

WOMEN, FILM AND RACIAL THINKING: EXPLORING THE REPRESENTATION AND RECEPTION OF INTERRACIAL ROMANCE

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Abstract

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Women, Film and Racial Thinking:
Exploring the Representation and Reception of Interracial Romance
(Under the direction of Dr. Anne Johnston)

At the height of the civil rights movement, the symbolic struggle inherent in interracial images was plainly visible in the picket lines and protests attracted by movies like *Island in the Sun* (1957). More than 50 years later, such demonstrations are long gone, but the Black-White interracial couple is still a figure imbued with personal and political significance. Recognizing this enduring importance and the complicated relationship between race and sexuality in American culture, the purpose of this dissertation was to explicate the beliefs about race that are implicated in Hollywood depictions of Black-White interracial romantic relationships and to understand how young women of different backgrounds make sense of these perspectives. To that end, this research employed a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis and focus groups, all aimed at the goal of illuminating the representation and reception of supportive and critical messages about race relations and interracial relationships in popular films produced since 1954.

The content analysis affirmed that the representation of interracial couples in American films has often been observably and quantifiably problematic as theorized, a finding that contradicts Hollywood's ostensibly egalitarian and liberal ideological bent. Despite marked social change during the period studied, certain negative tropes of interracial interaction remain prominent across long periods of time--especially the association of interracial relationships with social costs, the tendency to present the interracial romance as one that is less likely to be long lasting and fully realized, and the

near ubiquitous association of interracial romance with violence. There was also a surprising emphasis on African American resistance to these relationships in particular in a wide variety of these films. Nonetheless, there were important distinctions in representation in certain periods and evidence of racially egalitarian messaging in a minority of these interracial depictions. Moreover, in the past decade filmmakers have produced more and less problematic portrayals of interracial relationships than in previous ones.

At the same time, the focus groups revealed distinct differences in how young women of different racial backgrounds respond to these ideologically charged film depictions of interracial couples. Although our differences are now more subtle or even concealed, these conversations reflect the reality that deep and important social cleavages remain across racial lines even among the youngest Americans, and these differences yield markedly different patterns of attention to and interpretation of interracial film narratives.

The audience study also indicated that there are real dangers to stories that exaggerate one group's culpability in a social problem and negate another's, as so often happens in interracial film depictions. The unintended consequence of telling these stories of race and romance is that they may tend to further implicate the attitudes and actions of some in our ongoing racial conflicts (especially African Americans), while ignoring those of others (in this case Whites). Within this research context, the result was that Black audiences had their fears confirmed by viewing a negative, conflict-oriented interracial film depiction, and their hopes of social inclusion encouraged in viewing a more racially liberal or egalitarian one. White participants, however, were from the start less connected to issues related to racial struggle. For them, both stories seemed to exacerbate existing racial concerns and provide justification for already problematic and polarizing preconceptions about why Whites and Blacks in America remain so far apart.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the Minter and Smyers families and all those whose loving examples have helped to more inclusively define what normal means.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation owes much to the work of those who came before me and the generosity of those who supported me while the project was being completed. I acknowledge the importance of many scholarly works to my own research in the body of the dissertation, as well as in the notes and bibliography, but certain works have been especially significant and are worthy of particular attention here. Principal among these are Entman and Rojecki's *The Black Image in the White Mind* and Thomas Wartenberg's *Unlikely couples: Movie Romance as Social Criticism*. Discovering the latter reassured me that this topic, which had so long interested me on a personal level, had serious merit as an area of academic pursuit. It also helped me develop the ideas that form the basis for this work.

Several people helped me in the research, writing, and thinking through of the interlocking strands of race and gender that inform this project. Chief among these is Dr. Anne Johnston, Professor and Associate Dean for Graduate Studies at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As my dissertation advisor, Dr. Johnston has taught me by example how to be a supportive mentor, academic and scholar. This project owes much to Dr. Johnston's expert guidance, high standards, and generous spirit. Dr. Robert Entman, J.B. & Maurice C. Shapiro Professor of Media & Public Affairs in the School of Media & Public Affairs at The George Washington University, also deserves a great deal of the credit for the completion of this study, possibly more than I can express. On many occasions, Dr. Entman's steadfast support and insightful critique provided the momentum I needed to work through the challenges this study entailed.

My other dissertation committee members have contributed substantially to my work and my education. I am lucky and grateful to have worked with them. They are Dr. Jane Brown, James L. Knight Professor and Dr. Lucila Vargas, Professor, in our School of Journalism and Mass Communication and Dr. Marco Steenbergen, formerly of UNC's Department of Political Science and now Professor of Political Sociology and Political Psychology, University of Bern. I am also fortunate to have the participation of Dr. Trevy McDonald, Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, who so generously agreed to be an additional reader in the final stages of this project and whose expertise in race and media is a great resource.

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PART I: BACKGROUND

Almighty God created the races White, Black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that He separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix.

– Judge Leon Bazile, January 6 1959 ("Loving et Ux v. Virginia," 1959, p. 194)

“Immoral and indecent” and “grossly scandalous.” – Louis P. Davis Jr.,
President of the Gentilly Citizens’ Council on the interracial romance of
“Island in the Sun” (“Groups Protest Film,” 1957)

Just because you say you’d marry Chris Rock, doesn’t make you a civil rights
activist. – Wanda Sykes as “Barb” speaking to Julia Louis Dreyfus’s
“Christine” in the television series, *The New Adventures of Old Christine*
(Ackerman, 2006)

In the nearly fifty years between the protests and heated rhetoric surrounding *Island in the Sun* and the sitcom fantasies of Julia Louis Dreyfus, interracial intimacy has been transformed from a transgression with assured Biblical, legal, economic and physical penalties, to a social taboo whose crossing is the subject of public satire and popular titillation.¹ Several major events in the middle of the 20th century combined to facilitate this sea change-- science based advances in our understanding of race, the desegregation of the armed forces by Truman in World War II, and the civil rights movement all helped to bring about dramatic changes in the public perception and legal status of Blacks in America.² These changes in status and racial thinking certainly spilled over into the public-private sphere of interracial romance. Yet, the rehabilitation of forbidden images of

¹ By the end of the 2000s, depictions of interracial romance as controversial had become such a recognizable part of popular culture that they were the target of genre parody in the Wayans’ brothers *Dance Movie*, (2009).

² For a concise overview of how American thinking about race changed during the 20th century, see *Divided by Color* (Kinder & Sanders, 1996). Prior to World War II, racial hierarchy was widely considered an immutable matter of biology, and mixed race sexual alliances were often treated as pathological and unnatural and talked about in the most tragic terms in public discourse (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Sollors, 1997, 2000).

interracial sexuality is not as simple as these contrasting comments suggest. On the contrary, before, during and after the civil rights era, real life and fictional interracial romances have remained one of the most hotly contested and complicated signifiers of American racial attitudes and progress (Childs, 2005, 2009; Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997; Sollors, 2000).³ Recognizing this enduring significance, the purpose of the present study is to explore the complex process of construction and interpretation of beliefs about race that accompanies Hollywood depictions of interracial romantic relationships.

The Political Implications of Interracial Romance

At the height of the civil rights movement, the symbolic struggle inherent in interracial images was plainly visible. The Harry Belafonte-Joan Fontaine drama *Island in the Sun* (Zanuck, 1957) opened to widespread press attention, political controversy, angry crowds of protesters, *and* great box office success in 1957 ("Klan Film Pickets in South Dispersed," 1957; Popkin, 1957). The film's distribution stretched out over several months with multiple stops, starts and incidents along the way. At the start of the movie's run in the South, groups of concerned White citizens' including the anti-communist Americanism Committee of the First District American Legion protested when the film opened in New Orleans in July 1957 ("Groups Protest Film," 1957). As showings expanded throughout the South, more trouble ensued. In August, the Klan marched in front of a movie theatre in Jacksonville, Florida and in September they marched in Charlotte, North Carolina ("Klan Film Pickets in South

³ Public debate about mixed race unions has sometimes been florid and sensational. One notorious example involved the prominent Rhinelander family of New York. As the *Washington Post* reported in 1934, the marriage of the scion of the wealthy Rhinelander family to his mixed race former servant was considered so inexplicable and unfortunate that his error in judgment must have had a medical cause; Rhinelander was a victim of "reduced resistance" due to a history of stuttering ("Science Explains Rhinelander's Unlucky Marriage," 1925). Much of this history is documented by Heidi Ardizzone in her analysis of the film *Night of the Quarter Moon* (Zugsmith, 1959), which was loosely based on this story (2008).

Dispersed; Negro Home Gets Expanded Guard. Film Picketed in Florida. Special to The New York, Times").

While mostly small groups marched in the streets, in South Carolina's state capitol, legislators contemplated proposals to penalize theatres that showed the film. In October, segregationist picketing in Atlanta threatened to erupt in a riot at a drive-in theatre and the next day the police obtained an injunction against showing the film ("Georgia Injunction Bars Film," 1957). In short, miscegenation, as it was called then, was considered a grave social threat by many and in 1957 those who opposed it were unashamed and unafraid to say so publicly. After all, they had powerful allies in the church and legal establishment on their side.

The movie picket lines have long died down. Nonetheless, Black-White romantic coupling is still contested in our culture and retains symbolic potency on both sides of the American racial divide (Childs, 2005). Though the terms and shape of the controversy have shifted over time, in newspaper and magazine articles (Anthony, 2006; Buckley, 1991; Pearson, 1991), feature films (Lee, 1991; Sharp, 2009; Shill, 2009) and scholarly studies (Childs, 2005; Gateward, 2005; Moore, 2006), the Black-White interracial couple is a figure imbued with enduring, complex and contradictory personal and political significance.⁴ The

⁴ The NAACP, for one, has continued to take this subject very seriously, publicly announcing their commitment to monitoring the content of films with interracial themes as recently as 1991 (Buckley, 1991). In addition, a politician, who transgresses this norm is presumed to be damaged (Harold Ford for example), and one who upholds it may be strengthened. To illustrate this latter point, two identity related questions were routinely discussed within the Black community at the start of President Obama's 2007 primary campaign: Can "we" trust him and is he Black enough? The ready response which was often answered, look who he married, with Michelle Obama offered as proof of Barack Obama's Black authenticity. Addressing the contingent nature of this validation, in a widely circulated column, Debra Dickerson surmised, "Blacks fear that one day he'll go Tiger Woods on us and get all race transcendent." Dickerson also gave voice to the unspoken assumption that Black women especially may not have support Obama in the same numbers and with the same enthusiasm if his wife were White, speculating, "he might well have never been in the running without a traditionally black spouse and kids" (Dickerson, 2007).

Hollywood film in particular has been a favorite medium for these images. As Gail Lumet Buckley observed, “If the ‘formula’ worked once, it would work forever” (1991, p. H1). So, time and again, in works as divergent as D.W. Griffith’s infamous epic of reconstruction, *The Birth of A Nation* (Griffith, et al., 2002), and Spike Lee’s polemic of Black racial separatism, *Jungle Fever* (Lee, 1991), interracial sexual involvement has been a source of recurring fascination since the silent film era (Courtney, 2005; Wartenberg, 1999).⁵ American films have addressed this topic in a variety of genres, across multiple periods, from a variety of political perspectives. These portrayals are in turn heavily influenced by American theatrical tradition and literature that predates the civil war (Sollors, 2000). Given the ongoing social resonance of this imagery, and understanding popular culture to be one of the principle sites in which social controversy is worked out in American society today, the present study aims to accomplish two goals: to understand the beliefs about race that are conveyed in post-civil rights era depictions of interracial romance and to investigate how young African American and White women make sense of the perspectives about race relations articulated (implicitly or explicitly) in contemporary film depictions of interracial romantic relationships.

Symbolic Politics and “Epoch Making, Precedent Shattering American History”

“These are not bad people,” he said of the Southerners who were defending themselves in the segregation cases. “All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in schools alongside some big

⁵ Key patterns in the portrayal of mixed race sexual involvement in American film are most often traced back to D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, et al., 2002). Although film critics praise the film, Blacks were incensed by its portrayal of southern horror stories of reconstruction, which featured Blacks as villains and Black men as dangerous, sex-crazed rapists and Klan members as heroes restoring order to a chaotic post-civil war environment. The NAACP mounted a national campaign including public protests against the film’s release (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Boston Branch., 1915). Susan Courtney’s comprehensive book *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation* chronicles the earliest representations of interracial affairs in American movies.

Black Bucks.” – David Halberstam, quoting President Eisenhower (1993, p. 421)⁶

To be sure, recurring cycles of controversy over interracial intimacy were not confined to media representation. Looking beyond the movie house, interracial sexual unions have often been explicitly connected to physical and existential danger; visions of rape, lynching and disorder are seared into the collective American unconscious. Even in race-related public policy disputes seemingly far removed from sexual politics, racial symbolism and intergroup competition often meet. In the 1950s, fears of interracial union were infused with a special urgency by the perceived threat of school integration and these fears were harnessed as “an important source for legitimizing racial segregation. In contemporary America, White supremacist groups use fear of interracial unions to justify their rejection of racial equality...”(2001, p. 132). Accepting that much of mass public opinion is based in large part on individuals’ affective (emotional) reaction to powerful political symbols, and that symbolic politics can shape both social and economic public policies (Sears, 1993), the production and consumption of interracial sexuality as a powerful and enduring symbol in American life is deserving of much greater study.

A great deal has changed since those mid-century disputes. George Wallace no longer guards public schoolhouse doors in Alabama.⁷ No one protests now when images of cross racial intimacy are projected 20-feet high at the local Cineplex. But Black-White interracial couples are still rare in real life and on-screen (Childs, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b); their presentation in popular film is still infused with controversy (Childs, 2009; Gateward, 2005); and the meaning of these cultural images for audiences has rarely been

⁶ David Halberstam recounts this story in *The Fifties* (Halberstam, 1993).

⁷ George Wallace’s daughter Peggy was a public supporter of Barack Obama and wrote a commentary arguing that her father might have supported Barack Obama had he lived to see the 2008 election. (David, 2009; P. W. Kennedy, 2008).

explored in any depth.⁸ With the wealth of popular film depictions over the years and the wellsprings of emotion still stirred by the topic, we should know more about the cultural and social significance of on-screen interracial romance, and this study seeks to help fill that gap. To begin to help us better understand this subject, this dissertation focuses on deciphering both the ideological content of these depictions-- what they have shown us about our ever-changing beliefs about race-- and how these representations are received today by two groups of viewers most centrally implicated in these controversies – young Black and White women.

Study Organization

Bearing in mind these aims, the dissertation is divided into three major sections. Section one comprises the background for the study—this introduction to the topic, the review of scholarly literature, and the research design. The remaining two sections present the research findings, first those evaluating interracial representation and then the audience study.

In Chapter one, the literature review brings together scholarly knowledge about American racial attitudes, racial representation in media, and both effects and reception of race related media content. Chapter two describes the different methods used in all phases of the dissertation.

Next, focusing on representation, Chapter three presents a content analysis that establishes a framework for understanding the dominant or preferred meanings for each of

⁸ There has, however, been treatment of the issue in the popular press from time to time. When *Jungle Fever* was released in 1991, it sparked a great deal of public debate. Many interracial couples publicly condemned the film as a throwback to the negative stereotypes of the past. See the contemporaneous group interview in *Newsweek* for examples of public response ("You Can't Join Their Clubs: Six mixed couples get together to talk about love, marriage and prejudice," 1991).

the films shown in the audience study and puts them in historical perspective in relation to other works featuring interracial relationships. This part of the study explicates the prominent patterns and beliefs about race that dominate interracial romantic depictions, and compares the representation of Black-White romantic relationships in different periods to determine how these patterns have changed over time since desegregation.⁹ In this chapter I also argue that film depictions of interracial relationships constitute distinctive *racial frames*--cohesive, consistent and ideologically rich patterns of representation that both tell the audience how to view a racially charged social situation (in this case the interracial relationship) and provide justifications for the audience's general position towards it . Understanding ideology to be a "system of beliefs, values and opinions" that operates both explicitly and implicitly in popular entertainment, this analysis shows how the narrative conventions employed in film depictions of interracial romance frame racial issues in ideologically charged ways that may both reflect and contribute to how we think about race (Giannetti, 2007; Maddux, 2009; Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008, p. 331). In addition, to round out the analysis of representation, Chapter four provides textual analysis of select films that exemplify the different racial frames identified in the content analysis. This includes close readings of the two films that were utilized in the audience study.

The final four chapters present the findings from the audience study and concluding thoughts on the study as a whole. Chapter five explores audience members' experience with and predispositions toward race. This provides much needed context about their standpoints that helps in analyzing their responses to the films and also helps to establish a baseline for comparing the attitudes expressed after viewing the film to those expressed before it. Do these young Black and White women share similar views about race, media and interracial relationships or does Kinder and Sander's racial divide persist among these members of the

⁹ The U.S. Supreme Court *Brown versus Board of Education* public school desegregation ruling in 1954 is used as the symbolic marker for this period.

Millennial generation? What were the universal themes and key differences in attitudes expressed about interracial relationships and race relations within the different participant subgroups before viewing? This analysis speaks to the work done by Kinder and Sanders (1996) and calls into question the claim so often made in the popular press of Gen Y being a “color blind generation”(Yoseph & Grmai, 2008).¹⁰

To the extent that there is a persistent racial divide among young women, chapters six and seven explore how audience reception of two very different popular depictions of interracial relationships was complicated by race and other factors including individual background, life experience and preexisting attitudes and opinions. This analysis also explores how focus group participants incorporated or disputed the viewpoints and discourse of the films shown into their conversations. Finally Chapter 8 synthesizes the information from these analytical chapters on representation and reception. Ultimately, my objective in this study was to use this analysis of the representation and reception of these still uncommon and often marginalized couples to tell a story not only about mixed race unions, but also about how media, gender and race intersect in America.

¹⁰ For a discussion on race from the perspective of several leading writers from this age group, see “The Root: Is Generation Y Colorblind?”(Yoseph & Grmai, 2008).

Chapter 1: Theories of Race, Representation and Audience Reception

Why We Still Care About Interracial Marriage -- The Case for the Present Study

How profound the hatred, how deep the bigotry...that wakens in this image of Black life blooming within White....It is an image that squeezes racism out from the pores of people who deny they are racist. –Patricia Williams (Evans, 2007, p. 223; P. J. Williams, 1991, p. 189)

The idea that interracial romance is socially meaningful is certainly not new, but the conviction that such couplings retain a pivotal symbolic place in our culture is gaining more rather than less currency of late despite such couples becoming more statistically commonplace (Childs, 2005, 2009; Sollors, 2000, 2004). Because of their intimate access to multiple social worlds, sociologist Erica Childs likens interracial couples to canaries in a racial coal mine (2005, p. 5). The metaphor is a telling one. Like the canaries that miners used to detect even the lowest levels of noxious fumes, within the American racial landscape, interracial couples are uniquely situated observers of the most intimate racial attitudes and racial tension. Furthermore, Childs argues, there is as much insight to be gained about race in analyzing cultural representation of interracial couples as there is in interviewing such couples about their lives or even in surveying the broader community about their attitudes towards interracial dating and marriage (2009, p. 2).

Recently, film and philosophy scholar Thomas Wartenberg argued that there is an important tradition of mainstream film using the symbolic figure of a transgressive or “unlikely” romantic couple to subvert existing social hierarchies (including race) and raise a range of significant philosophical topics. Susan Courtney affirms this idea while

acknowledging a profit motive was equally important in the resurgence of such films.

Looking further back in American cultural history, Alex Lubin contends that Paul Robeson altered not just theatrical but civil rights history as soon as he appeared onstage at the Brattle Street Theater in 1942:

Robeson became the first Black actor to assume the role of Shakespeare's "dark Moor" in an interracial production in the United States... In selecting Robeson as Othello, the producers challenged the color line in a society that outlawed Black/White interracial marriage in thirty-one states and that lynched African American men for imagined indiscretions toward White women.

Perhaps even more important than Robeson's role in the play were the political uses the play served for its audiences. (Lubin, 2005, p. ix)

Calling attention to the significance of this appearance at the time, an editorial in the historic Negro paper *the Chicago Defender* described this event as "epoch making, precedent shattering American history" (Burns, 1945). This was not hyperbole. The implications of this theatrical production reverberated way beyond the stage. Robeson's performance was seen as a radical, and explicitly political act that had great meaning as "audiences in Cambridge and around the United States saw this production as evidence that racial equality could exist in the United States." (Lubin, 2005, p. ix) The attention afforded this theatrical production and the explicit arguments made in contemporary reports about it reveal much about the symbolic importance of interracial intimacy as a marker of racial equality. The current study confronts these and several other claims about the meaning and impact of interracial representation, exploring in particular the interracial "unlikely couple" film as a site of ideological discourse and social criticism in relation young female audiences' responses to these films.

Given the enduring importance of race in our society and the lack of research examining the connections between entertainment discourse, public opinion, and race relations, the present study will apply a multi-method approach in order to pull together these interconnected subjects. In doing so, this project integrates data about film representations of interracial relationships with information about individual attitudes towards race and audience responses to film depictions of interracial relationships.

By necessity, this study has many scholarly influences from several different academic disciplines, but principally cultural studies, public opinion, political communication and political psychology. In exploring both the construction and reception of meaning in interracial romance, this study relies upon knowledge about several interrelated subjects and fundamental conceptual issues:

- the legal and social history and contemporary facts of interracial marriage in American culture;
- the role of entertainment in political discourse;
- how Americans feel about race;
- how race and what Americans believe about race are represented in entertainment media;
- how the above elements come into play in the production of media depictions of interracial romance;
- how what Americans feel about race is affected by the media;
- and, finally, how active audiences transform the media they consume, filtering it through their own values and viewpoints.

In this chapter, the literature is organized according to which one of these foundational issues it addresses. It's also important to note here that whereas previous literature has addressed the production of interracial representation, it has not substantially addressed the reception of these images. So it is one of the key functions of this study to fill this gap, bringing perspectives on media effects and audience reception to bear on how audiences consume film depictions of interracial romance.

In terms of theoretical approach, this study is influenced by the growing number of media scholars who incorporate the two major traditions of media research (Press & Cole, 1999). The first is the rapidly growing body of work in the social science tradition investigating the relationship between mass media, politics and public opinion. This includes political psychology and media effects literature that examine how and to what extent media images influence perceptions about and attitudes towards race and sex and even their preferences regarding public policy issues that have racial and gender components.

The second important influence is the cultural studies tradition of media research. The cultural studies work illuminates how messages about race, gender and sexuality are encoded within entertainment media by media producers and interpreted by media audiences. Most important, this scholarship contextualizes these seemingly simple romantic narratives, revealing them to be layered with deep history and infused with ideology. These disparate traditions afford distinct but arguably complementary ways to think about how political critiques are encoded within popular entertainment and decoded by media audiences. They are addressed in an integrated fashion throughout the literature review. As a whole, the literature reveals that these popular entertainment forms play an important social function, reflecting, reproducing, and questioning ideologies of gender, race and class.

Private Matters, Public Discord: the Social History and Contemporary Facts of Interracial Marriage in America;

While the *Defender* characterized the spectacle of make-believe interracial intimacy as “epoch making” and “precedent shattering” in 1942, these adjectives aptly described the Supreme Court decision that finally legalized such pairings a quarter century later.¹¹ On June 12, 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court put an official end to anti-miscegenation laws in the United States, ruling that “there can be no doubt that restricting the freedom to marry solely because of racial classifications violates the central meaning of the Equal Protection Clause (“Loving v. Virginia,” 1967, p. 53). While less well known than *Brown v. Board of Education*, some legal scholars argue that *Loving v. Virginia* was an equally pivotal legal milestone in the African American struggle for equal rights (Lubin, 2005).¹² In reversing a couple’s conviction for violation of Virginia anti-miscegenation statute, the Court did so on explicitly civil rights and egalitarian grounds, asserting, “the freedom to marry has long been recognized as one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men,” and that “to deny this fundamental freedom on so unsupportable a basis as the racial classifications... is surely to deprive all the State’s citizens of liberty without due process of law” (“Loving v. Virginia,” 1967). At the time of the Supreme Court’s decision, 16 states still had laws prohibiting interracial unions.¹³ Historically, more than 40 states had at

¹¹ Attesting to the power of interracial intimacy as cultural symbol of civil rights, in 1942, *Ebony* magazine editor Ben Burns also called Paul Robeson’s performance of Othello a “happy omen” of “a new world a-comin in U.S. race relations.” See historian Alex Lubin’s *Romance and Rights, the Politics of Interracial Intimacy, 1945 – 1954* for a full account of the social history surrounding this performance.

¹² As precedent, the impact of “Loving v Virginia” still reverberates in American life as gay rights activists use it to argue against laws restricting marriage on the basis of gender.

¹³ See *Loving v. Virginia*, 1967. The Court was unequivocal in its denunciation of laws against intermarriage, writing, “There can be no question but that Virginia’s miscegenation statutes rest solely upon distinctions drawn according to race. The statutes proscribe generally accepted conduct if engaged in by members of different

one time outlawed unions between Americans of European and non-European descent, most often Blacks (Foeman & Nance, 1999). Following the Supreme Court's ruling, such laws, although no longer enforceable, remained on the books for some time in many former Confederate states (Lubin, 2005).

The decision's cultural significance was certainly not lost on the American media, which analyzed its repercussions from a variety of angles. In September of the same year, *Time Magazine* even featured an interracial couple on its cover when Secretary of State Dean Rusk's daughter married an African American man ("A marriage of enlightenment," 1967)¹⁴. Less than six months later, the quintessential American drama of interracial romance, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* opened in theatres throughout the United States and seemed to underscore the beginning of a new era in social integration.

Our current (segregated) social reality.

Despite these signposts of change -- the history-making legal rulings, subsequent public events, and accompanying media fanfare marking the dismantling of *de jure* sexual segregation at the federal level in 1967-- *de facto* social segregation remains a reality in America to this day (Foeman & Nance). At the same time, scholars and laypersons agree that few issues in American politics are as divisive and polarizing as race relations, a phenomenon that continues to be intensified when issues of race are complicated by sex.¹⁵

...members of this Court have already stated that they "cannot conceive of a valid legislative purpose . . . which makes the color of a person's skin the test of whether his conduct is a criminal offense"....There is patently no legitimate overriding purpose independent of invidious racial discrimination which justifies this classification."

¹⁴ In the *Time* cover story entitled "A Marriage of Enlightenment," the writer observed, "Family matter or no, the wedding was social history rather than society-page fare. Dean Rusk, Secretary of State of the U.S., native of Cherokee County, Ga., and grandson of two Confederate soldiers, had given his only daughter's hand to a Negro" (Kristof, 2005).

¹⁵ Linda Williams devotes much of her book *Playing the Race Card* to explicating the intersecting sexual and racial fears underpinning many interracial conflicts including the OJ Simpson trial (L. Williams, 2001) . In 2007 one needed only look at the number of column

This ongoing social conflict is reflected in a variety of formal and informal indicators, from popular discourse to public opinion surveys to media accounts. Whereas support for legal equality and equal economic opportunity between Blacks and Whites has increased so dramatically over time that they are nearing full support, the American public's support for social integration, especially in the key areas of housing, schooling, and sexual relationships, has changed more slowly since the 1970s (Foeman & Nance, 1999; Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997).¹⁶

Our persistent preference for self-segregating within racial group is demonstrated in where we live, where we worship, and in whom we marry. In 2008, an overwhelming majority of all married couples in the United States (93%) were of the same self-identified racial category, and marriages between Blacks and Whites accounted for substantially less than 1% of total marriages (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008a). In theory at least, approval of intermarriage is much more widespread than those numbers indicate, however. Gallup has tracked public opinion on interracial marriage for more than 50 years (Carroll, 2007). The latest figures indicate 77% approval among the American public, with Blacks and Hispanics more likely to say they approve than Whites at a rate of 85% and 87%, respectively, for those groups compared with 75% for Whites. As recently as the 1990s, however, those numbers were significantly lower, especially among Whites. In 1991, only 44% of Whites

inches and front page headlines garnered by the Don Imus controversy and Duke Lacrosse rape case to observe the phenomenon in action.

¹⁶ It is important to note that despite signs of enduring bias against interracial dating and marriage, the number of Americans involved in such relationships has risen steadily since 1940 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b). See *Time magazine* "U.S. Interracial Marriage Rate Soars" for a history (Cary, 2007). The article provides a historical timeline and overview of psychological theories about interracial sexual relationships between Blacks and Whites in the United States. As of 1992, there were more than 1 million reported interracial marriages and more than one half a million biracial children. In "Blacks, whites and love" (Kristof, 2005), Kristof cites 2000 U.S. Census estimates that "6 percent of married Black men had a White wife, and 3 percent of married Black women had a White husband." In addition, Kristof points out, since those numbers are aggregate, that percentage is expected to be much higher among young couples."

said they approved of marriage between Blacks and Whites whereas 70% of Blacks said they did so. This gap is at least in part because, as discussed earlier, the issue of Black-White intermarriage has long been intertwined with issues of equality and civil rights for African Americans.

Even with the gap in approval, those numbers represented a dramatic increase compared to approval of intermarriage during the civil rights movement, when the present study begins. In 1958, the first year in which Gallup asked about this issue, only 4% of Americans “said they approved of marriages between Whites and Blacks” (Carroll, 2007, p. 2). A majority of Americans overall indicated they approved of marriage between Blacks and Whites for the first time in 1997.

These numbers also vary substantially by age. According to the most recent Census figures available, among younger Americans, the rate of interracial unions and support for them has increased at a more rapid pace.¹⁷ Overall, 85% of American adults under 50 now approve of marriage between Blacks and Whites compared to 67% of American adults 50 years and older (Carroll, 2007, p. 4). Despite known methodological issues with race and survey questions, where social norms are known to affect response, this overall upward trend is widely accepted as credible (Carroll, 2007). What’s more, since it is notoriously (and likely increasingly) difficult to measure racial attitudes given the public’s sensitivity to changing social norms,¹⁸ political scientists consider actual rates of intermarriage as well as

¹⁷ According to an AP report published in April 2007, “Since that landmark *Loving v. Virginia* ruling, the number of interracial marriages has soared; for example, Black-White marriages increased from 65,000 in 1970 to 422,000 in 2005. The most recent census bureau data also confirm these figures (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b). Factoring in all racial combinations, Stanford University sociologist Michael Rosenfeld calculates that more than 7 percent of America’s 59 million married couples in 2005 were interracial, compared to less than 2 percent in 1970.” (Stevenson, Gonzenbach, & David, 1994).

¹⁸ Because the expression of overt racial prejudice is increasingly outside of prevailing social norms in the United States, social acceptability bias, the desire to give an

attitudes toward it to be among the last, best indicators of lagging racial divisions available to opinion researchers (Schuman, et al., 1997).

The Importance and Scarcity of Entertainment Studies in Political Communication

In the context of these inherent challenges in gauging attitudes towards racial issues, cultural indicators become even more salient. Leading film scholars and critics assert that racial beliefs are among the most important facets of American life that are regularly and effectively explored through film and that a film both “reflects and contributes to” cultural ideologies (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008, p. 318). Yet, despite an abundance of signs pointing toward the central symbolic significance of interracial relationships in American racial and cultural history, scholarly study of entertainment media discourse involving intimate interracial relationships has been extremely limited.

This scarcity reflects broader patterns in the study of mass media and politics. Until recently, while much attention has been paid to the influence of news and public affairs media in politics and public opinion, the interaction of entertainment media, politics and public opinion remains an area in need of much greater study. Reflecting on this fact, Holbert noted a decade ago, “an initial focus on public affairs content was perfectly logical given researchers’ interests in providing empirical support for Lippmann’s claim that the press ‘is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of the darkness into vision.’ However, some would argue that Lippmann’s quote is equally applicable to entertainment television” (p. 437). I would argue that Lippmann’s claim is also equally applicable to popular film. As Holbert makes clear, the study of political communication is incomplete if it does not encompass entertainment as well as news and affairs programming. So scholars study the representation of gender and

answer that the respondent feels fits the social norm, is considered a substantial threat to accurate measurement of racial attitudes.

race for a variety of reasons, but one of the most important is that we believe entertainment media content means something both as a reflection of (no matter how distorted) and as an influence on society.

Since political analysis of entertainment media is a relatively new area of scholarly pursuit, it is understandable that few studies have addressed either the representation or reception of interracial relationships. Furthermore, since audience studies are generally less common than studies that focus on the media text, at this juncture the few studies that have addressed interracial relationships in popular culture have done so only briefly or tangentially, either within a broader study of race or using a strictly textual focus, examining select cultural artifacts of a particular era, without accounting for the role of individual citizens and audiences in the communication and meaning-making process.

How Americans Feel About Race

Understanding that media images are consumed in context, not isolation, it's helpful to begin the present study by examining recent public opinion scholarship on racial attitudes. Surveying the contemporary racial landscape through the lens of public opinion and political communication scholarship, Entman and Rojecki find, "convincing evidence for both pessimism and optimism"(2001, p. 16). Most notably, scholars assert, since the start of the civil rights movement (and beginning prior to it) White racial attitudes in the United States have undergone major changes.

Tali Mendelberg (2001) and Kinder and Sanders (1996) among others note that these changes include a major shift in attitudes among White Americans toward a normative, almost universal belief in racial equality (in principle if not practice). In fact, writing near the end of the last millennium Kinder and Sanders observed, "Whites' views on racial matters have undergone a sweeping change over the past half-century, quite unlike

any other in the annals of public opinion research... On matters of principle, Whites have become dramatically more egalitarian.”(1996, p. 92) Unlike earlier in the early twentieth century, by the 1990s, most White Americans supported the idea of equality in all spheres of public life including education and housing, believing that “Blacks have a right to live wherever they wish” and that segregation in public facilities like buses and restaurants is wrong (1996, p. 92).

Despite these important advances, however, scholars also acknowledge that significant racial division and “discord” persist. Whereas White Americans now see racial discrimination as something primarily in the past, Black Americans “see prejudice and discrimination everywhere” (Kinder & Sanders, 1996, p. 92). In part this explains why White Americans support egalitarian principles but overwhelmingly do not support the principle policies that are designed to facilitate equal opportunity and advancement for Blacks whereas Blacks overwhelmingly do. This attitudinal gap reflects differences in the prioritization of competing values as well as experience. Where Whites emphasize individualism, Blacks are more likely to emphasize egalitarianism.

It’s important to treat this racial divide not just as a symptom of divisions in experiences, values, etc. but also as a cause. It is both a dependent and independent variable in our racial environment. Because Whites *perceive* the American racial landscape differently, they feel resentment about what they see as Blacks’ failure to appreciate the advances made and to take advantage of the opportunities now afforded them, embracing the American value of individualism and hard work. So, alongside an increasingly pervasive “norm of racial equality” there is also subtle but substantial racial discord and resentment. In place of old-school biological racism, which emphasized differences in innate ability between Blacks and Whites, Kinder and Sanders assert, “at the core of this new resentment was not whether Blacks possessed the inborn ability to succeed, but rather whether they

would try” (1996, p. 105). The turbulence of the late 1960s and 1970s only fueled these doubts. As the authors note, “the riots specifically and inner-city life generally were interpreted by many Whites as repudiations of individualism, sacred American commitments to hard work, discipline and self-sacrifice”(p. 105). Whereas the civil rights movement ultimately received widespread approval from Whites at least in retrospect, subsequent race related events in the latter half of the century fed White racial animosity.

Within this complex and nuanced new landscape, interracial couples occupy a special place. Though no longer the rare, exotic creatures they were when *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* was released, mixed race couples are still an anomaly in American society, with Black-White couples constituting just under 0.8% of all marriages as of 2007 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b). They “navigate interracial borders” between Black and White revealing attitudes and issues that lurk beneath the learned racial etiquette and public racial progress.

Expanding on the idea that interracial couples are specially situated in our society, much like a “miner’s canary” is in a coal mine, sociologist Erica Child explains that couples who cross racial boundaries are rare but also representative of broader social trends, “revealing problems of race that otherwise can remain hidden, especially to Whites” (2005, p. 6). Furthermore, Childs contends:

The issues surrounding interracial couples—racIALIZED/sexualized stereotypes, perceptions of difference, familial opposition, lack of community acceptance—should not be looked at as individual problems, but rather as a reflection of the larger racial issues that divide the races. Since interracial couples exist on the color-line in society—a ‘borderland’ between White and Black—their experiences and the ways communities respond to these

relationships can be used as a lens through which we can understand contemporary race relations. (2005, p. 6)

This position “on the color-line” is an important and valuable one given the challenges and divisions that remain with us. As we will see in the content analysis, the issues Childs identifies above are presented in ever evolving and revealing ways on the movie screen.

In the wake of all the changes and racial turmoil of the twentieth century, Entman and Rojecki contend, White racial thinking now spans an imperfect spectrum running from *comity* and mutual understanding on one end, “to *ambivalence*, then to *animosity*, and finally to outright *racism*” at the opposite end of the scale. In keeping with the complex ingredients that shape racial attitudes, Entman and Rojecki distinguish four dimensions that together define where Whites fit on this spectrum of racial thinking. Three of these dimensions have to do with beliefs about race. The fourth dimension is affective. The defining dimensions include: the degree to which Whites attribute homogeneity in negative traits to African Americans rather than seeing them as a heterogeneous group, the degree to which Whites deny the existence of race based discrimination; the degree to which Whites believe that their interests conflict with Blacks’; and finally, the degree and direction of Whites’ emotional responses to Blacks as a group. Having rejected the most egregious racist beliefs of the past, most Whites, according to the authors, exhibit ambivalence regarding race, but may be pushed either towards comity or hostility/animosity depending on the interaction of several key factors including political climate, personal experience and exposure to mediated communication including popular film.

