at her identity she proclaims that her father is Black and not that she is Black or part Black. In doing so she is transcending her Blackness as a means to

feel more accepted. Thus, her elimination is similar to that of Sam from *Dear White People* (Brown, et al., 2014). Rachel, like Sam, transcends race—in reality transcends her Blackness—as a means to fit in more. Rachel's exertion of sexuality is not problematic in itself. The problem stems from her sexuality both overshadowing all other aspects of her identity and her sexuality being more exposed than her mono-ethnic characters. While her father offers to help her on her journey, she refuses and thus further strains her relationship with him.

Rainbow's identity is even further contested as her bi-ethnicity is continuously joked about by those around her. She is picked on by her mother-in-law and at times her children for her “White tendencies” and her confused behavior (Barris, et al., 2014). This is a comedy series, and stereotypes are typically used for comedic relief. However, the root of this comedic relief is what has been deeply engrained in our minds—that her dual identity is unnatural. The character Rainbow seems to be the least problematic, as she herself is a strong character. She is self-driven, a doctor, has a family, and she seems to be the most comfortable with her dual identity. Nonetheless, her identity is treated as a joke by her family members. As a result, Rainbow feels she must overcompensate to appear “Black enough” in the eyes of her Black family. In the same way that Queen excluded from the African American community for her perceived privilege of being part White, Rainbow experiences this exclusion, but on a lesser level through microaggressions and comedy. Dre questioning his own wife's Blackness or identity as a whole speaks to his own discomfort with her not

being fully Black or Black enough. Thus, her conflict with her own identity is caused by those around her questioning it. Although this is done in a comedic fashion, she is still being eliminated from her identity.

Anika's elimination can be seen in two different ways, the first is displayed when Luscious is incarcerated. Cookie, Anika, Hakeem, and Andre attempt to execute a hostile takeover of the company. When that fails, the four begin their own record label company. Anika is eventually kicked out of the company over a disagreement and is in a sense left homeless in terms of her career. Although Anika eventually helps Cookie double-cross Luscious, Cookie still denies her a place in the company and leaves Anika further displaced. Anika runs to Hakeem for comfort but yet again is turned away as he is with another woman (Strong et al., 2015). The constant rejection by those in her life is an all too familiar characterization of the tragic mulatta archetype. As a result of her rejection, much like Queen, Anika begins to act insane. At one point Anika considers suicide, but upon learning that she is pregnant, decides against it. Anika eventually becomes obsessed with Hakeem and finally announces to the Lyon family that she is carrying Hakeem's child. Upon doing so, the family reluctantly accepts her and even Cookie attempts a relationship with her. Anika is finally included in the family again; however, it is soon revealed that Rhonda, Luscious and Cookie's daughter in-law, is pregnant as well. In true soap-opera fashion, Anika becomes worried that her special treatment will end and that Rhonda's baby will overshadow her own. Anika sneaks into Rhonda's home and pushes her down a

large flight of stairs causing her to miscarry. Unable to remember that night, Rhonda and everyone else believes this is an accident. When she finally remembers that night, she confronts Anika on a rooftop of a high building. The two fight, resulting in Rhonda falling off the rooftop to her death (Strong et al., 2015). In a turn of events, Anika is not the one whose story ends in death. However, the series of events that led her to this place signify her ultimate demise. Though she does not die, her identity and ultimately her agency is stripped from her. She is forced to marry Luscious in a strategic plan of his to keep her in close reach and torture her for her mistakes (Strong et al., 2015).

While Anika's actions were far from innocent, there is something to be said about her punishment in the show. Her character's impending demise began in the first season when her Blackness was threatened and later became excluded from those around her. This led her character down a fast-downward spiral in which she committed acts of insanity that led to her elimination. In its essence, Anika, like the tragic mulatta, was sent into slavery by way of Luscious stripping her of her agency.

Each of the characters possessed the themes that signify the tragic mulatta, but of course in very different ways. Despite the different ways in which they employed these characteristics, the ultimate message communicated through each of these only stands to reinforce the tragic mulatta stereotype. Further, these representations reify the objectification, unnaturalization, and dehumanization of bi-ethnic women. I preface my conclusions by first stating that

I do not know the intentions behind these representations. My conclusions are based on what the representations communicate.

