

Mixedness Comes of Age: Learning from Multiracial Portrayals in Young Adult TV Series

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ABSTRACT

Representation in literature, popular culture, and media has been shown to influence identity development and belonging as exemplified in the enduring hashtag #RepresentationMatters. However, mixed race representation on television has received little attention in research and scholarship. Hence, this essay examines how multiracial characters are portrayed in coming of age and young adult storylines from four TV series (*All American*, *Charmed*, *Trinkets*, and *Dear White Peoples*) representing two different networks (Netflix and The CW). Through a close reading of dialogue within the context of larger story arcs, we identify and critique common tropes in order to further multiracial literacy and inform pedagogical practice in the classroom. Specifically, three analytical themes are explored: (a) the perceived promise of racial mixing toward transcending Blackness, (b) the boundaries of Blackness, and (c) the grappling with identity and what it means to claim Blackness. Our discussion illuminates the need for more deliberate considerations when constructing mixed race characters on TV so that their portrayals reach the full potential of multiracial representation. We conclude with recommendations for more critical portrayals of multiracial young people and the intentional usage of such media in pedagogical efforts within college classrooms.

Keywords: Multiracial, Mixedness, Young Adult, TV Series, Coming of Age, Representation, Portrayal, Blackness

MIXEDNESS COMES OF AGE: LEARNING FROM MULTIRACIAL PORTRAYALS IN YOUNG ADULT TV SERIES

Representation in literature, popular culture, and media has been shown to influence identity development and belonging (Besana et al., 2019), as has been exemplified in the perennially trending hashtag #RepresentationMatters. Indeed, the famous quote by Marian Wright Edelman, Founder and President of the Children's Defense Fund, that states "you can't be what you can't see" has been internalized by those seeking enhanced representation across various fields, positions, and genres. Despite some critiques of this phrasing as being potentially exaggerated, both the demand and need for better representation persist. Therefore, we situate this article in relation to Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) lasting metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, particularly as we consider young and new adult media audiences. The importance of seeing oneself reflected (mirrors), learning about others (windows), and having entryways to new worlds (sliding doors) cannot be understated, especially for an often-overlooked population like multiracial youth. This population has seen considerable growth over the past few decades, with recent Census data projections noting "the share of children who are Two or More Races is projected to more than double in the coming decades, from 5.3 percent in 2016 to 11.3 percent in 2060" (Vespa et al., 2020, p. 4). Indeed, the 2020 U.S. Census found that while 10.2% of the total U.S. population identifies with Two or More Races, this percentage increases to 15.1% of all children (defined as under the age of 18) (Jones et al., 2021).

Despite this population growth, research and scholarship on representation for this multiracial demographic have not kept pace (DaCosta, 2007; Larson, 2016). And while multiracial-focused research is burgeoning in education and the social sciences (Gabriel et al., 2022; Johnston-Guerrero & Wijeyesinghe, 2021), the connections between popular cultural representation and pedagogical implications for this population remain under researched. One significant exception comprises an undergraduate honors thesis by UC Berkeley student Paloma Miya Larson (2016), whose investigation of multiracial characters on Disney Channel shows has demonstrated how characterizations of mixed race personas within the media contribute to a false narrative associated with a post-racial society. We build on Larson's analysis to examine how mixed race characters are portrayed in coming of age and young adult storylines across a broader range of networks. This desire arose from the following observation: there have been increases in mixed race portrayals on TV, corresponding with an entire series dedicated to the topic (ABC's *black-ish* spinoff, *mixed-ish*). Yet, as we consumed these media ourselves and realized the college students we were teaching in higher education were also consuming them, we questioned whether the portrayals of mixed race characters accurately address demands for further representation.

Here, we make an analytical distinction between portrayals and representations. According to Oxford University Press (n.d.a), portrayal is defined as "the act of showing or describing somebody... in a picture, play, book, etc.," whereas representation can be defined as "The action of standing for, or in the place of, a person, group, or thing, and related senses" (Oxford University Press, n.d.b). Thus, we see representation as a more powerful action versus portrayals, which solely describe an individual. But if this distinction plays out within TV series, at what point do portrayals become representation? As mixed race people, do we see ourselves as powerfully and holistically represented versus just portrayed a certain way? In seeking answers to these questions, this article aims to expose common tropes related to multiraciality that can be useful for higher education and student affairs educators to become more aware of as they teach about racial dynamics.