This framework, based on a study of a range of political communication and public opinion scholarship on race, demonstrates that majority thinking about race in the United States *has* been transformed, moving significantly toward greater equality and

understanding between the races. However, as Kinder and Sanders, Entman and Rojecki, and Childs show, this journey is not yet fully made. This lesson becomes even clearer when examining the discussions of the young women in this study.

Up From Invisibility?¹⁹ How Race Is Represented On the American Screen

Approaching the study of interracial romance in media within the context of representation, we find a significant body of work dedicated to explicating patterns of representation of African Americans in media. Overall, as Greenberg, Mastro and Brand (2002) observed, even in the 21st century, the portrayal of African Americans in entertainment media still seem to reflect patterns that Cedric Clark first observed in the 1960s (1969) . Despite increased prevalence on screen, most media scholars agree that depictions of Blacks in American culture are still highly problematic and in general do not reflect the diversity of African American life.

Applying the Clark (2002) framework, the authors argue that African American representation is stuck within the middle phase of a four-stage continuum that begins with invisibility or absence, then ridicule, and progresses through a regulatory phase in which the predominant roles afforded the group involve law enforcement, and finally arrives at an “egalitarian” stage in which portrayals are varied and equal. Within this framework, African Americans, who in the earliest days of film and broadcasting were either invisible (completely absent) or confined to positions of subservience and ridicule (e.g., comic servant figures like those played by Stepin Fetchit) are now within the ridicule and regulatory phases of the continuum with stereotypical portrayals still prevalent alongside more positive if token representations of Black authority present as well. Given this pattern, Black

¹⁹ This title refers to a study of gay representation in American media. In it, Gross argues that “media invisibility helps maintain the powerlessness of groups at the bottom of the social heap.” (2001, p. 4)

characters are more likely to interact with Whites in isolated, official rather than social capacities, and the low number of interracial relationships is partially a logical extension of this.

Other important studies of the representation of Blacks in popular entertainment affirm this idea. Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki's influential text *The Black Image in the White Mind* provides a comprehensive overview of the social scientific literature on race in mass media which draws upon stereotyping literature, cultivation and framing theory (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). They report that although the quantity of minority images in mass media has increased significantly over the two decades since the Civil Rights Commission Report, important problems remain with regard to the quality of images. Specifically, they and other scholars and media watchdog groups have shown that the majority of Black portrayals are concentrated within certain time and genre constraints, most noticeably all-Black sitcoms. Entman and Rojecki also confirm that with portrayals dominated by the regulatory category, there is little opportunity for the kind of intimate social interaction between characters of different races, which is necessary for what they call racial comity – a mutually respectful state of existence in which minorities are seen as equal and unique individuals, rather than stereotyped, and viewed neither with fear nor as competition or threat.

Beyond the study of stereotypes: race, media and ideology.

Adding a political perspective to these findings, critical studies of race in entertainment media emphasize the multifaceted and contextual nature of popular culture. Led primarily by Stuart Hall, Tony Bennett and others at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies in England, the cultural studies “project” (as its proponents call it), drew on the work of Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci and French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu among others, to help us to understand the relationship between forms of popular culture and

ideology (Morley 1989; Gurevitch et al. 1982). In this vein, the present study draws on literature that addresses the production of racial difference, subjectivity and group identity within popular culture.

In its earliest and arguably most popular incarnation, the cultural/critical approach stressed the inherently hegemonic and oppressive nature of popular culture based on its reflection and replication of capitalist, dominant hierarchical images and values. In its most advanced form, rather than looking at the text in isolation, this perspective interrogates it in relation to the cultural, political, economic structures at work in the production of meaning by cultural producers (encoding) and those at work in the interpretation of meaning by audiences (decoding). Knowledge is seen as being intratextual, intertextual and receptive. Accordingly, later work in the cultural studies mode has focused on how audiences may make sense of popular culture in ways that reflect their social position and interests, which may be in opposition to those of the dominant culture.

A substantial portion of this type of scholarly work has explored the beliefs embedded in the representation of race in American film and television. Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness* (1993), Don Bogle's *Toms Coons, Mulattos, Mammies and Bucks*, Patricia Collins' "Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images," Herman Gray's *Watching Race*, and Norman Denzin's *Reading Race* are some of the most influential and relevant works addressing issues of racial representations of race in popular media (mainly television) from an ideological, cultural studies perspective.

By far, the best known of these works is Bogle's often cited and best selling study of Blacks in American film. First published in the seventies and updated several times since, Bogle's interpretive history is mainly focused on explicating the stereotypes that have predominated Blacks representation. Like Linda Williams, Bogle (1994) identifies the roots of many of these stereotypes in two seminal works – *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *The*

Birth of a Nation (Dixon & Griffith, 1915). Initially, during the silent film period Bogle observes:

Fun was poked at the American Negro by presenting him as either a nitwit or a childlike lackey. None of the types were meant to do harm, although at various times individual ones did. All were merely filmic reproductions of black stereotypes that had existed since the days of slavery and were already popularized in American life and arts. The movies, which catered to public tastes, borrowed profusely from all the other popular art forms. Whenever dealing with black characters, they simply adapted the familiar stereotypes, often further distorting them. (1994, p. 4).

Bogle contends that these antebellum-based images have had an indelible imprint on American culture. Although forgotten, “the early silent period of motion pictures remains important, not because there were any great black performances—there weren’t—but because the five basic types—the boxes sitting on the shelf – that were to dominate black characters for the next half century were first introduced then.

Bogle delineates five main types of Black characters, plus several additional subtypes or variations within categories. The “tom” is a socially acceptable, ever-faithful good Negro servant, an evergreen character who is popular with white audiences and is named for the eponymous good servant in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Second, the coon is the black buffoon, used for comic relief; pickaninnies and uncle Remus being the two variations on this type. The “tragic mulatto” is a fair-skinned, most often female character of mixed Black and White heritage whose terrible, often fatal, flaw is that her blood renders her unable to live happily in either the Black or White world, and whose ambitions have disastrous consequences. Bogle’s “mammy” type is a coon-like female servant, who is

“usually big, fat and cantankerous.” In her more “tom”-like incarnation, the mammy is a more good-tempered, often religious figure who is fulfilled in her proximity to her white masters.

Finally, there is the “brutal black buck,” a type introduced in the D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*. There are two variations of this figure although the differences between them are subtle. Bogle describes the “black brute” as a “barbaric black out to raise havoc” and whose “physical violence served as an outlet for a man who was sexually repressed.” In Griffith’s reconstruction epic, this character type is explicitly tied to the threat of miscegenation, as the black brutes “flaunt placards demanding ‘equal marriage’” (1994, p. 13). Even more fearsome, as Bogle describes them, are Griffith’s “pure black bucks,” who are “always big, baadddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh.” This, according to Bogle, is the archetypal figure born in Griffith’s film, the Black rapist, “psychopaths, one always panting and salivating, the other forever stiffening his body as if the mere presence of a white woman in the same room could bring him to sexual climax. Griffith played hard on the bestiality of his black villainous bucks...” (1994, p. 14).

Bogle also argues that with only rare exceptions, rather than disappearing, many of these stereotypes have mostly been updated over time, reemerging in new forms in modern film. At different points, “the history became one of actors battling against the types to create rich, stimulating, diverse characters.” Sidney Poitier’s roles in the 1960s, for example, are singled out as new versions of the accommodating Uncle Tom. Comparing Poitier’s character in *Lilies of the Field* to Hattie McDaniel’s in *Gone with the Wind* Bogle contends:

Even in 1944, her character’s obvious tom quality seemed ludicrous. Twenty years later, when Poitier took a similar part-time job for similar reasons—to help the white nuns—it seemed to black audiences, if not to white, that he

was now leading the black character back in his place as a faithful servant.

(1994, p. 216).

Similarly, Bogle dismisses Poitier's most famous film, *Guess who's Coming to Dinner* (Kramer, 1967a), arguably the best known and most widely viewed interracial drama in American history, as "pure 1949 claptrap done up in 1940s high-gloss MGM style" that "diverted the audience from any real issues" (1994, p. 217). Bogle's history is comprehensive and an invaluable history of the African American presence in Hollywood film, but the author's readings are necessarily cursory in such a broad study, and his evaluations sometimes run roughshod over the differences in representation.

Focusing solely on the representation of African American women, Patricia Collins' work provides an excellent example of an ideologically rigorous interrogation of cultural images. Collins argues that the negative stereotypes that dominate the portrayals of African Americans within mainstream popular culture are "controlling images," which serve to reinforce a social hierarchy in which Blacks represent a subjugated, inferior "other." American society is defined by a series of unequal dichotomies in which one half of the dichotomy represents the norm, and the other half "the other" or the outsider. Within this system, the norm is defined in large part by what it is not – male defined by female; White defined by Black, etc. Furthermore, according to Collins, the predominant televisual representation – that of deviant Black stereotypes reify the presumed differences, making them seem natural and fixed. This deviance provides justification for the current hierarchical social order.

Like Collins', Gray's investigation of television in the 1980s and 1990s is an ideological analysis of racial representation within the cultural studies tradition. Gray suggests that there are two predominant and dichotomous types of representation of Blackness in television--on the one hand the *Cosby* idealized Black middle class and on the

other, the images of the criminalized Black underclass, which dominate the news media. Rather than being in conflict, these images work together to stigmatize and marginalize Blacks who “fail” to achieve the American dream. In this view, *the Cosby Show* and programs like it individualize and decontextualize problems of poverty by discounting the effects of institutional racism and unequal access and add credibility and weight to the conservative political claims that racism is no longer an important factor in Blacks’ unequal status (H. Gray, 1989; Herman Gray, 2004).

Recognizing, as these researchers of American Black representation do, that in a given culture, “ideologies often seem to describe the world in a neutral way, but, in fact they are based on underlying assumptions about the way things should be,” scholars like Pramaggiore and Wallis also contend that a culture’s “beliefs, values and opinions,” are “inevitably embedded” in its film (Pramaggiore, 2007, pp. 331, 333). Consistent with this view, Bobo makes the important distinction that cultural producers “are not aligned in a conspiracy against an audience” (2002, p. 212). Rather, when media producers create a text like a film or television show, “they draw on their own background, experience, and social cultural milieu. They are therefore under “ideological pressure” to reproduce the familiar” (Bobo, 2002, p. 212).

Perhaps most significant in terms of why it is so important to attend to ideologies in entertainment, these embedded ideological beliefs often operate invisibly but wield great influence. They may “shape the relationship between an individual and culture, influencing her ideas about family structure, gender and sexuality, faith, the function of work, and the role of government, among other things” (Pramaggiore, p. 332). Ideologies can also shape what individuals believe about race and “serve as the psychological and emotional justification for the differential treatment of one group over another” (p. 332). Paradoxically, “those who advocate a particular ideology present it as “commonsensical” or “natural” and

therefore, not subject to question, yet ideologies depend on assumptions and assertions that remain open to debate” (p. 332). Advocacy, however, is a slippery term in this context. As Bobo points out, conscious intent need not be present for ideology to be reproduced in a text. Ideological pressure is a byproduct of being a member of a culture.

Because of the invisible, embedded, and complex nature of ideologies, uncovering the ideological beliefs embedded in film texts is a necessary but complicated enterprise. Using his analysis of the film *Rambo* as an example, Kellner explains that doing ideological analysis of film necessitates:

Showing how representations of women, men, the Vietnamese, the Russians, and so on are a fundamental part of *Rambo* and that a key element of the text is remasculination and re-establishment of white male power after defeat in Vietnam and assaults on male power by feminist and civil rights movements. Consequently, reading the ideological text of *Rambo* requires interrogation of its images and figures as well as its discourse and language ...within the context of existing political struggles. (pp. 59-60)

Bearing in mind this conception of ideology and representation, the content focused part of the present study will try to decipher what sorts of ideologies of race have most often been implicated in interracial romantic depictions.

Interracial Narratives – Mixing Racial Politics and Romance

While a great deal of work has given insight to how Blacks and other minorities are represented on screen, the portrayal of intergroup interactions is an important subject that has received far less attention. To understand the meaning and impact of media depictions of interracial relationships, it is critical to bear in mind the representational patterns just discussed while also attending to the unique cultural context, symbolism, and social history behind these particular narratives. As an increasing number of scholars now recognize,

there are multiple layers of meaning packed into sexual and racial imagery in depictions of love, sex and romance across the races. At the same time, since each one of these categories is so rich in meaning, it is also essential to limit the scope of the enquiry so as to not muddy the analysis. Given that the primary focus of this particular research is race, and because sexuality is such a volatile complicating factor for racial ideology and representation, movies dealing with non-heterosexual romance were considered beyond the scope of this project.

We know that the issue of race relations is at once one of the most controversial yet perennially recurring social topics in American culture. Despite the myriad legal and social barriers against it, interracial sexual involvement has been a topic of American film for over a century (Courtney, 2005)Wartenberg, 1999b), and American films (and theatre and television) have depicted interracial liaisons in a variety of genres, across multiple periods, from a variety of perspectives. As the content analysis will show, these films employ consistent patterns of representation, reflecting common cultural roots.

Taken as a whole, American interracial romantic narratives arguably constitute their own comprehensive subsystem of discourse and racial ideology. As a result, in order to understand the potential frame-setting function of contemporary narratives of interracial romance, it's necessary to trace their historical roots and cultural antecedents. These narratives share a common heritage that brings together two disparate spheres of influence, each with its own imperatives: evolving American ideas about race that trace back to the antebellum period and even older ideas about the social significance of romantic love and marriage. To understand the ideas embedded in these representations of interracial relationships in movies, it is first necessary to look briefly at the core principles of these sometimes contradictory belief systems.

Alex Lubin's detailed post-war examination, *Romance and Rights, the Politics of Interracial Intimacy, 1945-1954*, Linda Williams' *Playing the Race Card*, and Susan Courtney's excellent film study *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation* contribute essential insights to the understanding of early historic roots of interracial romance in American culture. All affirm the fundamental importance of this issue in American society.

Lubin shows that interracial intimacy in the post World War II era was a key catalyst of public debate over the relationship between personal and public rights. He makes a convincing case, documenting a wealth of instances in which African American leaders openly sought to move this private issue into the sphere of public debate, recognizing that arguments over whether Blacks and Whites should be permitted to marry were inevitably linked to arguments over the nature of race and the status of Blacks as full citizens in the United States. This newspaper editorial by *Ebony* magazine editor Ben Burns is one example of the type of political argument Lubin documents:

History is being written by the great Paul Robeson these nights at the Erlanger Theater in the Loop. It is more than theatrical history. It is epoch-making, precedent-shattering American history that is a happy omen of a new world acomin' in U.S. race relations. (Burns, 1945; Lubin, 2005, p. x)

Through contemporary news and legal accounts, Lubin shows us that in the civil rights era and even prior to it that the idea of interracial romance is closely linked to the debate over Black equality and provides the backdrop for much of American racial discourse and conflict. Despite all the taboos, rather than remaining under the surface, this issue is sporadically brought to the forefront of racial discourse through cultural events including but certainly not limited to American film.

Such was the case in 1924 with Eugene O'Neill's play *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. In an interview with *the New York Times* prior to the play's debut, O'Neill is asked about his

racial beliefs and intentions in writing about a marriage between a Black man (also played by Paul Robeson) and a White woman. The expectation that the play's subject matter would invariably carry with it significant implications about race and racial boundaries is a central focus in the interview although one that O'Neill tries to minimize. In the article, journalist Louis Kantor relates his conversation with the playwright in detail, reporting that he had pointed out to O'Neill that some people felt public objections "indicated it was felt that some things might not be done in the theatre... That the dramatist had to at least consider the community's social code, that if the community did not like the notion of a Black man and a White woman married on the stage, the dramatist should not present such a play" (Kantor, 1924).²⁰ Also, when O'Neill responds that these objections were no different than other resentments based on economic and social prejudices, Kantor presses, "But don't you think there is a difference? Isn't the White race superior to the Black?" (Kantor, 1924). In that era, which preceded notions about a norm of racial equality that became popular in World War II, the connection between romantic drama and the maintenance or challenge of racial beliefs was considered obvious.²¹ By design, Lubin's account is limited to the period before the historic 1967 court ruling, and as we will see the issue has continued to reverberate culturally far beyond that date.

²⁰ Kantor does not overstate the extent of public controversy around O'Neill's play. A *Time* magazine article reported reactions included the following column published in a Philadelphia paper "Said Jay E. House, colyumist [sic] for the Philadelphia Public Ledger: "It was inevitable, of course, that Mr. O'Neill finally would write a play about marriage between the whites and blacks. He has already written plays about nearly all the other revolting topics . . ." "We write frankly of Mr. O'Neill for the reason that the spectacle of soiled fingers searching a dead man's chest for fleas does not intrigue us. But it is perfectly all right for those who like that sort of thing." ("All God's Chillun. (The Theatre)," 1924)

²¹ This is not to say that Kantor necessarily had these views. In the article he repeatedly couches his challenges to O'Neill as views held by unnamed others in the community and in that way allows the playwright to respond to critiques that had been swirling around him during rehearsals.

Roots of discord: the victimization lens.

The controversy surrounding those two plays is telling, but contemporary film representations of interracial relationships have deep historic roots that extend back earlier than Robeson's theatrical work at the Brattle or on Broadway. American interracial narratives trace their heritage back to at least the 19th century. In *Playing the Race Card*, an examination of the melodramatic undertones of American race relations, Linda Williams argued that certain iconic 19th century fictional representations of race play a central part in Americans' conception of race to this day:

If race as an essential entity does not exist, racialization does; it gives meaning to the visible signs of difference and that meaning has long been embedded in popular culture in such icons as the beaten Black man or the endangered White woman. The race card is best viewed then, not as a cheating, marked card. It needs to be seen, rather as an integral process of the gaining of rights through the recognition of injury. It was in play when Americans first recognized the virtue of Black victims in the beating of Uncle Tom; it was in play when Americans first perceived the White woman endangered by the Black man. (Williams, 2001, p. 4)

Here Williams credited Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with creating the image of Black victimization at the hands of Whites and Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* (the source material for *The Birth of a Nation*) with creating the indelible image of the wild oversexed Black man as the ultimate threat to White womanhood. In Williams' view, even if contemporary audiences are not aware of these particular texts, the images exert a powerful, if subconscious, influence on the American memory. Williams argued that these two forms of victimization remain the dominant frames through which race relations have been consistently depicted in all types of American fiction – either the violent victimization of

Blacks at the hands of Whites or vice versa (Williams, 2001). These fears are rooted in the institution of slavery which brought these groups together and all the fear, mistrust associated inequities of a volatile and often violent system. In the 19th century view, miscegenation was a grave threat to the social fabric and well being of White society, and Black males are dangerous figures which must be controlled.

Although the dominant, historical focus of fear about miscegenation in mainstream American culture concentrates on the purity and protection of White women from Black men, there is also fear among Blacks on behalf of Black women, who had no legal power or protection against the sexual demands of White men (especially White masters) in the antebellum South especially. Fear of sexual exploitation and ruin runs through interracial narratives in American history from both the Black and White perspective and is one reason for the distrust of such liaisons on the part of Black women in African American culture. So the victimization frame is one which is mutual (although not equal) and deeply rooted. This victimization lens is a simple but powerful and persistent way of seeing Black/White relationships and one which echoed clearly as Williams would have predicted, in both Black and White focus groups as discussed in chapters seven and eight.

Susan Courtney's *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation* provides an important comprehensive history of Hollywood representation of interracial romance prior to the Loving decision (Courtney, 2005). A film studies and literature scholar, Courtney provides context through reviews, news clippings and other historical artifacts of the time in addition to close textual analyses of some of the most obscure and earliest known depictions of interracial couplings. In keeping with Williams' contention, Courtney finds that depictions of interracial romance are part of a much longer standing and continuous representational tradition than commonly known. Whereas many scholars cite *Birth of a Nation* as the traditional point of origin for interracial representation and iconography, Courtney's analysis begins with silent

short films produced in the 1900s not long after the invention of moving pictures, and includes films created up to the moment of federal decriminalization of interracial marriage in 1967.

Courtney illuminates a pivotal but often forgotten period in the history of interracial representation, the late 1950s to early 1960s. During this time, she asserts, “the unprecedented visibility of interracial couples of interracial couples seems to have been hard *not* to see by anyone looking in Hollywood’s direction,” (2005, p. 194). Indeed, within just a few years, Hollywood studios released star filled interracial problem films including *Island in the Sun* with Harry Belafonte, James Mason and Joan Fontaine (Zanuck, 1957), *Band of Angels* with Clark Gable (Walsh, 1957), *Kings Go Forth* with Frank Sinatra and Natalie Wood (Ross & Ross, 1958), *Night of the Quarter Moon* with John Barrymore (Zugsmith, 1959), plus *Imitation of life* (Hunter, 1959), and *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (Englund, 1959).

There are several factors at work in this increased presence and the author is an adept at bringing them together. Here the rich historical context the author provides is particularly helpful. In addition to responding to tension aroused due to the pivotal Brown versus Board of Education decision in 1954, Courtney contends that, “since viewers were in fact looking elsewhere more than ever before in this period, namely, at their televisions, this spectacular display of interracial couples can be read in part as an attempt to reattract their attention”(2005, p. 194). In the wake of the relaxation of the production code, “after nearly thirty years of regulated repression, interracial romance erupted in Hollywood in markedly sensational terms” and tried to be all things to all people, both self-consciously liberal in principle yet non offensive and commercially viable (Courtney, 2005, p. 193). Quoting Henry Popkin from the political magazine *Commentary* (Popkin, 1957), she characterizes civil rights era ‘miscegenation films’ like *Island in the Sun* and *Band of Angels* as created to be

“all things to all men” (Courtney, 2005, p. 193). Popkin also adds, “They must capitalize on the current-events interest in racial issues and they must attract the Negro and Asian audiences, but , at the same time, they must not alienate the South (1957, p. 354). Courtney is right to point out these motives and she also deftly traces how external considerations impact creative choices. As a result, her analysis, which balances historical perspective and psychological and ideological analysis, is particularly insightful.

Courtney also argues that although their titles may be obscure, these earliest depictions continue to wield significant cultural influence, not the least of which is that interracial sexuality is still treated as a social problem in American film and the indelible archetypal images and recurring narratives of social strife and tragic loss commonly associated with it remain both strangely familiar and spectacular in American culture.

The social significance of romantic and sexual narratives

Looking at more contemporary film, Jacquie Jones’ reading of the construction of Black sexuality in contemporary Black American film brings the centrality of sexual themes in the representation of race into even greater focus (1993). Understanding that sexuality is a central part of what makes us human, Jones argues that the depiction of Black sexuality in American film has been and continues to be the “most denormalizing factor in the definition of the Black screen character” (p. 247). More specifically, she argues that in the dominant genre for Black male representation in particular, the interracial buddy film, Black sexuality is represented in two primary ways, both deviant. According to Jones, in these films Black male sexuality is either sublimated and substituted for via violence, or expressed through the Black character’s domination of Black women. In the latter construction, the Black male achieves status through the assumption of the role of the White male, treating the Black women as a powerless object of domination, a “prize” rather than a partner.

Jones contends that this liminal treatment of Black sexuality in popular culture dehumanizes Black men by stripping them of an essential facet of their humanity:

By sabotaging the ability to create or maintain primary ties to other individuals through intimate contact, the Black male character calls into question not only his ability to function as a legitimate, full—in other words, normal—member of film culture, but also cancels the ability to be perceived as capable of complete humanity. Without reconstructing the sexuality of the Black character, it is impossible to enter into the more general discourse of identity.

Although Black male heterosexuality is generally treated as the dominating context in which Black feminist and Black gay and lesbian critical theories are situated, I submit that Black male heterosexuality itself is also a repressed discourse currently characterized by powerlessness and reaction in mainstream cinema... (p. 247).

Jones' analysis is rooted in ideological and psychological analysis of culture, with Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1980) as one main influence and Jessica Benjamin's essay "Master and Slave" (1983) the other. Her interpretation serves to both contextualize and call attention to the place of depictions of interracial intimacy in American cinema. Although Jones' essay presents an insightful treatment of an essential subject, she is sometimes too general and definitive in her analysis, ignoring key contextual nuances and the possibility of openness in the texts. In one example, she uses the British film *Mona Lisa* to illustrate a point about the portrayal of Black female sexuality in Hollywood film while downplaying the importance of the distinctive cultural and historical contexts of the UK production. Even accepting that audiences are now global, given the central importance of context in cultural studies, this oversight diminishes the weight of an otherwise insightful analysis.

The enduring nature of these dehumanizing patterns of representing Black sexuality is demonstrated by the fact that racialized sexual stereotypes are presented not only in older, early 20th century films that would be expected to reflect hierarchical ideas about race. On the contrary, they continue provide the back-story to fictional works representing a variety of perspectives. Almost all of these films in the present study, for example, in one way or another invoke and reference racial and sexual stereotypes, either to affirm or deconstruct and dismantle them.

Still, persistence, however, is not the same as stasis. Despite the persistence of the victimization and exploitation fears surrounding interracial liaisons, popular culture is never inert. Change can and does happen over time, and the literature on romantic narratives in general is particularly helpful in understanding how this change occurs. Despite their reputation as light entertainment, in addition to being popular, romantic narratives are also among the most socially meaningful and frequently retold classic narratives. They can also be key cultural markers of social change (Hall & Whannel, 1964; Wartenberg, 1999).

As Stuart Hall argued in *The Popular Arts*, the practice of referencing and reformulating classic narratives is a key part of how meaning is created within fiction:

The same situations are worked through in each period in a contemporary setting, a similar type of hero or heroine is conjured into life, the story is supported by some collective myth (popular romance, for example, is full of variants on the Romeo-and-Juliet or Cinderella themes); the story moves to the same kind of resolution and points the same kind of moral....Yet, within these acceptable patterns, in each new period we find the various elements assembled in new ways: in fact, quite new experiences and feelings are being dealt with. The writer responds, often without being aware of it, to a subterranean source within the collective subconscious of his society, and

embodies these symbols within his story; and under pressure from this source the forms of the story inevitably change. (Hall & Whannel, 1964, p. 165)

It is in the reworking of classic tales in new contexts that the contemporary attitudes, social problems and emphases are revealed. Furthermore, in answer to critics who challenge this notion that ideology is embedded in popular cinema, Hall wrote:

Nicola Chiaromonte attacks the cinema generally for 'attempting to distort the nature of the cinematic image by forcing it to express ideological or lyrical meaning'. Yet this is precisely how the complexity of the image in *The Blue Angel* works. It is powerful, not only because of its sexual connotations but because it connects these with the social and psychological life of the whole society at a particular moment in history. (Hall & Whannel, 1964, p. 197)

Furthermore, Hall contended, of all fictional film genres, romantic narratives are most packed with cultural meaning. Rather than mere entertainment, "it is perhaps in its handling of sexual themes that each national cinema most sharply reveals characteristic national attitudes" (Hall & Whannel, 1964, p. 198).

Consistent with this perspective, in contrast to the critical/cultural view which holds that popular culture mainly or even exclusively serves to maintain existing social norms and hierarchy⁴⁰, in *Unlikely Couples: Movie Romance as Social Criticism*, Thomas Wartenberg argues that there is also a tradition of mainstream film using the figure of a transgressive couple to *condemn* existing social hierarchy as well as to explore a range of significant social and philosophical topics. *Pygmalion* (Asquith, 1938) and *My Fair Lady* (Cukor, 1964) critique class hierarchy, for example, while *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Kramer, 1967b) and *Jungle Fever* (Lee, 1991) comment on racism, race relations, and liberalism.

Of the ten films analyzed in Wartenberg's *Unlikely Couples*, all five contemporary works explicitly reference and reformulate previous narratives about class and racial barriers. Wartenberg's analysis enriches our understanding of the underlying connection between social boundaries and romantic narratives. It also invites further study. Among other things, the second half of the current study speaks to this still widely contested conception of the unlikely couple film (in particular the interracial unlikely couple film) as a site of ideological discourse and social criticism from the point of view of the young female viewer.

Similarly, Alan Marcus argues that *Touch of Evil* and *Diamond Head* "followed a progressive trend of exploring racist attitudes towards people of color through the vehicle of the interracial romance" (Marcus, 2007, p. 16). Although none of their lead characters is Black, these films, produced in 1958 and 1963 respectively, are seen as precursors to the Black and White interracial romance of the late 1960s. As Marcus writes, "given the sensitivity of the time, it is significant that *Touch of Evil* and *Diamond Head* highlighted issues germane to contemporary Black/White relations by setting them not in Middle America but in the less contentious transitory world of a Mexican/American border town and the distant and exoticized Hawaiian islands" (2007, p. 16). These representational compromises were essential to the interracial dramatic formula. Though the production code's strict prohibition against interracial sexual representation had been retired in 1957, social norms didn't change overnight and still had to be respected (Homes). Looking specifically at films produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Marcus finds that the Hollywood produced interracial film was a highly recognizable form-- both inherently political and aggressively commercial. In the interracial romance, studios found a way to balance social criticism with more immediate motives, channeling the nation's political angst into a

formula that was both compelling and profitable, “palatable to censors and commercially viable with potential audiences” (Marcus, 2007, p. 16).

In contrast with Wartenberg and Marcus, in “In Love and in Trouble: Teenage Boys and Interracial Romance,” one of the most recent scholarly works on the depiction of interracial couples in popular entertainment, Frances Gateward finds mostly hostile representations of interracial romance in contemporary teen movies. According to Gateward, even in movies produced in the last decade, “when young white people are paired with Others romantically, the films are still not positioned in the teenpic genre, rather they are ghettoized to the realm of the social problem film (Gateward, 2005).” Furthermore, Gateward argues, rather than challenging racial barriers, historically:

Interracial, social problem romance narratives are shaped by the intersection of ideologies of race and gender, often reflecting and reinscribing America’s long history of white fears of miscegenation, with the requisite stereotypes utilized to justify the legal and in the case of lynching, extralegal enforcement of racial segregation of racial segregation and oppression. (2005, p. 159)

Using a critical/cultural approach, Gateward shows how this ideological legacy of fear is carried forth in contemporary movies. Gateward contends that while films of interracial romance “continue to fascinate American audiences,” they are now more likely to occur between boys and girls rather than adult men and women. Despite the increasing prevalence of such pairings in American society, Gateward’s analysis reveals that popular teen oriented movies continue to paint interracial romance in remarkably consistent, socially transgressive, even deviant, ways, highlighting the social costs associated with crossing racial barriers in the most dramatic fashion.

Like Gateward, sociologist Erica Childs finds even the most contemporary interracial film narratives to reflect and reinforce regressive rather than progressive themes about race

(Childs, 2005, 2009). Childs has produced two studies on interracial relationships. The first explored the social worlds of Black-White couples through interviews with couples and people in the different social networks these couples navigate every day– from churches to neighborhoods. That study touched upon media representation as one element in those social worlds, one that reinforces the implicit or overt opposition Black-White couples face from their friends, families and neighborhoods. In that context she concluded, “there are common ideas about interracial relationships that dominated the couples’ narratives, communities’ statements and popular cultural images”(2005, p. 73). Furthermore, in response to the increasing visibility of interracial couples in popular culture she contended:

the infrequent yet growing interest in portraying interracial intimacy does not render interracial relationships less deviant. Mainstream film (even in the depiction of Black-White couples) does not depict acceptance; rather it reveals a social structure that privileges intraracial unions. The images in these films provide certain ways of thinking about or understanding interracial relationships that serve to reproduce racial boundaries, even when attempting to challenge the existing racial hierarchy. (Childs, 2005, p. 74)

Returning to the subject of interracial representation in greater depth in 2009, Childs narrows her analysis to popular American films produced between 1990 and 2008 and concludes, “most films present the story line from a white male perspective, or dominant gaze, which replicates through narrative and imagery the racial inequalities and biases that exist in society” (2009, p. 70). Confronting what she identifies as a popular claim that an increasing presence of interracial couples in popular culture is a sign of liberalized social boundaries, she also contends that these films usually represent interracial couples in stigmatized ways that fit into stereotyped “frames of deviance”, patterns of representation “privileging whiteness and perpetuating racism while denying race matters” (2009, p. 70).

Childs devotes two chapters in the second study to film; one focuses on interracial romances in which the White lead is male and the other on films in which the White lead is female. Both groups of films, she finds, recreate and reinforce racial difference, White supremacy and the deviance of interracial love, although through different representational means. Comparing films that pair White men and exotic women of color with interracial pairings featuring White women and men of any color other than White, Childs finds the latter “occur so infrequently that it can be argued that there is an implicit censorship of these unions that demonstrates how certain subjects are rendered outside the realm of what is speakable” (2009, p. 97).

Child’s film readings are persuasive. She identifies a multiplicity of ways that narratives can imply deviance and reinforce social hierarchy. As part of a broader survey of the representation of interracial couples in mass media forms including the internet, television and sports, however, her film work is also necessarily selective and begs for further study. She concedes that contrasting views exist, but characterizes them as being misguided without engaging with the most relevant scholarly works in film or media studies on interracial representation that might provide the strongest contrasting or even complementary viewpoint, such as Wartenberg, Courtney or Marcus. Instead, she critiques how interracial romantic depictions are treated in the popular press and more generally by social critics. In particular, Childs singles out legal scholar Randall Kennedy’s contention that “interracial intimacy has been emerging as simply one part of a larger story in which racial difference is of little or no significance...” as being a flawed and misreading or overlooking important elements of his own examples.

Like Gateward, Marcus, Wartenberg and Courtney, in this study Childs’ approach is critical and she is exclusively focused on the film text alone. As a result of their work, we now have a rich foundation of critical readings of interracial romance, but are lacking in both

quantitative and audience centered scholarship. The inherent tensions in these contrasting perspectives on interracial romantic depictions demand further study.

Spike Lee and the Black conservative impulse in interracial film

In the post-civil rights era, Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* is one of the most overtly ideological, controversial and best known interracial romantic films. As a result, it has attracted more scholarly attention than any other in this study. While Bogle praises Lee for his "imaginative style," "innovative direction," and the skill with which he has in been able to "get close to basic mass African American attitudes and arrive at a certain truth," he also contends that the film does little to explain why these attitudes are the way they are (Bogle, 1994, p. 352). Furthermore, he contends, the film does an inadequate job tying together the principal romance with its secondary stories about urban drug abuse. The former is a curious criticism, however, given Lee's inclusion, through the Black protagonist's parents, of rather lengthy articulations of the historical roots of Black opposition to interracial romance.

In fact, it is Lee's self-conscious, overt social messaging that has attracted the most scholarly analysis to his film, and much of this criticism addresses Lee's essentialist, reactionary position towards race. Diana Paulin's critical readings of Spike Lee's film alongside Octavia Butler's science fiction novel *Kindred*, for example, elucidate the way that fictional accounts of interracial couplings can reify traditional racial discourses of racial purity and hierarchy. Paulin argues that White supremacist discourse, which defines nonwhites as inferior and a threat to purity, and the discourse of minority or "decentered" communities, articulate similar nationalist or separatist ideologies, the latter in an attempt to "combat domination and oppression" (Paulin, 1997, p. 166). Similarly, Kellner, observes, Lee "seems to rule out the possibility of healthy romantic relationships between people of different color – a quasi-segregationist position that a more progressive multi-culturalist vision would reject" (1995, p. 171).

Other critics focus on Lee's conservative, classed rendering of the Black community. Positioning Lee within what he sees as a reactionary backlash against the revolutionary black liberation movement of the 1960s, Baraka (1993) argues that Spike's films reflect the view that only the black middle class is "dignified" and that Lee himself belongs to a whole "school" of black artists whose identity is based on caricaturing the black revolutionary politics and art that came before them and arguably facilitated their existence. Baraka argues that Spike Lee "joints", are filled with cartoonish caricatures of black stereotypes and images that are contradictory to Lee's expressed themes.

Like Baraka and Paulin, noted Black Cultural Studies scholar Paul Gilroy (1991) critiques Lee's conservative presentation of race and class. While recognizing Lee as an important *symbolic* figure in Black culture, Gilroy contends that this popularity necessitates more thoughtful critical analysis of his films. Overall, despite the adoption (co-opting?) of Black "vernacular expression" in his films, Gilroy sees Lee's body of work as advancing an essentially conservative, even reactionary Black bourgeois perspective that romanticizes the Black middle class, pathologizes the Black poor, and ultimately supports White corporate interests. In sum, Gilroy contends, "Spike looks at the complex of fear and desire that has engulfed 'race mixing' since the dawn of America and, having explored the arbitrariness and absurdity of racial classifications, concludes with the absolutely conservative message that we should cleave to those who share our own phenotypes if the integrity of our culture is to be preserved" (1991, p. 30).

Gilroy makes a compelling case that the effect of Lee's "loudly declared" but simplistic political messages is to both trivialize the social realities and foreclose the possibility of any positive result. *Jungle Fever* is a unique and important film in this study as it is the purest articulation of what I later argue is a conservative Black political impulse that runs through the films about interracial romance that are written and produced by African

American filmmakers. Whether or not interracial film depictions are progressive or regressive depends necessarily on one's social and political position and how one defines those terms. So this study does not presume to definitively answer that question. Through content analysis, the present study can, however, quantify how prevalent some of the most essential elements of the patterns of racialized representation identified by these scholars are in American interracial films and how this has changed over time. These elements include the association of interracial romance with extreme social sanctions like racial violence and familial ostracism (Childs, 2009; Gateward, 2005), the preference for White male-Black female pairings (Childs, 2009); the rendering of Black-White couples as doomed and ultimately unfeasible (Childs, 2009); and the erasure of Black male sexuality (Bogle, 1994; J. Jones, 1993) to name just a few.