### Discussion

This study asked three research questions as a means to understand the portrayals of bi-ethnic women in media through the tragic mulatta trope. As I answered the questions posed, I focused on three themes in order to analyze how each of them is present in each character. The first question asked was, “What are dominant images of bi-ethnic women in the chosen film and television series?” As examined earlier in this chapter, the two pre-civil rights era/pre-post racial America characters— Sarah Jane and Queen— along with the four modern “post racial America” characters— Rachel, Sam, Rainbow, and Anika— all portrayed similar archetypes. They each employed the themes related to the tragic mulatta. Further, each of the characters imposed a fixed identity on themselves. Sarah Jane only wanted to be White, Sam only wanted to be Black, but in the end transcended her Blackness. Queen, attempted to pass for White at one point only to lead to her ultimate demise when she could not fit into either of her identities. Rachel, did not openly disavow her Black side but attempted to distance herself from her Black father and in turn distancing her Black identity. Rainbow, seldom mentions her bi-ethnic identity, but does claim her Black identity and constantly attempts to prove it to others. Lastly, Anika does not claim bi-ethnic identity but like Rainbow continuously attempts to prove her Blackness

to others; thus, their treatment of identity further portrays identity as fixed and binary.

The bi-ethnic woman is portrayed as a hypersexualized or overexoticized character with primarily European features via colonial gaze. There is not one specific look for bi-ethnic women, but she is portrayed in a one-dimensional way both physically and character-wise. As stated earlier in chapter 2, in this case Hollywood (the West) imposes its hypersexualized and overexoticized view of what a bi-ethnic woman (the other) should look like. This is perpetuated repeatedly, but what makes her hypersexualization unique is the way it is paired with her over exoticization. Whereas women are typically hypersexualized in media representations, bi-ethnic women have little substance other than her sexualization. The most dominant theme is her confusion or rather her conflict with her dual racial/ethnic identity. Because of her conflicting identities therefore fixates on one and avoids the other thus imposing a fixed identity. And lastly her fixity of identity and hypersexualization stand to dehumanize her by eliminating one side of her identity and by sexualizing her to the point that she is no longer a human, but an object. Whether or not this is done purposely, it is my hope that with more research in this particular field that individuals become more educated on the implications of such representations. The fact still remains that the tragic mulatta trope has persisted over time, and has not disappeared yet. Therefore, the dominant portrayal of bi-ethnic women in each of these media pieces follows each of the themes outlined in this study.

The second research question, “How do dominant beauty standards that give preference to ‘Whiteness’ and European features contrasted with representations of Black women, factor into the hierarchical representations of bi-ethnic women?” was answered in my analysis. The persistent representations of Black women and dark skin as the antithesis of dominant beauty standards—light skin and European features—reinforces what Fanon spoke about in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)—that is, that Whiteness is something to strive for in order to humanize oneself. The contradictory positioning of Black as ugly and White as beautiful therefore reinforces a hierarchy of class, race and beauty. It also presents part of the cognitive dissonance that comes with the identity of a bi-ethnic woman. She is told by media representations that her European side should be strived for, and that her Black side is undesirable. Sarah Jane’s cognitive dissonance causes her to completely disavow her Black side. Whereas Sam’s cognitive dissonance caused her to rebel against the status quo only and embrace her black side only. However, this only lead to her eradicating her Black side. Each of the characters examined had a particular look in terms of skin color. They each had light olive-tan or golden skin, and with the exception of Rainbow, either had their hair straightened, wavy, or in loose soft curls. The bi-ethnic characters presented in majority of media pieces tend to either favor their European side more, or they strive to do so. This is primarily evident with Sam’s character, who at the end of the film rids herself of her Blackness and achieves apparent happiness in the ending. This communicates that the less you are

associated with Blackness the greater your chance of happiness is. Therefore, dominant beauty standards as paired with representations of Black women are indeed factors in the representations of bi-ethnic women.