ANALYZING MIXED RACE PORTRAYALS IN YOUNG ADULT TV SERIES

To answer questions around mixed race portrayals vs. representations, we examined multiracial characters from four live-action TV shows (*All American*, *Charmed*, *Trinkets*, and *Dear White People*)

representing two different networks (Netflix and The CW). The inclusion criteria included recent shows (having aired or been concluded within the past five years) that feature at least one multiracial young adult character and where mixedness is discussed in some form. Multiracial characters were defined as having parents featured on the show who are of different racial groups or who deliberately acknowledge their mixedness. We omitted *mixed-ish* from our analysis because the show itself feels like an outlier given its purposeful engagement of mixedness as a central storyline. Similarly, Netflix's *Ginny & Georgia* also centrally engages the storyline of an interracial family and multiracial identity; thus, we omitted that series as well. Across the four shows that we selected, we found a total of six multiracial or mixed race characters that fit our inclusion criteria. Table 1 contains the important information, demographics, and focal episodes that we utilized in our analysis.

Table 1*TV Show Character Demographics and Information*

Show (Network)	Character(s)	Background	Age	Portrayed by	Focal Episodes
<i>All American</i> (CW)	Jordan & Olivia Baker	Black dad/ white mom	High School	Michael Evans Behling & Samantha Logan	Season 1, Episode 3: "I" and Season 1 Episode 14: "Regulate"
<i>Charmed</i> (CW)	Maggie Vera & Macy Vaughn	Black dad/ Latina mom	College	Sarah Jeffrey & Madeleine Mantock	Season 1, Episode 18: "The Replacement" and Season 2, Episode 12: "Needs to Know"
<i>Dear White People</i> (Netflix)	Samantha White	Black mom/ white dad	College	Logan Browning	Season 1, Episode 1: "Chapter I," Episode 7: "Chapter VII," Episode 10: "Chapter X" and Season 2, Episode 8: "Volume 2: Chapter VIII"
<i>Trinkets</i> (Netflix)	Tabitha Foster	Black mom/ white dad	High School	Quintessa Swindell	Season 2, Episode 5: "Works in Progress"

Our analysis focused on identifying and critiquing common tropes of multiraciality to further multiracial literacy for college educators who may wish to utilize such media as pedagogical tools. Through our analysis of dialogue within the context of larger story arcs, we found three main themes: (a) the perceived promise of racial mixing toward transcending Blackness, (b) the boundaries of Blackness, and (c) the grappling with identity and what it means to claim Blackness. We outline these themes below and integrate each one with related literature. Additionally, we wish to acknowledge our positionalities and that although the six characters in our analysis were identified as having a Black parent, neither of us identify as Black. We are two mixed Filipina/o American and white scholars attempting to analyze Black representation and anti-Blackness, yet we recognize the potential limitations we have as outsiders to Blackness, while still being insiders to mixedness.

The Perceived Promise of Racial Mixing toward Transcending Blackness

In their introduction to the book, *Mixed Race Hollywood* (2008), Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas describe the broad evolution of mixed race characters as a movement from tragic to hero, following changing

ideologies associated with theories of “hybrid degeneracy” emanating from the pseudoscience of eugenics in the early 1900s to more contemporary racial logics. The tragic mulatta trope prominent throughout the 1930s-1950s period eventually changed to featuring “more nuanced and typically more positive representations in film and television” in more recent decades (p. 10). Indeed, no longer just tragic, mixed race characters “have been represented alternately as neutral, ordinary, positive, or even heroic” (pp. 10-11). Ralina Joseph (2013), in *Transcending Blackness*, takes the evolution from tragic to heroic one step further, arguing how “throughout U.S. history, mixed-race African Americans have been placed, and sometimes place themselves, on a trajectory from tragedy... to ostensible privilege (an excess of sexuality, light-skinned advantage, and straight white male desire)” (p. 157). Across media portrayals, we found an engagement and signifying of biracial characters’ Blackness at various points—but these situations seemed to center around encounters with crime, specifically through encounters with white police or surveilling by white employees. Two prominent examples manifest in the high school-centered shows *All American* and *Trinkets*.