In addition, since each of these studies limits their focus to select films in a relatively narrow time frame – Gateward and Childs to films made in the 1990s and later, Courtney to films made prior to 1967, the present study can also provide a broader view, showing how patterns evolve over time. Finally, this study can also bridge the gap between representation and reception by exploring how these patterns of interracial representation (and potentially others not yet identified) are received by audiences.

Economic imperatives and diversity in the Reagan era

In addition to the cultural influences discussed above, there are important economic imperatives driving the evolution of on-screen interracial romance as Marcus acknowledges. With its superficially integrated casts and conservative, stereotyped characters and representation of race relations, as Chris Jordan explains in *Movies and the Reagan Presidency* (Jordan, 2003), the nominally integrated movies of this era reflected both cultural and economic imperatives of the 1980s, specifically the need to appeal to increasingly diverse American movie going audiences. Predominantly, in the Reagan era that meant the

biracial buddy action/adventure films, rather than interracial romance. Chris Jordan examines movies in the Reagan era and finds that during the Reagan era, popular movies reflected both the overarching conservatism of that time and the economic changes that were taking place under the Reagan administration. During this time, the movie industry became highly diversified and consolidated, and Jordan notes that most studios (7 out of 8) became part of horizontally and vertically integrated multinational conglomerates. This corporate structure emphasized maximizing profits through high concept films with cross over appeal.

Although the buddy movie was the quintessential genre of integrated films in the Reagan era, the interracial romances that followed were also highly influenced by their practices. Like many of the interracial romances produced in the post-Reagan era, the buddy film is problematic in the way it portrays race. Overall, according Jordan, it relates “black experience from a white point of view” (p.78). The black character is isolated within a largely White cast and cultural setting. The film offers “only token insight into his background” (p. 78). This film becomes a conservative model of integration in which the black costar helps the White lead to protect the status quo.

Within the biracial buddy film, a black costar is integrated into the white middle class and helps the white lead defeat usually ethnic evildoers (usually but not always an ethnic “other”) that threaten their way of life. This film genre reflected the audience’s belief in the individual capitalist values and also appealed to both White and Black audiences. In this way the black costar reflects and reaffirms the success “myth” (as Jordan calls it) and the norm of racial equality while still being firmly grounded in settings which were familiar for white audiences. Several of these observations about the interracial buddy film is noticeably similar to Jones’ and Childs’ critiques of interracial romantic depictions—that they maintains

racial hierarchy by heroizing the White male lead as “physically and ethically supreme” (J. Jones, 1993, p. 253) at the expense of the Black costar.

I believe there is substantial merit in all of these views. The rise and evolution of the interracial romance is driven by multiple causes and there are both strong progressive and conservative messages in interracial romantic narratives (sometimes in the same films). Just like America’s relationship with race, these film representations are complex, contradictory and socially meaningful. Certainly, the subject certainly merits much further exploration. The current study contributes to this line of research on the contemporary depiction of interracial romance begun by Wartenberg, Gateward and Marcus with quantitative and textual content analysis of film depictions of race and with qualitative exploration of audience reception of these representations.

Race, Media Effects, and Media Audiences

How media consumption affects audiences – essential theories

In keeping with these aims, although the study of representation is important in and of itself, this study recognizes that the depiction of race and sexuality is also inextricably linked to questions about consumption. This includes both the potential effects that media may have on the audience and, in contemporary media studies especially, the potential transformation and meaning making the audiences may enact in response to the films. As such, while this study used qualitative methods of audience study, in addition to scholarship on audience reception it is informed by insights gained from social scientific studies of media effects and influence, especially work focused on the measurement of racial attitudes and their primary determinants through survey and experiment.

A review of the most relevant media effects and political psychology literature regarding media and race helps to illuminate the nature and magnitude of the media’s

influence in this aspect of American life. In contrast with the critical approach, which primarily entails textual, analytical and qualitative modes of research, historically, the methods of investigation for social scientific media effects research have been predominantly but no longer exclusively quantitative. With regard to race, perhaps the most important media effects research involves the study of priming and racial stereotypes and the framing of race related issues, all of which are closely related to and influenced by social psychology research and cognitive theories of how media images are processed.

Priming and the Psychology of Bias

Priming theory, often used in conjunction with the analysis of stereotypes, posits that exposure to certain stimuli in our culture triggers the activation of related schemas. In political psychology and communication contexts, schemas can be defined as cognitive structures that act as shortcuts to understanding by allowing us to use a few salient characteristics to categorize the objects and people with whom we come into contact. Stereotypes are a form of schemas, which help us make sense of the social world. The problem arises not because we use schema as a shortcut to recognition and understanding, which is a natural process, as social psychologists point out, but because our racial schema or stereotypes are filled with negative and faulty information. The social scientific studies of priming and stereotyping help us to understand the ways in which negative stereotypical portrayals of African Americans and other minority groups activate and reinforce racist stereotypes about those groups, and then influence attitudes and even behavior towards members of those groups.

Patricia Devine's work on stereotypes and automaticity in particular shows that priming a stereotype by exposing study participants to words associated with negative stereotypes about Blacks can negatively influence on how subsequent events and information involving Black individuals are interpreted even when race is not initially

mentioned (Devine, 1989; Gerbner, et al., 2002). Devine, Blair, Dasgupta and others have also shown that when stereotypes are primed via exposure to a member of a stereotyped group or even just via exposure to words associated with that group, stereotypes and related attitudes are activated automatically (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Rudman, Ashmore, & Gary, 2001). It is a process which does not require conscious or active thought and media images are a prime way in which stereotypes are activated and reinforced. Furthermore, racial attitudes can be both explicit and conscious and implicit and unaware. Stereotyping and racial bias are not limited to people with bigoted attitudes towards minorities, but rather is a result of cultural knowledge and exposure. Exposure to the kind of emotional narratives and racially charged themes and images in films depicting interracial romances can therefore be expected to have substantial and unknown effects on audiences.

Priming is particularly important for this study as one of the key points explored through the focus groups was whether more negative views of race relations may be articulated after viewing stereotypical, conflict-ridden depictions of interracial relationships. Just as stereotypical portrayals of minorities can trigger a host of negative associations and expectations, so could highly critical portrayals of race relations trigger expectations of perpetual racial strife and conflict, crowding out the notion of racial progress and comity in viewers' minds.

While critical and social science scholars agree that the media are conduits through which most Americans are exposed to predominantly negative images of minorities and race relations, when media convey positive images, this can also have an effect. In social psychology, experimental studies measuring racial prejudice show that exposure to positive depictions of minorities can help lessen the effect of the "overlearned" negative associations or stereotypes that are understood to be the basis for implicit, automatic racial bias (2001, p. 800). On this topic, Dasgupta and Greenwald contend that "attitudes are multifaceted

evaluations, shaped by a number of factors only one of which is explicit motivation” (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001).

So, unlike previous scholars like Devine, who tried to attack the problem of racial prejudice and conflict through self-conscious interventions, asking individuals to be more aware of their biases, these researchers argue that such attitudes are malleable, but that it is the underlying, *automatic* negative cultural associations associated with minority groups that must be relearned and that some of this work is naturally done via the media that we consume (Entman, 2004).²² While agreeing wholeheartedly with the goals of prejudice reduction, John Bargh argues that the research demonstrates that effectively controlling stereotype activation and application is extremely unlikely. Likening stereotypes to a cognitive monster (1999) Bargh contends that once the monster is on the loose, that is once a prevalent stereotype is primed or activated, chains can not contain it. The only way to avoid the effects of group bias is to eliminate the cultural stereotype from the culture.

The difficulty of combating implicit associations is compounded in light of a rather large body of work employing a computer based response measure, the Implicit Associations Test (IAT) that reveals these culturally based implicit prejudices to almost ubiquitous (Banaji & Hardin, 1996; Banaji, Nosek, & Greenwald, 2004a, 2004b; Greenwald, et al., 2002). Critics of this type of research argue with both its conception and metrics. They contend that the IAT is faulty in conception as implicit associations are really more akin to one’s awareness of cultural norms rather than the beliefs one “endorses.” Furthermore, they say, this work puts too much emphasis on people’s unconscious and automatic thoughts without knowing whether or how such thoughts may lead to specific behavior. Banaji, however, responds that the IAT’s critics have redefined an implicit attitude as one

²² Tali Mendelberg’s study of racialized campaign communications also seems to support this view of priming and the role of the media in helping to set and trigger these cultural associations.

that a person on some level endorses. This is wrong, she notes, because to endorse something is to publicly state one's support and approval, whereas an implicit attitude is one that a person does not consciously acknowledge or recognize. And if they do not recognize some of the attitudes they hold, they most certainly are not publicly acknowledging such attitudes. Plus, other studies have shown that high levels of implicit bias on the IAT are associated with a higher propensity to specific, racially biased behaviors in experiments such as recommending higher prison sentences for the same hypothetical crime depending on whether the perpetrator was identified as a Canadian with a culturally European-sounding name or a Mexican.

In addition, Bargh acknowledges that some recent research, Kawasaki in particular, has shown that group stereotyping reaction can be retrained using strategies that bear similarity to cognitive therapy. However, these activities have extensive prerequisites for success and the likelihood of all of the conditions being met – awareness of bias, accurate understanding of the effect of the bias on behavior, and the motivation to apply egalitarian values instead – is extremely low. This debate over the social psychological effects of cultural representation raises the question, what new associations are being learned when audiences watch interracial romance on screen and serves to further strengthen the case for further study of images of race and interracial intimacy in popular media.

Framing as a Guiding Paradigm for Media Effects Research

Complementing the contributions of these social psychology studies, one of the most productive areas of social science inquiry applies framing theory to the study of both the production and reception of news and entertainment media. There are myriad definitions and theoretical variations of how framing operates in the production of media texts, but many mass communication scholars have adopted the formulation put forth by Entman: “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a

communicating text” (1993, p. 52). In its most developed and politically relevant incarnation, media framing of an issue can suggest certain causes, make moral judgments, and even propose preferable remedies to a given problem (Entman, 2004).

Although this concept was developed in reference to news media, a growing number of scholars now advocate the application of framing to entertainment media as well (Holbert, 2005; Holbert, et al., 2005). Assessing the landscape of framing research just four years ago Holbert et al advised:

political communication scholars interested in framing need to ask themselves the following questions: is it only news content that frames the political world and shapes citizens’ political consciousness? We argue that it is important for political communication-based framing research to step beyond a singular focus on public affairs content. (Holbert, et al., 2005, p. 507)

This expansion of framing is instrumental to the present study as it is a fundamental assumption of this research that popular film depictions of interracial couples may *frame* interracial relationships in distinctive ways.

Consistent with Holbert et al (Holbert, et al., 2005), this study is informed by studies of framing in both news and entertainment media. Gamson and Modigliani endorse the view of a media frame as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (1987, p. 143). In this way, members of the media use frames to streamline events and help make experiences intelligible for audiences (Entman, 2004). Studies have shown that while an issue or event may have multiple facets and therefore many possible frames, in order to tell a coherent story, the media often select

a single central frame for its audience, and tend to use certain frames repeatedly as a shortcut to comprehension.

Synthesizing Goffman and other theorists, Joshua Greenberg observed how people tend to use the frames they consume in media in their lives:

human beings organize or “frame” everyday life in order to comprehend and respond to social phenomena. When applied to studies of news, “media frames” allow readers to ‘locate, perceive, identify, and label’ (Goffman, 1974, p. 21) the multiple happenings of the social world in a way that will be meaningful to them. Media sociologists have found the framing metaphor to be of heuristic value for understanding how journalists process and package large quantities of information. (2002, p. 183)

Terkildsen and Schnell also provide a helpful distinction. Where agenda setting and priming may elevate certain issues to be more salient in the public mind when determining what issues matter most to them and what issues should be given the highest consideration in evaluating potential political candidates for public office, media framing can shape how the public perceives and defines an issue (Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997). Social and political issues are multifaceted and can be presented in multiple ways. In news media, this is accomplished primarily through word choice, source selection and emphasis. Through these elements, news articles highlight certain facets of issues and in doing so can manipulate how the public feels about the issue.

Focusing on the policy implications of such choices, Entman notes that framing can also imply causes, assign blame and potential “remedies” or solutions for problems (Entman, 1993, p. 52). This more robust formulation was particularly helpful in shaping the parts of the current study that focus on representation. As discussed earlier, this research expands on key assertions suggested by critical/cultural research on interracial

representation (Gateward, Childs, Marcus). It is also driven by the idea that popular film depictions of interracial couples may frame interracial relationships in distinctive ways that can be explicated through the current content and textual analysis and have highly differentiated implications -- that these interracial frames promote a particular views of the "problem" and legitimacy of interracial relationships; they convey distinctive ideas about how race relations are and should be; that they identify causes and assign blame for racial conflict; and they even different offer solutions for how race relations can be improved. Furthermore, these depictions may also have potentially important implications for audiences that can be reflected in the focus group conversations.

As the Loving case illustrated and as documented by a variety of scholars, the use of framing in the public sphere is not limited to the media. Political elites have a tremendous influence on how public issues are understood ("Loving et Ux v. Virginia," 1959) and in turn framed for the audience by media producers. Although court cases often hinge on matters of legal technicality as much as policy, there is a clear tradition of court opinions *framing* controversial issues in streamlined, values-based appeals much in the same way that journalists do. As noted earlier, in a testament to the enduring social significance of this issue, just eight years prior to the federal ruling in Loving v. Virginia, a Virginia trial judge had vigorously defended the duty of the state to enforce anti-miscegenation law, stating:

Almighty God created the races White, Black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix.

("Loving v. Virginia.," 1967)

It is this opinion that was ultimately overturned by the Supreme Court in 1967. It's notable that both the Virginia trial court and U.S. Supreme Court opinions affirm the case's

social significance and make claims to higher authority, but whereas the latter ("Loving et Ux v. Virginia," 1959) refers to the "basic civil rights" of all "free men" guaranteed by the United States Constitution, the state opinion claims a higher authority, that of "God's law". Here, the differing ways in which the court opinions framed the case predict the ongoing public split across a variety of public issues between those who invoke secular egalitarian appeals, often grounded in constitutional law and those whose traditionalist appeals are based on religion and grounded in a creationist version of the universe.²³ These dueling perspectives are reproduced in both elite political discourse and the media discourse of the time.

My content analysis draws heavily on this conception of framing. In order to understand how framing works in these films, it's essential to have a working definition of media frames in the context of entertainment. Applying this conception of framing to the movies in this study, I argue that films frame interracial dating and marriage and the broader issues related to Black-White race relations in consistent and distinct ways that convey specific beliefs about race and have the potential to manipulate how the public feels about these issues. The films do this through a variety of means. Like the news or any other specific medium, fictional film has its own language and ways of creating meaning. My quantitative content analysis focuses on some of the most quantifiable elements of movies: the manifest content in the film's narrative (key events and resolution) and dialogue. The subsequent textual analysis also delves into more gray areas such as characterization and subtext. Through this analysis I seek to answer these essential questions: how have popular film depictions framed Black-White interracial relationships? And what sorts of causes and solutions have these film depictions suggested to the historical problem of contentious and unequal Black-White relations.

²³ As blogger/author Andrew Sullivan and others have pointed out, this dichotomous discourse, pitting religious authority and traditional values against secular authority and egalitarianism is closely paralleled in the contemporary debate over same sex marriage.

How audiences make sense of the media they consume--the audience's role in framing.

Just as frames help journalists tell a coherent story, this practice of framing performs an essential function for audiences as well, enabling individuals in an increasingly information-soaked culture to make sense of and function in the modern world, thereby aiding in cognition (Entman, 1993). In order to better understand this process, the study of framing “illuminates the precise way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location—such as speech, utterance, news report, or novel—to that unconsciousness (2004).” Elaborating upon this formulation, Entman argues that frames are distinguished by their potential capacity to stimulate support or opposition to a position in a political conflict via two distinct attributes -- their resonance and magnitude (2004). Resonance is created by using images and words with high salience to the audience (meaning ones that are noticeable, memorable and emotionally charged) and magnitude is determined by the prominence and repetition of select images and words within a media product. By manipulating these attributes, a dominant frame can activate and spread congruent thoughts and feelings in individuals’ knowledge networks.

Gamson articulates how frames work, connecting media and audience or interpersonal political discourse. The frame, as invoked in political discussions, is a simple organizing idea that rests on more abstract political ideas. For example, in *Talking Politics* (1992), Gamson shows how Black focus group participants’ discussion of affirmative action reproduces what Gamson identifies as a “remedial action frame”. This frame, which is found both in media and audience discourse, according to Gamson:

assumes that racial discrimination is not a remnant of the past but a continuing presence, albeit in subtle form.” It rests on the abstract and difficult

idea of institutional racism, which Vanessa skillfully articulates and makes understandable and concrete. In this frame, affirmative action programs are an expression of an ongoing, incomplete struggle for equal opportunity in American society. (1992, p. 3)

Whereas this process has been previously been shown to operate most dramatically within news media coverage of major political events (especially terrorism), this study will examine the relevance of this formulation to the understanding of how entertainment media does or does not effectively also frame the problem of race relations.

Qualifications and limitations of framing.

Although significant, media framing effects are neither uniform nor universal. They are limited by a variety of factors including source credibility, the audience's knowledge of the issue being addressed, and the personal characteristics of the audience (Scheufele, 1999). Research shows that framing effects can be limited by the audience's prior attitudes and the congruence of those attitudes with the media frame (Kunda, 1999; Taber & Lodge, 1999). Such studies show that people operate as "motivated skeptics." When confronted with a range of conflicting arguments and information sources, people more readily accept new information that supports their prior beliefs and apply greater scrutiny to arguments and information that contradict them (Taber & Lodge, 1999).

Most important, the effects of framing are thought to be particularly strong with regard to groups of people and topics about which individuals may have little direct knowledge.²⁴ Since most Americans continue to have little first hand experience with

²⁴ For example, researchers examining the effect of economic news on public opinion of economic conditions find actual economic indicators to be weaker predictors of public attitudes than news coverage.²⁴ Recession news, news during economic downturns, and pessimistic news have all been found to negatively influence public perception about the condition of the economy.²⁴ Because "the economy" is an abstraction, it is not just how well the economy is doing, but how the news media are framing economic conditions that is most influential to consumer confidence.

persons outside their racial group, scholars argue that negative media images of minorities in the news may exert a significant effect (Franklin D. Gilliam, Valentino, & Beckmann, 2002). Supporting this hypothesis, residential proximity to Blacks has been found to be a moderating factor for Whites exposed to negative racial stereotypes about Blacks. When exposed to racial stereotypes and racial framing in the news, White residents of predominantly White neighborhoods were more likely to endorse more punitive policies to address crime, and to feel more distance from Blacks as a group, whereas Whites living in more racially integrated areas were either unaffected or moved in the opposite direction when exposed to the same information (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Unfortunately, several scholars of media coverage of public policy have found that the media tend to ignore or even undermine constructive dialogue about race in multiple ways--by providing little context, by concentrating on the most controversial and divisive aspects of race-focused government initiatives such as affirmative action, and by sensationalizing the coverage of interracial crimes (Entman & Rojecki, 2001).

Media effects in entertainment- lessons and considerations

Along with Lance Holbert (2005), Delli Carpini and Williams are also staunch advocates of expanding the range of political communication scholarship on framing, agenda-setting and priming effects to include entertainment genres (2002). Gamson's influential 1992 focus group study is an enlightening example of this type of application. According to Gamson, citizens regularly draw on a wide range of media discourse in political deliberation and conversation on a variety of issues, from nuclear power to education. This of course includes the news but also advertising, entertainment television, and film (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994a; Gamson, 1992).

As a further demonstration of the potential significance of entertainment as public communication, Holbert recently reviewed research across multiple disciplines on the

political implications of entertainment media in (2005). His meta-analysis lays out a typology of politics and entertainment as a way of systematically thinking about and organizing the disparate fields of inquiry. Included in Holbert's classification is an array of scholarship in disciplines ranging from critical/cultural studies to social psychology and political science (Holbert, Pillion, et al., 2003).

Most relevant here are media effects studies examining the relationship between entertainment media usage and political attitudes. A 2003 study of the television drama *the West Wing* demonstrated a positive correlation between viewing the television drama with its heroic fictional president and approval ratings for the real American president (Holbert, Pillion, et al., 2003).²⁵ Scholars have also shown that specific categories of television have differential effects on perceptions of the federal government, welfare and women's rights (Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2003; Pfau, Moy, & Szabo, 2001; Sotirovic, 2001). These studies indicate that use of certain forms of entertainment television is correlated with specific patterns of political opinion.

Holbert, Shah and Kwak's study is particularly instructive. The authors found that exposure to three particular forms of entertainment television that represent women's issues in distinct ways—labeled “progressive” drama, traditional drama, and situation comedy—holds statistically significant and unique relationships with opinions on women's rights, even controlling for demographic and other mediating variables that shape media use and political opinion (Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2003). Mira Sotirovic's study of media usage and attitudes toward welfare also identified differentiated effects for different types of media use. Heavy viewing of television drama and cable television news with its personalized and episodic framing was correlated with higher levels of misinformation about welfare--specifically the misperception of the majority of welfare recipients as non-White, female, of younger age--

²⁵ Even though the fictional president is decidedly Democratic and liberal, this positive effect held true for both Democratic and Republican administrations.

and with overestimation of federal spending on welfare programs (Sotirovic, 2001). The current study continues this emerging expansion of framing theory into entertainment media by exploring if ideologically distinct depictions of interracial couples seem to have similarly differentiated effects on conversations about race.

While these priming and effects studies demonstrate the effect that entertainment media can have on real world beliefs and attitudes, more theoretical work explores how and why it might be that fictional information can have such significant impact. Dual process theories of social psychology encompass a broad range of models, but they have in common an essential idea that people process information and accommodate that information in their attitudes and beliefs in multiple modes. On the one hand, there is the systematic process which involves logic and rationality and requires conscious effort. On the other hand, there is another type of information processing that occurs quickly, without effort and according to different principles.

Prentice and Gerrig extend dual process theory to understand how audiences incorporate fictional information into their beliefs about reality. Surveying a variety of data sources, they conclude that there is substantial evidence that people approach fiction with the assumption of truth. Although they know that the specific plot and individual characters are “made up”, they assume the backdrop is not and thus believe the contextual information contained in fictional worlds to be true (Prentice & Gerrig, 1999, p. 534) . They find that psychological models of belief and attitude formation point to people’s inherent credulity—their tendency to allow any information, reliable or unreliable, to gain entry into their store of knowledge and to influence their belief about the world. While allowing that these theories weren’t intended to apply to the processing of information from fiction, they hypothesize that the way audiences process information from fiction likely follows the automatic pattern given the scarcity of cognitive resources and the use of fiction as entertainment.

Prentice and Gerrig explore a number of different models to explain how this automatic information process operates. Their presentation of the elaboration likelihood model seems most applicable to the present study. They write:

When motivation and ability to elaborate persuasive arguments (i.e. to engage in systematic processing) are low, people form and change attitudes through any of a number of mechanisms that are triggered by the presence of peripheral cues. These cues include variations in the source, length and context of the persuasive message. (pp. 534-535)

For fictional sources of information, the authors extrapolate, belief should work similarly and “depend on the peripheral cues that authors embed in their narratives” (p. 534). There are a myriad of choices within a fictional cultural product such as a film or television show, however. Prentice and Gerrig identify some of the most important cues for belief in information presented in fictional works:

Authors can put words they wish readers to believe into the mouths of intelligent, attractive characters with whom readers closely identify; they can put words they wish readers to dismiss into the mouths of foolish or unsavory characters. They can depict a sensitive and discerning character being persuaded by or alternatively rejecting another’s arguments. They can manipulate the setting and tone of their work so as to increase or decrease the likelihood that readers will see a link between the events of the story and the real world. In short, authors can use peripheral cues to their advantage to ensure that their stories have the real-world effects they wish them to have. (p. 535)

I would add that the text’s creator need not have that specific intention for the cues to have an effect on the audience’s belief. The content and textual analysis is designed to

break down and isolate some of the most potentially salient cues in interracial film depictions, attending elements including the settings, the sequence of events or consequences that result from the romantic relationship, the characteristics of characters who present particular arguments about race in the films.

Active Audiences, Multiple Standpoints, and the Construction of Cultural Meaning

Together, the media effects and social psychology literature show us that media, including, or perhaps especially the entertainment media, can have important implications for political discourse, attitudes and opinions. Implicit prejudice is based on associations built up over time, partly from media content and people learn from and process info from fiction in similar ways as information from news. Applying this to the current study, these studies suggest that exposure to repetitive interracial romantic film depictions *may* even create associations and facilitate social learning. But entertainment content is also polysemic, and audiences play a central part in creating meaning.

To that point, cultural reception studies help us better understand the role of the audience in making meaning from cultural products. Whereas the critical/cultural work discussed earlier provide important insights into the portrayal of race in entertainment media, like most scholars in this area, those works illuminate the intertextual and intratextual meaning to the neglect of reception. Recognizing that the process of meaning making does not end with production, and that it includes the audience's interpretation of those communication practices, an essential branch of the cultural studies project is focused primarily on understanding the meaning that audiences create from the media they consume. Audience studies in this tradition reflect a paradigm shift, with movement away from a positivist stance, which insists on a single universal truth that can be gained, tested,

and proven. Studies in this tradition position the audience as an active rather than passive participant in the communication process.

Another essential characteristic of this type of research is that it recognizes that cultural consumption is “a complex process of negotiation whereby specific members of a culture construct meaning from a mainstream text that is different from the meaning others would produce. These different readings are based, in part, on viewers’ various histories and experiences,” in other words, the totality of their individual standpoints (Bobo, 2002, p. 211).

Drawing on Stuart Hall’s theory of encoding and decoding (1980), research from this perspective allows that cultural readings vary significantly depending on the audience. They may be dominant, accepting the seemingly “natural” or manifest meaning of the text “without question” (Bobo, 2002, p. 211); or negotiated, accepting parts of the text’s dominant codes while imposing modifications that reflect the audience’s own experience and social location; or a reading may even be oppositional, a reading that recognizes the dominant meaning but rejects it, applying instead its own framework for interpretation – a feminist reading for example that recognizes “that the system that produced the text is one with which he or she is fundamentally at odds” (Bobo, 2002, p. 211).

In addition to the theoretical work of the Birmingham Center’s Stuart Hall in the 1970s and 1980s, this approach to audience reception is greatly influenced by *seminal* applications of this theory in such projects as sociologist David Morley’s audience study of the British public affairs television program *Nationwide* and Radway’s study of women readers of romance fiction (1980; 1984). Although there is still more race-related work focusing on cultural production via textual and political economy analysis, over the past 10 years, an increasing number of scholars have begun to examine how audiences interpret portrayals of race in entertainment media. Among these, the most notable for this study are

Jacqueline Bobo's study of Black women as cultural interpreters of mainstream film and literature and Harris and Donmoyer's film study "Is Art Imitating Life?" (Bobo, 1995; T. M. Harris & Donmoyer, 2000).

These projects are strikingly consistent in ideological orientation, method and findings. They employed qualitative audience research methods including focus groups and in-depth interviewing, which are the primary methods of research in the cultural studies tradition. In one such study, which explored racialized dimensions of responses to the movie *Crash* (Haggis, 2004), Kinefuchi and Orbe summarized, "different standpoints mean different realities" So, despite "little biological difference" across groups, "the racial locations that we occupy necessarily affect our ontological and epistemological orientations in the world" (Kinefuchi & Orbe, 2008, p. 71). Moreover, while "people of color see their experiences being racialized and thus are different from those of European Americans," "European Americans tend to emphasize the universality of human experience" and "believe that racism is largely a historical issue" (Kinefuchi & Orbe, 2008). Similarly, when we consumer cultural products like film, we necessarily bring these contradictory standpoints into their reception.

This racial perception gap necessarily influences how people with different racial backgrounds make sense of the cultural products they consume, but it is not all encompassing. These studies also affirm that African American women process popular entertainment in multilayered ways, invoking and filtering media images through different ideologies in keeping with their multiple standpoints as women, as Blacks, and as members of a certain class. Bobo finds that Black women as cultural consumers work implicitly in concert with Black women who are cultural producers, employing resistant interpretive strategies to counteract the negative images of themselves that she argues are so pervasive in American culture. Bobo's focus group discussions with middle class Black women who

had both read the novel *The Color Purple* and viewed its film adaptation were particularly helpful in understanding the audience's collaborative role in the communication process. The groups convincingly demonstrate that while Spielberg's version "produced not only a simplistic exploration of a Black woman's life, but one that in fact undermines the revisionist efforts by previous women writers," Black women were able to "resist the pull of the film, and to extract progressive meanings" from it (1993, pp. 278, 285).

Applying a cross-cultural approach to reception study, Harris and Donmoyer (2000) also affirm the utility of standpoint theory in understanding how women negotiate competing standpoints of race and gender to make sense of the racial and gender themes in entertainment. Using in-depth individual interviews, the authors explored how Black women and White women interpret complex identity issues in the 1959 production of *An Imitation of Life*, a film in which uses the drama of race and the figure of the tragic mulatto as pivotal fodder for melodrama (T. M. Harris & Donmoyer, 2000; Sirk, et al., 1959). Their analysis emphasizes that "there are multiple dimensions embedded within a person's standpoint. While a film text may be interpreted as speaking to a woman's experiences as a woman, a woman with the multiple identities of race, class, and gender may have several interpretations of the meaning contained within that text" (T. M. Harris & Donmoyer, 2000; Sirk, et al., 1959).

Harris and Donmoyer's study effectively demonstrates the multidimensional nature of standpoint epistemology and affirms the wisdom of Patricia Collins' important caution with regard to standpoint epistemology:

While common experiences may predispose Black women to develop a distinctive group consciousness, they guarantee neither that such a consciousness will develop among all women nor that it will be articulated as such by the group...standpoints are not static (Collins, 1998, pp. 201-228).

Thus, common challenges may foster similar angles of vision leading to a group knowledge or standpoint among African American women. Or they may not. (2000, p. 25)

Furthermore, Collins is careful to note that one group's truth is not more important than another and that different group's visions must not be artificially ranked in relation to one another. Thus in undertaking cultural and ideological critique, while it may be "tempting to claim that Black women are more oppressed than everyone else and therefore have the best standpoint from which to understand the mechanisms, processes, and effects of oppression, this is not the case" (Collins, 2000, p. 270).

Consistent with Collins (Collins, 2000) and Harris and Donmoyer (2000), and perhaps of greatest importance to the current study of how audiences interpret interracial film narratives is Press and Cole's innovative research on female television audiences and the issue of abortion (1999). Over several years, the authors conducted more than thirty small, peer-based focus groups with women of different classes and religious backgrounds to explore how the consumption of abortion discourse in entertainment television combines with women's individual backgrounds and preexisting attitudes to influence how women view and talk about abortion in their own lives. Press and Cole present the women's changing discourse as indication that viewing a dramatic treatment of the abortion issue might alter how women conceptualized, debated and discussed their own stances on abortion (this study was influential in the design of the present research and is described in greater detail in the Methods chapter).

This comparative work-- the studies done by Press, Press and Cole, Bobo, and Harris and Donmoyer that emphasize the viewer's standpoint as an essential element in reception-- is the final conceptual element that drives this study (Bobo, 1993; Harris & Donmoyer, 2000; Press & Cole, 1999; A. L. Press, 1991). As Harris and Donmoyer advise,

“careful, detailed research is needed in order to understand fully the components of “standpoints” and how they interact. Through such methodologies as in-depth interviews and focus groups, we can gain an increased knowledge and understanding of the multiple dimensions of standpoint” (2000, p. 92). The current audience study attempts to do just that through cross-cultural comparison of responses to racial and sexual themes in interracial romantic films.

These studies notwithstanding, there is some considerable debate about the extent to which popular texts are open to oppositional reading. Some critics argue that by placing so much focus on what certain segments of audiences take out of films we risk underestimating the power of dominant messages (Budd, Entman, & Steinman, 1990; Kellner, 1995). Others warn against the danger of attempting to classify responses to media according to categories like class or gender. Ien Ang, for example, critiques Press’s study of classed responses to *Dynasty* (1990) , contending that such analysis may lead to “creeping essentialism”. By treating demographic categories as “self-evident pregiven factor(s) that can be used as ‘independent variable(s)’ to explain” given phenomena such as responses to media, we give them greater power. These categories become strengthened, more “clearly defined, fixed, static ‘objects’ in themselves” (Ang, 1996, p. 49). In other words, cross gender or cross cultural reception studies like this one risk reinforcing presuppositions and essentializing categories of race and gender and class.

These considerations are valid and must be kept in mind. Still, the study of how audiences negotiate or provide oppositional readings to cultural texts remains a fertile, important area within the study of media and politics, and most researchers today accept the basic premise that communication and meaning are necessarily socially situated because “every knower is grounded in his or her own particular identities, including gender, class and

race”(Press & Cole, 1999, p. x).²⁶ Moreover, acknowledging the power of the text does not negate the necessity of understanding the audience’s response to it. Thus the approach this dissertation takes is to acknowledge both the multidimensionality of audience reception and the power of the text, consistent with the second essential model of audience reception put forth by the British cultural theorists – the articulation model--essentially a more inclusive refinement of the earlier encoding/decoding reception model.

In the articulation model, “meaning is determined by the intersection (“articulation”) of various ideologies within the viewer’s social experiences, including both individual and social factors”(Heide, 1995, p. 22). So, as Mary Anne Moffitt describes, “Hall’s articulation model views meaning as an historical moment in which cultural forces, textual features, and social pressures on the individual receiver all intersect and articulate meaning to the receiver”(1993, p. 234). This is an essential framework through which to view both the audience and the text as it helps move us substantially forward, facilitating the integration of essential theories of media influence and reception:

This interpretation moves us beyond the increasingly sterile debate over the power of the text versus the power of the audience in the creation of meaning. For in the articulation model meaning is the result of myriad intersecting factors, many of which are contradictory, including as Moffitt writes, “the fantasy of the text; the ideologically and culturally charged social, gender and labor positions of the receiver; and currently felt, so-called ‘real’ lived experience of the receiver” (Heide, 1995, p. 22).

²⁶ There is in particular, a growing body of material on sexual minorities’ interpretation of homoeroticism in ostensibly “straight” fictional entertainment that seems to support the idea of oppositional reading (Allington, 2007; Woledge, 2005). The Internet has proven particularly fruitful in providing opportunities for fan expression and audience study, especially exploring the negotiated and oppositional readings that cultural subgroups bring to popular entertainment.

How Disparate Approaches Complement Each Other: A Case Study

The predominant portrayal of Blacks as perpetrators of violent crime in television news and drama and popular film provides perhaps the most striking example of how the critical and social scientific approaches have begun to complement each other. In *Reading Race*, cultural studies scholar Norman Denzin argues that the violent urban films of the 1980s and 1990s which were directed by Black filmmakers bore many of the same negative attributes as those directed by White filmmakers in terms of their portrayal of Black youth, violence and inner city life as pathological. Denzin uses critical race theory and close textual analysis to deconstruct the meaning and impact of this emerging genre. He also argues that these films provide ideological support for conservative political leaders via their demonization of Black culture, citing Reagan, Newt Gingrich and other politicians who invoked menacing images of urban violence and welfare cheats to shore up support for their law enforcement and social policy agenda.

In a similar vein, but using very different methodological means, social science researchers have used correlation analysis of survey data and experiments to show that watching crime shows has both attitudinal and behavioral consequences. In multiple studies, viewing crime dramas and local television news has been positively associated with attitudinal effects including increased fear of violent crime and negative attitudes towards African Americans. In addition, studies have also shown this type of television viewing to have significant public policy implications as well. Viewing television crime, news and “reality” programming such as *Cops* is correlated with what may be seen as reactionary attitudes towards policies that are seen to be race related. Specifically, these viewers of these shows exhibit greater levels of support for punitive law enforcement policies (such as mandatory sentencing for example) (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994a) and lower levels of support for social support programs such as welfare (“A marriage of enlightenment,” 1967).

So in the example of urban violence, we find scientific evidence for the theoretical claims and ideological analysis found in cultural studies.

As shown in this example, although seeming initially to be in conflict, scholars of race and mass communication are increasingly recognizing that a mixture of social scientific and critical approaches are required to understand the portrayal and significance of race in entertainment media. At the most basic level, social scientists who study race and media increasingly acknowledge the importance of the active audience within the communication process. This in itself is a measure of the mainstream adoption of basic tenets of the cultural studies approach within social science. Furthermore, a growing number of media researchers including Holbert, Williams, and Delli Carpini routinely cite and encourage the adoption of critical modes of media analysis and qualitative research methods to add depth to social scientific audience study. Delli Carpini in particular has argued repeatedly and extensively for the focus group as a method of investigating how audiences process sociopolitical messages (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994a, 1994b).

Whereas quantitative social science provides representativeness, generalizability and verifiability, the critical approach provides essential context and deeper cultural and ideological understanding of the impact and influence of portrayals of minorities in popular media. Far from being incompatible, it seems invaluable to try to draw upon both traditions in designing future studies. Accordingly, this study incorporated this mix of insights and methods in the critical and media effects traditions. To do so, this research applied a qualitative method of reception study to the exploration of how certain dominant patterns of representation of interracial romance (racialized frames identified through quantitative and qualitative content analysis) may influence audience discourse about interracial dating and, more generally, discourse about relations between Whites and Blacks.