Lastly, the third and perhaps the biggest research question asked “How have Hollywood portrayals of bi-ethnic women changed? Moreover, how are elements of the tragic mulatta trope modified or being negotiated to simulate current apparent political correctness?” It is apparent that the tragic mulatta archetype has not been exactly the same; it is one that has transcended over time and continues to be reinforced in portrayals of bi-ethnic women in mainstream media entertainment. Yet, instead of seeing an improvement in the understanding of bi-ethnicity, the archetypes present in pre-civil rights films live on revived and multiplied transmedia through storytelling, cultivation, propagating, and procreating, sometimes covertly, the methods of perpetuations of existing stereotypes in the proposed “post-racial” America. However, among the characters analyzed, the character Rainbow appeared to be the most progressive. Her character held more substance than her sexuality, she was the only character who diverged from the signifier of the archetype. While she did employ some of the themes it’s not in the way the others did. she is the only character to employ substance other than her sexuality. She gained success on her own, and did not hold herself back. Her discomfort with her identity does not stem from her own thoughts, but rather from outside influences (her family). /for the most part, Rainbow is fine with her dual identity, but her family constantly

pokes fun at it and discounts her blackness. However, she retaliates and although in one scene she fragments her body which is problematic, she still stands her ground and resists the fixity of her identity by others. While her identity is eliminated by others, she perseveres. The themes discussed; a) overexoticized or hypersexualized, b) inherently problematic, and c) destined for non-existence through invisibility, elimination, and even death, work to reinforce the archaic stereotype of the bi-ethnic woman as a tragic mulatta, but ultimately, it is a dehumanization process that is eventually violent and dangerous.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The road to eliminating the tragic mulatta archetype has proven difficult based on the representations present. *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959) was a film produced during the pre-civil rights era, which I used as a benchmark for analyzing a sample of a film produced in the so-called “post-racial” America, *Dear White People* (Producer and Director, 2014). Further, in my supplemental analysis, I used Orbe and Strother’s reading of *Alex Haley’s Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993) as a point of contrast for my own analysis of more recent TV series, *Suits* (Liman & Bartis, 2011), *Black-ish* (Barris, et al., 2014), and *Empire* (2015). After analyzing a film that was overtly racist in its presentation of stereotypes like *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959), and series that fell into the tragic mulatta stereotype, like *Alex Haley’s Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993), it was rather unfortunate to see the same signifiers and themes modified and reinforced in modern day representations.

#### Implications

##### Political Economy Production and the Subordination of Bi-ethnic Women

Overall, these themes found in the representations of bi-ethnic women stand to further stereotype them. The political economy production can be defined as an approach that focuses on way in which media is produced and consumed and critically analyzes the cultural, economic, and political implications

of media industries (Bendukurthi & Raman, 2016). I use this approach to emphasize the implications of the representation of bi-ethnic women aside from physical representations. Political economy production focuses on the way in which politics then affects or influences culture (2016). There is a clear dehumanization that is articulated through continuous exploitation in representations dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to current times. The beginning of the tragic mulatta archetype in 1842 began a cycle of the unnaturalization of the mixing of Black and White races. This unnaturalization has become reinforced by the racist stereotypical representations and unspoken rules and laws such as the one drop rule, the ban on miscegenation in Hollywood, the banning of interracial marriage, and the enforced binary thinking of racial/ethnic identity by way of the census bureau (Jordan, 2014; Courtney, 2005; Nagai, 2010).

Those are a few of the many implications that are presented through the persistence of the tragic mulatta trope. Representation in mainstream media holds salience in the identity of politics and holds tremendous significance for marginalized groups (Bendukurthi & Raman, 2016). A more recent example is from October of 2017: a young bi-ethnic girl had her hair shaved off, without the permission of her mother, by volunteers at her group home. The young girl was told that her hair lacked basic hygiene, and if she shaved it off it would grow back straight (May, 2017). This again speaks to the dichotomy of beauty standards represented in media. It is easy to think we are in a more tolerant society, one in which racist acts like this do not exist. However, the reality is that the prominent