In the first season of the CW’s *All American*, there is a pivotal scene where biracial and ambiguously brown Jordan Baker (Michael Evans Behling), who has a Black father and white mother, has a run-in with white cops (Hardy, 2018). After Jordan and monoracial Black Spencer James (Daniel Ezra) are pulled over by police and Jordan is involved in a hostile encounter with the white police officer, Spencer is shown putting his hands on the dashboard and questioning Jordan, “What are you doing, man? Just give him what he asked for.” After Jordan’s incredulity at the cop’s accusation that he made an illegal turn at a red light, the officer asks, “What are you boys doing in this neighborhood?” clearly hearkening back to Jim Crow-era racist and dehumanizing use of “boys” to refer to Black men (Irons, 2004). Jordan states that this is harassment and claims, “my mom is a lawyer.” Jordan is subsequently restrained and arrested. Spencer, who then tries to help him stay calm, is also restrained and handcuffed. In this experience, Jordan is treated as a Black man similarly to Spencer, despite their phenotypic differences. Even his threat to call on his lawyer mom goes unheard—it is unclear if this is because the cops do not know his mother is white or if they do not care. In any case, Jordan’s proximity and access to whiteness failed to save him from this racist police encounter.

Fast forward in the episode and Jordan later asks his Black dad, Billy Baker (Taye Diggs), “How could you not go off on that cop?” and why didn’t he “have his back?” Billy responds by saying that by getting him home, he did have Jordan’s back, and he asks Jordan why he would even argue with the cop and put himself in that kind of danger. Jordan retorts, “I did what I was taught. I was standing up for myself, ok, Dad?” Jordan’s invocation of “teaching” signals both his upbringing in posh Beverly Hills schools but also the apparent lack of racial socialization from his parents. Within the social sciences, racial socialization has been described as the messages received to “foster an understanding and awareness of race, racism, and racial privilege as well as enculturation of ethnic heritage and culture” (Rollins & Hunter, 2013, p. 141). For many multiracial young people, these messages have been shown to focus more on cultural heritage than preparation for racial bias (Johnston-Guerrero & Pecero, 2016).

We see the distinction between the apparent racial socialization Spencer received and Jordan’s lack thereof when Spencer asks Billy (Jordan’s dad) why he never instructed Jordan on ways to deal with the police, explaining that his mom had already made that clear by the time he was eight years old. Spencer explains, “Cops like that they see my Blackness as a weapon. You know, so you talk slow, you do as they ask, you keep your hands visible, and you never run. How come you ain’t tell him that?” Though Billy says he thought he had more time before Jordan “had to face the ugly side of being a Black man in America” we later find out it might have more to do with Jordan’s mixedness and proximity to whiteness. Billy tries to take ownership of not having had “the talk” (DiAquoi, 2017) with Jordan earlier. Jordan responds by asking, “If I looked like Spencer, would you have had the talk with me earlier? Billy’s answer is telling: “Probably. Yeah, I—I think I would.” Here, we clearly see how Jordan’s parents wished to use his mixedness and proximity to whiteness to transcend race and racism.

This focus on how the biracial character looks in relation to the potential for racial progress happens in a similar manner during a scene in the second season of Netflix's *Trinkets*. Tabitha Foster (Quintessa Swindell), one of the main characters, has a Black mother and a white father. Throughout the first season, there is no mention of race, though we do get to meet Tabitha's parents: Father Whit Foster (Linden Ashby) and mother Lori Foster (Joy Bryant). In the second season, specifically Episode 5 of the 10-episode season, race is brought up for the first—and pretty much only—time. Early in the episode entitled “Works in Progress” (Chenzira, 2020), as Tabitha is out shopping with her mom, she is racially profiled and followed by a white woman salesperson in the store who accuses Tabitha of stealing. Granted, the show is centered around stealing trinkets, but in this case, when the white woman spots Tabitha putting her own phone away in her pocket, Tabitha has not stolen anything. Two white women salespeople ask Tabitha to empty her pockets, which she refuses to do. When Tabitha's mother Lori comes over to see what is going on, the white woman starts saying, “We have reason to believe...” and Lori cuts her off exclaiming, “The only reason is racism” and they storm out.