The Current Study: American Film and the Public Debate on Interracial Romance

As reviewed here, several essential truths about race and media inform this dissertation--the problematic history and ideological richness of Black racial representation and its political and social psychological implications; the fact that interracial relationships still hold great symbolic meaning in American life; and the polysemy of media texts and the centrality of standpoint in reception. Given what we know about race and representation in American culture, it's important to understand how American films have treated the controversial and symbolically potent subject of interracial romance. Likewise, it's just as crucial to know how select audiences interpret and evaluate film treatments of this issue. Compared to the news media, entertainment may be a less established area of opinion research, but this line of inquiry should be helpful in illuminating the nature of support for or against the expansion of racial integration in intimate, social spheres and in shedding light on how the entertainment media may influence public and private discourse on race. Since interpersonal relationships between Blacks and Whites have historically been among the most volatile and emotional aspects of race relations, film representations of this type in particular are a potentially rich resource for understanding race in America.

Research Questions

To achieve these goals, better understanding of the representation, reception and potential political implications of interracial romantic depictions I address several central and subsidiary questions. The first research questions ask about the defining characteristics of interracial representation and their relationship to prevailing racial ideology and changing times:

- How have popular film depictions framed Black-White interracial relationships since the 1950s to today?

- What are the most prominent features of these popular film depictions and how do they contribute to the overall frame?
- Within these frames, how do these films characterize race relations--to what extent are these frames negative and focused on interracial conflict or positive and focused on reconciliation and progress?
- In terms of ideology, what beliefs about race and intergroup relations -- are conveyed both implicitly and explicitly in these depictions, and what sorts of normative prescriptions or solutions have these film depictions suggested to the historical problem of contentious and unequal Black-White relations?
- How have these patterns and beliefs changed over time? Do more modern interracial depictions predominantly reinforce or challenge the inevitability of race-based conflict between Blacks and Whites?

Turning to reception, I investigate how audiences respond to different depictions of interracial romance:

- Which elements in these films do the audiences find to be most meaningful?
- How do the viewer's preexisting standpoints (including racial identity and personal experience) shape their responses to the film?
- How did the film depictions contribute to the interpersonal discourse and judgments about interracial relationships among Black versus White female audiences?

These questions can be answered fully only through content analysis and audience study, so this study combines both. Specifically, I incorporate a variety of different types of data that addresses both representation and reception and includes both quantitative and

qualitative methods. Using content analysis, textual analysis of film and qualitative data from focus groups, this study identified ideologically-distinct film depictions of interracial romance and then investigated how these representations are received by two groups of viewers most centrally implicated in these controversies – young African American and White women. Ultimately, I hope this analysis helps us better understand in even a small way how media, gender and race intersect in America and how entertainment contributes to our evolving national conversation about these issues.

Chapter 2: Research Design

Summary of Methods

The current research adds to the growing area of race and gender focused media studies using content analysis and critical textual analysis in combination with audience reception study. The analysis draws heavily on cultural studies theory and framing, in particular studies addressing how ideology and framing operate in entertainment (Holbert, et al., 2005; Kellner, 1995; Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008; Prentice & Gerrig, 1999). This combination of approaches allows me to explore how films frame interracial dating and marriage as well as broader issues related to Black-White race relations in consistent and distinct ways that convey specific ideological beliefs about race and to discern how these depictions may contribute to how the public feels and talks about these issues.

Justification for the Approach

While ideological interrogation of media representation and reception is well established, as discussed, the application of framing to the study of how audiences interpret entertainment media is fairly new. Most research has focused on the media text, often using quantitative content analysis to identify the types of content and patterns of meaning, which are prominent. Concerning attitudes towards gender, Holbert, Shah, and Kwak (2003) observe that “content-focused research *hints* at the potential effects of entertainment content on opinions about gender roles and such varied matters of public policy concern as abortion, birth control, and the women’s rights movement” (p.46). Because most content-

focused studies do not investigate the role of the audience, this research has generally had limited explanatory value in terms of media effects. Accordingly, Holbert, Shah and Kwak assert, “the failure to directly link various categories of media content to specific effects stemming from their use speaks to a chasm between content and effects-based media research” (2003, p. 48)

Because of this disconnect, proponents of mixed methods argue that framing research can be enriched through triangulation of content analysis with audience research methods including qualitative methods developed in the critical tradition (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994b; Holbert, 2005; Holbert, Shah, et al., 2003). Holbert, Shah et al. suggest combining quantitative analysis with a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of how audiences receive and interpret these frames. They write, “the merging of insights from various qualitative or critical/cultural studies with a quantitative analysis has proved fruitful . . . and we encourage this meshing of approaches for future studies that deal with the relationship between media and public opinion” (2003, p.58). To date, only a few studies have used focus groups effectively to gain insight into the effects of media treatment of controversial issues such as abortion on audiences’ deliberation and attitudes towards these issues (Press & Cole, 1999).

Content Analysis

The coding scheme was designed to quantify how critically or supportively interracial relationships and race relations are depicted in American films that prominently feature a romantic relationship in which one romantic lead character is Black or biracial and the other is White and to enable comparisons across time. This study examines mainstream American films over six decades, from 1954 to 2009. As the mandated desegregation of public schools is seen as a pivotal legal milestone that facilitates social desegregation and brings

the issue of interracial intimacy to the foreground of public discourse, this study uses the historic Brown Vs. Board of Ed Supreme Court ruling in 1954 as a symbolic marker and starting point.

Movie selection criteria

Because different issues arise depending on the race of the individuals involved and the issue of Black and White interracial dating has historically been the most contested and controversial in the U.S., the study was limited to films that depict dating between members of these races (Childs, 2005; Kantor, 1924; Lubin, 2005). Furthermore, this study was restricted to films that have a Black *leading* character involved in a romantic heterosexual relationship with a White *leading* character.²⁷

These films were identified by cross-referencing listings for “miscegenation,” “interracial relationship,” “interracial affairs,” or “interracial romance” in three major film indexes with newspaper and journal articles written during the period that also include these or similar terms (Buckley, 1991; Groups Protest Film," 1957; Hollywood, TV Have Fear Problems; Seek Answers," 1960; Old Movie Taboos Eased in New Code For Film Industry," 1956; Pearson, 1991; Popkin, 1957). The indices were The British Film Archive’s electronic database, *Film Index International*, The Internet Movie Database (IMDB), and *Videohound’s Golden Movie Retriever*. Because the goal of the study was to identify patterns of representation in mainstream American film, a distribution-based selection criterion was also applied. Only films that were produced by major studios or received major theatrical distribution (as indicated by gross box office receipts in excess of \$1 million) were included.

²⁷ As discussed earlier, because sexuality is such a volatile complicating factor for racial ideology and representation, movies dealing with non-heterosexual romance were considered beyond the scope of this project.

This distribution based criteria was useful as it allowed for both studio and independent films.²⁸

As I am interested in the representation of interracial romance in connection with American race relations, the study was also limited to films produced in the United States (but not necessarily set in the U.S. as foreign locations were sometimes used as a form of displacement to appeal to American audiences, a factor that is addressed in the analysis).

Finally, bearing in mind my emphasis on interracial relationships as a window to race relations, in terms of subject matter, only films in which the romantic relationship was the movie's central focus were selected for the content analysis. In order to ensure that the films selected would not be biased towards problematic treatments of race, this content based criterion only required that the interracial couple be the lead characters and that the romantic *relationship* be central to the on-screen narrative. Just as important, race, did not have to be a focus of discussion within the film or a central driver of the movie's narrative for me to include it in the study.

Based on these rules, in several of the movies which were *excluded*, one but not both romantic leads are main characters, or there is a different central narrative other than the relationship, and/or the relationship is featured in only a small number of scenes. So, the romantic comedy *Away We Go* is included in the core set of movies although race is almost never explicitly discussed in that film, but *Rachel Getting Married*, which shares a similar tone and post-racial sensibility, is not. In the latter, the relationship between the two sisters is the central subject, not the romantic relationship, evidenced by the fact that the couple

²⁸ Although it confronts the issue of interracial relationships, John Cassavetes' 1959 film *Shadows* was excluded from the study as an independently produced movie, which did not receive wide release from what can be discerned through contemporary reviews (citation). In addition, box office data was not available. As a result it was considered outside of mainstream American cinema for the purposes of this study.

only appear together in a few scenes. Applying these criteria narrowed the consideration set to 30 films, beginning with *Band of Angels* in 1957 and ending with *Away We Go* in 2009.²⁹

Coding Design and Influences

Bearing in mind the conceptions of framing and ideology discussed earlier, this content analysis focuses on the quantifiable elements of interracial film depictions that are most salient to existing theories and popular beliefs about interracial dating and Black-White race relations. To that end, this coding scheme was informed by three main sources: the previously cited research on the representation of race in American popular culture (Bogle, 1994; Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Graham, 2001; Guerrero, 1993); scholarship on the representation of interracial relationships in particular (Childs, 2009; Courtney, 2005; Gateward, 2005; Gilroy, 1991; Paulin, 1997) and studies about attitudes toward interracial couples (Childs, 2005; Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Schuman, et al., 1997). It also pulls together categories derived from exploratory open coding along with ones adapted from those previous works.

Like the news or any medium, fictional film has its own language and a multitude of variables that contribute to the elaboration of its meaning (Prentice & Gerrig, 1999); the quantitative content analysis is necessarily limited, however to the film's manifest content, principally its narrative and dialogue. The resulting coding scheme attends to four major aspects of interracial representation: characteristics of the romantic relationship; consequences/outcomes from the relationship; explicit racial beliefs/ideology; and racial environment.

²⁹ A list of films in which the interracial romance was depicted in a secondary storyline or back-story is also included in the Appendix.

The Codebook

Organization and unit of analysis:

There are 21 variables in the coding scheme, which employs two units of analysis. When the film is the unit of analysis, the presence or absence of a variable is observed once in the overall film. When the scene is the unit of analysis, the presence or absence of a variable is recorded for each individual scene. To facilitate the latter, all the films in the study were analyzed on DVD using the chapter/scene divisions indicated by the studio.

In the first phase of coding, a dozen descriptive variables were coded at the scene level. In scene-level coding, each variable present counts just once per scene regardless of the number of individual occurrences of that element. These codes help us to assess a variety of elements that all contribute to the overall representation of race in these films. These included the representation of the romantic relationship; whether is represented as genuine and intimate or superficial and abusive; the gender of the White romantic lead; relationship outcomes-- the positive or negative impact that the relationship has on the characters' lives and those of their family and friends; the type of resistance or support that the relationship receives; and the type of beliefs which the main characters express about race.

In the second phase of coding, the unit of analysis is the film as a whole. This section contains two elements that may shape the audience's overall impression of the couple's legitimacy: romantic resolution and racial environment. Finally, the last phase of coding also uses the film as the unit of analysis. This section contains just one pattern-level category, which I call the film's racial frame. The codebook delineates the characteristics of four distinct racial frames, which I first identified through qualitative textual analysis prior to the present study. Each racial frame encompasses a combination of elements corresponding to specific ideologies of race. This interpretive category was coded at the end of the film and

requires the coder to draw on the totality of her overall impressions and observations of the film. Although elements of multiple frames are often in a single film, the coder was required to choose one racial frame that she felt best represented the film's *dominant* perspective.

Content analysis – Specific categories and codes

Romantic relationship and relationship consequences

First, the content analysis assessed the characteristics of the romantic relationship itself and consequences of the relationship. To that end, the central questions were: is the central interracial couple shown in intimate or abusive situations and what type of events result from the interracial pairing? Is the relationship associated with positive or negative outcomes? Specific codes include:

- Physical intimacy – romantic or sexual – characters engage in physically intimate behavior, including kissing, having sex, holding hands, etc.
- Emotional intimacy – any instances of the romantic characters exhibiting real closeness- honesty, sharing personal secrets, vulnerability, support, mutual concern.
- Physical violence, aggression or graphic, explicit sexuality within the interracial relationship. This is distinguished from sexually intimacy by its explicit nature. Such scenes violate norms of romantic representation and would be jarring or out of place in a mainstream romantic film.
- Emotional/verbal abuse (beyond minor everyday mutual conflicts between loved ones). Emotional/verbal abuse is distinguished by insulting and degrading language that is aimed at demeaning its target and would be jarring or out of place in a mainstream romantic film.
- Gender of White lead – as discussed in the literature review, gender is a variable that intersects with race and helps to shape how people receive interracial romance. This is coded just once per film.

- Relationship consequences--Positive outcomes:
 - Cultural exchange or other cultural benefits including: characters benefit from enjoyment, appreciation, learning about a different culture – music, dance, traditions, language, and history. This exchange may result in the creative collaboration, better understanding between races and cultures, or just a personal gratification for the individual character.
 - Family and friends unite: the relationship drives racial reconciliation in the couple's social network, with family and friends from different, often polarized groups coming together.
- Relationship consequences--Negative outcomes:
 - Disapproval from friends and family - conveyed verbally or visually (through explicit, pronounced gestures, looks).
 - Public disapproval from strangers – conveyed verbally or visually
 - Racially motivated violence
 - Social ostracism: loss of friends, family relationships—characters in the interracial relationship are shunned by family, excluded from social circle, events.

Explicit ideology.

The coding scheme also takes into account explicit expressions of racial beliefs/ideology by lead or supporting characters. Lead characters include the romantic couple and their immediate family, closest friends. A supporting/peripheral character is one

from the social network, workplace, or community of the lead characters. Ideology was coded as being either pro- integration/racial reconciliation or separatist/anti-integration.

Explicit pro-integration expressions were considered to include those espousing any of the following beliefs:

- All human beings are equal and that what people have in common (especially love) is more important and powerful than what separates people.
- America as melting pot or color blind
- Integration and/or multiculturalism as positive.
- Diversity as a positive element, strength

Dr. King's "I have a Dream" speech is the most famous articulation of this perspective. More recently, Barack Obama has also repeatedly put forth this viewpoint, first as part of his keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in 2004 and then as the central focus of the "A More Perfect Union" speech on race delivered in Philadelphia during the 2008 presidential primary campaign.³⁰

Explicit separatist or anti-integration expressions were defined as those endorsing the belief that:

- Blacks and Whites can not get along and are best left separate.
- Racial differences are persistent and important and will always be so.
- Diversity is a problem for society
- People who cross a color line are "selling out" or betraying their race
- Famous articulations of this perspective include the early teachings of Malcolm X, Nation of Islam leader Farrakhan, and Marcus Garvey, who stressed the need for Blacks' solidarity, nationalism, and even a movement back to Africa. This would also encompass the beliefs of people like White supremacist David Duke.

It's important to recognize that the "separatist" or anti-integration classification encompasses a wide range of beliefs. As noted earlier, previous scholars (Gilroy, 1991;

³⁰ Together, the speeches are credited with helping launch Obama's career and helping to facilitate his victory in the Democratic primaries. They are available in full on YouTube. 2004 DNC Keynote address <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWynt87PaJ0> . A More Perfect Union: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWe7wTVbLUU&feature=channel_page

Paulin, 1997) have acknowledged a separatist impulse in African American culture and have recognized in it reactionary characteristics in common with White supremacist discourse. However, it's also important to note that the present analysis does not imply any equivalency between these belief systems.

At one end of the spectrum this type of belief does *not necessarily* denote animosity. Racial separatism can be a prescription for making the most of how things are, not necessarily how one thinks they should be. Arguing that ideology “functions a social narrative that interprets problems and offers solutions” for us in contemporary life, Melissa Harris-Lacewell identifies four political ideologies in black political thought that wield great influence in political and racial attitudes among Blacks (2004, p. 19). Two of them, Black Nationalism and Black Conservatism, espouse some facet of racial separatism even though they are highly differentiated in other ways. Black Conservatism stresses the behavioral and attitudinal pathologies of African Americans and the need for self-reliance and economic development as the key to uplift; Black Nationalist ideologies on the other hand emphasize the historic subjugation of Blacks and prescribes complete separation from the White dominated societies as a necessity for advancement.³¹

Racial outlook/environment and resolution.

The remaining content categories were coded at the film level. This section contains two elements that may shape the audience's overall impression of the couple's legitimacy: the racial environment that surrounds them and the ultimate romantic fate that befalls them. The atmosphere surrounding the couple is also a key component in the film's overall frame. Is the racial environment characterized as being one of racial comity and integration or racial conflict and separation? An environment marked by comity is one that shows signs of racial

³¹ For a thorough discussion of contemporary Black political ideology see Michael Dawson's *Behind the Mule* (1994) and “Everyday Talk and Ideology” in Melissa Harris-Lacewell's *Barbershops, Bibles, and Bet* (Harris-Lacewell, 2004).

progress and/or generally positive interactions between Blacks and Whites in the environment independent of the central interracial relationship. In such an environment there may also be minor evidence of racial conflict. Conversely, in an environment of racial conflict or amity, Blacks and Whites are polarized, with no or very little social integration. There are substantial racial conflicts in the community independent of the central relationship (preexisting rifts, issues). Alternatively, the film may depict a mixed racial outlook with evidence of coexistence, progress and serious conflict.

The romantic resolution is another fundamental factor in the interracial romantic film. Whether the romantic coupling is viable in the long-term contributes a great deal to the overall impression that the film leaves on its audience.

Total racial representation scores.

In addition to the values for each individual category, the coding scheme was designed to produce an overall score for each film that reflects the extent to which the depiction either normalizes or problematizes the interracial relationship. Different weights were assigned to each category depending on its seriousness and impact on the narrative. Within a category, a code that is supportive of interracial comity and shows the relationship between the two protagonists in a normal light carries a positive weight and codes that cast the relationship in a transgressive, deviant light carry negative weights. For example, in the relationship outcomes category, racially motivated violence resulting in death is a life and narrative-defining event that carries the maximum negative value compared to other variables (weight = -5). Social ostracism from family and friends (weight = -3) is another negative code-- more serious than verbal disapproval from family and friends (wt=-1), but less serious and therefore assigned a lesser weight than violence resulting in death (weight=-5). The complete codebook is provided in the Appendix.

Coders and training.

There were three coders including myself. Each coder completed at least one fourth of the total universe of interracial films fitting our selection criteria. Intercoder reliability was calculated across all three coders based on a 10% sample of the entire pool. In addition to reviewing the content analysis design and objectives of the study together at the start of the study, we had several subsequent meetings by phone in which we discussed and reviewed our individual results for the scene by scene coding for *Save the Last Dance*. This process allowed me to identify open issues and clarify any ambiguous rules before we coded the remaining films. The codebook and instructions are provided as an Appendix.

Textual Analysis

After completing the quantitative analysis, and bearing in mind Hall and Wartenberg's conception of romantic film as moral critique and collective unconscious, I conducted close readings on representative films within each racial frame, paying particular attention to the communication of racial myths and moral lessons in the film's narrative, imagery, and dialogue. The two films selected for the audience study, *Zebrahead* and *Something New*—representing different racial frames and ideologically distinct visions of interracial relationships and race relations--receive particularly close attention in Chapter four.

This textual analysis delves into gray areas that the quantitative analysis can not, such as characterization and subtext. Like the content analysis, this part of the study is also distinctly ideological--in keeping with Kellner (1995) and Pramaggiore and Wallis's (2007) conception of ideology in film and with the previous studies on Black and interracial representation previously discussed. Kellner instructs us that to carry out a full ideology critique, one has to address "the discourses and figures that construct the text's gender and

racial problematics” (1995, p. 59). This requires close readings of the films that interrogate how characters of different social groups are drawn, how visual and other creative elements like makeup, dress, lighting and editing (especially cross-cutting) contribute to meaning as well as a movie’s discourse and language. It also requires reading the films in relation to the surrounding culture’s contemporaneous “existing political struggles.”

From framing I adopted the focus on the media text’s implied causes, consequences, and solutions to problems, identifying the beliefs and solutions interracial film depictions have suggested to the historical problem of contentious, unequal Black-White relations. Applying this integrated, context-specific ideological approach, I hope to help us better understand how specific ideologies of race have been reproduced, reinterpreted and transformed by different filmmakers over time through interracial romantic depictions that inevitably reflect and respond to the contemporaneous political struggles of their times (Kellner, 1995).

Focus Groups

The audience study used semi-structured group discussions to investigate how young women of different cultural backgrounds interpret ideologically charged interracial depictions and also the relationship between viewing these depictions and women’s discourse regarding race relations and interracial intimacy. Each focus group viewed a film depicting an interracial romantic relationship and the issues that arise as a result of that involvement in one of two ways, either distinctively supportive or critical. The supportive film (*Something New*) positioned the interracial romance in a multicultural frame, addressing and endorsing acceptance of interracial romantic relationships. In contrast, the critical film *Zebrahead* was illustrative of the separatist or racial conflict frame - emphasizing the negative aspects and consequences of interracial relationships. These particular films were

chosen for the focus group study because they occupied different ends of the supportive/normalizing versus critical/problematising representational spectrum, and because they portrayed couples within parallel gender and race dynamics. Choosing films in which the couples had the same race and gender composition was necessary given audiences' potentially disparate reactions to interracial relationships depending on whether they involve a White woman and Black man or White man and Black woman. In addition, the two films which had the highest box office earnings in each category were also avoided so as to minimize the possibility that the audience would be reacting to the reception of the film rather than providing spontaneous individual reactions. This meant excluding *Jungle Fever* from consideration as a separatist film for audience study and *Save the Last Dance* from the multicultural category. Since there were fewer separatist framed films to choose from, that film was selected first.

In terms of the structure of the discussions, Press and Cole's qualitative study of abortion discourse was another important influence on the research design. Although it departed from traditional modes of studying effects, Press and Cole's research is influential, having been cited in subsequent studies and praised in respected academic reviews.³² Their

³² A reviewer in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, for example, wrote that "in addition to its substantive and theoretical contributions, *Speaking of Abortion* offers some tantalizing methodological insights. First, Press and Cole employ some unconventional strategies in their focus group design and analysis.... For public opinion researchers, *Speaking of Abortion* will serve as an outstanding exemplar of the principles of standpoint theory (Harding 1991), a feminist challenge to the premise that science is objective." Furthermore, this reviewer writes, the authors "offer a generally intelligent critique of how existing survey measures deal poorly with ambivalence. Although the conclusion that "forced-choice questions cannot tap the nuances of opinion held by many women, who feel *abortion* is justifiable in some cases but not in others" (p. 148) seems extreme, *Speaking of Abortion* lays down a gauntlet that question writers ought not overlook" (Bischoping, 2001, p. 150) .

Similarly, with only a minor nod to the study's methodological unorthodoxy (acknowledging that "other projects will display more rigorous and complex research methods"), the *Journal of Communication* reviewer recommended the book "to anyone interested in insights about how women talk about abortion and where this talk fits in the political landscape." He also described its contribution as, "a qualitative study of how prolife

method is instructive and can be used as an innovative model to follow in conducting audience study.

As Delli Carpini and Williams wrote (describing the authors' initial publications on the findings of these focus groups), "Press (1991) and Press and Cole (1992) designed their focus groups as qualitative pre-post experiments" (1994a, p. 63). In this format, the first third of the conversation consists of open ended discussion about abortion. Then the film is viewed, acting as a "stimulus" and afterwards the issue is discussed further. Changes in the language used by group members to discuss abortion following the film are treated as the response. While acknowledging the danger of over-generalizing from group interviews, Delli Carpini and Williams also recognize the limitations of quantitative methods to illuminate the dynamics of opinion formation, contending that "focus groups can reproduce other methods' strengths while avoiding some of their weaknesses" (1994a, p. 63).

Focus groups like Press and Cole's have a unique contribution to make. Whereas "closed end survey items often reify opinions by forcing respondents to present them as self-contained and preexisting objects,"(Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994a, p. 64) focus groups reflect the fluid nature of opinion formation and can be "catalysts for the individual expression of latent opinion...for free-associating to life" (Liebes & Katz, 1990, p. 28). As these and other scholars affirm, like other qualitative and ethnographic methods, focus groups can provide insights about audiences and attitudes that may be inaccessible through other means. Crucially, Childs asserts, "like manifestations of contemporary racism, white opposition to interracial unions is often subtle and not readily apparent or revealed." Furthermore, survey data on interracial relationships "rarely tells the whole story and allows respondents' views to remain hidden within politically correct check boxes"(2005, p. 45).

and prochoice women, distributed across the class system, talk about abortion" and one that "is also about the entertainment function of television and how television portrayals of women and abortion fashion the cultural conversation" (Ellis, 2000, p. 180).

Although the primary focus of the present study is to illuminate the audience members' responses to the films and how they relate to their different standpoints, a similar procedure was followed on a much smaller scale, with the "stimulus" in this case being one of two ideologically distinct interracial romantic films.

Adopting this approach, each group of participants viewed a movie depicting an interracial relationship and took part in a semi-structured group dialogue exploring attitudes about race and interracial intimacy before and after viewing. Participants also completed brief written questionnaires describing themselves and their individual reactions to the movie. As Merton, Fiske and Kendall argued in *The Focused Interview* (1990), the design of focus group audience study is grounded in a desire to explore a specific, well-defined research problem with participants, moderator, setting and individual group composition carefully selected and manipulated based on existing analysis and theories about the problem and the relationship between the audience and the media discourse under study. This study was designed to observe these best practices and those identified by other methodologists, principally Morgan, Krueger and Krzyzanowski (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newbold, 1998; Krzyzanowski, 2008; Morgan, 1997; Morgan, Krueger, & King, 1998; Press, 1991). These procedures are described below.

Participants.

I recruited participants through the School of Journalism and Mass Communication's research pool and student organizations at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For several reasons, the study was restricted to women of the particular backgrounds addressed in the films under study, White and African American. First, the literature shows that relationships between Blacks and Whites remain the most controversial in American culture, so the responses of members of these particular groups were of particular interest to me. In addition, while best practices dictated that we conduct separate groups for

participants of different cultural backgrounds, resource constraints limited the number of participants who could participate and the total number of separate sessions I could conduct. Most important, because my research interest is feminist in nature and because women (especially young Black and young White women) have most often been subjects implicated in, but not necessarily heard from in debates about race and sexuality, I wanted this study to focus on young African American and White women's perspectives. So, all participants were screened for their fit with the dimensions that were of interest to this study, in this case age, race and gender.

Most participants (all of White participants and many of the Black students) were journalism and mass communication majors recruited through the school's research pool. In order to gain sufficient numbers of African American participants, who are a minority in the School, I also reached out to Black students by email and in person through organizations including the Black Student Union and the Campus Y. The electronic notices and personal announcements disclosed in advance that the study would address media and race related issues and that participation would be limited to undergraduate women who were between the ages of 18 and 24 at the time of the study and who identified racially as either African American or European/White American. Deciding exactly who is or is not American and who is or is not Black was beyond my scope. I trusted the students to culturally identify and qualify themselves. This meant that a foreign student who was Black but foreign born and raised or partially raised abroad and self-identified as British, for example, would not qualify but one who was born in Jamaica and raised here, and identifies herself as African American would.

The groups were limited to five to twelve participants each in order to approximate a discussion size that is considered most effective for this kind of research (Delli Carpini &

Williams, 1994a; Morgan, 1997).³³ A total of 50 participants took part in six focus group sessions, four Black and two White. Because the pool of White students far outnumbered that of African American students, the initial White groups were fully subscribed, and therefore sufficiently large in number--11 to 12 participants each, at the upper end but still within optimal size for discussion -- so that no additional White groups were needed (Morgan, 1997). The initial Black groups were half that size, so two additional groups were scheduled. The total number of participants of each background remained comparable (23 White and 27 Black).

In appreciation of the women's substantial contributions of time, energy and personal disclosure, each participant received dinner and snacks on the night of the study and two movie theatre tickets per person good at the local movie theater nearest campus. In addition, the School of Journalism research pool participants also received credit fulfilling their entire annual research requirement for participating in the study. Students who did not need research credits also received the chance to win an iPod Shuffle—one student from each non-major focus group won an iPod.

Moderator.

To further help facilitate discourse and make the groups as comfortable as possible given the sensitive subject matter, the groups were led by a interviewer of the same race as the discussants (T. M. Harris & Donmoyer, 2000). As the principle researcher and someone of Afro-Caribbean-American heritage I led the discussions among the Black women participating in the study. The sessions for European American women were facilitated by Dr. Lisa Paulin, an Assistant Professor of communication from a local college, who is also a race and media scholar and of the same racial background as those participants.

³³ Initially the upper limit was ten participants, but the focus groups were oversubscribed and up to twelve students were permitted to try to accommodate students who had no alternative way to get research credit.

Setting.

The research was conducted on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill Research Triangle area of North Carolina. The sessions were held in a closed meeting room on campus. Both moderators tried to create a relaxed, informal and permissive atmosphere during the discussion and dinner was provided at the start of the session so that the participants could introduce themselves over a shared meal. Participants were also told they never had to answer any question they were uncomfortable with and could leave at any time. All of the discussions were taped by the moderator to facilitate transcription and subsequent data analysis.

The discussion--structure and key questions.

Given that both gender and race are key complicating factors in the formation and deliberation of opinions on race and sexuality, in addition to restricting the groups based on gender, I assigned participants to separate groups according to their self reported racial identification (Harris & Donmoyer, 2000; Press & Cole, 1999). This separation had a number of benefits. It helped to create groups that better approximate real life (as participants described their own lives on the college campus), minimized participants' discomfort with the subject, facilitated more open discussion than might have been possible in a diverse setting, and also enabled cross –cultural comparisons in the analysis stage (T. M. Harris & Donmoyer, 2000; Press & Cole, 1999).

Each focus group viewed only one film. The supportive film, *Something New* (2006), and the critical film, *Zebrahead* (1992) were each shown to three groups – two Black and one White. Following the reading and signing of the informed consent form, participants took part in semi-structured group interviews, viewed a movie, and completed a brief written questionnaire.

The focus groups included three distinct phases: the opening discussion, the movie screening and the post-film discussion. So the group discussion was itself comprised of two parts, with a series of baseline introductory questions before the screening and more directed questions after participants watched a movie that depicts an interracial relationship in one of two distinct ways. Topics in the discussion guide were ordered so that the moderator could focus initially on building trust with general questions, then build up to more politically charged questions, and end the group with a lighter and more free-flowing discussion about movies and politics in general. This helped to create a relatively innocuous end to the sensitive and often emotionally involved discussions.

The opening discussion explored the participants' views about race relations and interracial dating, their prior exposure to these types of relationships, and thoughts about how these issues are portrayed in the media. This part of the discussion allowed the moderator to solicit the women's preconceived impressions about our topic and get the participants used to talking with each other. This portion of the discussion lasted approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour depending on the size of the group. Some of the questions for this section of the discussion included:³⁴

³⁴ Please see Appendix B for the Discussion Guide, which includes a full list of questions and suggested prompts.

- Do you think of race relations between different groups as an abstract thing that doesn't affect you or does it come up in your life as something you have to think about?
- Are racial issues generally covered in the news that you read or hear? Is it covered too much or not enough? Do you feel things are getting better or worse in terms of relations between Blacks and Whites?
- Did you ever know anyone (a friend, family member or one of you if you want to talk about this here), man or woman, who is involved in a romantic relationship with someone of a different race? Can you tell us about that and describe some of the issues that relationship brought up that you wouldn't mind telling us about here?

After this initial discussion, each group viewed the selected film. Then, immediately following the screening, each participant completed a brief written questionnaire regarding their family background and media usage and was given five minutes to write down their free-form individual reactions to the film (see Appendix for questionnaire).

The written questionnaire enabled me to get a fuller sense of who the participants are as individuals. It included both close ended questions on estimated parental income and education that helps us get a sense of the participants' socioeconomic circumstances and open ended ones about media consumption and recall of prior exposure to interracial relationships in media. I discuss this background information in Chapter five as part of my analysis of the participants' opening discussion and preexisting attitudes.

The written response also provided a valuable sense of how people reacted individually to the films prior to any group discussion. Individual reaction versus group deliberation and consensus opinion will be addressed in the audience reception chapters.

Finally, in the same group setting, participants were asked a series of questions accessing their more specific responses to the film, its depiction of the interracial couples,

and its sociopolitical content/viewpoint about racial differences, and race relations.

Developed from the model used in Press and Cole's abortion study (1999) and guidelines suggested by Hansen et al (1998), the questions used were open-ended and meant to foster an open environment for discussing the participants' response to the film and the issues it raises. Some of the central questions were:

- What did you think of the movie in general? Was there anything about this film that you really liked? Anything you disliked?
- Did the couple in the film face unique issues or challenges because of race?
- Looking back, was there anything in particular in the film – a specific scene or moment - that really stood out while you were watching, maybe something that struck you, either reinforcing something you were thinking before or changed it?
- What would you have advised this person to do about the issues they faced in this relationship?

At the end of the questions, the participants were asked if there is anything else that they think is interesting and/or important about the show or if they have anything else they would like to add. The post-film discussions lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1-1/4 hour. Including viewing the film, the study lasted a total of three to four hours.

Analytical approach to the focus group data.

I primarily analyzed the focus group data using a grounded theory approach, but feminist media studies addressing how women negotiate sometimes competing standpoints of race, class and gender in cultural reception also provided instructive models to follow in terms of application of standpoint theory to qualitative audience reception data (Bobo, 1995; T. M. Harris & Donmoyer, 2000; Heide, 1995; Press, 1990).

The transcripts were analyzed using the three-step coding process for generating grounded theory advocated by Glaser and Strauss and others (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In

the initial open coding stage, aided by the qualitative analysis software package Atlas.ti 6.0, I performed microanalysis, reviewing the transcripts closely, going over them line by line to identify recurring themes and recurring vocabulary. The second step was to review the annotated transcript again to validate and add to the initial list through axial coding. In the last stage, I reviewed the transcripts in an iterative process commenting more selectively, focusing on refining these classifications and grouping them together into broader concepts to see how they fit together and try to uncover relationship between different categories.

This coding process was also informed by Van Dijk's approach to critical discourse analysis of opinion and ideology (1998). This approach helped me to more effectively reveal the ideology embedded in member discourse and identify the most dramatic differences between the groups of women. One of the principle ways ideology may be discerned is via group members' representation of clear "self and others, us and them" dichotomies and expression of highly articulated group membership identity, customs, and hierarchy (p. 25). Van Dijk terms the latter items "group self-schemata," those attributes that "reflect the basic criteria that constitute the social identity and define the interests of a group" (p. 25). This approach proved useful in understanding how ideology may be reflected in forms that are not immediately apparent upon first reading.

Finally, as with the textual analysis the focus group analysis is also significantly informed by framing theory. One of the subsidiary research questions this study seeks to answer is to what extent did media discourse shape the participant discourse. Although one may assume that this may naturally happen, the question of how films frame social and political issues for their audiences is one that several leading scholars say has yet to be adequately addressed in Media studies and is ripe for further study using qualitative methods including focus groups (Gamson, 1992; Holbert, 2005; Press & Cole, 1999) . So, in analyzing the transcripts, I tried to determine whether there were specific indications that the

racial frames and specific language identified in the film content analysis were present in the women's post-viewing conversations. In keeping with Gamson's conception of media frames as simple organizing ideas resting on more abstract political ideas, which are similarly reproduced in interpersonal discourse, the frames I looked for in the focus groups are ideologically distinct ways of representing interracial relationships that are closely tied to more abstract ideas about race and racial progress. These racial frames include: Liberal Integrationism, Multiculturalism, Separatism, and Ambivalence. These are introduced and discussed at length in Chapters three and four.

Considerations in reporting the data.

To help give some form to my reporting of the data and aid in deciding how much emphasis to place on different aspects of the women's conversations, I took heed of David Morgan and Michal Krzyzanowski's advice on focus groups (Krzyzanowski, 2008; Morgan, 1997). Krzyzanowski suggests that researchers consider three key factors when reporting on focus group discussions: the number of groups in the study mentioning the topic, the number of people in each group who mention the topic, and how much energy and enthusiasm the topic generates among the participants (2008, p. 63). Taken as a whole, these proved to be useful guidelines. I looked for consistency in level of energy among a constant proportion of participants across nearly all the groups both across and within racial groups. Conversely, this also helped me to identify notable exceptions, those elements of the films around which there was dissent and inconsistency.

Tracking these nuances of group consensus and dissent was greatly facilitated by the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti, which I used to code the transcripts. This program enabled me to report the precise origin of the comments being quoted and/or discussed, so throughout the focus group findings, I use a citation system which specifies the race and identification number of each focus group and indicates precisely when during

the course of conversation a statement appears. For quotations that refer to post-film discussion, the name of the film the women watched is also included. For example, on page 332 in Chapter 7, a quotation is cited as “Zebrahead AA3: 587.” This indicates that the speaker was a participant in the third African American focus group, that the group viewed the film *Zebrahead*, and that this comment appears on line 587 of that transcript.

Focus group advantages and limitations and personal context

Qualitative methods in general and focus groups in particular are recommended for understanding how people interpret political content in entertainment media (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994b; Holbert, Pillion, et al., 2003). Delli Carpini and Williams (1994b) contend that political meaning is negotiated in social settings, in conversation with others in one’s peer group, family, etc. For this reason, they recommend focus groups as a way of investigating the viewing experience in a way that approximates how viewers process media messages in real life. This method may be preferred to surveys or even interviews because “What survey research labels ‘public opinion’ might better be termed ‘private opinion,’” since it studies individual opinion in isolation” (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994b, p. 788).

In contrast, with those methods, “Focus groups offer a promising way to explore our conversational model of opinion formation” (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994b, p. 788). They “allow one to examine politics in a communal setting and to focus on how citizens interact with each other”(p. 789). Thus researchers learn about media usage in context and in the audience’s own voice rather than through language imposed by a research instrument. In addition, this method is cost effective in comparison with in-depth interviews and can be conducted in a significantly shorter space of time. Ten participants may effectively take part in a single two-hour focus group, whereas it would take over ten hours to conduct the same number of in-depth interviews.