portrayal of marginalized groups in negative stereotypical ways stands to justify their negative treatment. The rationale for why that young girl's hair was shaved off was so that her curly hair could simply grow back straight. The fact that the media representations of bi-ethnic women all overwhelmingly favored their European side more, and were thus hypersexualized and overexoticized, brings to light the dominance of European features and the subordination of Black features. We see this now imitated in real life with the example above. I relate this back to Fanon's assertion in *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) about White being the standard for humanity/purity and Black being the opposite. In this case, we see this translated in terms of beauty standards, e.g. White (purity) beauty standards=straight hair and Black (impurity) standards=curly hair.

In the comparison of *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959) and *Dear White People* (Brown, et al., 2014); Sarah Jane, is first sexualized by Lora's friend, Steve. Later she is exoticized and hypersexualized as she becomes an exotic dancer at a nightclub. Sam is subtly hypersexualized as she is the only character to appear nude in the film. Further, she is exoticized by those around her, specifically by her potential love interest Reggie. The implications of this hypersexualization stand to reify the notion of the tragic mulatta as a sexual object or rather a sexual conquest. Her exotification by means of her strong European features paired with her African features, stands to further dehumanize her by reducing her to her "foreign" appearance. In doing so there then becomes a specific image of a bi-ethnic woman—Exotic features, typically strong European

features paired with slightly darker skin, and full long hair. This then creates an exclusion for the bi-ethnic women who do not fit the criteria. There is no “one-size fits all” look for bi-ethnic women. Some of have 4c hair, some have wide noses, some have dark brown skin, some don’t favor their European side at all. Similarly, some do not favor their African side either. Portraying bi-ethnic women in this light not only dehumanizes them, reduces their identity to their exotic features and sex appeal, but it also stands to exclude bi-ethnic women who do not fit this standard. Moreover, it communicates the acceptance of bi-ethnic women as objects of desire.

#### The Romanticization of Rape

Ultimately, this desirability becomes a mirage of post-racial perceptions, when in reality is masked racism. The dangerous implications of this can be seen in the characters, Queen, Rachel Zane, and Sam White. Their overall objectification by way of exoticization in a sense removes their agency. We see this come in to play with the scenes mentioned in which they are intimate with their lovers. The common theme between these three characters is that when each of them were angry or arguing, their lover downplayed that anger by way of imposing sex on them. When Queen confronts the child of her father, Davis, for abandoning them he grabs her and kisses her, ending the conversation with sex despite her initial unwillingness *Alex Haley’s Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993). Even further, Rachel confronts her potential love interest (Mike) for lying to her. After being slapped, Mike grabs her and although she is reluctant

in the beginning they engage in sex *Suits* (Liman & Bartis, 2011). And lastly, when Sam attempts to have an intellectual conversation with her love interest, Gabe disagrees with her and cuts her off by kissing her, and ultimately undressing her and ending the scene with the two engaging in sex (Brown, et al., 2014).

Two problems arise from these scenes: 1, these women are the sexual object of a man's desire and therefore should not speak their mind; and 2, the romanticizing of assault and rape. The common theme in each of these scenes is that Queen, Rachel, and Sam each displayed resistance to the sex. This however is downplayed through the romanticizing of rape and assault. If compared to the scene in which Queen is raped by Digby, that scene was darker and perceived negatively. However, each of these scenes is portrayed in a pleasant manner, with the exception of Rachel's scene, which is presented in a passionate manner. These scenes each communicate a subordination of women, in particular of bi-ethnic women. This subordination then reinforces the objectification of such women by way of the romanticizing of rape. These scenes of assault further posit that despite the reluctance of these characters, they are there to please the men in their life. The romanticizing of rape for bi-ethnic women then further reifies the ramifications of the tragic mulatta archetype. In films dating pre-civil rights era, it was common for the mulatta to get raped, specifically when a White man found out she was Black. This form of rape is now modified through supposed romance and passion. It is normalized to the point

that it's no longer negative. This communicates an overall complacency and almost a belief that the rape or assault is deserved and moreover expected. Her agency is stripped from her, she is in a sense, a slave to the man now. The objectification and hypersexualization that White slave masters would impose on their bi-ethnic slaves or on bi-ethnic women (via colonial gaze) in general, lives on in current representations. This furthers the objectification of all women, but in particular, it furthers the over exoticization and hypersexualization and ultimately the dehumanization of bi-ethnic women.