Afterward, when Tabitha and her mother are back in the car, processing the encounter, Lori then shares her own story of this kind of incident happening when she was younger. Tabitha says, “You never told me.” Similarly, to the father in *All American*, Tabitha's mom responds, “I was hoping things would be different for you.” From this response, it is unclear as to why she believed things would be different as the show does not explicitly tell us. Still, we can assume that, just as when Jordan asked whether he would have received “the talk” if he “looked like Spencer” i.e., was perceived as monoracial Black, that belief was likely because Tabitha looks mixed and thus has closer proximity to whiteness. Later in the episode, Tabitha gets braids as a bold new approach to embracing her Blackness, signaling that she was previously trying to minimize or hide it.

These scenes demonstrate how monoracial parents in an interracial marriage had a perceived hope or promise about their multiracial children's experiences with racism, given their mixed identities and phenotypes. Because their children had a white parent and demonstrated more proximity to whiteness in their appearance, there was a perceived promise that their children would transcend Blackness, thus transcending racism. However, both encounters with policing and profiling that Jordan and Tabitha experience respectively exhibit the falseness of this presumed promise, which is not in line with biracial the characters' lived experiences as portrayed in these scenes. Moreover, as Ralina Joseph (2013) has argued, the parents' beliefs about the promises of mixedness perpetuate anti-Blackness in their desire to transcend race. That is, they are not transcending race generally; they are trying to transcend Blackness specifically.

The Boundaries of Blackness

As we explored the theme of transcending Blackness, we identified another prominent theme related to who could claim a Black identity—or more accurately, who was claimed as Black by other (ostensibly monoracial) Black characters. In these cases, the boundaries of Blackness were sometimes fluid, yet the racial authenticity of biracial characters was often questioned, as has been documented prominently in the literature (Harris, 2017, 2019). We see this in *Trinkets*, *All American*, and *Dear White People*. These examples are often centered on how one looks or their phenotype.

Later in the same racial profiling episode in *Trinkets* described earlier (Chenzira, 2020), the focus on Tabitha's appearance becomes explicit when she shares what happened with Marquise (Austin Crute), a dark-skinned Black male student. Initially, Tabitha is hesitant to share but responds to Marquise's emphasis that “there's only so many of *us* in this school. We gotta be able to talk to each other.” In this scene, there seems to be tension between how Tabitha is included in the Black community by her peers while recognizing how her light skin color makes her different. Marquise places emphasis on “us” when referring to how few Black students there are in their high school, and so Tabitha should feel comfortable confiding in him. However, he is then surprised that such a racist incident happened to Tabitha because she “passes the paper bag test,” which was a crude custom of measuring proximity to whiteness within African American communities that

could be used to regulate membership to elite Black organizations (Hunter, 1998). Later Marquise says, “our unapologetic Black faces” indicating he again clearly sees Tabitha as Black. These examples demonstrate what Reginald Daniel and Gary Haddow (2010) refer to as “strategic essentialism” for the African American community, which is defined as “a tactic that nationalities, racial/ethnic, or minority groups can utilize to mobilize themselves in order to achieve certain goals” (p. 318). Marquise engages strategic essentialism by creating community with Tabitha when he emphasizes “us” and later seems to include her in “our unapologetic Black faces.”

Daniel and Haddow (2010) discuss the tensions that occur around strategic essentialism when mobilizing across Black multiracial and monoracial communities because it can lead to conflicts regarding different definitions and manifestations of racial identity, which is demonstrated by Marquise being surprised by Tabitha’s experience of racial profiling. Despite this peer perpetuating a monolithic Black experience for those who do not pass “the paper bag test,” this scene does provide some nuancing of mixed race representation. In one interaction/scene, Tabitha is portrayed as being both included (in line with strategic essentialism) and excluded (due to colorism and her proximity to whiteness). Taken together, the scene with Marquise likely signifies a more common lived experience of multiracial young people in line with the power of representation. Yet, neither multiraciality nor mixedness are named explicitly.