In this type of study, it is also important that groups are homogenous along a select dimension in order to facilitate analysis of the differences across groups based on that dimension. In addition to being able to isolate a specific factor in audience reception, many researchers believe that this approach more closely approximates natural peer groups as people are more likely to have conversations about and process the meaning in media texts with their peers. In the United States, this still more often than not equates to people of similar demographic profile.

Despite its utility to the present study, focus groups have significant limitations. The most important restrictions are the method's subjectivity and lack of generalizability. Both the discussions themselves and the interpretation of them are subjective. The focus group moderator and the researcher have significant influence on what is said in the groups and how material is interpreted, so taking on both of these roles I had to avoid the possibility that I would unduly influence findings at two points in the process: during the groups themselves and during analysis. As a result, the power of suggestion was a significant challenge in these focus groups. By asking certain questions, the moderator could steer the conversation in one direction, for example asking the participants to think about the film in ways that an audience would neither think about nor comment on without being prompted.

Moreover, during the data analysis phase, the study relies on the researcher's ability to recognize and interpret patterns of meaning in conversation, so my own experience and potential biases should be examined here as well. What's more, although this research is driven primarily by historical realities, part of the original impetus for the study was personal; this research was originally inspired by my experiences with race and with movies.

This subject matter is particularly familiar and personal to me as I bring both individual experience and a family background that includes several mixed race unions to this study. My family is from the Caribbean, but most of us have now lived in the United

States for the past two decades. Over that time, our family which already encompassed multiple faiths and races has only grown more culturally complex, transforming through marriages, births and a myriad of long-term relationships that crossed traditional boundaries.

Through it all, there often seemed to be a substantial disconnect between my own experience and what I saw depicted on-screen. Growing up, I navigated a variety of mixed race social settings. Most were imperfect but managed to be both amicable and even intimate the vast majority of the time. This amity seemed contrary to the way race was depicted on screen, especially film, which more often than not seemed to me to be dramatically, often alarmingly conflict-ridden. The contrast made me think about the relationship between fictional worlds and social reality and inspired me to do this study. Over time, this work took on greater urgency as I quickly found that there was little contemporary scholarship on the representations of mixed race couples in popular culture and none which approached the topic from the audience's perspective.

Because of my background and research interests, there was a risk that I may have brought my own preconceptions to bear on the analysis. I may have read the dialogue quite differently from researchers with less involvement in the subject. Because of my investment in the study, I could overstate the similarities and significance in participants' statements. Using an independent moderator hopefully helped to mitigate some of these risks. Rigorous application of a grounded theory approach and the three-step analytical coding described earlier were important safeguards as well.

In addition to the limitations introduced by the researcher, the selection of participants is also an issue in focus groups. These participants are not selected at random. As a result, these focus group findings can not be generalized to a larger population or be used to conclusively confirm or disprove a theory of media effects. Finally, although they *approximate* natural political deliberation and dialogue, focus groups are in some ways an

artificial form of conversation. They can force participants to “think about and stay with the subject being discussed in a way which is surely *not* natural” (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newbold, 1998, p. 262).

A focus group’s inherent subjectivity, lack of generalizability, and artificiality are significant limitations. However, as I’ve reviewed, the focus group is also a highly effective way to explore and further develop theory and to enrich the explanatory value of existing, mainly quantitative data about racial attitudes. Accordingly, I believe that the potential for more in-depth insights far outweighed the method’s limitations in this study. As researchers have noted, “ultimately because the media and politics cut across institutional, textual, social, and psychological processes, understanding them requires a combination of methodological techniques” (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994b, p. 808-89). Bearing this in mind, the current study relies on focus groups in combination with other methods to enhance what we have learned from years of scholarship about race and media in both the media effects tradition and the critical tradition.

PART 2: REPRESENTATION OF INTERRACIAL ROMANCE

Chapter 3: Content Analysis of Interracial Romance in American Film

Representations of miscegenation have had a far more integral place in the history of American cinema than we have yet to fully recognize. They offer particular insight into cinema's role in the intertwined productions of race and gender in twentieth-century culture and into the role of racial and sexual fantasy in shaping the form and content of Hollywood cinema itself. – Susan Courtney (2005, p. xv)

This study asks two primary questions—how do interracial film depictions portray our thinking about race, and how do they contribute to our conversation on race? In answer to first question, this chapter explores the racial and political beliefs embedded in film depictions of interracial romance as well as the historical and social context within which these movies were created. This analysis adapts some of the basic assumptions about interracial relationships learned from other disciplines – those of public opinion studies that have used attitudes toward inter ethnic coupling as an indicator of social values and social division (Schuman, et al., 1997) and the work of sociologists who have long viewed higher rates of minority exogamy (partnering outside one's racial or ethnic group) as a sign of improving race relations and assimilation. Arguing that “a low rate of endogamy (partnering within one's racial or ethnic group) suggests that a group is being assimilated into the

surrounding society,” sociologists track both behavior involving and attitudes toward interracial marriages as means of measuring assimilation of different minority groups both from the minority and majority perspectives.³⁵ Although we now understand attitudes about race to be more complex and multifaceted than this simple framework suggests, it’s helpful in this context.

Applying this interpretation of interracial relationships to media studies, I argue that the representation of interracial relationships is also an indicator of the status of relations between groups. This application has important limitations, however, that must be kept in mind. Accepting the basic assumption that analyzing fictional representations of controversial issues across different time periods can be a valuable tool for investigating underlying changes in cultural ideology (Berry, 1996), this content analysis is grounded in the idea that media depictions are often not realistic reflections of society, but do approximate society's changing norms, ideals and fears. More specifically, this study assumes that the narratives in popular films about interracial couples frame these relationships in distinctive ways that have several potentially important implications: these films promote a particular view of the legitimacy of interracial relationships; they convey distinctive ideas about how race relations are and should be; and they even offer solutions for how race relations can be improved.

I believe this is particularly true of interracial sexual involvement, which has been a persistent locus of concern and symbol of racial progress in America.³⁶ So, before we turn to film audiences’ interpretations of interracial romance, Chapters 3 and 4 review the content of

³⁵ See the Sociology Index at <http://www.sociologyindex.com/endogamy.htm> for a discussion of endogamy and historical Census tables for interracial marriage from 1960 to 1992 at <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/race/interractab1.txt> .

³⁶ The election of a biracial American president who emphasized his personal narrative during the election also demonstrated the symbolic importance of interracial marriage in our society. The cultural implications of the election and Obama’s personification of cultural exchange and bridging building were discussed at length by Zadie Smith in an essay for *The New York Review of Books* (2009).

the films, providing a framework for conceptualizing the patterns of representation and ideas embedded in interracial film narratives. The current chapter explores images of interracial couples in American film through quantitative content analysis, while Chapter 4 provides close textual analysis of select films to illustrate dominant patterns of and representational practices.

Overview

As discussed earlier, despite the centrality of social intimacy as a marker of racial climate in America, little scholarly work has been done to understand how the most intimate of race relations have been depicted on screen or how audiences have reacted to their depiction. This study seeks to address those knowledge gaps by investigating how interracial relationships have been depicted in popular American film in the post-segregation era, exploring how these representations may have changed over time and how they remain the same. Applying the concept of framing to the movies in this study, I argue that films frame interracial dating and marriage and the broader issues related to Black-White race relations in consistent and distinct ways that convey specific beliefs about race and may potentially contribute to how the public talks and feels about these issues. The films do this through a variety of means. This quantitative content analysis focuses on some of the most quantifiable elements of movies: the manifest content in the film's narrative (key events and resolution) and dialogue. The subsequent textual analysis also delves into more gray areas such as characterization and subtext. Through this analysis I seek to answer two central questions: how have popular film depictions framed Black-White interracial relationships? And what sorts of beliefs and solutions have these film depictions suggested to the historical problem of contentious and unequal Black-White relations?

This content-focused part of the study is necessary so that we can compare the ideas manifest on screen with those articulated by the audience members in the focus groups and see if the ideas on screen are reflected in the discussion of race and interracial relationships that follows the screenings. The current study contributes to research on the depiction of interracial romance with quantitative and textual content analysis of film depictions of race and with qualitative exploration of audience reception of these representations.

Research Questions on the Representation of Interracial Relationships in Film

To answer the overarching questions about representation this chapter addresses these specific questions about the manifest content of films depicting interracial romantic relationships:

- First, how prevalent were depictions of Black-White romantic relationships between 1950 and 2009 in American film?
- What are the most common elements of these films?
- What, if any, are the dominant overall frames employed in these representations?
 - What are the most prominent features of these frames in terms of narrative and characterization?
 - Do these films recreate racialized patterns identified in cultural critiques of interracial film such as White male privilege and framing Black-White relationships as dangerous and deviant or do they portray the relationships supportively in positive/normal ways?
 - To what extent are these frames negative and focused on interracial conflict versus comity and progress?
 - What if any underlying normative beliefs about race are explicitly communicated in these films?
 - How do these films depict the status of race relations?
- Finally, to what extent have these depictions changed over time? And how closely associated with or predictive of positive or negative depictions is gender?

This analysis is based on a purposive selection of mainstream American films produced between 1954 and 2009 that feature Black-White, heterosexual interracial romantic relationships as a central plot point or conflict around which the film is structured. This list represents a census of films that fit the criteria for inclusion that were detailed in the Methods chapter. It was compiled specifically for the purposes of this research project by cross-referencing listings for “miscegenation,” “interracial relationship,” “interracial affairs,” or “interracial romance” in three major film indexes with newspaper and journal articles written during the period that also include these or similar terms (Buckley, 1991; Groups Protest Film," 1957; Hollywood, TV Have Fear Problems; Seek Answers," 1960; Old Movie Taboos Eased in New Code For Film Industry," 1956; Pearson, 1991; Popkin, 1957).

For inclusion on this list, a film had to be produced and distributed widely in the United States as indicated by published box office receipts, focus on the romantic relationship as the central narrative or focal point, and feature a consensual interracial romantic relationship. The box office criterion was useful as it allowed for both studio and independent films to be included. Bearing in mind this project’s emphasis on interracial relationships as a window to race relations, only films in which the romantic relationship was the movie’s central focus were selected for the detailed content analysis. However, and perhaps most important, to ensure that the films selected would not be biased towards problematic treatments of race, this content-based criterion required only that the interracial couple be the lead characters and that the romantic relationship be a central part of the on-screen narrative. Race, did not have to be a focus of open discussion within the film or a central driver of the movie’s narrative to be included it in the study.

Quantitative Content Analysis Findings

Prevalence of interracial romance

Historically, the most obvious characteristic of interracial couples in American film has been their rarity. Traditionally, Black-White couples have been so uncommon as to be nearly invisible. These depictions are certainly more frequent now than in the past, however the movement has not always been upwards as one may have expected. As shown in Table 3.1, in the first two decades studied, the 1950s and 1960s, these couplings were infrequent, but they were not as rare as in the following two decades. In 1967 the Motion Picture Code that banned a variety of socially unacceptable practices including interracial sex from the screen was dismantled.³⁷ Even prior to this change, however, race was also a compelling subject and “problem pictures” dramatizing social problems were popular at the box office. Five films in the 1950s and two in the 1960s met all criteria for this study— prominent depiction of an interracial romance, production by an American Studio and wide distribution in the United States as evidenced by box office. However, three of these films actually starred White actresses in the role of a woman of mixed race. In the 1970s and 1980s, in contrast, only one major motion picture each decade met all of these criteria. Societal tastes proved to be a more powerful censor than the old production code and prominent depictions of interracial romance almost disappeared from studio pictures the screen in the eighties

³⁷ Adopted by the industry in 1930, The Motion Picture Production Code (also known as the Hays Code) established standards for what was acceptable and unacceptable content for motion pictures produced for a public consumption in the United States. Most important, the code stipulated that no motion picture should be produced which would lower the moral standards of audiences viewing it; that only “correct standards of life” should be depicted; and that no law should be “ridiculed” nor “sympathy created for its violation.” It also included many restrictions against specific categories of content from childbirth to sexual perversion, white slavery and prostitution. One stipulation explicitly forbade portraying “miscegenation”. For more information, see *Hollywood: The Production Code* (Homes).

and nineties. Finally, in the 1990s and 2000s, prominent depictions of interracial romance have become more prevalent. Fully 40% of all the films included in this study were produced in the last 10 years, and 70% of these depictions produced in the last 20.

Table 3.1

Prevalence of Prominent Depictions of Interracial Romance by Decade of Release

Decade	Frequency	Percent
1950s	5	16.7
1960s	2	6.7
1970s	1	3.3
1980s	1	3.3
1990s	9	30.0
2000s	12	40.0
Total	30	100.0

There are important qualifications to note about the prevalence of interracial romance in the films studied. Of the five major studio films produced in the 1950s ostensibly depicting Black-White interracial relationships, almost all films avoided confronting the subject of contemporary race relations in some way, either through setting, period, or casting.³⁸ All were American productions, but four of the films were set outside the United States or in another time period. *Island in the Sun* (Zanuck, 1957) depicted racial conflict

³⁸ From 1950 to 1959, several films focused on interracial relationships between Whites and Asians in the wake of the United States' conflict and resulting close reflection on relations with Japan. Moreover, the aforementioned *Touch of Evil* and *Diamondhead* also depicted Whites involved with less taboo ethnic minorities in marginal outposts like Hawaii and a Mexican border town, some authors argue as a stand-in for the proscribed Black-White interracial romantic involvement. For more information on the representation of other Whites and other minorities on screen in this period, see Marchetti (1993) and Marcus (2007).

brewing on a fictitious Caribbean island; *Kings Go Forth* (Ross & Ross, 1958) takes place in Europe; *Band of Angels* takes place at the start of the Civil War and *The World the Flesh and the Devil* (Englund, 1959) is a science fiction piece that imagines New York after a post-nuclear holocaust with just three inhabitants, two White and one Black.³⁹

Band of Angels is the best known of these films and merits special consideration. Its shift in time period from the ante-bellum south rather than the contemporary United States was an important one as it provided distance from controversies over segregation in schools and the armed forces that were still fresh in the public mind.⁴⁰ In addition to its far removed historical setting, like *Kings Go Forth* and *Night of the Quarter Moon*, *Band of Angels*, hedges the formal restrictions and social taboos of miscegenation by starring a White actress playing a common Hollywood type, the “tragic mulatto”—a person of mixed heritage whose African heritage is kept a secret.⁴¹ Despite their casting choices, these films are included in this analysis as I believe, as Susan Courtney argues, that they represent an important milestone in the evolution of racial representation (Courtney, 2005). So of the five interracial themed movies in the 1950s, only two, *Island in the Sun* and *The World, the Flesh and the Devil*, actually starred Black actors in one of the lead romantic roles. The latter

³⁹ In fact many film historians have studied science fiction and fantasy as a key genre in which the issue of race relations were debated metaphorically (Paulin, 1997).

⁴⁰ Set on a Southern plantation over several years around the time of the civil war, *Band of Angels* centers on Amantha Starr, a beautiful slave of mixed race who falls in love with her owner, depicted by Clark Gable. See the Filmography in the Appendix for details.

⁴¹ This tragic mulatto character is adopted from American literature. Although the tragic mulatto theme is a relatively marginal subject in film history, American literature is full of the tragic mulatto theme, and the subject has received substantial scholarly study (Sollors, 1997, 2000, 2004). Such stories most often depict a woman of partial Black heritage, living with the tragedy of being neither fully accepted in the Black or White worlds. Often, the character desperately wants to be considered White, but learns over the course of the film that this will never happen. These stories usually but not always come to a tragic end. This theme has been analyzed at great length in literary studies, most notably by Werner Sollors. For the most comprehensive treatment of the subject see Sollors' *Interracialism: Black-White Intermarriage in American History, Literature, and Law* (2000). In film, the best known examples are *Pinky* (1949) and *Imitation of Life* (1934 and 1959). For a discussion of tragic mulattoes in American film, see Don Bogle's *Toms Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* (2001).

number is the same as in the sixties, when there were two major U.S.-based, contemporary themed films prominently featuring interracial couples, *A Patch of Blue* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Both films starred Sidney Poitier and signaled an end to the casting of White actors to play light-skinned African Americans.

Interracial sexuality remained a taboo in mainstream film throughout the 1970s and 1980s, most likely because of a combination of factors including tradition and audience tastes.⁴² Whether because of commercial considerations or political ones, in the 1970s and 1980s, interracial romance was noticeably absent from major film releases. Only two films in this entire twenty-year period, *The Great White Hope* (Turman, 2004) and *Soul Man* (Tisch, 1986), prominently featured an interracial romantic couple and met the other criteria for inclusion.⁴³

In contrast with the nine prominent interracial film depictions produced in the first four decades of study, 21 films in the 1990s and 2000s contained Black-White interracial romantic pairings, more than twice as many.⁴⁴ Over the nearly 60-year time span of this content analysis, there was an increase from an average of one to two films per decade to one per year among the hundreds of mainstream releases. This increase is consistent with the four-fold increased presence of such couples in American society during that period

⁴² Gail Buckley documented some of this history in a thematic overview of interracial representation in television and movies in 1991.

⁴³ In the 1970s and 1980s, at least seven other movies, such as the Diana Ross musical *Mahogany* (Cohen, 1982) and the James Bond thriller *Live and Let Die* (Broccoli, 1973) briefly featured interracial romance or sex as minor subplots with little screen time, *Flashdance* featured a racially ambiguous actor, and the controversial plantation films *Mandingo* (Fleischer, et al., 2008) and *Drum*, featured interracial sexual exploitation between slave and slave master. None of these films prominently feature consensual interracial romantic relationships, however.

⁴⁴ Although it is beyond the scope of this project, if one includes all American feature films with Black-White romantic or sexual pairings, the number of Black-White interracial film depictions in the 1990s and 2000s exceeds 60.

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b).⁴⁵ Nonetheless, interracial couples remain uncommon as lead characters in mainstream American film (and television). Furthermore, as we know, prevalence does not necessarily mean acceptance, so it is important to examine the dominant characteristics of these representations as well as their sheer presence.

Dominant characteristics: normalizing and problematizing aspects of on-screen interracial romance

To evaluate whether film depictions of interracial romance tend to recreate racialized patterns identified in cultural critiques of interracial film such as White male privilege and framing Black-White relationships as dangerous and transgressive, the content analysis documented 21 different aspects of the depictions. Because many more interracial films were produced in the latter decades, those films have the potential to dominate these numbers. For that reason, changes in the prevalence of these dominant features over time are a central issue this content analysis explores. Attributes that vary substantially with time are highlighted in the final section of this analysis, which addresses the evolution of representation. Apart from time period and gender, each variable was classified as contributing to framing the romance as either deviant/negative or normal/positive. Normalizing variables included physical affection or intimacy, emotional intimacy, cultural exchange; unification of friends and family; and explicit expressions of supportive, racial egalitarian beliefs by characters in individual scenes. Conversely, denormalizing or critical elements of the representation aspects were quantified negatively and included physical abuse or sexual deviance; disapproval of friends and family; public disapproval; social ostracism or exclusion; and explicit statements of critical, separatist beliefs by characters to the interracial couple in individual scenes within the movie.

⁴⁵ The most recent census figures show that the rate of Black-White intermarriage quadrupled within the period of study and that it has risen more sharply within recent years although it remains quite low, comprising less than 1% of all unions in the U.S.

Four variables stood out as particularly prominent characteristics of these films. These attributes were present in more than 10% or 1 in every 10 scenes overall. The data for these scene variables were evaluated in four ways: looking at the exact number and percentage of scenes in which a variable was present in each film; classifying each variable on a simple three-point scale of increasing presence from none/absent to present in multiple scenes; and looking at the overall proportion of films in which the element was present to any extent. The ratio or percentage of scenes in which a variable was present was an important metric since film length, scene length and number of scenes varied widely. So a relatively short film like *In the Mix*, which had only 14 scenes and ran just over one and one-half hours, could be more effectively compared to *Liberty Heights*, which included 41 scenes and ran more than two hours. Frequencies for the ten most common scene variables are summarized in Table 3.2 and discussed below along with their corresponding intercoder reliability metrics.⁴⁶ This set of most common variables includes both positive/normalizing and negative/deviant characteristics. A complete list of frequencies and reliability coefficients for all of the variables studied, regardless of prevalence is contained in the Appendix.

Positive/normalizing elements in interracial film depictions.

The two most prevalent elements were physical affection and emotional intimacy, elements that point to a normal or positive depiction of the interracial relationship. Emotional intimacy was defined as verbal expressions in which the characters disclose personal

⁴⁶ Intercoder reliability for all variables was calculated on a 10% random sample for scene variables and a 100% census for film variables (since N was only 30 for films) using Cohen's Kappa. As Neuendorf reports, there is no uniform standard for an acceptable level of intercoder agreement. However, Banerjee et al (1999) suggested the following guidelines for Cohen's Kappa: .75 indicates excellent agreement beyond chance; .40 to .75, fair to good agreement, and below .40, poor agreement beyond chance. Values for both percent intercoder agreement and Cohen's Kappa are provided in Appendix C and D for all variables.

information to each other, express feelings of love or show concern for each other's feelings. Physical affection/intimacy included physical expressions of romantic affection such as holding hands, touching and hugging in a romantic context as well as kissing and sexual intercourse.

As shown in Table 3.2, physical affection/intimacy occurred in one-fourth (24.1%) of scenes and all of the films studied. Emotional intimacy was only slightly less ubiquitous, occurring in almost all of films and nearly a quarter of the scenes. In fact, the vast majority of these films had multiple scenes of both physical and emotional intimacy, as should be expected for films focusing on romantic relationships. Without having similar benchmarks for romantic films in general, however, it's not possible to say whether the percentage of scenes of intimacy is relatively high or low. The intercoder reliability coefficient for physical intimacy was .80 and for emotional intimacy it was .818.

Table 3.2

Prevalent Variables: Mean Number, Percent of Scenes and Percent of Films (n=30)

	Mean Number of Scenes	Mean % of Scenes	% of Films
Physical intimacy	5.2	24.1	100
Emotional intimacy	4.9	23.8	96.7
Explicit anti-integration or racial separatist statements by any character	2.5	11.6	80.0
Friends and Family Disapprove	2.5	10.9	90.0
Explicit anti-integration or racial separatist statements by supporting character	1.6	7.3	66.7
Cultural exchange	1.3	6.4	63.3
Explicit pro-integration or racial egalitarian statements by any character	1.3	5.5	60.0
Racially motivated violence	1.1	5.5	63.3
Explicit anti-integration or racial separatist statements by main character	.9	4.8	63.3
Negative outcome: Public Disapproval	.9	4.2	50.0

In addition to measuring the presence or absence of each variable at the scene level, for each film, an aggregate measure was developed to signal each attribute's prominence in the film. Prominence was defined as whether an attribute appeared only in a single scene, in multiple scenes or was completely absent from the film. Features that appear in multiple scenes are considered more prominent than ones that occur only once. As shown in Table 3.3, the vast majority of the films studied (90%) included multiple scenes of physical affection and multiple scenes of emotional intimacy between the Black and White interracial couple.

Table 3.3

Prominence of Prevalent Characteristics (N=30)

	Multiple Scenes	Single Scene	Absent
	% of films	% of films	% of films
Physical affection or intimacy	90.0	10.0	0.0
Emotional intimacy	90.0	6.7	3.3
Disapproval by family and friends	63.3	26.7	10.0
Separatist expressions by any character	70.0	10.0	20.0
Racially motivated violence	43.3	20.0	36.7
Total		100.0	

Recognizing that sexuality, not just physical affection, is an essential element of the human experience and one that has historically been among the most controversial and distorted aspects of African American representation in film (J. Jones, 1993), this study also specifically measured the presence of sexual intimacy in interracial films. Scrutinizing the concept of physical intimacy more narrowly as consummation of the physical relationship, sexual intimacy is much less common than more innocuous touching and kissing in these depictions. A solid majority of the films (60%) depicted the relationship between the leads as being consummated, although in many instances, the actual sexual act is never shown on screen. Cohen's Kappa for the sexual relationship variable was .72.

Denormalizing elements of representation.

Although prevalent, these normalizing elements, physical and emotional closeness and sexual intimacy between the romantic leads, are more than counterbalanced, however, by an accumulation of characteristics that represent interracial relationships as seriously socially transgressive, and/or dangerous. Three key characteristics that point to problematic depictions of interracial romance were frequently observed in the films studied: explicit expressions of separatist racial ideology, family and friends' disapproval, and racial violence.

Racial beliefs or ideology.

Seventy percent of the films studied contained multiple scenes in which characters voiced explicitly separatist sentiments or racist beliefs. As shown in Table 3.2, this was the third most prevalent element in the films studies with an average of more than 11% of scenes and 80% of films including such expressions. The mean across films was 2.5 scenes including separatist sentiments per film. Overall, separatist or anti-integration sentiments were approximately twice as prevalent as pro-integration or egalitarian racial beliefs, which were voiced in only 5.5% of scenes. Intercoder reliability for explicitly separatist or racist beliefs was .517 overall and for pro-integration or egalitarian statements it was .822.

In a similar vein, almost all films (90 %) contained at least one scene in which friends and family openly disapproved of the relationship. Furthermore, 63% of films included multiple scenes in which the couple suffered through the disapproval of family and friends. More than 1 in every 10 scenes in these films portrayed the explicit disapproval of friends and family regarding the interracial relationship. In fact, in several films, like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, disapproval was a factor in more than a third of the scenes, making negative reactions to the relationship a primary focal point of the film, with far greater screen time than personal interactions between the romantic leads. The disapproval of family and friends had a reliability coefficient (K) of .551 with 88% intercoder agreement.

Depictions of violence involving the interracial couple were also highly prevalent. The content analysis measured violence in two ways – as specifically racially motivated and as any violence involving the interracial couple regardless of motivation. Almost two-thirds of the films (63%) portrayed overtly racially motivated violence. Of these, a plurality (43%) contained multiple scenes of racial violence. Another three films portrayed violence involving the couple that was not explicitly tied to race or overtly driven by race-related motivations so that almost three-fourths (73%) of films portrayed at least one member of the couple involved in some kind of violence.⁴⁷ For both measurements of violence, intercoder agreement was fairly strong. Cohen's Kappa was .72 for any violence involving the couple and .90 for racially motivated violence.

In addition to the violence and opposition the couples face in a majority of these films, the surrounding world inhabited by these couples adds to the association of Black-White interactions with danger and hostility. The majority of interracial film depictions showed the racial environment as divided by race, with little positive cross racial interaction beyond the couple at the film's center. Overall, 80% of the films depicted social environments marked by racial conflict and polarization and only 20% could be classified as taking place in predominantly peaceful, integrated racial environments.⁴⁸

Love and legitimacy in interracial romantic depictions

These individual variables measured at the scene level convey a decidedly mixed picture of whether these relationships are predominantly characterized by deviance or

⁴⁷ As shown, for the sample as a whole, N=30 films. However, the 1957 ensemble film *Island in the Sun* depicted three separate interracial relationships and each one is counted separately for the purposes of examining the relationships between gender and the four key, film-level variables: sexual relationship, romantic resolution, racial violence, and general violence.

⁴⁸ Intercoder reliability as measured by Cohen's Kappa was .45 for the racial environment, indicating that this was a more subjective metric for coders, but still within the acceptable fair to good range.

normalcy. Accordingly, looking at the most prevalent variables at the scene level, it is unclear whether or not, as Childs argues (2009), the depictions ultimately frame interracial relationships as transgressive rather than socially acceptable. To get a better sense of the films' overall framing of the interracial relationship, it's helpful to scrutinize whether or not a film depicts the relationship in question as being a legitimate and serious love relationship or merely a passing sexual affair or infatuation. This is especially important since relationships that are characterized as being love relationships carry more moral weight as critiques of social boundaries that stand in their way (Gateward, 2005; Wartenberg, 1999). In this study, the seriousness and legitimacy of the relationship was measured by whether or not it was explicitly characterized as love by the characters involved and through the romantic resolution, whether or not the couple stayed together at the end. The relationships were explicitly characterized by as love in more than half of the cases (56%).

The romantic resolution is also a signal of seriousness—if a couple survives the challenges presented throughout the film, it is as though they have earned the right to be together. Bearing this in mind, it is notable that only a little more than half (53%) of the interracial relationships depicted had positive romantic resolutions. Approximately one-third (34.4%) of the depictions ended in a break-up and in 12.5% of the cases, whether or not the couple stayed together was ambiguous. Although the depiction of love is clearly a tricky and highly subjective variable to measure relative to the others, the intercoder agreement coefficient for this was .61. Reliability for the romantic resolution was even higher than for love with a Kappa of .81.

The two measures of romantic legitimacy--love and romantic resolution--were also closely associated with each other, as shown in Table 3.4. Over three-fourths of the relationships characterized as being love (78%) ended with the couple together. Conversely, a clear majority of those not explicitly cast as love relationships ended in a breakup. Only

44% of all the relationships depicted, however, were both explicitly characterized as love and ended with a positive resolution while the majority, a solid 56% failed to meet one or both of these criteria, either ending ambiguously or in breakup or not being characterized as love.

Table 3.4

Relationship between Resolution and Characterization of Relationship as Love

Romantic Resolution	Relationship characterized as love?		Total
	Love (n=18)	Not Love (n=14)	
Negative	11.1	64.3	11
Ambiguous or mixed	11.1	14.3	4
Positive - stay Together	77.8	21.4	17
Total	100.0%	100.0%	

Chi-square: 11.248. Df=2, p= .004.

Overall frame: quantitative and qualitative measures

Although these individual variables are helpful, ultimately, these depictions are perhaps best understood by examining the representation as a whole through the variables in combination rather than by looking at any one element in isolation. To that end, this content analysis looked at the overall representation in two ways, one quantitative and the other qualitative. As discussed earlier in the Methods chapter, for the quantitative measures of overall representation, the coding scheme was designed to produce an aggregate or *composite racial representation score* for each film that reflects the combination of supportive and critical aspects of the depictions. The composite racial representation score is an indication of the extent to which the depiction problematizes or legitimizes the

interracial relationship. All variables were weighted to reflect the positive or negative valence of each code and also different magnitudes for each coding category depending upon its importance or impact on the narrative. A code that is supportive of interracial comity and shows the relationship between the two protagonists in a normal light carried a positive weight. Codes that cast the relationship in a transgressive, deviant light were assigned negative weights. All variables included in the index had Kappa values indicating fair to good or excellent agreement beyond chance according to the guidelines suggested by Banerjee et al (1999) and Neuendorf (2002).

In addition, after deriving each film's index score, all movies were then classified according to whether its racial representation score was negative, reflecting the most critical, problematic rendering of the relationship at one end of the continuum, or positive and high, reflecting the most supportive, racially egalitarian rendering of the interracial relationship, or positive but low, reflecting a mixed representation somewhere between the two extremes. The resulting ordinal variable is called the *quantitative racial frame*.

The qualitative or interpretive measure of the dominant racial frame, on the other hand, was assigned by each coder based on his or her observations and overall impressions of each film according to categories and definitions I developed in the textual analysis. These two ways of looking at the overall racial frame are distinct but closely related. The correlations between these two indicators of racial frame were .72 for Phi and .51 for Cramer V ($p < .01$ for both).

Results for the quantitative racial index score.

As Table 3.5 shows, the majority of the films (17 films or 57%) garnered negative racial representation scores in which the point value of the deviant or critical factors outweighed the point value of the positive ones. Another 13% (4 films) had scores in the low

positive range, characterized as being ambivalent or mixed representations. Only 9 films or 30% were in the clearly supportive, high index score category.

However, it is also important to note that there was also a great deal of variation among the composite scores for these films. This is reflected both in the wide range of total scores--with the lowest scoring film, *Jungle Fever* (Lee, 1991) at -49.5 and the highest, *Away We Go* (P. Harris & Mendes, 2009), at 54--and in the large standard deviation (23.3). The mean score for all films was -1.98. (How these scores changed over time is addressed later in this chapter).

Table 3.5

Proportion of Quantitative Racial Frames (N=30 films)

Racial Frame (Score)	Percent
Critical -- Low	56.7
Ambivalent --Medium	13.3
Supportive -- High Positive	30.0
	100%

The interpretive racial frame.

As discussed earlier, (and detailed in the Research Design chapter), for the qualitative racial frame, each coder was asked to determine which of four overall patterns of representation seemed to be best fit for the film as a whole. These four frames were derived from my qualitative exploration of a subset of these films, and the coders were supplied with definitions for each framing category. At the end of the coding process for each film, each coder identified the frame that best fit their overall impressions of the film and the attributes they documented in the discrete individual categories. This analysis revealed a striking consistency among these depictions that I argue is best understood within a four part typology of racial representation, a distillation of the dominant approaches to race with which

the United States has struggled during the time period under study. This four-prong typology of interracial representation connects the frames or patterns of on-screen representation with prevailing beliefs about race.

To distinguish this concept from the quantitative framing categories, I call this the film's *interpretive racial frame*. The four frames include: integration/racial reconciliation; racial conflict/separatism; ambivalence; and multiculturalism. Both the integration/racial reconciliation frame and the multiculturalism frame convey supportive messages about race relations and interracial relationships. In choosing the dominant frame, coders took into consideration their subjective impressions of the movie's predominant characteristics and overall intended message as well as specific observations from the individual coding categories.

The salient characteristics of the four overarching interpretive racial frames and their respective frequencies are presented in Table 3.6. Since most films were coded by all three coders, wherever there was disagreement, the reported frame reflects the mode or majority opinion for that film.

Table 3.6

Interpretive Racial Frames

Frame (% of 30 films)	Racial/political ideologies endorsed and core values	Defining cultural and political expressions	Representational characteristics	Exemplar film
Ambivalence (50%)	Color blind racial egalitarianism Individualism Black conservatism Ambiguous Pragmatism	Republican Party	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Complications due to other factors than race drive plot ▪ Unclear romantic resolution ▪ Racial violence 	<i>Monster's Ball (2001)</i>
Liberal Integration (23%)	Liberal racial egalitarianism Integration Assimilation	I have a Dream MLK Democratic Party	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Positive romantic resolution Positive effects interracial relationship has beneficial effect on characters' lives and on social network-- interracial couple unites family and friends 	<i>Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967)</i>
Conflict/ Separatism (17%)	Black nationalism, Black conservatism, White Supremacy, Racial pride Solidarity	Louis Farrakhan David Duke Pat Buchanan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Racial violence ▪ Explicitly stated separatist racial beliefs ▪ Negative romantic resolution 	<i>Jungle Fever (1991)</i>
Multiculturalism (10%)	Multiculturalism Diversity Recognition and equal respect for all cultures	Cultural fusion Hip-Hop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Racial conflicts presented and ameliorated ▪ African American and other ethnic cultures ▪ Positive effects interracial relationship has beneficial effect on characters' lives and on social network 	<i>Something New (2006)</i>

As Childs (2009) and Gateward (2005) both argued, increasing prevalence has not always meant increasing acceptance. The findings of this study reinforce that claim. Half of the depictions were judged to be ambivalent in racial framing and another 17% seemed to

frame interracial relationships through a lens of serious racial conflict that makes separatism seem like a pragmatic solution. In only the remaining third (33%) of the films were judged to be supportively framed, with either a multicultural (10%) or liberal integrationist (23%) perspective dominant.

Although this supportive one-third is consistent with the 30% of films that garnered high quantitative racial frame scores, the two sets of films are closely correlated but do not perfectly align. In three cases, films that were interpreted by the coders as fitting one of the two supportive frames (multiculturalism or integration/racial reconciliation), had medium or even low racial index scores. For those three films, while the filmmakers' intentions seemed sympathetic to the interracial couple, the film nonetheless included a preponderance of elements such as violence, disapproval, and separatist racial ideology that led to low overall racial index scores. Thus these films portrayed the relationship in a sympathetic but transgressive and dangerous light. This combination is interesting as it is likely to be open to a variety of interpretations from audiences.

Though the focus group was conducted prior to the quantitative content analysis and therefore without benefit of knowing how the films would score, the films selected for audience study, *Something New* and *Zebrahead*, were proven to have interpretive and quantitative frames that were internally consistent with each other—*Something New* was judged to be multicultural in interpretive frame and earned a very high score of 35 while *Zebrahead* was judged separatist and garnered a very low total score (-25). Despite these clear scores, however, the films nonetheless contain potentially contradictory elements that beg for audience analysis.

Since the qualitative racial frame was the most complex and subjective attribute included in the study, calling for coders to interpret complex, multifaceted patterns of representation, it's not surprising that reliability was not as robust for the interpretive frame

as it was for the individual variables. Cohen's Kappa for dominant racial frame was .32 overall. Looking at these framing categories on a binary basis, however--classifying ambivalence and separatism as negative racial frames and multiculturalism and liberal integration as positive/supportive frames (as described earlier)--the coders were fairly consistent in classifying the films' dominant frame as either critical or supportive. For this binary classification of the interpretive racial frame there was 76% intercoder agreement with a Kappa of .51. Given the exploratory and theoretical nature of the research as well as the central aim of measuring supportive or critical ideology, this seems appropriate.

Context and examples for interpretive frames.

The ambivalence frame

Between integration and separatism there are films that straddle these two perspectives, incorporating elements of reconciliation and polarization, and arriving at a conclusion that suggests the resolution is yet to be determined. Ambivalent framing of interracial relationships was most prevalent in the films studied and comprised 50% of the 30 films studied. These films include *A Bronx Tale* (De Niro, 1993) and 2001's *Monster's Ball* (Daniels, 2001).

Although these films contain some elements of the separatist frame, there are also signals of integration and racial redemption as well. This frame thus endorses the possibility of the viable interracial relationship while still cloaking it in fear, mystery and danger. So while these movies invoke the idea that racially transgressive involvements lead to social isolation and violence, they also leave room for more positive outcomes. Several of the films that we judged as framing the relationship in ambivalence are period pictures like *Liberty Heights* (Levinson & Weinstein, 1999) and *A Bronx Tale* (De Niro, 1993). Both are set in periods of major social change, 1954, and the 1960s, respectively.