#### Binary View of Racial and Ethnic Identity

The tragic mulatta has manifested itself to appeal to the attitudes of dominant culture to seem politically correct. We see in the analysis that each of the themes leads to the next with the last one being elimination. The representations of bi-ethnicity in *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959) were similar to those found in *Dear White People* (Brown, et al., 2014). Both Sarah Jane and Sam attempt to conform to one side of their identity and discount the other. Albeit one tries to pass as White and the other as Black. In doing so, both end up isolating themselves from the parent whose identity they wish to conceal. Sarah Jane pushes her Black mother away, blaming her for all the troubles in her life, until her death at the end of the film. Similarly, Sam admits that growing up she tried to hide her White dad from others. In doing so she further strained her relationship with her father. There is something to be said for both of these characters and their need to assimilate to one side of their identity. This

reinforces the binary thinking of identity. Both characters communicate a need to be accepted, in doing so they attempt to hide their dual identity. Sarah Jane's ambiguous ending communicates her tragedy. Whereas Sam's ending communicates happiness through her transcending of her Blackness. The juxtaposing of these two endings both stand to reify binary thinking. Sarah Jane's ending communicated despair through the ambiguity of her choice in identity. Sam was happy in her ending because she had transcended her Blackness and embraced one part of her identity.

Unlike Sarah Jane, Sam was able to mend her relationship with her parent. After he becomes ill, Sam feels increasingly guilty for distancing herself from him and further straining their relationship. The two characters share a similar storyline, but ultimately Sam has a seemingly happy ending. Whereas *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959) ends with Annie's funeral and Sarah Jane hysterically crying over her grave, "I'm sorry mama." In *Dear White People* (Brown, et al., 2014), Sam walks off happily into the sunset holding hands with Gabe after she had mended her relationship with her father. The seemingly happy ending for Sam does nothing in offering a solution to the binary viewing of her identity. It stands to reify homogenizing one's identity as the only way to bring peace to both themselves and those around them. It reinforces that choosing between the two identities is a must and thus further imposes the fixity of racial and ethnic identity. The enforced fixity brings forth the archaic viewing of ethnic mixing as unnatural. The notion that one's identity is unnatural stands to further

dehumanize that individual. Overall, the common theme communicated through each of these implications is the ultimate dehumanization of bi-ethnic women.

The visual representations of the three TV characters as paired with the visual representation of Queen, not only support but further reinforce the myth of the tragic mulatta and the social hierarchy of race and beauty standards. In the second comparative analysis, the themes appeared to be more present in some characters while subtler in others. The hypersexualization of Rachel and Anika is part of their characters and for the most part defines them. Whereas Rainbow—who favors her European side less—is not hypersexualized, but her overexotification is seen through the way in which she is treated by her Black counterparts. Each of the three characters portrayed some form of hypersexualization or overexoticization. Whereas the second two themes seemed to be subtler, this can be attributed to the ambiguity of the treatment of certain characters. Meaning the characters had other implications that could have been factors in the other signifiers.

The silence surrounding the portrayal of bi-ethnic women may be a factor in this ongoing archetype and representation. The fact that bi-ethnic women are portrayed in this type-cast way is further reinforced by the diverse media representations of her across time. This creates a story of representation that exists transmedia, an incomplete representation that is then projected onto the bi-ethnic woman's identity and has repercussions in her life experiences. "If the icons (or signifiers) are the vehicle, transmedia is the roadways by and through

which icons (or archetypes) get around and cement the symbolic powers of the spectator society" (Gallegos, 2013, p. 39). The fragmentary existence of her identity, as it is coded in various yet repetitive representations transmedia, this is what creates further hierarchization and enables dehumanization at an ideological and societal level. The fragmentary existence of the bi-ethnic woman's identity is apparent through the comparison of film dating pre-civil rights era to "post racial America". Further, the persistence of the tragic mulatta archetype proves that we have not ascended into "post racial America" at all.