Similar dynamics also appear in *All American*. In an episode toward the end of the first season (Shotz, 2019), Jordan is talking with his (monoracial Black) Grandpa Willy (Brent Jennings), who tries to push Jordan to take more ownership and lead his football team in contradistinction to Spencer. Willy says “You’re too comfortable, son. And that’s no fault of yours. You were raised that way. Given a seat at the table. Spencer, on the other hand, had to fight for his seat, as do most of us Black men.” Here, “comfort” might be connected to privilege accorded to Jordan on account of his not being seen as a Black man, which is counter to the police arrest scene. The white cops clearly saw Jordan as a Black “boy” and treated him as such. But Grandpa Willy does not seem to see Jordan as a Black man given his use of “us Black men” which could include Jordan, though in this context, represents an attempt to make a distinction between “most of us Black men” and Jordan’s level of comfort and his not having to fight for a seat at the table as Spencer has. Jordan’s response signals his need to assert that he is part of the group by later using “our” when explaining that Jordan was not taught much of “our Black History” growing up in Beverly Hills. This is another example of how a Black character perpetuates essentialized constructions of what a Black man or person should be. Though, the fact that this scene captures some of the nuance that Jordan might be feeling related to his inclusion/exclusion in Black communities signals a move toward more nuanced representation as opposed to a mere one-dimensional portrayal.

Further, in the first episode of Netflix’s *Dear White People* (Simien, 2017a), one of the main characters, Samatha “Sam” White (Logan Browning), who is biracial Black and white, converses with her monoracial Black best friend Joelle Brooks (Ashley Blaine Featherson) about dating a white man and how that is connected to her campus activism and racial identity. Sam tries to rationalize “dating white boys” with being biracial, but Joelle retorts “You’re not Rashida Jones, biracial. You’re Tracee Ellis Ross, biracial. People think of you as Black.” This scene is similar to the previous scenes because Joelle is essentializing what it means to be a biracial Black person by limiting this racial identity to two options as modeled by Rashida Jones or Tracee Ellis Ross. This illustrates the extent to which racial authenticity is often questioned and how whether monoracial Black characters claim multiracial characters as part of the race depends on the choices that the multiracial character makes within the show. Moreover, portrayals of multiraciality on TV shows are inherently essentialized, given that shows typically represent one multiracial lived experience (even if there is more than one multiracial character) by solely engaging race from the perspective of just one such character. Therefore, there ought to be deliberate character construction that leads to an accurate representation of the nuances associated with mixed race identities in order to avoid essentializing a singular multiracial experience.

Grappling with Identity: What Determines Blackness?

As the previous examples illustrate, oftentimes, the policing of identity comes from external groups. But there are other shows with characters who grapple more explicitly with their mixed identities and the extent to which they can claim Blackness. *Charmed*, the fantasy remake that includes college-going young adult Maggie Vera (Sarah Jeffery), tackles questions of racial authenticity when, late in Season 1 (Episode 18), Maggie finds out that she has a different biological father than the one she has always known (Beeman, 2019). And her biological father was Black and not Latino. Maggie later is shown filling out demographics for a scholarship and selects both Black and Latino, which leads her to a screen that reads “specialized scholarships.” She says, “I’m special” but then is unsure when those scholarships are geared toward Black students. After looking at photos of Black students associated with the scholarships, she then searches online, “what determines Blackness?” Maggie has a questioning and unsure expression at first, but her statement about being “special” signals her entryway toward claiming Blackness and that she can be both Black while also unique or special for not fitting a prototypical or essentialized Black identity.

Later in the episode, Maggie says to her sister, Macy Vaughn (Madeleine Mantock), who shares the same biological parents as Maggie, “For 18 years, I have always checked the same box on every form. And now, I am eligible for all these scholarships for Black students. Is it messed up for me to apply?” Macy responds, “Our dad is Black.” Maggie then presses for a definitive answer from her older sister, who has been Black all her life. Macy ends the conversation by noting how hard the question about whether Maggie should be considered Black is when she states, “It’s a hard question. I am sorry that I can’t answer it for you.” This example of needing an external authority to tell her what to do demonstrates how Maggie is still developing into emerging adulthood and establishing her sense of identity and confidence in who she is. This is reminiscent of college student development theories like Marcia Baxter Magolda’s (2004, 2014) self-authorship theory, which have been adapted to multiethnic and multiracial students (e.g., Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008). Self-authorship outlines a developmental trajectory from externally defined ways of knowing, being, and constructing relationships to more internally defined ways to do so.