The liberal integration frame

The second most common racial frame, Liberal Integration/Reconciliation, presents a world that is consistent with the conventional liberal views associated with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other members of the non-violent civil rights movement of the 1960s. These films depict a society that is currently divided but capable of and moving toward achieving Entman and Rojecki's (2001) "racial comity," a state characterized by Blacks and Whites living in peaceful, integrated coexistence. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Kramer, 1967) is the quintessential example of this type of film. It contains all of the prominent markers of this frame including: positive romantic resolution, explicit expressions of race-blind, integrationist ideals and a positive outlook on racial progress. In terms of the barriers like social ostracism and violence, although the couple confronts the possibility that this might be a problem in the future, the presentation of these problems is relatively mild compared to other films and they expect to overcome them through the strength of their love. Minds are changed (for the most part), and these barriers overcome. The single, overarching idea these films convey is that a just society can best be achieved through integration. Since these films usually involve African Americans entering mostly White social contexts, they also imply cultural assimilation.

Often, in these films, the intimate interracial relationship becomes a vehicle for overcoming racial divides, not just for the characters who are romantically involved, but also for the people around them. As a result, racial reconciliation, not just integration, is symbolically achieved through the interracial relationship. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, this journey is made by the couple's parents. In particular, the wealthy liberal father is forced to rise to the occasion and live up to his race blind ideals when his daughter brings home a suitor who is ideal in all ways but one. In addition to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Kramer, 1967), films that manifest this racial frame include *Guess Who* (Sullivan,

2005), loosely based on the Kramer film's original premise *and Corrina Corrina* (Mazur, 1994). The frame emerged in the 1960s and reemerged in the 1990s.

Overall, the integrationist frame is dominant in only seven (23%) of the 30 films that have interracial romance as the central narrative. The explicitly color-blind integrationist perspective was one Hollywood seemed to have set aside for a while and relegated to the history books. This likely seemed fitting since the questions about race and racial integration in our society were no longer seen as being as straightforward as they were in the King era. With de jure segregation officially relegated to the past, when explicitly discussed, racial progress is now defined differently. A contemporary film like *Away We Go*, however, may represent a similar (some would argue unrealistic) outlook by presenting a post-racial view in which race is only minimally discussed if at all and racial differences are portrayed as trivial.⁴⁹

The Separatist frame – dealing with disillusion and despair.

Following the idealism of the 1960s and the lack of attention to interracial dialogue in the 1970s and 80s, a palpable disillusionment and cynicism seems to set in. Along with this comes a decided shift in outlook with regard to racial progress. Accordingly, at the other end of the spectrum from the integrationist film, the separatist film emerges. This type of film depicts interracial couples as navigating a racially hostile world, filled with physical and social threats. Unlike the integrationist frame, which carries a clear normative message, the separatist film may be more descriptive than prescriptive. As conveyed in movies like *Zebrahead* and *Jungle Fever*, the separatist frame doesn't necessarily indicate that separatism is ideal, but it does imply that comity might well not be achievable.

⁴⁹ *Away We Go* is discussed in the Conclusion. Plot summaries and brief comments are provided for all of the films studied in Appendix E: the Annotated Filmography.

In terms of narrative, this type of film follows a fairly consistent pattern. The relationship sets into motion a predictable series of events often involving social isolation, emotional loss, and violence. Collectively, as *Gateward* and *Childs* concur, these outcomes reinforce “social costs” of transgressing racial barriers.

The outlook for race relations is bleak in this type of film and ultimately, Black racial solidarity and even separatism are presented as more realistic, feasible alternatives to integration. *Jungle Fever* is the quintessential separatist interracial romance. Multiple instances of racially motivated violence and deep social ostracism and loss result from the pairing. The film presents an almost uniformly pessimistic outlook for race relations. In addition to deep racial divisions, these films shine a light on problems within the Black community. Both *Jungle Fever* and *Zebrahead* are set largely in poor, almost exclusively Black urban areas. Both have main characters whose families have been ravaged by drugs. Both films explode in graphic violence in reaction to the interracial romance. Both end in ambiguous plaintive rhetorical cries for help.

Although the idea that interracial romantic pairings are likely to provoke social ostracism and violence is not exclusive to this frame, that the characters and their communities are stuck in a hopeless cycle of violence, isolation and deterioration *is* unique. Among the 30 films studied, five (17%) fell into this pattern. While there is some indication that this perspective may be more prevalent among independent, Black owned and produced films, most of these movies either fail to attract a substantial audience or do not prominently feature the interracial relationship, relegating the romance to a minor subplot in the background, based on the selection criteria of this study, these films were outside the

scope of this project.⁵⁰ For the audience study, half of the focus groups watched *Zebrahead* as the representative example of a separatist narrative.

Multiculturalism frame

The multicultural frame shares the characteristics of racial comity and positive resolution of the central romantic relationship with the integrationist frame, but is also distinct in important ways. The most important difference is that this treatment of race is decidedly not color blind. These films are a departure from the melting pot ideal in which individual cultures are subsumed into one. Rather than negating cultural differences, these films celebrate them. This frame is apparent only in the most recent interracial films, such as *Save the Last Dance* (Carter, 2001) and *Something New* (Allain, 2006). This frame emerged in the 1990s; it comprised just 10% of the films in the study.

Mitigating factors—the impact of time and gender on representation.

The final elements in the quantitative content analysis are time period and gender. This section of the analysis explores the extent to which how positively or negatively these relationships are represented is associated with the period in which the film was produced and the gender composition of the interracial relationship.

Gender

The gender breakdown in the films studied was fairly even as shown in Table 3.14. Just over half or 53% of the films had White male leads involved with African American women or women of partial African heritage, and 47% of the films featured African American men involved with White women. However, despite this relative balance, there were

⁵⁰ Filmmakers Tyler Perry and TD Jakes, for example, have recently begun to attract increasingly large audiences despite limited coverage from national movie critics but have mainly used interracial romance in the background of their films. The exception to this rule is *Tyler Perry's The Family That Preys* (2009) and this film is included in the films studied. In all, six films in the study (20%) were directed by African Americans, a relatively high proportion compared to films in general.

differences in film depictions of interracial romance in which the White lead character was female versus ones in which the White member of the relationship was male. Violence and the romantic resolution appear to be somewhat related to gender. When the White romantic protagonist is a woman, the relationships are more likely to be plagued by violence, to include multiple scenes of violence, and to end in a breakup.

As reflected in Table 3.7, there was a substantial (Cramer $V=.415$) and statistically significant association ($p=.03$) between gender and the romantic resolution in these films. Depictions in which the White romantic lead is male more were likely to have a positive resolution, with the majority of these couples staying together at the end of the film (71%), compared with only 33% of depictions in which the White romantic lead is a woman. This pattern seems to reflect the idea of white male privilege in interracial narratives or at least the idea that White male- black female relationships are more sustainable despite their relative infrequency in real life.⁵¹

⁵¹ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, (2008b), Black men are twice as likely as Black women to be married to someone of another race. Please see the literature review for discussion of current marriage statistics.

Table 3.7

Gender of White Character and Romantic Resolution

Romantic Resolution		Gender of White Character		
		Male	Female	Total
Negative	Count	5	6	11
	% within Gender of White Character	29.4%	40.0%	34.4%
Ambiguous	Count	0	4	4
	% within Gender of White Character	.0%	26.7%	12.5%
Positive - stay Together	Count	12	5	17
	% within Gender of White Character	70.6%	33.3%	53.1%
	Count	17	15	32
	% within Gender of White Character	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Pearson Chi-Square		6.875 ^a df (2), p=.032.		

Racially motivated violence was also more prevalent in depictions of relationships between African American men and White women as shown in Table 3.8. Whereas less than half of the movies depicting relationships with White men included scenes with violence that was overtly racially motivated, nearly three-quarters (73%) of the films involving White women did so. Although there appears to be a relationship, with Cramer V equal to .27, the association was not significant at the .1 level (sig=.13), in part because of the small sample

sizes. Moreover, the proportion of interracial depictions that included multiple scenes of racially motivated violence was also slightly higher for White women than for White men (47% versus 33 %). Finally, violence in general, racially motivated or not, was also more frequent in depictions involving White women than White men. In 12 out of 15 or 80% of the depictions of White women involved with Black Men, there was violence involving at least one of the romantic leads. That figure was only 53% for White men involved with Black women. Furthermore, in the latter case, the figure includes instances of violence in movies as the Bodyguard in which the violence is unrelated to the relationship.

Table 3.8

Gender of White Character and Racially Motivated Violence

Racial Violence	Gender of White Character		
	Male	Female	Total
Present Count	8	11	19
% within v20 Gender of White Character	47.1%	73.3%	59.4%
Absent Count	9	4	13
% within v20 Gender of White Character	52.9%	26.7%	40.6%
Count	17	15	32
% within v20 Gender of White Character	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Pearson Chi-square= 2.28, df (1) p=.13.

Interracial representation and change over time.

From the fearful and racially ambivalent 1950s to the emerging multicultural, “post-racial” Obama era of the late 2000s, each frame can be seen as a distillation of the prevailing ideas of the time about race. While there is overlap between periods and

sometimes even inklings of competing frames within individual films, the initial emergence of these frames corresponds to distinct periods: 1950s-1960s: ambivalence then integration/reconciliation; 1970's to 1990s, separatism; and, finally, in the mid-1990s to 2000s multiculturalism. However, just as the volume of these depictions has varied over time rather than always increasing, so have the dominant ideological frames in these films evolved slowly and sometimes erratically.

Table 3.9

Racial Representation by Time Period

Interpretive Racial Frame						Composite Racial Representation Score
Period	Separatism	Ambivalence	Multiculturalism	Integration	Total Films	Mean Score for the Period
Civil Rights era 50s 60s	0	6	0	1	7	-2.3
Post Civil Rights Struggle/70s to 90s	4	4	0	3	11	-16.3
Contemporary Period 2000s	1	5	3	3	12	11.3
Total	5	15	3	7	30	

Pearson Chi-Square 11.42, df (6) p=.076.

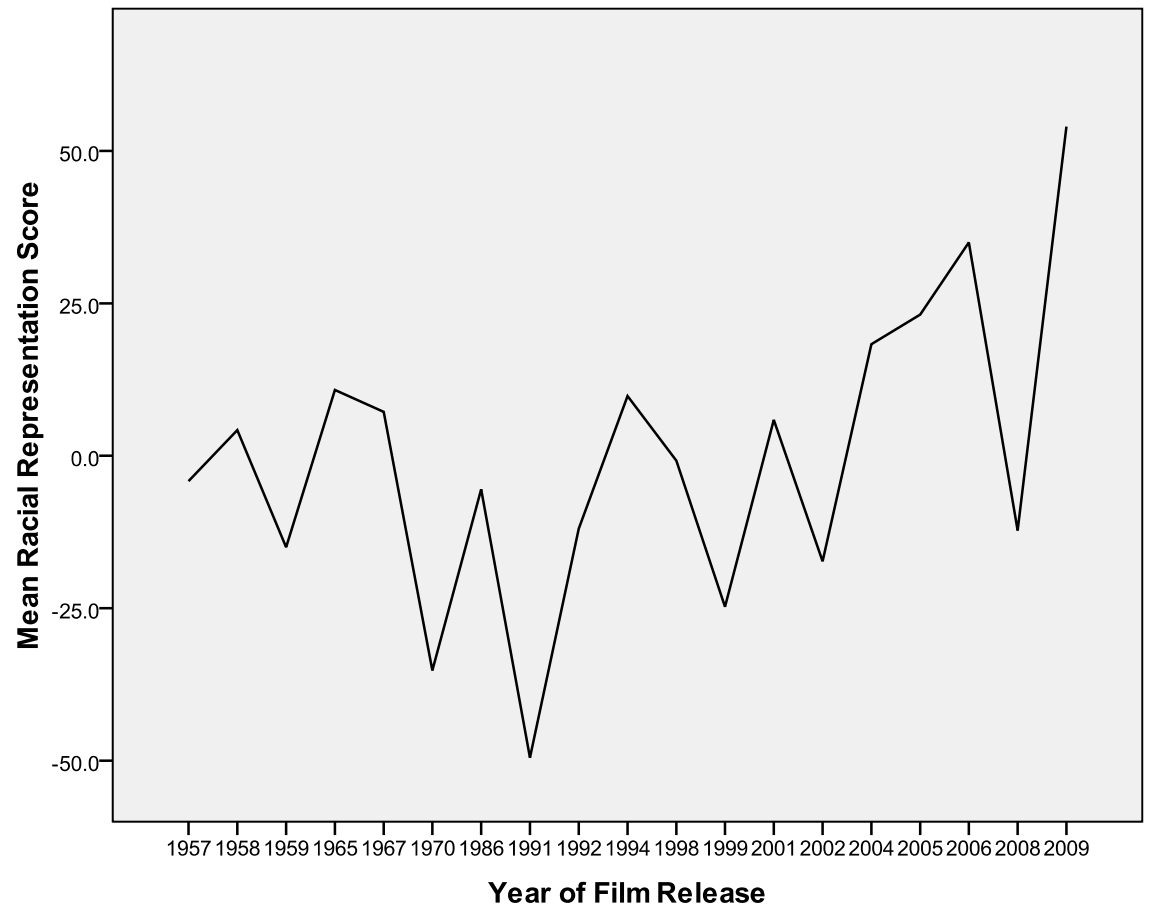
Despite the relationship between time period and interpretive frame, there was wide variation in representation in each decade and period. A cross tabulation of interpretive frame and decade reveals a weak association between the total score and the particular decade in which the film was produced. If one examines larger time periods, however, as shown in Tables 3.9, a stronger relationship between period of release and racial frame emerges, with Phi of .617 and Cramer's V .436 and significance p at .076. The relationship between time and the supportive or critical nature of the representation is illustrated in Figure 3.1 which plots mean composite racial representation scores by year of film release and in the mean scores of different periods shown in Table 3.9

In addition to looking at the interpretive frame, I also analyzed the mean composite racial representation scores for the different periods (the same composite scores that determined which quantitative racial frame each film was assigned to as discussed earlier). For this analysis, I examined three different time classification schemes—decade, periods made up of multiple decades as shown in 3.9, and periods delineated by major racial and political events. The relationship between a film's racial representation scores and the period in which it was produced was both substantial and significant for all three classification schemes (Eta-squared values ranged from .277 to .329 and the significance ranged from .013 to .072).

Perhaps the most striking finding in the analysis of representation over time was that the 1990s emerged as a period in which representations became more prevalent and more problematic. Both the interpretive frame and the composite racial representation scores affirm this finding. More than three-fourths of the numerous film depictions of interracial couples in that decade (78%) were framed as either separatist or ambivalent. Moreover, the average racial representation score for the nine films released in the 1990s was -15.311, the lowest mean score among decades with multiple interracial film depictions.

Figure 3.1

Racial Representation Scores by Year of Film Release



Similarly, as shown in Table 3.10, the measures of romantic legitimacy discussed earlier--romantic resolution and whether the relationship is characterized as love--further underscore the more negative nature of interracial depictions in the 1990s. Almost all (89%) of the interracial romantic film depictions produced in the 1990s portrayed the relationship as less than legitimate.

Table 3.10

Romantic Legitimacy by Decade

Decade Released		Romantic Legitimacy as Product of Love and Romantic Resolution			Total
		Less Legitimate relationship	Ambiguous relationship	Legitimate Love Relationship	
1950s	Count	2	2	3	7
	% within Decade				100.0%
1960s	Count	1	0	1	2
	% within Decade				100.0%
1970s	Count	1	0	0	1
	% within Decade				100.0%
1980s	Count	1	0	0	1
	% within Decade				100.0%
1990s	Count	8	0	1	9
	% within Decade				100.0%
2000s	Count	3	0	9	12
	% within Decade				100.0%
Total	Count	16	2	14	32
	% of Total	50.0%	6.25%	43.75%	100.0%

Pearson Chi-Square 18.772a Df (10), p=.043

Summary

For the most part, this content analysis revealed that the criticisms of film depictions of interracial couples are largely warranted. Whether evaluated quantitatively or qualitatively, the majority of these depictions have been ambivalent at best. These films more frequently feature scenes that include explicitly separatist or supremacist racial ideology than egalitarian ideology and ninety percent of them exhibit strong opposition from the couple's primary social network, their family and friends. Furthermore, in two critical respects, these

representations appear to be gendered in stereotypical ways, with interracial films depicting White women involved with Black men more often associated with violence and less often represented as viable romantic relationships.

This analysis also revealed important positive developments as well. Despite the prevalence of problematic tropes of interracial representation in a majority of films studied, there is evidence that within the past decade representations have become more egalitarian. The most recent decade was the one in which the greatest number of movies prominently featuring interracial romance (40% or 12 films) were produced, and also the one in which the most racially egalitarian representations appeared. The 2000s was the first decade to have a solidly positive mean racial representation score, 11.3 for 12 films. The two films with the most positive racial representation scores, *Away We Go* (P. Harris & Mendes, 2009) and *Something New* (Allain, 2006), were also created in the last decade. The mixture of egalitarian and critical elements in these films provides an interesting jumping off point for the audience study.

Chapter 4: Reading Interracial Romance--Select Films

As Hall and Whannel contended, rather than simply entertaining us, “it is perhaps in its handling of sexual themes that each national cinema most sharply reveals characteristic national attitudes” (1964, p. 198). Bearing this in mind, in this chapter, I explore the attitudes that are revealed in American interracial romantic depictions by explicating films representing each of the four frames identified in the content analysis. As a preface to the audience study, the purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate how the creative formal elements of a film contribute to the creation of meaning in interracial romantic depictions and to show how common patterns are reproduced, reinterpreted and transformed in different eras. In doing so I address the following questions: how are the most prominent ideological elements of interracial narratives manifest in the narrative, dialogue and other creative choices of specific films? What are the most salient features of the films shown in the audience study?

At all times, I perform this analysis in view of the theoretical knowledge about race and representation reviewed earlier. From framing analysis I adopt a focus on the media text’s implied causes, consequences, and solutions to problems, identifying the beliefs and solutions interracial film depictions have suggested to the historical problem of contentious, unequal Black-White relations. Even more than the content analysis, the focus of this part of the study is distinctly ideological, paying particular attention to the communication of racial beliefs and moral lessons. This textual analysis delves deeper into subtleties of representation such as symbolism and the visual language of film that the quantitative analysis could not. It requires that I interrogate how characters of different social groups are

drawn, how creative elements like makeup, dress, casting and editing (especially cross-cutting) contribute to meaning as well as a movie's dialogue and plot. It also requires reading each film in relation to its contemporaneous political struggles. Apart from the two films that were used in the audience study which had to meet the particular criteria discussed in the Research Design, I selected most of the films featured in this chapter based on what I perceived to be their social and historic significance (as in *Jungle Fever* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*) or because they stood out as being in another way – either for artistic merit (*Monster's Ball*) or because they seemed to exemplify the characteristics of the frame they are meant to illustrate (*Night of the Quarter Moon*). While I was particularly interested in working with lesser known but ideologically fertile films like *Zebrahead*, about which little scholarly analysis has been written, a few of the films in this section have received significant scholarly attention in the past. Nonetheless, it is my belief that the specific emphasis of the readings here will contribute something new to the discussion.

Within each reading I concentrate on the select scenes that best illustrate the representational strategies and ideas that define each film and connect it to its interpretive frame. It is also important to note that while these readings are informed by and reference the scholarship on race and ideology in film previously discussed in the literature review, all of the detailed scene analysis in this chapter is original, based on my own viewing, coding, and observation of these films. The dialogue quoted here is also taken from my transcriptions of scenes from viewing the films repeatedly on DVD. Whenever a reading is either influenced by or contradictory to existing interpretations, that relationship is discussed explicitly within the text.

The Integration/Reconciliation Frame

Idealization and Racelessness in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*

Interracial romantic film depictions that manifest the integration/reconciliation frame are recognizable as a variety of the Hollywood message movie (Cripps, 1993). As we saw earlier, in contrast to the critical/cultural view which holds that popular culture mainly or even exclusively serves to maintain existing social norms and hierarchy, scholars like Wartenberg argue that mainstream film has sometimes used the figure of a transgressive couple to *condemn* existing social hierarchy and explore a range significant sociopolitical and philosophical topics (1999). While *Pygmalion* (Asquith, 1938) critiques Britain's entrenched class hierarchy, in the United States, an overt message movie like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Kramer, 1967a) scrutinizes American racism, race relations, and liberalism.



Photo 4.1 Man to Man in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967)

Within this context, the most recognizable representational strategy that integration/reconciliation films employ is the idealized Black character who acts as a moral

exemplar or model Negro for White audiences. In contrast, reaction, and answer to predominantly negative portrayals of Black men in most American films (Bogle, 2001), the Black romantic lead in the integration film is unquestionably worthy, intelligent, and professional, a positive influence on the White partner. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the archetypal example of this type of film, the Black romantic lead is John Prentice, a world-renowned doctor, played by Sidney Poitier, who is designing a way to export Westernized medicine to Africa on a mass scale. By stacking the deck in this way, the filmmaker compels the audience to approve of these matches, to judge these characters not “by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (King, 1963). The philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr. is a heavy influence here, and as Poitier’s persona in particular seemed to “perfectly fit” the nonviolent ethos of the African American civil rights movement during the 1950s and early 1960s (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009). These seem to films imply that Blacks can gain equality by being inscrutable, polite, and serene in the face of opposition.⁵²

As many critics have pointed out, however, there are problematic political implications to this idealized characterization. As discussed earlier, Herman Gray and others have similarly critiqued *the Cosby Show* for its idealization (*Cosby, et al., 2001*). They argue that such representations individualize and decontextualize problems of poverty by discounting the effects of institutional racism and unequal access and add credibility and weight to the conservative claims that racism is no longer an important factor in Blacks’ unequal status (H. Gray, 1989; Herman Gray, 2004; Jhally & Lewis, 1992). Individualization is certainly a risk with the Poitier’s perfect inscrutable romantic heroes like Dr. John Prentice in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and Gordon Ralfe in *A Patch of Blue*.

⁵² Poitier’s individual inscrutability and charisma as a safe and trustworthy ideal sort of Black man can not be overstated and contributed much to the film’s meaning. In 1967, the year *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was released, Poitier starred in three of the top 20 grossing films of the year. *In the Heat of the Night* and *To Sir with Love* were Poitier’s other hits.

Sometimes this undercurrent is conveyed by example; at other times it is communicated through the omission of political context as with *the Cosby Show*. In the interracial romance, the reassuring submersion of egalitarian themes within an individualist rather than collective action theme is sometimes explicitly engaged as in *Night of the Quarter Moon*, which is also analyzed in this chapter. This reassuring packaging, apart from diffusing fears and counteracting negative stereotypes, may have been the part of the price of admission to wide audiences.

Although he believes that interracial romances and other unlikely couple pairings on film can offer substantive social criticism, Wartenberg agrees that some of the representational strategies employed in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* undermine its liberal message. Along with the characterization of John Prentice as an extraordinary individual (and therefore an exception rather than the rule about American Blacks in general), Wartenberg notes that Kramer's film "understands racism as an effect of the prejudices of individual social actors" to the exclusion of "racism's systematic, structural aspects" (1999, p. 120).

Another common characteristic of the racial integration/reconciliation frame, which is manifest in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, is its exclusion of cultural specificity. For his time, in accent, dress, and occupation, John Prentice, the Black protagonist is almost raceless. This effect is aided by the Bahamian-born Poitier's vague foreignness -- his almost untraceable accent and formal manner set him apart from Black American culture. Kramer's film does include one scene in which the hint of cultural change is represented through music and dancing, but the musical gyrations occur between a young Black maid and a White delivery boy, far removed from the film's central romance.

In its handling of sexuality, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* provides an obvious, implicit counterpoint to the portrayal of Black men in American culture as threatening and

interracial sex as a threat to civilization (Bogle, 2001; Graham, 2001). In these 1960s films, the threat of Black male sexuality is safely diffused. First, the threat of deviance is removed by stripping these relationships almost entirely of sexuality. This is not just simply the reticence or prudishness of cutting away from a sex scene to please censors. The issue of sex is not ignored in these films. It is confronted and the image of the uncontrollable, sexually deviant Black male (a la *Birth of a Nation*) is replaced with dignified restraint. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the film that most exemplifies this type of representation, the Black romantic lead is so honorable that rather than threatening White female virtue, he protects it. When Christina asks her daughter about the physical aspect of their relationship, Johanna (formerly known as Joey) is happy to tell her mother she wanted to consummate it but John refused.

With their optimistic endings, and inversion of racial stereotypes, integrationist films reflect the basically socially conservative non-violent civil rights movement. The ethos of these films is encapsulated in a comment by Poitier's Dr. Prentice. Near the film's conclusion, he tells his father that the difference between them is that his father sees himself as a Black man, whereas he sees himself first as a man. This is a distinctly 1960s stance, one that endorses King's color-blind ideal of being universally human first and foremost.

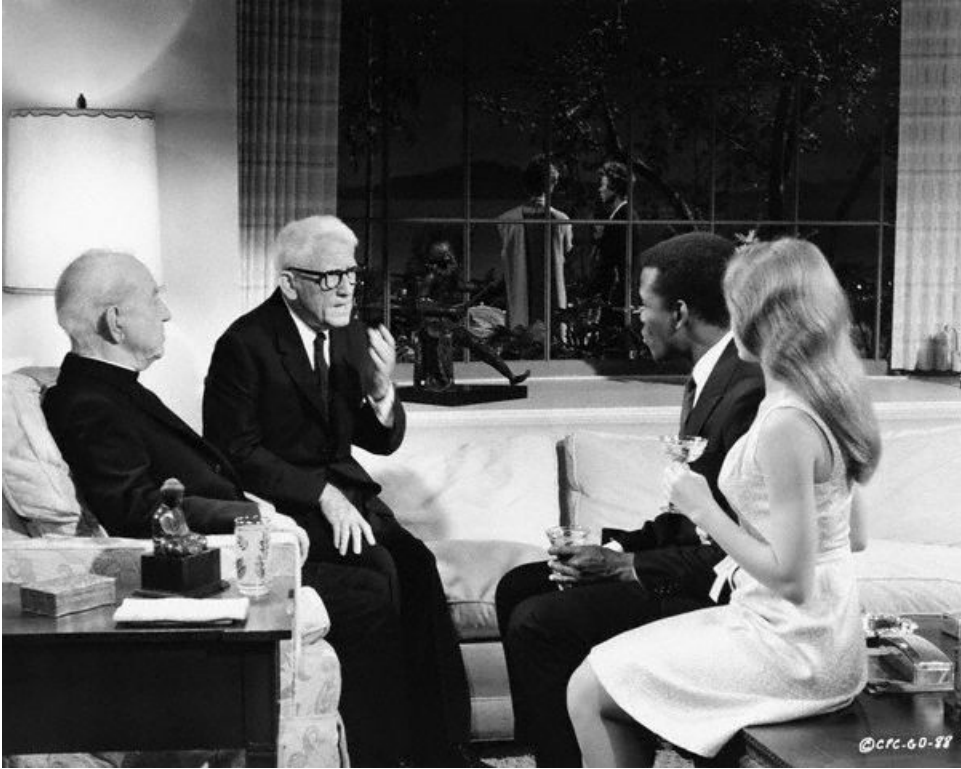


Photo 4.2 Family deliberation: *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967)

Parental authority in interracial narratives.

The issue of parental authority as a barrier to realizing this ideal looms large in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and merits special consideration. In supportive interracial narratives (whether integrationist or multicultural in outlook) in addition to transcending cultural boundaries as equals, there are several essential narrative mechanisms that facilitate change. Wartenberg (1999) has identified several commonly recurring narrative and representational strategies in unlikely couple films. These include the inversion of traditional hierarchy that is being critiqued (the presumed social inferior is shown in a superior position), counterexample in which the presumed inferior is made into an exemplar, and displacement in which the hierarchy is shown to be an inadequate and faulty way of understanding the world. There is another prominent narrative strategy, however, that has not yet been explored by scholars, but which figures prominently in many of the films

analyzed in this study. This element – the absent parent – is a key part of the narrative or back-story for many of the best known unlikely couple films that deal with race.

The popularity of this particular narrative wrinkle seems driven by both sociological and commercial considerations. As sociologist Michael Rosenfeld argues in *The Age of Independence*, in addition to changing attitudes about race, declining parental authority during young adulthood is a key factor in the rise of interracial and other nontraditional couples including same sex couples in the United States (2007). In the past “parents had much more control over their children’s eventual mates” and “adult children who were economically dependent on their parents could not easily form romantic relationships against their parents’ wishes”(p. 3). As more Americans went to college and moved away from home during the years in which they choose mates, however, parental influence as a traditional form of social control and conservative social values began to wane. According to Rosenfeld, this declining influence was both a result and catalyst of the social movements of the 1960s and 70s.

In race-focused unlikely couple films, diminished parental authority is manifest in an absent, often deceased, parent. Frequently, the absent parent is White, and if it’s the mother who is missing, this represents the loss of a nurturing and benevolent influence, and the moral center of the family. In her absence, the father, traditionally an authoritarian figure, remains to exert parental power, but his authority is also put in question by the narrative as he is often revealed to be abusive or neglectful, thus diminishing the moral legitimacy of his authority and, ultimately, his influence.

This absent parent narrative figures prominently in films across multiple decades and within a variety of ideological frames. In some films it is central to justifying the protagonists’ desire for each other; in others, the missing family member’s absence facilitates the film’s coupling by eliminating a key barrier to their relationship. This narrative device comes into

play in movies as varied as *Jungle Fever* (Lee, 1991), *Guess Who* (Sullivan, 2005), *Zebrahead* (Dowd, 1992), *Save the Last Dance* (Carter, 2001), *Monster's Ball* (Daniels, 2001), and, with the male and female authority roles inverted, *A Patch of Blue* (Berman, 1965). Rather than attempt to change the older generation's attitudes about race, all of these films render the parent absent and/or irrelevant in order to break the familial bond and accelerate generational change.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner presents an important exception to this pattern. In that film, instead of being subverted through plot devices such as death or representational strategies that call the legitimacy of the parental authority into question, parental approval is affirmed and courted. This is made explicit in dialogue, through the character of John Prentice, the young Black doctor who has come to San Francisco to meet his White fiancée's parents. Instead of dead, alienated or abusive, this woman's parents are alive, unified and nurturing. Although they were absent geographically during the courtship which took place away from home, their moral and parental authority is intact. In recognition of that fact, unbeknownst to his fiancée, John has decided that he will not marry Johanna without her parents' approval.

So, whereas the other films position traditional familial authority in opposition to mixed race couples, and by proxy, integration and the dismantling of an inegalitarian racial order, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* asserts the importance and viability of bringing the older generation along. While the film is most often criticized for its idealized representation of the exemplary Black doctor, it is important to recognize that the film is ideologically coherent and consistent in its characterization. Rather than using the device of an absent parent to skirt the issue, this 1967 film directly, if idealistically, confronts the issue of parental authority and social control, something most of the films in this genre fail to do. Ironically, in

doing so, the film reasserts patriarchal authority grounded in traditional gender roles even while it gently challenges White authority.

Here my interpretation differs slightly from previous readings. Wartenberg wrote that the film presents change as occurring in the natural evolution of things, that it “adopts narrative and representational strategies that encourage its audience to passively await the arrival of integration rather than actively work for its realization.” His philosophically grounded reading is more nuanced than most but still discounts the impassioned and angry confrontation between Dr. Prentice and his father which is a pivotal moment in the film.

Consider three scenes which show the couple struggling with their parents and others of their parents’ generation. In the movie’s opening scenes we see a subtle, polite prejudice in the reactions of Cristina’s middle aged, and markedly upper class gallery employee, Hillary. The disapproval is first visual – a look of disgust when the couple’s back is turned-- and then verbal --Hillary calls Johanna’s engagement “appallingly stupid”(Kramer, 1967a, DVD Chapter 7). The latter, the woman summarily loses her job at Christina’s gallery.

Hillary may be a hypocritical bigot, but she is quickly dispatched. The loudest, most plain and persistent voices of disapproval and separatism in the movie are Tillie, the Drayton’s longstanding maid, who calls John “one of those smooth talking, smart ass niggers just out for all you can get”, and John’s father, who calls him “boy”. The scenes between John and Tillie and John and his father are the most racially provocative. Isabelle Sanford does a convincing job, but Tillie is a prototypical Mammy figure. In a scene that mocks “Black Power” and an earlier one commenting on civil rights, she makes it plain to everyone in the house whose side she’s on (hint – it’s not with Blacks fighting for equality), and that her priorities lie in protecting the White child she’s brought up “from a baby in her

cradle” (Kramer, 1967a, Chapter 13). John holds his tongue with Tillie, in deference to the Draytons. Later, though, John explodes at his father and the accumulation of insults:

You and your whole lousy generation believes the way it was for you is the way it’s got to be. And not until your whole generation has lain down and died will the dead weight of you be off our backs. You understand. You’ve got to get off my back. (Kramer, 1967a, DVD Chapter 27)

Poitier is remembered in this film for his exemplary deference, but in this moment he is defiant, challenging, even threatening as the anger wells up, his voice is raised and he gets very close the older Black man repeating, “You’ve got to get off my back.” He then pauses, releases the fist and is, again, contained. Here Kramer allows John to express the human anger which would have made White audiences reject him had it been directed at a White character.

This exchange has multiple layers of meaning. In addition to confronting intergenerational struggles, the movie’s penultimate scene also juxtaposes John’s confrontation with his father with Johanna’s exaggerated confidence in hers. When Johanna tells her mother about Mr. Prentice’s visible shock upon meeting her, Christina gently tries to open her daughter’s eyes to the reality of her situation. Having witnessed her husband Matthew’s vehement objections all day, Christina asks, “What about your father?” But Johanna never recognizes the severity of her adored father’s concerns; she does not imagine what Christina already knows, that he has decided to deny his consent (Kramer, 1967a).

This scene plays with the dynamic that the film recreates on screen—minimizing White opposition while dramatizing Black infighting. Through editing and parallel structure Kramer calls attention to the idea that Whites downplay their own opposition to interracial marriage while highlighting that of Blacks. The film’s editing encourages this comparison.

The movie cuts from the tense, claustrophobic scene with two Black men in the study, from John's powerful angry and at the end touching plea to his father, to Matt on the terrace in the dark with the nighttime San Francisco sky behind him, and then finally to Johanna in her bright colorful bedroom, twirling around, trying on hats, not a care in the world. Along with the editing, the staging and use of color invite comparison. While father and son stand glowering at each other, Johanna and her mother end up on her bed chatting. These are sharp contrasts-- the assertive but contained young Black man and his cautious, hardworking Negro father; concerned but fair older White gentleman; and, finally two generations of White women watching from the sidelines--sweet but childishly naive younger woman and the knowing but still deferential White mother. These contrasts suggest cleavages along generational and gender lines as well as race.

So, part of the difference between the concerns borne by John and Johanna is certainly related to gender. The film has a decidedly patriarchal focus on securing the male parent's permission. Both mothers/wives are allowed opinions but not much independent say; they must use words to implore the men to make the right decision, but the decision belongs to the men.

Gender is not everything though. The characters' authority and responsibility vary with gender, race, age, and class position. The imbalance in the John-Johanna relationship (her blissfully unaware and him tense to the point of exploding; him having the final say on how to handle their parents) is mirrored in the contrast between the White and Black fathers at the film's conclusion. Whereas Matthew redeems himself by eventually living up to his own egalitarian principles in the film's final scene, there is no such redemption for the stern Mr. Prentice (no first name in the movie or the credits). The elder Prentice still glowers and grunts impotently even as he is overruled, as Matthew delivers his consent and heartfelt, Oscar-winning paean to the supremacy of love over social convention. It's a fascinating

series of contrasts and complications for a film mostly remembered for its optimism and ideals.

Perhaps because of the romantic hit soundtrack (“The Glory of Love”), its idealization of Dr. John Prentice, and its happy ending, the film’s confrontation of the idea of struggling with generational change is almost always glossed over in reviews and critiques that insist the film merely plays it safe. It is true and certainly not accidental that John Prentice’s most assertive moment of racial clarity results *almost* exclusively from disputes with other Black characters. This type of displacement likely provided a safety valve that enabled this story to be acceptable to White audiences feeling threatened by an onslaught of rapid social change and instability. The tendency to blame and challenge the Black community while ultimately reassuring White audiences of their moral superiority becomes a recurring and problematic pattern in a range of contemporary interracial romantic films. This begs a question which can not be answered through textual analysis alone – what do audiences make of such representational compromises and subtle imbalances?

Ambivalent Interracial Romance

Where integrationist films are distinguished by their messages about race, ambivalent films resist broad, definitive political statements and reflect several important trends in race relations: greater complexity in racial attitudes (as in the subtle prejudice discussed earlier), a desire to contain racial discussions at the individual rather than institutional level, and a hesitance to draw broad public meaning from private matters. Accordingly, even though they are ostensibly ambiguous, ultimately, these films can be read as fundamentally conservative in that they assert individual rights but resist calls to collective action or even optimism. On screen this translates to greater emphasis on negative consequences from interracial pairings, the depiction of separatist beliefs as overwhelmingly

prevalent and exceptionalizing couples who do manage to stay together. As shown in the content analysis, ambivalent framing emerges in the 1950s and resurfaces in the nineties. Genre may also be a key element here. The dramatic films of the 1990s and 2000s were almost all ambivalent, whereas the romantic comedies and musicals are vehicles for multiculturalism. With such different political contexts, the ambivalent film of the 1950s and 1960s make interesting contrasts with those of the 1990s and 2000s. Accordingly, one film from each period is analyzed here: *Night of the Quarter Moon* and *Monster's Ball*.