As a bi-ethnic woman, I find myself relating to each of these characters. I do not fall into the problematic factors of the tragic mulatta archetype and I do, however, relate to them in their yearning to belong to a single identity. I was 12 years old before I saw any character that slightly resembled me or even possibly shared a similar ethnic background. The first character that I could identify with was Alex Haley's Queen. She did not look exactly like me, as she favored her European side more than I do, but knowing that she came from two different backgrounds meant something to me. While I could not fully relate to her as she was a character from the 19th century, I finally felt represented. However, I am reminded of the message that I took from that series. That is that with her prominent European features she was perceived as privileged, yet she was excluded both of her cultures. This communicated to me that I would never fit into either of my cultures nor would I be fully expected. I would always be too Black for my Arab (perceived as White) side, and not Black enough for my Black side.

This notion stuck with me invariably until my college years. The lack of representation of bi-ethnic women is problematic in itself, however, what's just as problematic is that the representations have not progressed. To see the same markers I saw in my adolescent years in Alex Haley's *Queen* (Wolper, Sofronski, & Erman, 1993), now manifested in modern representations of bi-ethnic women in films and TV series that I enjoy is alarming. Further, the lack of discourse around these representations communicates a complicity that I seek to get rid of.

Orbe and Strother (1996) criticized *Queen's* character for falling into the harmful archetype of the tragic mulatta. It was the first of its kind, being the only TV series at the time that focused primarily on the life of a bi-ethnic woman. Since then there have still been few representations of such a character and these depictions fall into the same archetype with little to no variation. My contribution to this area of research hopefully sheds light on this issue and will encourage others to join in on the conversation. Although a number of scholars have analyzed bi-ethnic characters— Joseph (2013), and Orbe & Strother (1996)—there is no current analysis of recent characters over the past two decades. This study focused exclusively on bi-ethnic women (of African and European descent) in U.S. mainstream entertainment media. While many research the implications of societal and familial pressures on multi-ethnic identity, few focus on the role mainstream entertainment media plays.

The stereotypes that the characters fall into show attempts at humanizing themselves. The depictions do show that characters employ a strategic

essentialism in order to navigate their way through life. This brings to light that this is not just a problem of representation, but a social issue that is now being represented, when bi-ethnic women are not given the opportunity to represent themselves. Media represents myths of what is, in the process it then recreates those myths. While Alex Haley certainly did not create issues for bi-ethnic individuals, he simply represented the issue of dehumanization that was present at that moment in time. In a sense, he utilized strategic essentialism to allow his voice to be heard. While strategic essentialism refers to one's own group temporarily essentializing in order to act (Spivak, 1985). This form of strategic essentialism was imposed onto Queen as a means to bring visibility to bi-ethnic characters. Alex Haley himself is not bi-ethnic, but in order for his voice to be heard, he projected the tragic mulatta archetype onto Queen. Dehumanization processes of people of color have existed for long outside of media, and still persist today. The fact that there is little discourse on the problematic of bi-ethnic representations and that these representations that dehumanize women are still prevalent serves as evidence that we still live in a world that dehumanizes them.

### Limitations

All research has limitations, from researcher bias, to a limited scope. One limitation of this study was the limited scope. While I adequately analyzed two films with leading bi-ethnic characters and three supporting bi-ethnic women characters in three TV series, the sample size is rather small. I only analyzed films with leading bi-ethnic women characters, that either claimed bi-ethnic