A crucial point of the developmental journey is the crossroads, where individuals question the external formulas they have been following and must now decide what path to pursue next. In this episode of *Charmed*, Maggie explicitly states she is at a crossroads during the group scholarship interview with other Black students: “I just found out that my dad is Black and I am at somewhat of a crossroads.” Later in the same episode, Maggie is talking with her older sister Macy again, who offers to be a listening board for her newfound identity and associated dilemmas. Maggie shares “I don’t think I will apply for any of the Black student scholarships. It just doesn’t feel right. But, I am going to check out the BSU again... I want to figure out this new part of myself.” This decision exemplifies Maggie’s place in the crossroads and her movement towards an internal definition of what it means to be multiracial and what it means to claim Blackness. Specifically, Maggie demonstrates this by asserting her desire to figure out this new part of herself.

Later in Season 2, we hear Maggie reaching a similar crossroads by signaling to a sense of liminality, which means to occupy a threshold or in between existence (Turner, 1969). In Season 2 Episode 12 (Byrd, 2020), Maggie in reference to white and dark lighters says “the world isn’t black and white. It’s gray.” White and dark lighters are protectors of the witches in the *Charmed* universe whereby the white represents the good in people, while the dark represents the darkness or evil. Maggie exudes a complex understanding of liminality in claiming that concepts do not have to exist in a binary. Rather, similar to her lived experience, they can exist in a threshold or beyond rigid boxes and definitions.

However, in *Dear White People*, Sam is not allowed to be in the gray. Throughout Season 1, she must grapple with a choice between being in a relationship with white Gabe Mitchell (John Patrick Amedori) or Black Reggie Green (Marque Richardson). Sam’s struggle to choose between Gabe and Reggie represents

her struggle to choose between the white and Black sides of her biracial identity. This idea is most evidenced in a pivotal scene in Episode 7 (Ganatra, 2017) when Gabe and Sam say “I love you” to each other and Gabe mentions how complicated and a mess she is, calling in tropes of mixed people being confused or pathologizing their identities (Nadal et al., 2011). And later in Episode 10 (Simien, 2017b), Sam says that she slept with Reggie because “I needed to know for sure what I wanted.” However, in Season 2 (Simien, 2018), Sam’s confidence in her Black identity seems solidified as she responds to Gabe during a fight: “Do you think I get to go out into the world half the time as a white girl and the other half as a black girl? I’m black. In this society, that is what I am, period.” This confidence of her identity might be due to her receiving explicitly and expressly monoracist attacks like being called a “half-breed” and her mother being called a “monkey” and, even recalling hybrid degeneracy theory, (Aspinall, 2015) by an attack stating, “your dad ruined you.”

These two examples from *Charmed* and *Dear White People* denote the divergent ways multiracial people engage their identities and what it means to occupy a gray space or feel forced to choose between racial identities, thus choosing between two or more parts of themselves. While this complexity is illustrated across two different shows, this complex portrayal falls short within one TV show. One must watch multiple TV shows to see anti-essentialized portrayals of the mixed experience that approach a level of nuanced and powerful representation.

BROADER DISCUSSION: MIXED RACE PORTRAYALS AREN'T ENOUGH

Though our analysis focused on the specific examples of these focal mixed characters who intentionally discussed or engaged their mixed identities, their relationships with parents need further unpacking, especially given recent critiques of Netflix shows like the ones we have been analyzing. Writing for Polygon, a gaming-focused outlet from Vox Media, Petrana Radulovic (2021) critiqued biracial characters’ representations on Netflix because they tend to not show a meaningful connection to the parent of color. However, we found that in two Netflix series included in our analysis, *Dear White People* and *Trinkets*, the biracial characters, Sam and Tabitha, respectively, spend the most meaningful time with their Black moms. While there is meaningful engagement of this type in *All American* and *Trinkets*, the Black parents failed to sufficiently provide racial socialization, specifically the kind that prepares children for encountering bias (Rollins & Hunter, 2013; Snyder, 2012).