Individual Rights and Conservative Victories in *Night of the Quarter Moon*

Night of the Quarter Moon (Zugsmith, 1959) dramatizes the infamous 1920s marriage and divorce of a wealthy white scion of a very old New York family and a woman of mixed heritage.⁵³ As Heidi Ardizzone convincingly argues, the 1959 movie marked a pivotal milestone in the development of films about race and romance, advancing from chaste racial dramas like *Imitation of Life* (Stahl, et al., 2004) and *Pinky* (Crain, et al., 1994) and other more restrained interracial romances of its time like *Island in the Sun* (Zanuck, 1957). Those movies presented people of mixed birth as doomed figures, recreating the tragic mulatto myth that was so prevalent in American literature.⁵⁴ They starred white actresses playing women of mixed heritage so the audiences always knew that no real racial mixing was actually occurring, and the outcome of the tentative romance was always disastrous.

⁵³ The legal case is documented in a sensational newspaper account of the divorce case published in the *New York Times* as well as in Ardizzone's critique (2008; Science Explains Rhinelander's Unlucky Marriage," 1925)

⁵⁴ See several studies by Sollors previously cited in Chapter 3 (1997, 2000, 2004).



Photo 4.3 A publicity still captures an intimate moment for the newlyweds in *Night of the Quarter Moon*.

Key distinctions and ideological beliefs.

In *Night of the Quarter Moon*, on the contrary, several of these conventions are thwarted. Indeed, like Ardizzone, I believe that *Night of the Quarter Moon* differs from the tragic mulatto dramas that preceded it in critical ways that indicate a progressive turn in racial ideology (2008). Most important, the couple is reunited at the end. The film also treats sexuality more openly than previous films. The relationship between Ginny and her husband is very physical but in a way that would not detract from their sympathetic characterization given the more conservative sexual mores of its time. Their love is depicted as passionate but based on more than sexual attraction. The two enjoy several embraces and long kisses on-screen. They talk for hours and share personal secrets.



Photo 4.4 A promotional poster for *Night of the Quarter Moon* captures ambiguity and controversy surrounding a wife's racial identity.

Moreover, although the actress playing Ginny is actually White, symbolically she is definitely Negro, one-quarter “Portuguese Angolan” (African) to be exact. This mixture is not small enough to be dismissed, and Ginny, being a “quadroon” would have been considered Negro under any regime that specified such rules.⁵⁵ So, symbolically and meaningfully Ginny is a colored person, and not just by technicality or some long lost ancestor. Although her features allow her to be read as physically, phenotypically White, through the magic of movie makeup, Ginny’s complexion is more like beige. She appears to have the sort of skin color that, in combination with her European features, may be mistaken for a tan – and is initially by her new family and the press-- but the film hinges upon the fact that her dark complexion is not from the sun, that it is her natural coloring. This differentiates Ginny from previous mixed race heroines like Amantha Starr in *Band of Angels* (Walsh, 1957) who had no such telltale physical signs. In previous movies, a mulatto heroine’s racial identity was almost undetectable, a mystery of blood (Ardizzone, 2008).

⁵⁵ For a history of such guidelines and rules on racial status, see Lubin’s *Romance and Rights* (Lubin, 2005). This includes current guidelines used today to determine minority status on college applications.

Night of the Quarter Moon also upends assumptions about the psychological implications of crossing racial boundaries. Ginny differs fundamentally from the tragic mulatto of the 1940s and 1950s in that her psyche is not tormented, and she is not trying to pass for White. Whereas Chuck is tortured, Ginny is happy and strong. Traditionally, an essential part of the lore of the doomed mixed race character was her inner struggle.⁵⁶ They internalized racism, hating the part of them that was Black and disowned their families to pass for White. Ginny commits no such transgression. She has no sin of dishonesty or abandonment for which to atone. Additionally, her mother, who was half African, is dead (conveniently). Ginny's dead mother (also mulatto) is remembered as aristocratic and proud of her heritage and she was happily married to Ginny's father, who is White. Recounted by her father, that successful marriage is a testament to the legitimacy and viability of the interracial union and their potential offspring.

Courtney (2005) observed that Ginny is depicted as a great beauty and an idealized feminine figure, whose devotion restores her husband. Her healing power is what brings them together. When Ginny and Chuck first meet, he is a broken man, recovering from two years as a prisoner of war in Korea. Their love stabilizes him, makes him vigorous, even steady handed where he used to shake. Ginny's virtuousness and femininity are further proven in her unwavering devotion to this man who has seemingly abandoned her. This devotion is proven in court when she is willing to sacrifice her dignity to save her marriage.

⁵⁶ That couples who cross racial boundaries (and their children) inevitably pay too high a psychological cost for their social transgression has been one of the most durable arguments against interracial marriage. It resurfaced in 2009 when a Louisiana justice of the peace refused to grant a marriage license to a mixed race couple, citing his concern for any children the couple might have. Bardwell reportedly said, "I'm not a racist. I just don't believe in mixing the races that way" ("Interracial couple denied marriage license," 2009). Similar sentiments were expressed in the focus groups conducted for the present study and are discussed in subsequent chapters. This issue of children was addressed in an editorial shortly after the Justice's refusal and in a recently published book documenting the personal stories of multiracial Americans (Tauber & Singh, 2009; Times, 2009).

The idea that Ginny is good for Chuck, that she heals and restores him, is dramatized twice in *Night of the Quarter Moon*--once after his time in Korea and a second time after he has been drugged and "browbeaten" by his mother, brother and a team of doctors and lawyers. Ginny's second dramatic rescue places her in opposition to Chuck's mother, who is presented as an emasculating, symbolically castrating figure of White femininity.

That Mrs. Nelson is the diametrical opposite of Ginny, that she is a power hungry and cold witch, who robs Chuck of the strength and vitality that Ginny lovingly restored, is made clear in several pivotal scenes. The first signal of Mrs. Nelson's power appears when Chuck is afraid to tell his mother the truth about Ginny's heritage. Chuck's deception sets in motion and enables the lie at the center of the film's court case--that Ginny hid her heritage from Chuck and therefore the marriage was fraudulent. This is further compounded by the confrontation with his mother and her team in the police station. Mrs. Nelson, her other son, and the family lawyer all try to get Chuck to admit Ginny defrauded him by concealing her "true identity." Eventually this leads to a breakdown in which Chuck imagines Mrs. Nelson and her functionaries are his Korean inquisitors. Chuck gives in, saying yes to them without knowing what he is acquiescing to. In this scene, Chuck's mother is the direct catalyst for Chuck losing his tenuous, recently won stability and strength. This loss is punctuated aurally with loud atonal music that is meant to sound disturbing, through repetition of words, and by a swirling graphic representation of Chuck descending into hallucination. In this and other scenes, the film uses music to heighten the dramatic effect, a practice that was common to its time and to the melodramatic genre.

After that, Mrs. Nelson takes custody of Chuck, keeps him sedated and watched round the clock by nurses and doctors. With the help of the psychiatric team, Mrs. Nelson is literally keeping Chuck weak and under her control in a state of drug induced semi-sedation.

The battle for control over Chuck is also played out in the fact that it is Mrs. Nelson who takes power of attorney over him and sues Ginny for an annulment of the marriage. Chuck regains his manhood by resisting his mother's control in a most literal, traditional act of physical, violent masculinity – he gains his freedom by punching out the two men (orderlies) who guard his door in the psychiatric hospital.

Overcoming his mother's emasculation is the primary hurdle in the film, but Chuck's will is also briefly tested by societal rules. Looking for Ginny, he gets a lesson in the color line from her cousin who advises him that there is no place for such a couple in American society, that the most generous thing he could do for Ginny is to make her stop loving him.

Eventually, Chuck completes his restoration by leaping to his wife's defense when she is made to display her body for the court to prove she is colored through and through and could not have been mistaken for White by anyone who had seen her body as Chuck did prior to their marriage. At that point he is defiant. He has stood up to his family and to the society that says they do not belong together and asserted that his love is more important. Chuck reasserts both his masculinity and his free will in these two key moments of masculine authority.

Courtney reads Chuck's acts of masculine authority, coupled with the contrast of the Ginny's self sacrificing idealized femininity juxtaposed against Cornelia Nelson's manipulative, castrating figure as reestablishing strict gender roles as compensation for destabilizing racial ones. This is certainly true, but the film's portrayal of gender roles is not simple. There is far more ambiguity and equality in the relationship between Ginny and Chuck than between John Prentice and Johanna Drayton, for example, in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, though the latter is a slightly more contemporary film. Ginny incorporates several prototypically feminine characteristics—she is unflagging in her devotion and flashily womanly with long hair and a tight fitting wardrobe that calls attention to an hourglass figure

reminiscent of the extreme, enhanced femininity of Jayne Mansfield. However, the relationship is well matched and they are represented as equal partners⁵⁷. So Ginny is also college educated, artistic, and outspoken as well as beautiful.

Early in the relationship this equality is expressed in the most literal fashion as Ginny matches Chuck in a game of chess. Later, in the aftermath of Ginny's front page outing as mulatto, their equality is conveyed through her reactions to the threats to their marriage. Chuck puts on a performance for Ginny when his mother calls. As the camera switches between Cornelia and Chuck's sides of the conversation, we see and hear that Chuck is pretending to have a normal conversation with his mother when really Mrs. Nelson is sounding multiple alarms and suggesting that the marriage be immediately ended. As soon as he hangs up, Ginny gently but firmly scolds him never to do that again. This scene establishes Ginny's character and the nature of her relationship with Chuck. She is insightful and understanding but firm, clearly a full partner, not someone who needs to be shielded or kept in the dark.

Like the interrogation in the police station, this scene is punctuated by creative choices that intensify the drama. Chuck's lie to Jenny is highlighted with loud, jarring tones. Throughout the film in fact, each event that threatens the couple is accompanied by discordant, jarring chords of modern jazz. A rock through the couple's window, the fight on the lawn with local bullies, Chuck's mother's use of a racial slur, are all conspicuously underscored with music.

Ultimately, the film's dramatic denouement hinges upon Chuck's assertion of love and free will over social rules, but this triumph is also, importantly, and distinctly framed as a

⁵⁷ The Ginny-Chuck relationship recalls the marriage of equals hailed by feminist film critic Molly Haskell (1987). Love among equals or "intelligent love" shares certain signal characteristics: male and female share a pedagogic relationship (they teach and learn from each other and influence each other); the relationship is morally and socially beneficial to both; their views are separate and equal.

private and individual victory. The “destabilization” of racial boundaries is counterbalanced by the restoration of male authority (as Courtney argues). Importantly, I would add, what makes this film so ideologically ambivalent is that this destabilization is also contained through clear disavowals of the idea of broader social change.



Photo 4.5 *Night of the Quarter Moon*: A dramatic moment in divorce court.

At several points in the film, broader lessons about race are consciously disavowed. Ginny makes the individual nature of her struggle clear in a scene with her darker skinned cousin Maria’s husband Cy. Cy challenges Ginny. He’s had it with people who exploit color for financial gain and accuses Ginny of trying to exploit her newfound Negro identity to extort a settlement from the wealthy Nelson family. Ginny shouts that she’s not trying to win any victory for colored people, that she’s not colored, she’s “White or mostly White” and all she wants is her husband. This reassures Cy. In this scene, the civil rights movement is impugned, explicitly associated with financial exploitation by one of the most credible African American characters. Played convincingly by Nat King Cole, Cy is a talented musician, with a thriving business, who wants no part of that movement. Neither does Ginny. All they want is the freedom to chart their own course.

The scene with Cy positions individual freedom as somehow separate from and in opposition to the collective action of the civil rights movement even as the movement was focused on securing equal protection for individuals under the law. This false dichotomy is repeated by the judge in the couple's divorce hearing. That Ginny and Chuck are truly alone and apart from society is highlighted by the ending in which they drive off in a taxi with no destination. They are uncertain where they'll be able to live together, but at least they'll have each other. Collective action is further undermined by Cy's response to how he handles living with the injustices of the color line. He tells Ginny he copes by just playing his piano. This scene, in combination with Chuck's reassertion of masculine power, reassures the audience and contains the disruptive changes suggested by film's romantic resolution.

Monster's Ball: Realism and Ambiguity

In the Oscar-winning independent film, *Monster's Ball* (Daniels, 2001), death row prison supervisor Hank Grotowski finds his way out of his personal tragedy through his love affair with a Black woman. This very dark film includes many defining elements of the separatist/tragedy frame, including raw sexuality, social ostracism and the threat of racial violence. However, the film also incorporates elements of the integration frame: emotional intimacy, a character arc of redemption, an optimistic romantic resolution, and the possibility of a future together for the lead characters, played by Halle Berry and Billy Bob Thornton. Rather than either separatism or integration, there is a sense of ambivalence, of being in limbo.

As in *Jungle Fever*, explicit sexuality is a central part of the interracial romance in *Monster's Ball* (Daniels, 2001). Also just as in *Jungle Fever*, the relationship between Hank and Leticia begins with a feverish, primal sex scene. Here, though, it serves a different representational purpose and creates a substantially different effect. Along with other choices --such as shooting on digital video instead of film, using real-life locations rather

than sets, and the sparing use of racial epithets—explicit, unglamourized sexuality is a key part of the film’s realistic aesthetic.



Photo 4.6 Hank and Leticia in *Monster's Ball*

Because the other sex scenes between two White characters are presented just as graphically and unromantically (the other scenes are brief and involve a very bored prostitute), and because the tone of the scenes between Hank and Leticia changes over the course of the film, the graphic sexuality doesn’t have the same dehumanizing and dismissive effect here that it does in Lee’s film. As the relationship matures, the depiction of sex between these characters evolves. Whereas the initial scene is loud and feverish, the final sex scene is quiet and tender. In the final sex scene, also, Hank’s entire focus is on giving Leticia pleasure. The act of oral sex is one part of a series of scenes in which Hank proves his love by taking care of Leticia.

Although *Monster's Ball* ultimately rejects the separatist perspective, it uses racist language in a way that is comparable to films that manifest separatist framing. Again, the term “nigger” is pivotal, an insult shouted in anger by a sympathetic lead character, not just

by his antagonists. This time, however, the use of this language is selective. It doesn't overwhelm the film's realism. This "reveal" is a tool for exposing Hank's initial weakness in terms of racial views. In the ambivalent frame, instead of signifying the end of the relationship, the scene becomes a point against which the character's later growth is measured.

Monster's Ball is heavily character-driven, personal, rather than overtly political. Still, race is a major factor in the narrative, and the issues of racism and racial conflict are addressed explicitly in this film. Unlike in separatist films, however, in *Monster's Ball* overt racism is given voice, but only springs forth from the mouths of the most unattractive and bitter characters, thereby allowing the sentiments to be dismissed rather than endorsed. In *Monster's Ball*, this role belongs to Hank's father, Buck Grotowski, the ailing patriarch of the family and a domineering and vicious former prison guard. A pivotal scene near the start of the film establishes both the nature of the relationship between the three Grotowski men and their individual racial stances. When Hank's son receives a visit from his two young Black friends, Buck expresses his disapproval to Hank, demanding that he take action:

What the hell those niggers doing out there? I said something to you. Do you hear me?

Damn porch monkeys. Be moving in here soon. Sitting next to me. Watching my TV. There was a time when they knew their place. Wasn't none of this mixing going on.

[pause]

Your mother--she hated them niggers too.

The last line is a telling detail. Here again, as in *Jungle Fever*, the patriarch invokes the figure of his dead wife to instill shame in his child over "mixing" with Blacks. Buck's taunt

works; Hank fires his shot gun in the yard to scare off the boys. Walking off, he warns his own son, "You watch your ass."

Whereas Hank may have a momentary racist thought or even act, Buck's racism is consistent and runs deep. It is conveyed in the character's face as well as in his words. Once Hank gives in and scares the boys off the family property, the camera lingers on Buck's momentary smirk of satisfaction. Buck takes pleasure in his hate. This and a similar scene later on in the movie are the only times that Buck shows happiness. Hank's displays of racism, in contrast, are shown to be quite painful for him. Hank only reluctantly shoos the boys off his property and the one time he uses a racial epithet stems from anger over what he considers an indignity done to a Black prisoner on death row in preparation for his execution. That this man is the husband of the woman Hank becomes involved with is not yet known.

The physical setting also plays an important role here in creating the film's sense of realism. The entire film was shot on location in the South. All of the exterior and interior settings – characters' houses, diners, hospital, gas stations, and local bar are real locations. The prison where Hank works is the historic Angola prison in Georgia.⁵⁸ The execution scene uses an actual electric chair.

Apart from the general sense of realism derived from shooting on location, the locations help set the tone, creating distinctive moods for different parts of the film. The early scenes mostly take place in the Grotowski house or in the local prison. The prison scenes are especially cramped, often shot through the metal bars of cells. Because the camera doesn't have the luxury of the missing fourth wall that films shot on movie sets enjoy, the interiors help convey a real sense of the characters' confinement.

⁵⁸ In a ironic bit of realism, according to the DVD commentary, even the motel where Hank and Sonny have their sexual encounters with the local sex worker were true to life, shot in a New Orleans motel that rents rooms by the hour and which became infamous when Jimmy Swaggart was caught with a prostitute there in 1988 (Daniels, 2001).

Unlike African American characters in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and even *Jungle Fever*, Blacks in *Monster's Ball* don't hesitate to challenge acts of racism. After Hank's dismissal of the two young Black boys from his property, the boys' father, Ryrus Cooper, played by Mos Def, confronts Hank directly and questions his behavior:

Ryrus: You see these two boys here. They my sons...

Hank: They were on my property.

Ryrus: Ain't no need to be scared of no little boys. They ain't coming to hurt you. And there ain't no need to be letting off no shotgun telling them to leave neither. You understand?

Hank: Well then, keep them off my property.

Ryrus: They're friends to your son. Okay? He invited them there. They ain't trespassing. They ain't hurting nobody. The next time you want to play cowboy, I'm over here all the time.

Hank: Well you keep them off my property.

Ryrus: I think you heard me sir.

Hank: Well I think you heard me too.

Neither man backs down in this exchange. The responsible Black father neither turns the other cheek (as he would have practicing the passive resistance espoused by integrationists) nor fights hate with hate "by any means necessary" or through retreat to an all-Black world as he would acting out of a strict Black separatist philosophy. Ryrus simply stands his ground, demanding that he and his children be treated with respect.

Hank's central journey in this film is one of learning to break with the past. He doesn't have to live like his father did and he also learns to accept Blacks on equal footing. He starts out as someone whose world is defined by boundaries and restraint, both racial and familial. At the outset, Hank is merely respectful of the Blacks he encounters in his daily life, treating prisoners with formality and kindness, but maintaining the careful distance that is required by his job and his family. After losing his son to suicide and falling into a relationship with a Black woman, however, Hank changes. For most of the film, Hank experiences a kind of rebirth after separating from his father and embracing his attraction to Leticia.

Opening himself up to the world outside his family, Hank's demeanor is lighter; he dresses better, and smiles more. He even gives his son's car to Leticia and names his new gas station "For Leticia." Importantly, his reaching out across racial lines is not restricted to his relationship with this one Black woman. She is not just an exception and his change is not just driven by sexual attraction. Hank also reaches out in business and friendship to Ryrus Cooper, the same Black man whose children he earlier scared off his property. This relationship legitimizes his journey, proving that it is not just a product of sexual desire. Although that relationship is a catalyst for change, so is his son's death. The interracial relationship doesn't occur in a vacuum, nor is it a panacea.

There is still an important impediment to Hank's happiness, however. The realization of his new life is threatened by his father who is not only proudly racist and defiantly resistant to change, but also determined not to lose his hold on Hank. When Leticia makes an impromptu visit to Hank's home to deliver a present, Buck seizes his chance to hold onto his son by scaring her off. Leticia has pawned her ring to buy a cowboy hat for Hank, replacing one that was damaged in helping her with her son.

Instead of Hank, Leticia finds Buck at the house, and this brief but indelible exchange ensues:

Buck: Whoo. Damn. Hank must have done something right to deserve a fine hat like this.

Leticia: Guess he did.

Buck: In my prime, I had a thing for Nigger juice myself. Hank just like his daddy. Ain't a man till he's split dark oak.

Rather than causing the dissolution of Hank's relationship with Leticia, this scene is the catalyst for Hank's liberation from his stifling life with his father. After this incident, Hank realizes he can only protect his relationship with Leticia by making a full break. The day after this confrontation, Hank commits Buck to a nursing home that has, ironically, a Black female administrator, Black attendants, and even a Black roommate. Discussing Buck's care with the administrator, Hank asks her to take good care of his father. "You must love him very much," she comments. "No I don't," Hank admits. "But he's my father, so there it is."

Although the film does not include overt political statements of racial beliefs beyond Hank's father's, certain events and the ending suggest that progress may be achieved by breaking with the past. The constraints and limitations of the past are associated with the family. In addition to Hank's father being banished to a nursing home, Hank's mother and son are dead. Leticia is in a similar situation. By the middle of the film she is also truly alone. Her husband has been executed and, as a result of the tragic car accident that brings her in touch with Hank, she has also lost her son. This makes characters truly free—of familial ties, judgment, and the accompanying societal expectations that sometimes come with them.



Photo 4.7 Lovers reach an uncertain peace in *Monster's Ball*.

Monster's Ball rewards romantic determination in the face of resistance with the possibility of a happy ending. At the end, Hank seems to have regained his place in Leticia's weary heart, despite what happened with his father. Hank has found himself through this relationship, but it's not completely clear how things will turn out. Hank's last words, "I think we're going to be all right" is cautious, quiet hope. Their future is still uncertain, however, as Leticia sits silent on the step next to Hank, contemplating the knowledge she has just gained that he was the guard in charge of her husband's execution. It's clear that Leticia is at her own turning point, but the film doesn't show its resolution.

As Hank explains, there's a term for the party given to a prisoner before he goes to his death. It's called "A Monster's Ball." There on the porch steps, eating ice cream, the couple is either marking the start of their second chance or enjoying their own Monster's Ball before their relationship dies. Forster's direction of this scene leaves that unresolved.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ The filmmakers were conscious of and committed to this ambiguity in the film's resolution. Even on the accompanying DVD commentary, the director and writer affirm their

The Ideologies and Films Used in this Audience Study

The audience study involved showing focus groups one of two films that manifest either the separatist or multicultural frame.

The Separatist Frame-- Restoring Racial Determinism

As exemplified by films like "*O*" (Gitter, Fried, & Rhulen, 2002) and, especially, *Jungle Fever* (Lee, 1991), the racial ideology that defines the separatist frame is conveyed through visual symbolism, references to psycho-sexual racial myth, and tragic, violent narratives. Another distinguishing feature of this racial frame is the use of racist language. Even sympathetic characters throw about racially charged epithets rarely heard in mainstream films (or polite modern society). At critical moments, characters explode into racial epithets, revealing what is implied to be a lingering prejudice beneath the surface in otherwise sympathetic characters. In particular, the term "nigger" is often used repeatedly to dramatic effect.

Perhaps the defining characteristic of the separatist frame is that the film's denouement often hinges on the betrayal or abandonment of the romantic partner as a result of the difficulties they face because of race. Sometimes this betrayal is portrayed through violence. The climax of "*O*," the retelling of *Othello* in an American boarding school, comes when the Black character, "*O*" lashes out at his girlfriend, believing she has betrayed him. At other times, it's purely through the verbal denial of their relationship or a shocking outburst of racist language or beliefs by one of the lovers in the interracial relationship.

This most devastating betrayal happens, of course, because in the separatist film even trusted lovers harbor indelible racial fears. This portrayal implies that racist attitudes

intent to leave the ending open to interpretation and refuse to give their take on what may have happened next.

are deeply ingrained in the most seemingly sympathetic, enlightened (usually White) characters. Racial conflict is made to seem insurmountable and Blacks who trust Whites are naïve. The inevitable break-up provides a retreat from the interracial entanglement. Spike Lee's films, especially *Jungle Fever*, exemplify this practice, but the convention also appears in films like *Shadows* and *Q and A*. In the latter films, a light-skinned Black woman passing for White (reviving the tragic mulatto figure) is rejected by her White lover once he learns of her background.⁶⁰ In *Zebrahead* and "O", the twist on this theme of prejudice and fear is that even when prejudice does not truthfully hide in the White partner's heart, the fear of it can overwhelm the Black lover's psyche. This fear leads directly to Desi/Desdemona's death at the hands of Odin/Othello in "O" and more indirectly to the tragedy in *Zebrahead* as well. The lesson is that prejudice and race based fear lurks beneath even the most seemingly benign surfaces on both sides of the racial divide. Mixed with the normal human failings of romantic/sexual jealousy and insecurity these race-based misgivings are inescapable and deadly. In its focus on this potent brew of racial and sexual stereotype and jealousies, the separatist frame brings the cautionary lessons that Gateward (2005) speaks about in her essay *In Love and In Trouble* to the forefront.

Reconstructing Racial Difference in *Jungle Fever*

The story of an illicit affair between a happily married but sexually curious Black architect and his White secretary, *Jungle Fever* (Lee, 1991) is set in a racially segregated version of New York untouched by contemporary norms of racial equality. In Spike Lee's New York, racial stereotyping and social segregation are the rule. Stylistically, the film is innovative, mixing realism with visual conceits such as the moving sidewalk that have become part of Spike Lee's trademark. Thematically, however, the movie conforms to

⁶⁰ This narrative is used frequently in television drama as well as film. The crime drama *Law and Order* has featured several episodes in which the reality or threat of interracial sexual involvement is the catalyst for murder. The CBS drama *Lie to Me* also featured a similar storyline.

conventional, even reactionary notions about the nature and consequences of interracial romance.

The film hits every motif of the separatist frame. Extreme social ostracism flows from both sides, Black and White. The main characters are victims of violence resulting from their affair. Italians stereotype Blacks and vice versa. Even the romantic protagonists stereotype each other based on race. Flipper admits he's always been "curious" about White women and Angie asks if it's true that Black men don't like to perform oral sex.

Spike Lee portrays interracial relationships as social transgression through the reactions of the protagonists' friends and family, through the negative events that befall as a result of their relationship, and in vivid dialogue and monologue in which his characters debate the decency of such pairings. *Jungle Fever* is all about sexual and racial politics and Lee uses his characters as didactic tools to present the racial debate. Racial issues more than any thing else propel the plot and preoccupy the characters in *Jungle Fever*, many of whom deliver speeches articulating their views on all things race related.

In contrast with the integrationist frame's minimizing of the importance of race, with the separatist frame (as expressed in a film like *Jungle Fever*), racial identity is all-important. Racial difference is reified, made prominent and presented as essential. The distinctive rhythms of Black culture are an important feature of the movie from the opening scene over which Stevie Wonder sings the title song. The confinement of race is also portrayed through the geography of Lee's film. From the start, Black and White neighborhoods are clearly delineated and identified with on-screen titles superimposed over a map of New York. The boundaries are so strict that Angie has never met anybody from Harlem, and all of Flipper's neighbors and friends are Black.

Yet another distinctive characteristic of the separatist frame manifest in *Jungle Fever* is that interracial sexual unions are presented in a hypersexual way, reviving the stereotype

of interracial sexual attraction as deviant, or obsessive. The protagonists engage in rough sex that is animalistic, loud, and devoid of love. *Jungle Fever* exemplifies this treatment. Flipper and Angie begin their affair on a drafting table in Flipper's office. Since Flipper is married and portrayed as being in love with his wife, the affair with Angie is borne of seemingly uncontrollable sexual impulse. In this presentation, "Jungle Fever" is a psychological illness, a sexual obsession borne of its forbidden status in American history.

In addition to reviving stereotypical images of sexual deviance, *Jungle Fever* directly confronts and ridicules the integrationist ideal. When the Black woman he secretly admires approaches Angie's boyfriend's store in the very White, Italian neighborhood of Bensonhurst, the store regulars call out "Guess Who's Comin'?" in mocking reference to the 1960s film. More dramatically, when Flipper's and Angie's social circles hear about the affair, they immediately and vehemently express disapproval. Angie's friend comments, "Personally I think it's pretty disgusting. Yeah, I think it's gross." Similarly, Flipper's best friend, Cyrus, played by director Spike Lee himself, says "y'all are both in trouble....The both of you got the fever. The both of you got the jungle fever."

These reactions are just the start of Lee's critical, problematizing treatment of the interracial relationship. In fact, much like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the film attends more to reactions to the relationship rather than the relationship itself, although to different effect. Both films telegraph their focus on societal reaction in their titles—"Jungle Fever" is Flipper's friends' derogatory characterization of his affair and "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" is the question that the White family's disapproving Black maid asks.

As outlined in the content analysis, negative and positive reactions and other consequences of the relationship for the couple are one of the core coding categories that define the frame in the interracial romantic narrative. In *Jungle Fever*, those consequences are unrelentingly, often brutally negative. Moreover, unlike in the 1960s Kramer film, in Lee's

work those attitudes are not overcome. So in addition to these scenes of disapproving friends and family, Lee shows the couple being greeted with hostility each time they go out in public. And Flipper's wife spits on him after throwing his clothing in the street. In contrast, there are very few scenes between the romantic leads. If the majority of the American public now approves of dating and even marriage between Blacks and Whites, this increase has not yet transferred to on-screen representation.⁶¹

Another example of negative reaction to the couple comes from the friendship circle of Black women that gathers around Flipper's wife, Drew when she learns of his affair and kicks him out of the house. It's a complicated situation because again rage over sexual infidelity and race are so closely intertwined. The women talk extensively about the "problem" of Black men dating White women and deliver staunchly separatist racial philosophy. Flipper's wife is enraged about the infidelity, partly because she sees it as Flipper's betrayal of his race. Ironically, despite being biracial herself (yet another confused, tragic mulatto), Drew is the strongest opponent of interracial relationships. She virulently rails against the interracial aspect of the affair but refuses to give up on the ideal of Black solidarity. When her friends complain about the lack of eligible Black men, Drew responds, "My marriage is wrecked. It's fucked up. The man is gone. He's fucking some White bitch and I still believe there's good Black men out there" (Lee, 1991).

Drew is so committed to this all-encompassing ideal of Black social and sexual solidarity that when a friend advocates that the solution to the shortage is to start dating White men, she is quick to tell her she's wrong and point blame outside the Black community:

⁶¹ As detailed in the literature review, Gallup has tracked public opinion on Black-White intermarriage for more than 50 years. The latest figures indicate 77% approval among the American public with Blacks actually more likely to approve than Whites. Despite known methodological issues with race and survey questions, where social norms are known to affect response, the overall upward trend is widely accepted as credible (Carroll, 2007).

You're wrong Hilda. You're as wrong as the day is long....A lot of this doesn't really so much have to do with the Black men. I know it does and I know we want to blame them and it is their blame, but part of it is that these White bitches throw themselves at Black men. Do you see the way they look at em? You can't walk down the street with your man without 29,000 White bitches coming on to him. And they will give up the pussy because their fathers tried to keep it from them all their lives. When they turn 18 and they leave home, they gon' get that Black dick. They're gonna get it. (Lee, 1992)

In this response, Drew invokes stereotypes about the "White bitches" being obsessed with "Black dick," as a result of being kept away from it by their fathers. This is the Black corollary to White America's myth of White purity and Black deviance. As if to underscore this point, Flipper's father voices almost the exact same sentiments. When Flipper and his girlfriend go to Sunday dinner at his parent's house, Flipper's father, a preacher, becomes Lee's vessel for a didactic sermon about lynching and the unholy heritage of interracial sexual unions. Apprising Angie of the rich historical and psychological subtext of American interracial involvement, Reverend Purify lectures:

The White man said to his woman, baby you are the flower of the White southern womanhood. Too holy and pure to be touched by any man, including me. I'm gon' put you up on a pedestal for the whole world to fall down and worship you. And if any nigger so much as look at you, I'll lynch his ass.

She believed him. Thought she really was holy and pure like the Virgin Mary. She let him put her up on that pedestal. Meanwhile the husband no sooner the sun went down, down to the slave quarters grabbin' up every piece of Black poontang he could lay his hands on and running to the gin mill to brag

about it. And that's how our blood got diluted. Mulattos, quadroons, octaroons.

Until this point, the Reverend's speech is colorful and melodramatic, but arguably fact-inspired account of this aspect of American sexual history during slavery. At the end of his monologue, though, the symbolically named Reverend Purify, who so eloquently rails against African Americans' loss of racial purity, goes beyond historical facts and offers his personal take on the subject, finally addressing Angie and Flipper's relationship directly:

Now I'm sure that most of those high and mighty White ladies felt abandoned. But they were so proud to be White and therefore superior, they kept their mouths shut. And their legs locked tight. But in the midnight hour, then, alone, on the hotbed of lust, I'm sure they must have thought what it would be like to have one of them big Black bucks the husbands were so desperately afraid of.

I feel sorry for you. Here it is the nineties, still trying to make up for what you missed out on. But I don't blame you.

As for the Black man, like my own son Flipper who ought to know better. Got a loving wife and daughter. Still got to fish in the White man's cesspool. I have nothing but contempt.

In closing, the Reverend rises from the table saying, "Excuse me. I don't eat with whoremongers." To which, Flipper's mother replies simply and in emotionless deadpan, "But you knew she was coming." It's a classic Spike Lee assault--an insult to the son, the "whore-monger" and to Angie, the presumed "whore". It's satirical and ugly and funny all at the same time. This scene amplifies the social ostracism aspect of the separatist frame. Lee leaves no doubt that this familial disdain will not simply dissipate with time.

In the voices of the Purify patriarch and Flipper's wife Drew, Lee has conjured up every major race-based sexual image in the American cannon: the "big Black buck," the slave master obsessed with Black "poontang," the untouched and unfulfilled White southern lady, and the sex-hungry jungle fever-addled modern "White bitch" (Bogle, 2001; Lee, 1991).⁶² Last but not least, there is the vivid threat of lynching.

Still, as harsh as it is, Rev. Purify's verbal scolding pales in comparison with the Angie's father's reaction. It is the most brutal scene in any of these films. After learning of her affair through the neighborhood grapevine, Angie's father grabs her as she walks into the house, shouting:

A nigger. A Nigger. A nigger. What kind of woman are you? You fuck a Black nigger, you fuck a Black nigger. I didn't raise you to be with no nigger. Better you fuck, better he be a mass murderer, Hannibal Lecter, than a fucking, Black nigger. (Lee, 1992)

He then slams her into a lamp, beats her with his belt, and punches her with his fist, adding, "You're a disgrace. You could have had an Irishman or a Jew, but a fucking Black nigger" (Lee, 1991). It's interesting to note that the film was written by Lee and so is a Black person's interpretation of White racism. As ugly as the sentiments are, Lee manages to impart a twisted poetry and rhythm to this dialogue. With the relentless repetition of just a few highly charged words, there is something mesmerizing and memorable about these outbursts.

The next day, there is even more negative reaction as news of the scandal spreads like wildfire through the tight-knit Italian neighborhood. A neighborhood guy, Vinny, commiserates with Angie's Italian boyfriend at the shame of being cuckolded by a Black

⁶² For a comprehensive discussion of race based sexual stereotyping in American film, see *Toms Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* by Donald Bogle (2001).

man, saying, “Paulie, I feel for you...A colored, a spook, a spear chucker. Jesus Christ, a fucking eggplant...You didn’t give her a beating? You see my girl Denice, she knows better. She got out of line one time I stomped her right in the midsection.” Lee is in control here, and makes sure that the ugliest epithets and the only violence against women belongs to the White men.

As discussed earlier, within the post-civil rights era, Spike Lee’s *Jungle Fever* is one of the most overtly ideological, controversial and best known interracial romantic films. Accordingly this film has attracted more scholarly critique than any other in this study. While Don Bogle praised Lee for his “imaginative style,” “innovative direction,” and the skill with which he has in been able to “get close to basic mass African American attitudes and arrive at a certain truth,” he also contended that the film does little to explain why these attitudes are the way they are (Bogle, 2001, p. 352). Listening to Reverend Purify’s statements and those of the Black women who are Drew’s friends, one finds Lee’s world view to be dominated by middle class, Black conservative political arguments that are clearly articulated and grounded in historical grievance. Lee’s inclusion, through the Black protagonist’s parents, of rather lengthy articulations of the historical roots of Black opposition to interracial romance, provides as full a representation of certain strands of Black political thought as can be provided through a creative medium like film.

My reading is consistent with Diana Paulin’s, who found that White supremacist discourse, which defines nonwhites as inferior and a threat to purity, and the discourse of minority or “decentered” communities, articulate similar nationalist or separatist ideologies, the latter in an attempt to “combat domination and oppression” (Paulin, 1997, p. 166). This reading is also supported by Kellner, who observed that Lee “seems to rule out the possibility of healthy romantic relationships between people of different color – a quasi-

segregationist position that a more progressive multi-culturalist vision would reject” (1995, p. 171).

An equal opportunity social satirist, Lee portrays stereotypes that are class- related as well as race-bound. The lifestyles of working class Whites, specifically Italians are represented in clichéd overwhelmingly negative ways. As in *A Patch of Blue*, the female lead is uneducated and working class, a person of lesser social standing than Flipper. Here again also, the White character feels trapped in her situation, exploited by her family. She has to come home and cook for her family daily after working a long day. Angie’s material circumstances are not squalid, but she is clearly lower class. Her family home contains visual signifiers of lower class status. The sofa is covered in plastic; family members curse profusely at the dinner table, and Angie has only a high school education. And, finally, physical violence is represented as a part of the lifestyle. In addition to girlfriend-beating Vinny, every Italian man either hits or threatens to hit someone at some point in the movie.