identity or were identified as such. Further, I only analyzed popular films and ones in which the leading characters did not possess other glaring contextual factors that could hinder the or overshadow the analysis of the tragic mulatta. Therefore, if a study were done on any film portraying bi-ethnic women characters the results could differ. While this sacrifices generalizability, it makes up for in accuracy, rich detail and in avoiding assumptions of characters' ethnic identities. To further cover this basis, I added a second comparative analysis of supporting bi-ethnic women characters. This thesis was conducted beginning December of 2016 therefore newer seasons of the series I have chosen are then exempt from this study. In March of 2017, the series *13 Reasons Why* (Incaprera, 2017) premiered on Netflix and portrayed a bi-ethnic supporting woman character. Further, beginning in April of 2017 a new series based off of the film *Dear White People* (Brown, et al., 2014) with the same name premiered on Netflix. These two new series along with the newer seasons of *Suits* (Liman & Bartis, 2011), *Black-ish* (Barris, et al., 2014), and *Empire* (Strong et al., 2015) would be important additions for future studies. Another limitation in this study is that literature on the tragic mulatta archetype in modern mainstream media is scarce. Whereas the majority of studies on bi-ethnic identity relate to identity formation, studies that do focus on media representation tend to focus on older films such as *Pinky* (Zanuck, 1949), or *Imitation of Life* (Hunder & Sirk, 1959). A different limitation lay in the method itself. One individual analyzed the data and therefore it cannot connote a totalizing interpretation that is universal. While

semiotic analysis and textual analysis are useful and successful tools in analyzing meaning and underlying ideologies, it cannot account for audience interpretations of the representations.

Despite these limitations, this thesis provides an important component to the already scarce academic discourse surrounding representations of bi-ethnic women in recent mainstream entertainment media. I revolved this thesis around the representations of bi-ethnic women in mainstream media entertainment. More specifically it focused on two popular films spanning the pre-civil rights era and “post-racial America” era. In the supplemental analysis, I presented TV series from network TV channels ABC, and Fox, along with one from cable network TV channel USA. Despite my broad selection range of bi-ethnic supporting characters, there were very few to choose from. This further proves the notion that bi-ethnic women characters are rather invisible in mainstream entertainment media. However small my scope is, this will act as a starting point for future research in this field.

#### Further Research

With the limitations mentioned, future research could expand on this thesis by adding other media pieces such as the ones mentioned above. This field of research is highly unsaturated, and therefore there is a great amount of future research to delve into. One of my biggest recommendations for is to pinpoint all bi-ethnic women characters and create a database or fact-sheet detailing the statistics of bi-ethnic women characters in U.S. mainstream media. This will pave

the way for researchers to locate such characters to then analyze. A particularly interesting study would be a comparison between *Dear White people* (2014) the film and *Dear White People* (2017) the TV series. The Netflix original series is based on the film and portrays all the same characters. However, some of the characters have been replaced by different actors/actresses. This series premiered in April of 2017 and therefore was not added to this study. Another component that could be added to this field is to understand the mindset of the creators, and writers of these characters. To hear their point of view would then add another dimension in the understanding of these portrayals. As seen in this study, the number of multi/bi-ethnic individuals has grown exponentially in the past two decades. However, while the representation of bi-ethnic women has grown since, the representations are rather minute. As the positive representation of bi-ethnic women in media hopefully grows, scholars should add further to the discourse surrounding them to further scrutinize the representations and change them for the better.

APPENDIX A  
IMAGES OF THE BI-ETHNIC CHARACTERS



Sarah Jane with her mother Annie in the background (Hunter, 1959).



Sarah Jane as an exotic dancer at a nightclub (Hunter, 1959).



Sam White (Brown, Lem Lebedev, Lopez, Simien, & Waithe, 2014).



Sam White across from Gabe in the final scene of the film (Brown, Lem Lebedev, Lopez, Simien, & Waithe, 2014).



The promotional poster for Alex Haley's Queen (Wolper, & Sofronski, 1993)



Rachel Zane (Liman, & Bartis, 2011).



Rachel Zane (Liman, & Bartis, 2011).



Rainbow Johnson (Barris, Petok, Patel, Lerner, Nickerson, Shockley, & Saji, 2014).



Rainbow Johnson (Barris, Petok, Patel, Lerner, Nickerson, Shockley, & Saji, 2014).



Anika Calhoun (Strong, Gazer, Munic, Calfom Chaiken, & Hamri, 2015).



Anika Calhoun (Strong, Gazer, Munic, Calfom Chaiken, & Hamri, 2015).

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