Our findings illuminate the need for more deliberate consideration when constructing both story arcs and mixed race characters on TV. Portrayals are not enough. When people of color state that “representation matters” they never say, “portrayal matters.” Indeed, while portrayal is an essential first step, there must be more deliberate intentionality in the way mixed characters speak to the lived experiences of mixed race people in order to reach the power of being fully represented. Even in the shows with specific scenes that discuss multiraciality, they do not move beyond singular conversations or single episodes. For example, in *Charmed*, there is a powerful scene about navigating the world as a multiracial person in Season 1. However, there is no follow-up in Seasons 2 or 3 about this lived experience. The show touches upon race in the coming seasons but never returns to this crucial scene between sisters Maggie and Macy.

Our paper continues the discussion on the critical engagement of mixed race Hollywood, and our findings suggest continued and further engagement are needed. As Beltrán and Fojas (2008) noted, “mixed race imagery has been an enduring and powerful trope in U.S. culture, deployed to convey popular conceptions about national identity, social norms, and political entitlement” and we need to continue to “rethink normative discourses about the representation of race and racial categories” (p. 11). In addition to rethinking normative discourses, we must be able to center differential racialization specific to (anti)Blackness in U.S. society. In this regard, Ralina Joseph’s (2013) work is most instructive. Pulling from Valerie Smith’s articulation of how

so-called rules of hypodescent were internalized and converted from externally applied indicators of shame to sources of pride and belonging, Joseph states, “Representations of blackness as something to be transcended fly in the face of the historic embrace of multiracial African Americans in African American communities” (p. 3). Joseph (2013) goes on to critique these types of representations in popular culture because they “believe the complexity of real-life experiences of such subjects, who live simultaneously as black and mixed-race, in a messy multiplicity that is rarely contained in any racialized nomenclature” (p. 3).

WHY FOCUS ON PORTRAYALS OF MIXEDNESS AND MULTIRACIALITY? IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY

When focusing on popular culture as a pedagogical tool in the classroom, multiracial representation is critical because it helps to illustrate the complexities of race. Our findings inform recommendations for pedagogical practice for dialogue about race in college classroom spaces. In framing our recommendations for pedagogy, we return to Bishop’s (1990) metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors concerning young adult representation while encouraging readers to engage with the scholar’s larger legacy (see McNair & Edwards, 2021). Hence, mirrors represent oneself in the media, windows provide opportunities to learn about others, and sliding glass doors are analogous to entry points from different perspectives. We argue that all three types of representation serve as important pedagogical tools, and because of our focus on higher education, we discuss how our findings inform classroom spaces in college environments.

When teaching about privilege and oppression, educators must recognize how these dynamics that are related to multiraciality are contested. We argue that multiracial subjectivity is a marginalized identity that is often viewed as an outlier in society due to the presence of monoracism, a unique system of oppression that operates under the paradigm that people have one racial identity (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). Moreover, as demonstrated in our findings, multiracial identity development becomes more complex through the lens of adolescence and coming of age journeys (Lynch, 2022). Jeffery Arnett (2010) asserts the importance of examining late adolescence and emerging adulthood from the perspective of cultural psychology. He characterizes this time in life as an age of identity exploration, instability, self-focus, in between, and possibilities. Additionally, psychology and higher education scholars have examined multiracial identity development amongst adolescents and college-aged students (Campbell & Eggerling-Boeck, 2006; Lynch, 2022; Poston, 1990; Renn, 2000, 2004; Williams et al., 2014). This scholarship demonstrates the importance of multiracial identity development during adolescence and emerging adulthood; therefore, we have focused our analysis on portrayals of mixed race characters in young adult storylines on recent television shows and recommend this analysis in the classroom through assignments, exercises, and discussions.

Highlighting identity development also informs specific educational strategies and pedagogical practice focused on race and multiraciality. Other scholars in the women, gender, and sexuality studies discipline have recommended utilizing TV and popular culture as a pedagogical tool to learn about social justice, race, and identities (Bronski et al., 2006; El-Burki, 2017; Gonzalez, 2018). Additionally, Pauline Reynolds (2014) discussed implications of film representation, popular culture, and media in higher education settings. In fact, additional attention is needed towards building upon the use of TV and media as a pedagogical tool for teaching issues of identity in higher education. We utilize our findings to recommend tangible pedagogical practice strategies in college classrooms.

When utilizing TV portrayals as a pedagogical tool to educate about multiraciality and monoracism, we recommend intentional nuance and stewardship. Given that it is important for multiracial college students to see themselves (as mirrors) not only in popular culture and media, but in the curriculum and assignments in the classroom, we do suggest that instructors utilize these imperfect representations as tools to discuss

the complexities of race (Wijeyesinghe, 2021). However, it is also imperative that instructors clarify that representation (or mirrors) is not always enough and to encourage students to imagine different possibilities for more accurate portrayals of mixed race characters in media. This particular TV show portrayal could also be paired with clips from the Oprah Winfrey Network documentary, *Light Girls* (Duke, 2015) to further contemplate the connections between multiraciality, monoracism, and colorism. For the focal characters in our analysis, it is also vital for college educators to highlight that the characters in these portrayals are mixed, rather than assuming a monoracial identity. This emphasis serves as an avenue for mixed race students to see mirrors on TV and in the classroom.

Because utilizing these examples of mixed race representation also serves as windows for monoracial students to learn about the multiracial experience, educators must remember to assert that the mixed experience is not a monolithic one. TV portrayals are inherently essentializing because they only illustrate *one lived experience*. Within classroom spaces, instructors must acknowledge this in order to recognize that these singular discrete portrayals are not sufficient to thoroughly understand the complexities of multiraciality on a systemic level. Instructors can assign additional readings from an increasing body of literature connected to Critical Mixed Race Studies (see Daniel et al., 2014) along with other media clips to more accurately depict the holistic mixed race experience.

Finally, while utilizing popular examples like those in our analysis can serve as a powerful tool for young adults to learn about race, it is also essential to emphasize these examples can be sliding doors or entry points to learn more about multiraciality specifically, for all students. In order to continue learning, instructors should scaffold additional learning opportunities once students walk through that door. The topic of multiraciality should not be regulated within a single lesson plan. Rather it should be integrated for continued engagement, for example, with other forms of media, literature, and scholarship in order to expand students' knowledge about critical mixed race studies. This recommendation is not meant to negate the importance of mirrors and seeing oneself in media, but instead to expand further nuanced and deliberate conversations about the complexities of race inclusive of multiraciality.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This study continues to demonstrate more nuanced considerations when constructing mixed race characters on TV and other media. While these portrayals are an empowering and important start, more attention is needed to demonstrate anti-essentialized multiracial experiences. Multiraciality is not monolithic, and the way that adolescents, teens, and college students experience their multiracial identity differs depending on context, social environment, and time (Campbell & Eggerling-Boeck, 2006; Lynch, 2022; Renn, 2000, 2004; Williams et al., 2014). However, this complexity is missing from much of the current entertainment landscape. We therefore argue that these storylines must move beyond portrayals and more toward accurate representation for multiracial young people to not only see themselves on TV, but to also see their complex, messy, diverse, and empowering identities more accurately depicted on the screen.

Moreover, our study has implications for pedagogical discussions related to race and popular culture given the ways TV, media, and popular culture can be utilized as pedagogical tools in the classroom to examine complex issues related to social justice (Bronski et al., 2006; El-Burki, 2017; Gonzalez, 2018). Specifically, El-Burki (2017) emphasizes the point that current college students have spent most of their life with mediated representations of race through popular culture and asserts that representations in the media have become cues for understanding race and resulting worldviews. Our analysis calls for the intentional examination of portrayal and representation as a pedagogical practice in the classroom when discussing race and social identities. Dialogue and critique focused on these TV shows may push students to develop more

nuanced perspectives on race and multiraciality. We encourage higher education educators to build upon other disciplines and continue using TV representations as a social justice pedagogical tool, but to do so with stewardship and intentionality.

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