Uncharacteristically, however, in the midst of *Jungle Fever’s* unrelenting barrage of verbal condemnations and violent reprisals, the movie also presents a small glimmer of hope in the guise of a secondary interracial romantic subplot. Paulie, Angie’s cuckolded fiancée, has a longstanding crush on the only Black woman living in their almost exclusively White enclave. The object of his affections is a dark-skinned professional Black woman who encourages Paulie to apply to college. Although he has to withstand an obstacle course of challenges – including threats of disinheritance from his father, and a beating from neighborhood guys – Paulie refuses to let this keep him from his date with Orin Goode. He arrives on her doorstep bloody and bruised, but not defeated. They continue with their evening as planned. It’s one of the last scenes in the movie. In this way, the film leaves open the possibility that for those who are truly committed and pure in their intentions, that romance between Blacks and Whites *can* be more than just *Jungle Fever*.

Still, this subplot does not negate the fact that Lee has created an overwhelmingly negative cautionary tale that contributes to the view of interracial relationship as social taboo and urges traditionally conservative racial solutions. In the presence of such racial strife and absence of love, the resolution Lee suggests is Black solidarity, represented in Flipper's return to his family and, more broadly at a community level, in Flipper's embrace of a young black crack head on a Harlem street near his home. In Lee's world, the characters in 1991 are as confined by racial boundaries than those of 1965 and 1967.

***Zebrahead*: Black Separatism in the White Mind**

Also produced in the early nineties, like *Jungle Fever*, *Zebrahead* combines many of the signal practices of separatist framing. This film was one of the two films used in the audience study and responses to the film are recounted in Chapters 6 and 7. Written and directed by Anthony Drazan, this first feature is a 1990s high school rendering of the separation frame from a White, male filmmaker's perspective (Dowd, 1992). Although executive produced by Oliver Stone, *Zebrahead* is less well known film, produced on a relatively low budget, and has the personal feel of an independent production.

This film reproduces several of the representational practices of *Jungle Fever*, but was written, directed and produced by a team almost exclusively comprised of White men. The race of the filmmakers is notable since the separation frame is generally seen as a distillation of the concerns and political perspectives of Black Nationalism and Black conservatism. *Zebrahead's* representational strategies are consistent with the separatist frame, while at the same time seeming to critique rather than endorse the political ideologies it engages.



Photo 4.8 Fighting for love and respect in *Zebrahead*

Because of these differences, while *Zebrahead* may depict the urban world in terms that are consistent with *Jungle Fever* and manifest the same general frame, there are clear and substantial contrasts in how the films represent interracial romance. The films were released within a year of each other, *Jungle Fever* in 1991 (Lee) and *Zebrahead* in 1992 (Dowd, 1992). Unlike Lee's film, *Zebrahead* stops short of suggesting solutions to the problems it portrays. Also, where *Jungle Fever* presents problematic but complex, critical portraits of both its leads and their respective communities, *Zebrahead's* sympathies belong with its White male protagonist. At critical moments, the narrative hinges upon Zack's sincerity in crossing racial boundaries and Nikki's misguided and racially driven pursuit of respect. The resulting imbalance seems to cast doubt on the racially egalitarian ideals its hero espouses.

Cultural Fusion and Mixed Signals

Zebrahead takes place in Detroit and tells the story of the romance between a middle class White DJ, Zack, and a working class Black girl, Nikki. Nikki is new to the high school. The film establishes from the start that Zack is a genuine admirer of Black culture. His best

friend Dee is Nikki's cousin and he's a skillful Deejay who melds all kinds of music together, a fact which earns him street credibility in the school. Several key scenes in *Zebrahead* are essential in conveying its overall meaning—these scenes establish who these characters are independent of each other and then set in motion a series of events that lead to violence. Along the way, perhaps the most interesting element in the film is its parallels and contrasts between characters.

Zebrahead's opening scene establishes Zack as the hero of the piece. The camera follows him, hip-hop blasting, head bopping, driving his jeep with the top open through different neighborhoods of Detroit to his public high school. When he sees a man who lives next to an industrial works plant sets patches of gas in his grass on fire (the industry has so damaged the city that even the lawns are flammable), Zack stops his car to watch. This seemingly innocent detour makes him late for school and facilitates important plot developments – Zack's breakup with his previous girlfriend and introduction to Nikki. They also establish important facets of Zack's character beyond those facts.

Before any dialogue, the sights and sounds of these opening shots emphasize Zack's openness; he is in motion, fluid, engaged with his environment to the point of being oblivious to his responsibilities. The moment Nikki and Zack meet is also the moment that Zack's girlfriend dumps him for being irresponsible, inattentive, indifferent or just late one time too many. Zack's ex is White, well dressed and attractive in the polished manner of so many preternaturally poised young urbanites in popular culture. When she states, "this has nothing to do with lovers, any more," it presumably stings. It's unclear what happened between them; the key thing is he has been unceremoniously jilted by his girlfriend in front of the assistant principal, Nikki and other students.

The second important scene in *Zebrahead* that tells us who these characters are involves Zack's father and takes place just a few hours later. Zack is mildly upset about his

romantic situation when returns home later that day. This is the first peek at his home life. Jazz is playing. The house is nice but messy. Zack opens the door to his father's bedroom and discovers a woman who is one undergarment shy of naked, in his father's bed. Zack leaves, and his father him into his room even though he's only wearing bikini underwear. When the two men talk, it's clear they have very different attitudes to relationships. When he tells his dad he's feeling down about splitting up with Michelle today, his dad asks, "she wasn't putting out huh?" Then, attempting to console his son, he says "fuck her."

The scene subtly speaks volumes about who Zack and his father are. First, given the ease with which Zack opens his father's bedroom door and with which his father follows undressed into Zack's room, it's obvious there are no boundaries in this household. Second, there are pictures of now obscure Black musicians on his walls, so the musical interest hinted at in the opening scene is shown to have deep roots. Finally, while Zack is sensitive, his father is sexually cavalier.

The exterior and interior shots along with this verbal exchange establish that the family is middle class but untraditional and clearly somewhat dysfunctional in terms of parental authority. It also sets up contrasting characterizations of Zack and his father. When business is slow at the record store downtown, he comes home in the middle of the day to have sex with a woman it's clear he's not in a relationship with. In contrast with his father's who abandons his struggling store in the middle of a workday, Zack is hard working. After being at school all day, he works at a restaurant, and when he's not doing that he's deejaying and making and selling his mixed tapes.

The final important element in this early scene is that Zack's grandparents give him a candle to light for his mother who has now been dead 12 yrs. Like Sarah in *Save the Last Dance*, Zack has a dead mother and a father who is so untraditional and distant he barely fulfills the guardianship role. Zack is entirely unsupervised, free to control his schedule, live

his life as he pleases. While his father may have checked out, Zack honors his mother's memory despite being very young when she died. Almost everything in these first three scenes makes Zack someone whose actions the audience will support as he crosses racial boundaries: his admiration for Black people and culture, his reaching out to his father despite said father's inability to deliver parental authority/support; his vague loneliness.

Like Zack, Nikki is being raised in a one parent household. In contrast with Zack's life, however, Nikki's mother does try to give her advice, but this bears little authority as Nikki's mother also drinks a lot and is pictured in nightgowns at inappropriate times of the day. In different ways, both Nikki and Zack are shown to be more responsible than their parents. The common ground for their relationship is their missing parents – Nikki's absent father and promiscuous, alcohol-abusing mother, Zack's dead mother and his reckless, clueless father.

Unlike the detailed elaboration of who Zack is, however, what Nikki likes, wants and what she values are a mystery. There are no shots of posters in Nikki's bedroom, no scenes of her spinning music or performing any other activity she likes. Unlike in a film like *Save the Last Dance*, which sketches the interests and aspirations of both romantic leads (dancer, doctor), here we know only that Nikki's living situation is dependent upon the largesse of cousin Dee's family, who own the house she now lives in and the mattress she sleeps on, and that the troubled boy from school "Nut" lives across the street. Even by the end of the film, this thin portrait is barely filled in. Nikki's only clear attributes are that she seems to like Zack and she thirsts for, demands respect and attention.

Black Nationalism and racial conflict: the straw men of racial separatism.

The imbalance in fleshing out Nikki's character compared to Zack's is just the start of the lopsided characterizations in *Zebrahead*. As with *Jungle Fever* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, reactions to the relationship are at least as important as the portrayal of

the relationship itself. Whereas *Jungle Fever* portrayed virulent opposition to the romance from a variety of sources including both characters' friends and family, *Zebrahead* represents Black contributions to racial conflict as being much more serious than White.

As a result, *Zebrahead* presents a one-sided depiction of the causes and consequences of racial conflict. In this film, White opposition is subtle prejudice, muted and open to different interpretation, while overt opposition comes from Blacks. Black characters discuss their racial beliefs openly in *Zebrahead*, and much of this discussion involves Black students talking about why they disapprove of Nikki being with Zack. Black Nationalist ideology and Afrocentrism in particular are showcased prominently in *Zebrahead*, almost exclusively in a destructive light.

The primary proponents of separatist ideas are marginalized, flawed characters who are the cause of a great deal of the conflict in the film. These include Black parents who are irresponsible and bitter and whose advice seems to flow from personal disappointment. The second major source of opposition to the relationship is a clique of Afrocentric young men. The lead figure in this group is presented as a Dashiki-wearing fraud, the son of Black professionals who lives in the wealthiest, Whitest part of town. He wears his Afrocentrism like a badge and uses it as a bludgeon against Whites, especially Zack. Consider the cafeteria scene, which helps to establish Zack's musical and cultural credentials. Zack is at the center of the frame, spinning records, crossing musical boundaries, mixing Puccini with rap. All kinds of students, White, Black, Asian, and Hispanic are dancing, bobbing heads to the music in appreciation. But Mr. Afrocentrism (unnamed despite his many speaking scenes) is unmoved. He complains about Zack stealing Black people's music. When Dee says Zack is the best DJ around, he replies, "Even if he is he ain't. Only brothers can be. Every music innovation made by African and every one stolen." He repeats one refrain, "just leave it alone."

This Afrocentric young Black man becomes the embodiment of separatist beliefs and nothing else. Because he is strident and hypocritical in his class based criticism, this lack of credibility is transferred to the belief system, as if the audience needed any further encouragement to side with Zack. But at the same time, he and the other Blacks who express similar feelings are so relentless, so unavoidable that they can not be truly marginalized and dismissed.

White opposition to the interracial relationship is more subtle. Zack's White friends playfully question him about what it's like being with a Black girl. They treat Nikki as an object of sexual curiosity. In one scene, a small group of these young men take Zack aside at a party to ask him about his sexual relationship with Nikki. Of course Nikki overhears this and feels she is being disrespected. Although there is definite sexual objectification here, it is depicted as crude but not intentionally malicious. There are similar, almost parallel scenes in which Nikki's Black girlfriends ask her what it's like to be with Zack. However, whereas Nikki's overreaction to the boys' dialogue causes an ultimately tragic rift in the relationship, Zack is never given the opportunity to react to the girls' conversation about him. This adds to the emphasis on the role of Black sensitivity to offense as a catalyst for racial strife. This is one subtle way in which the Black community is shown to be the primary, almost exclusive source of racial tension in this film.

The writer-director makes this lopsided opposition even more dramatic in the film's climax. Trying to heal their rift, Zack invites Nikki to go skating. Cousin Dee and other friends are there as well. Unfortunately so is "Nut". For most of the film, Nut is a shadowy and volatile outcast, but when Nikki breaks up with Zack, somehow he briefly becomes a romantic rival for her affection. Feeling ignored by Zack and seeking attention, Nikki spends the afternoon with a group of Black kids in the neighborhood but eventually ends up alone with Nut. From what the audience is shown, these few moments of kindness may be the

best times he's ever had. So, when Nikki rejects him for Zack, Nut becomes enraged. Consumed with sexual and racial jealousy, he brings a gun to the skating rink and tries to command Nikki's attention. When that is not forthcoming, and Zack tries to intervene, he settles for revenge, aiming for Zack, but accidentally shooting and killing Zack's best friend Dee instead. This tragic denouement is the most serious manifestation of the racial violence that is typical of the genre. The ultimate act of violence is the apotheosis of all the different costs paid for transgressing racial borders.

There's a great deal of meaning packed into this series of events. The initial event, the breakup, caused by Black overreaction to perceived disrespect (the familiar racial slight of a White friend), becomes complicated by Nikki's flirtation with a volatile, destructive element in her community (Nut), and eventually propels an act of violence that reverberates way beyond them, destroying the best part of her world (her cousin). The fact that Dee is the most fully realized Black character in the film-- he is high-achieving, outgoing, generous and overtly integrationist—makes the shooting particularly meaningful, while encouraging its reading as an act of Black on Black violence at its most self-destructive.

Further underscoring the way these events unfold for the audience, multiple elements of the separatist racial frame are manifest in *Zebrahead's* final scenes: explicit separatist ideology from multiple characters, public disapproval in the form of racist graffiti, social ostracism and shunning of the interracial couple by their peers, and even another incident of racial violence. Even in the face of such a tragic loss, the more strident, Afrocentric Black students are unyielding in their racial judgments. One of the most outspoken critics, who earlier labeled Zack a thief of Black culture, now declares, "Dee got killed because he was an Uncle Tom and Nikki here is just another white man's whore."

Despite a series of events that quieted the school, these young, mostly Black, men are intransigent. The privileged, dashiki-wearing fraud becomes a Black Nationalist straw

man. Zack, ever idealistic, maintains that Dee got killed because he was his friend. And they were “like this. Black and White. Like this.” As he speaks, Zack’s two hands gesture togetherness. Nonetheless, the Afrocentric student counters, “Truth is, the white devil didn’t have Dee’s back.” Finally, an Italian classmate says “the truth is niggers killing niggers.”

The film ends with this tableau, each character stuck in these tightly drawn boxes: Dee a dead Uncle Tom, Nikki an outcast “White man’s whore” and Zack an unwitting, misguided liberal transgressor admonished by a school administrator to “stick with your tribe.” In the final shot, Zack is still reaching out. He follows Nikki into the hall and they embrace in their grief, while the Afrocentric Black student tumbles through the hallway locked in a fight with the Italian. The series of violent events, reactions, and unforgiving racial discourse call into question whether multiracial coexistence can ever be peaceful. No solutions are suggested in *Zebrahead*’s confrontational, conflict-driven framing of this interracial relationship. In the hands of this creative team, the Black separatist tale is one of self-destruction. At each turn, Black extremism either causes or worsens racial division while the White hero of the piece valiantly tries to no avail to make peace.

The Multicultural Frame: A New Idealism?

In contrast to the pessimistic separatist portrayals of movies like *Jungle Fever* and *Zebrahead*, films that manifest the multicultural frame convey an updated, more pluralist version of essentially optimistic integrationist philosophy. Whereas in the former the Black character becomes raceless, stripped of all cultural signifiers to fit into White society, in this type of film, a character adapts to another culture without losing her identity. In *Save the Last Dance*, for example, a movie that exemplifies the multicultural frame, a teenage ballet dancer loses her mother and must move from the suburbs where she grew up to downtown Chicago to live with her bohemian father, whom she has not seen for a long time. Although

it's a culture shock, Sara quickly gets used to her new life and finds love with one of the top students in the school. Along the way, she gets a hip-hop fashion, attitude, and dance makeover to fit in her new setting. Although this transformation begins with a simple attempt to fit in, Sara's cultural education deepens over time. Eventually it enables her to regain the creativity she lost when her mother died. She becomes a more outgoing, confident person and a more versatile dancer. This and her boyfriend's encouragement help her succeed in her dream of gaining admission to Julliard.

The multicultural frame is more nuanced in its presentation of social reality than the integrationist frame. The Black characters in the multicultural frame are not totally idealized, presented as superior in order to humanize them. Instead, the multicultural frame *assumes* an innate intellectual and moral, if not yet economic, equality among Blacks and Whites. Similarly, in these films, racial comity is not an uncertain "dream", but something that is emerging. Characters who don't get onboard with this racial vision are the ones who are ostracized and portrayed negatively. They are the unhappy outsiders and outliers, and their perspective is raised mainly so that it can be rejected.

Black culture is a prominent feature of these films. The soundtrack is dominated by Hip Hop or a fluid blend of Hip Hop and Rock. Cultural assimilation takes on a very different flavor here as it is the White characters that are expected to assimilate a bit of Black culture to be cool. In the case of *Save the Last Dance*, Sara's immersion in Black music and urban fashion is a positive signifier of personal growth and embrace of racial egalitarianism. Put another way, Sara can't be down with her new friends without being down with their culture. While *Save the Last Dance* raises the issue of Black hostility to interracial relationships, by the end, there is widespread acceptance that the two characters belong together.

In a variety of distinctive features, the multicultural film presents itself as something new within the genre of interracial romance. While it upholds many of the representational

practices of the post-integration unlikely couple interracial drama: the absent parent, reifying cultural differences, resistance from friends and family, and greater focus on black resistance as a key barrier to racial reconciliation, other traditional features such as racial violence are absent. Plus, it also confronts aspects of race previous films have ignored.

Something New: or When Kenya Met Brian

In 2006, *Something New* (Allain) presented a multicultural version of the interracial romance with an African American woman as the central romantic protagonist. *Something New* earned \$11 million in domestic box office, making it the 7th highest grossing romantic comedy of 2006. The movie's portrayal of the interracial romance from a Black woman's perspective and the fact that the director, producer and one of the writers were all women of African heritage helped the film attract attention in the popular press, which outweighed its modest box office. The film has also continued to attract a wider audience through DVD home rentals and sales. It was one of the most popular films with the Black community that year and enjoyed a wide release showing on 1,265 theaters at its peak.

Something New tells the story of how Kenya, a striving, status-conscious upper middle class African American former debutante, met and fell in love with Brian, an attractive, decidedly more laidback landscape architect. The two are introduced through a mutual contact, Kenya's friend and coworker who does not think to mention the difference in race. Brian becomes Kenya's "something new," the embodiment of a promise made with her closest friends to let loose and "let flow" in the New Year.

Four pivotal scenes do much to shape the film's overall multicultural frame—the falling in love montage, the breakup, the wedding, and Kenya's breakdown/epiphany at a debutante ball. In addition to cultural differences, the film depicts relationship tensions resulting from differences in values and class. After a breakup, the protagonist decides that

love is more important than any of these distinctions and the film ends with a big, joyous, multicultural wedding.



Photo 4.9 No love at first sight for Kenya and Brian

The falling in love montage comes first and is important because it establishes the worthiness of the connection between the two principals and introduces the idea that their differences are complementary rather than contradictory. Once Kenya and Brian begin to date, the film shows her beginning to flourish in several ways. Like the garden Brian brings back to life, Kenya's spiritual, sensual side has long been dormant, overshadowed by the monochrome, conservative uniform she adopts to be taken seriously. Her house is draped in beige; her body is covered in severe gray and black; and her features are slightly overshadowed by a long, straight hair weave.

When she begins to date Brian, however, Kenya cuts her hair, lets Brian paint her nails bright red, and together, they coat the walls in lavender. They also laugh, cook dinner and make love. Kenya's personal transformation and her garden's transformation take place in parallel over the montage of shots and the audience is encouraged to see the

parallels between them. That Brian has been good for her, has helped her grow, is visually represented by her blossoming, relaxed, more sensual beauty and manifest in the oasis he has created in her backyard.



Photo 4.10 Love blooms amidst nature in *Something New* (2006)



Photo 4.11 Kenya's garden refuge

This sequence is interrupted, however, by the reintroduction of racial concerns, which are a signature element in the multicultural movie. The pivotal breakup scene is set in motion by Kenya's desire to vent to Brian about the problems she's having at work--issues she feels are grounded in her clients' discomfort with her race. Although he has listened in the past, Kenya's recitation of her problems on that particular evening becomes the center of a public argument in which Brian ultimately suggests that he might not be what Kenya wants. It's an interesting moment for several reasons. As presented, the conflict is nuanced and open to interpretation. When Kenya complains about institutionalized racism, Brian counters with reminders about her relative privilege, elite education and income. It's a fairly realistic although brief encapsulation of the differences in how Whites and Blacks view the treatment and position of African Americans in contemporary society. As such, this part of the movie really is something new in that it attempts to acknowledge broader issues that impact interracial couples beyond individual prejudice and approval or disapproval.



Photo 4.12 *Something New*: A Brother Objects

Nonetheless, despite egalitarian intentions, some of the filmmakers' creative choices detract from their ostensibly liberal representation. The setting for the break-up scene is a Whole Foods-like market in which almost all the customers appear to be members of minority groups. This makes an interesting backdrop as Kenya complains that she spends all day always being the only Black person in the room. Here, though, it's clear that in their downtime Brian is the one in that position. So even though her assertions refer to her work environment, in this setting they seem out of place. The specific language they put in her mouth also seems awkward for who she is. Kenya talks about her office as "the plantation;" she refers to her colleagues as "the White boys" and complains of the "Black Tax," the idea that Blacks always need to be twice as good in order to be accepted as equal. When Kenya invokes a bit of this language in the grocery store to complain about her treatment by a White client, Brian reacts negatively, saying he wants to just put all that on hold for the night. It's highly racialized language from someone so privileged, Brian suggests.

In light of the film's omission of any unambiguous evidence of racialized treatment or behavior, the multiracial setting and Kenya's language of racial victimization combine to make her a less than credible and sympathetic figure. As a result, *Something New* fails in its attempt to talk more realistically about contemporary racial issues. If there are legitimate broader racial issues that mixed race couples still face, the audience will not find a clear articulation of them in this film.

Along with the scenes showing us how Brian and Kenya fall in and almost out of love, the wedding scene is important because it provides a definitive happy ending and symbolically it affirms the relationship's legitimacy. As in the falling in love montage, the meaning of the wedding is conveyed through culturally resonant visual choices like hair, dress and makeup, and through music, rather than dialogue. Kenya's dress is flowing and loose. She wears an African inspired multilayered necklace and her hair is loose, short and

natural looking. Brian is outfitted in an open collared shirt, no tie or jacket. The setting is the back yard garden and the guests are diverse. The ceremony's distinctly modern, even bohemian aesthetic suggests a successful merging of families and cultures.

The carefully crafted wedding sequence contributes a great deal to the supportive bent of the interracial narrative, but the film's highpoint is arguably in its penultimate scene. Here, the idea of multiculturalism and breaking free of old ideas and the social control that comes with parental authority all come to a head. The setting is an African American debutante ball with her family. During the breakup with Brian, Kenya has been miserable. Though usually reserved, at this pivotal event, Kenya is visibly drunk and audibly miserable. We learn that the event, which Kenya had participated in as a privileged young woman, is an important tradition for the African American elite. It is also a social event, which Kenya's mother, a prominent doctor's wife and leader in the African American community, has been anticipating and values.

This scene recalls an earlier one which the audience experienced second hand, when it was recounted to Brian. The story of those two debutante events in Kenya's life-- one past, one present, one retold, the other shown on screen-- provides an important narrative contrast. As told to her boyfriend and shown in scrapbook pictures, the first debutante ball was a lovely experience. Kenya is smiling and serene in her photos. At 17, her mother had chosen her escort, a young man from a similar, suitably prominent African American family.

Nearly twenty years later, however, the picture is far from serene. A professional woman in her thirties, Kenya is no longer content to date the escort her mother would choose for her, her ideal Black Man, but she has also not yet fully broken away from her mother's authority. So she attends alone. Displacing her anger, she lashes out, loudly slurring comments to the young women under her breath -- "Don't believe the hype" -- rather

than speaking up and taking control of her own life. Eventually, she can not hold together the war between her two selves-- between the big little girl still trying to tow the line with what's expected of her and the grown woman whose heart wants what it wants—so she heads to the bathroom for a breakdown.

Kenya's emotional public collapse provides the turning point that facilitates the positive romantic resolution, leading her back to the White boyfriend she previously rejected for not understanding her struggles. This resolution of course supports the idea that cultural differences can be overcome. That Kenya leaves this event and brings Brian back with her is symbolic of her two worlds finally coming together in a way which they had not throughout the rest of the film.

Moreover, the way her dramatic turnabout occurs also has interesting implications. The underlying value placed on unity, the idea that what unites us as people is stronger than what divides us, is explicitly voiced by two of her closest friends prior to this scene. Through their voices, racially egalitarian values are forcefully and credibly endorsed. But it takes Kenya's father to communicate this message in a way that makes her spring into action:

I know love when I see it. Plus I talked to him. He's a good guy....the point is, love is an adventure, Kenya. It's not a decision you make for others. It's a decision you make from the heart. Anyway the boy's just White. He ain't a Martian. I mean folks carry on like we're some kind of pure race that shouldn't be diluted. But look at us, all of us in this country. Black, white, brown, yellow. We're all mixed up. Mutts, all of us. Nothing pure about us. (Allain, 2006)

So, while her mother's admonishments and overbearing authority inspires a breakdown, it's Kenya's father who gives her permission and inspiration to be with Brian. This scene ironically acts out traditional ideas of patriarchal authority to enable the heroine to make a break with social convention. Kenya's father must breach the feminine sphere of

the women's bathroom where she has gone to cry. Although it takes place in a hotel bathroom and is delivered to his daughter rather than the whole family, the scene is reminiscent of the idealistic speech made by Matt Drayton in the similar moment in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Like patriarch Matthew Drayton, this successful, loving father privileges love over social convention and explicitly invokes egalitarian ideals. Despite the changing times and Kenya's relatively advanced age, this fatherly opinion also seems to supersede everyone else's even if he is not overtly imbued with veto power over his daughter's love life. Like Matt Drayton, his fairness and wisdom saves the day.

That the 2006 film recreates a pattern from the 1967 film is particularly interesting in view of the fact the 1967 film's even older, conventional influences. Spencer Tracy's Matt Drayton in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* has sometimes been compared to his character in *Father of the Bride* (1950), another film about a father coping with his daughter's new relationship, one that hinges even more on the uneasy relinquishment of patriarchal authority. The contemporary scene is even labeled "Daddy knows best" on the DVD, openly inviting parallels with earlier pop cultural expressions of paternal influence. One of the critiques of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is that it recreates strict gender hierarchy to compensate for disturbing racial hierarchy, so it's notable that rituals of male rescue and paternal permission are again played out in this modern film.

The Re-education of Kenya: Characterization and Development

Kenya, like most romantic comedy protagonists, is flawed in ways that seem to preclude happiness. Like her status-conscious mother, Kenya cares deeply about what other people think of her. This is evident from the early scene in which she is so uncomfortable meeting a White man in a predominantly Black neighborhood. Kenya overcompensates for her White date by making it comically clear that she is "down" with

African Americans, gesturing to every Black person in the Magic Johnson Starbucks individually and calling them brother and sister even as they barely notice her walk past.

Kenya's self-consciousness and conformity were stifling and this manifest in a number of ways we've already discussed. The romance becomes a way for her to break out of the mold. That Kenya blossoms in Brian's love, that she is more natural, more herself, is manifest in a myriad of stylistic details. These changes strike Kenya's mother as somehow too "bohemian"—the home redecoration reminds her of a bordello and she misses the weave, which was Kenya's "crowning glory"—but they also make Kenya very happy. Because of Brian's role in this transformation and other choices, Childs contends that in this film "the ideas and images of White masculinity are remarkably similar to mainstream films produced by Whites" (2009, p. 86). In sum, Childs observes:

the white man is still idealized in this movie as not only handsome but also as a rejuvenating force who enables Kenya to find out who she really is and in many ways to get more in touch with loving herself as a Black woman, as exemplified by the hair experience. (2009, p. 86)

In addition to recreating White male privilege, Childs also observes that the film locates opposition to the couple mainly in Black families and communities. She's right. It's a prominent pattern that is apparent in a variety of interracial films, despite the fact that opposition to interracial marriage has consistently been measured as being lower in the Black community than among Whites (Carroll, 2007). This enduring representational strategy seems designed to create a sense of equivalence of racial grievance or simply to appeal to White audiences. In the end, Childs believes the film's problematic approach overshadows what she sees as a positive development, the fact that the film is made "from a black woman's perspective" (2009, p. 83).

In my estimation, however, there are important differences, between *Something New* and previous interracial romantic depictions. The role of Kenya is an important one and far more fully realized than most film roles for African American women. Apart from the film's imbalanced and unrealistic rendering of opposition to interracial dating, the film's most substantial faults stem more from gender biases than racial ones and are consistent with the conventions of its genre, the romantic comedy. Unlike romantic comedies in which the heroine undergoes personal transformation through retail therapy, there is no shopping and dressing montage of makeover scenes in *Something New*. Nonetheless, Kenya's personal journey of growth begins with her deciding to date Brian and it develops as she increasingly begins to defy expectations in her outward presentation. This growth peaks when Kenya finally brings Brian into her world at the ball, but only after she gains permission from her father, who of course knows best. Recent all-Black romances like *Meet the Browns* and *Diary of Mad Black Woman* and *Not Easily Broken* depict their Black male leads in even more reverent, idealized manner than Brian is portrayed. Predominantly, it is the gender driven assumptions and practices of this format, its insistence that career women are stunted and need men to rescue them, which most need to be confronted. As a result, *Something New* is a contemporary but classically executed film that conveys racially egalitarian (but certainly not feminist) social criticism.

Summary and Discussion

On the whole, the trajectory in these films of interracial romance seems to be moving away from two extremes--on the one hand, the idealized but culturally sanitized 1960s vision of integration and on the other the philosophy of Black solidarity through separatism that emerged with the Black Power movement and reasserted itself most fully in the 1990s with films such as *Jungle Fever*, *O* and *Zebrahead*. In place of these philosophies, the films of

the 2000s present a more inclusive but ambivalent vision of racial tensions still being worked out and a future which is far from certain. Rather than simply abandoning the racially charged imagery of the past, the ambivalent film grapples with it, diffusing the worst, most offensive views by confronting them. At the same time, an alternative multicultural narrative frame has emerged. This new multicultural frame endorses the viability of interracial relationships and racial comity more confidently through the celebration of cultural exchange and exploration of racial difference and institutional barriers or simply through more authentically rendered cultural diversity (as opposed to colorblind assimilation in which minorities are subsumed into the majority through conformity).⁶³

We can not assume, however, that what seems to be the preferred reading and embedded ideology of these films is what audiences take away from them. For this reason, exploring the text is only one component of the present study, which also emphasizes the role of the audience in communication. The remaining chapters explore the representation of interracial couples in American film from the audiences' perspectives.

⁶³ Some critics view the proliferation of the multicultural narratives in Hollywood film in a less positive light, arguing that it is a symptom of Hollywood's unwillingness to deal realistically with race. Others point to the profit motive as a determining factor since there is some evidence that movie audiences are more likely to go to movies that feature actors of their own racial group.

PART 3: AUDIENCE STUDY

In December 1998, DNA tests identified Thomas Jefferson as the father of at least one child with his Black slave woman Sally Hemmings.... There were many who saw the decision as symbolic not just of a past that the USA had erased, but a future towards which it might tend. For Lucian Truscott IV, a White Jeffersonian descendant who supports the Hemmings's claim, the finding affirmed that this country 'is a family not only in democratic theory, but in blood'. – Nicola Evans (2007, p. 223)

Chapter 5: Exploring the Interracial Divide among Generation Next⁶⁴

The audience study used semi-structured focus group discussions to investigate how young women of different cultural backgrounds interpret ideologically charged interracial depictions and also the relationship between viewing these depictions and women's discourse regarding race relations and interracial intimacy. In this chapter I combine information from the first part of the focus group discussions with the background data from the written questionnaires to understand participants' personal standpoints and race-related predispositions-- their attitudes about race and interracial relationships prior to viewing as well as their personal experience with these issues.

To contextualize the audience responses to interracial depictions, this chapter explores four main questions. First, what socioeconomic standpoints did the participants bring to the study--what were their socio economic backgrounds? Second, what types of media do these participants regularly consume, and what prior exposure did they have to interracial romantic depictions in entertainment television and film? Third, what were the participants' attitudes toward race and interracial relationships prior to viewing the films? Are these young participants divided as their elders were about racial issues, or were these members of the Millennial Generation colorblind as so many have said?⁶⁵ What were the universal themes and key differences in attitudes about interracial relationships and race

⁶⁴ According to the Pew Research Center, the Millennial generation includes people born between 1981 and 2000. Members may also be described as GenYers or Gen Nexters (Keeter & Taylor, 2009). The terms are used interchangeably here.

⁶⁵ See "The Root: Is Generation Y Colorblind?" at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/discussion/2008/07/18/DI2008071801665.html>)

relations among the Black versus White participants? Finally, how did the participants' attitudes compare to those delineated in the race and public opinion literature review (Childs, 2005; Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Kinder & Sanders, 1996)?

Who are these people?

Fifty participants took part in six focus groups during November and December of 2007. All were undergraduates at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where the study was conducted. These participants were recruited as part of a purposive sample based on their fit with the study objectives. For the reasons detailed earlier-- most important, because my research interest is feminist in nature, and because women (especially young Black and young White women) have most often been subjects implicated in, but not necessarily heard from in debates about race and sexuality-- I wanted this study to focus on young African American and White women's perspectives. So the study was restricted based on age, race, and gender. In all, 27 participants identified as African American women and 23 identified as White. All were between the ages of 18 and 22.

The women enrolled in the study through the School of Journalism and Mass Communication's research pool and student organizations at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Most participants (all of the White participants and approximately half of the Black students) were journalism or mass communication majors. The remaining women were members or friends of members of the Black Student Union and the Campus Y. Since, as is customary in qualitative research, this study used a convenience rather than a random sample, and participants were screened to fit the criteria I was interested in, I can not assume that the participants' attitudes would reflect national attitudes found in surveys. So, the information in this chapter on participants' socio economic background, media

consumption patterns and views on race is essential background for the response chapters that follow.

Nonetheless, the racial attitudes and the evolving racial climate in the American public overall were an important part of the context of the study. As we saw earlier, a wide range of political communication and public opinion scholarship shows that majority thinking about race in the United States has been transformed in the past sixty years, moving significantly towards greater equality and understanding between the races. Nonetheless, our preference for self-segregating within racial group endures in our actions—in where we live, where we worship, and in whom we marry. In 2008, an overwhelming majority of all married couples in the United States (93%) were of the same self-identified racial category, and marriages between Blacks and Whites account for substantially less than 1% of total marriages (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008a). According to the most recent Census figures available, among younger Americans, the rate of interracial unions and support for them has increased at a more rapid pace.

Moreover, in theory at least, approval of intermarriage is much more widespread than those numbers indicate. The most up to date polling indicates 77% of Americans overall approve of Blacks and Whites marrying, with Blacks and Hispanics more likely to say they approve than Whites at a rate of 85% and 87% respectively compared with 75% for Whites. In addition, younger Americans are more likely to say they approve. Despite important changes in racial attitudes, as Kinder and Sanders, Entman and Rojecki, and Childs show, the journey towards racial comity and common ground is not yet fully made. This lesson becomes even clearer examining the discussion of the young women in this study.

Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Focus Groups

As discussed earlier, both socioeconomic background and media consumption patterns are considered key ingredients that help shape (but not necessarily determine) individuals' predispositions about race and the standpoint that they bring to the reception of media products. The demographic characteristics and media use of the different participant groups are summarized in Table 5.1. The data are organized by race and the movie each group watched.

Table 5.1

Focus Group Profiles

Group Race and Movie viewed	Total (n)	Median Age	Parents' Education – Highest level	Median Annual Family Income '000	Use Three or more media %	Median # of media used	Recall: Inter-racial Film %	Recall: Inter-racial TV %	Avg #. Depictions Recalled
White – <i>Something New</i>	12	20	College Grad	\$100 to \$149.9	100	4	92	100	3
White – <i>Zebrahead</i>	11	20	College Grad	\$100 to \$149.9	100	5	100	73	3
Black – <i>Something New</i>	13	19	College Grad	\$25 to 49.9/ \$50 to \$74.9	85	3	100	77	4
Black - <i>Zebrahead</i>	14	20	Some college	\$25 to 49.9	79	3	100	86	6
All groups	50	20	College Grad	\$25 to 49.9/ \$50 to \$74.9	90	4	98%	84%	4

Unlike socioeconomic class, the geographic region in which participants were raised was not something participants were asked about. Nonetheless, regional differences emerged as a topic of conversation and an element that many women described as a factor in how they view race. As indicated by the information volunteered during the discussions, however, the vast majority of the women who took part in this study, like the majority of UNC students, were North Carolinians. According to data that the university makes publicly available, 82 % of UNC-Chapel Hill students hail from the state of North Carolina; 16% are from other states and 2% are international ("The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill College Portrait," 2009). As a point of comparison in terms of how the participant profile might compare to the college as a whole, the average age of a UNC student (20) -- another key statistic contained in the College Portrait—was also consistent with the focus group profile.

Given the importance of regional identity, in the absence of individual level data, it's helpful to look at the general characteristics of the state in which the most of the participants were raised. One defining characteristic is North Carolina's traditional religious makeup. In 2007, 88% of residents described themselves as religious, and 84% self-identified as Christian ("U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, "). Looking specifically at race, North Carolinians are less likely to identify as multiracial, which may be an indicator that there is still less close racial integration there than in other states. Only 1.3% of the North Carolina residents identified themselves as mixed race in the last Census, compared with 2.0% of Americans nationwide (United States. Bureau of the Census., 2003).

Still, while the South has traditionally been more socially and politically conservative than the rest of the country, North Carolina is also in the upper south, however. Looking at party identification as an indicator of ideology, it is among the most liberal and Democratic leaning states in the South according to Gallup (Jeffrey Jones, 2008). In fact, since 2002,

North Carolina has been classified as either competitive, in terms of party identification or leaning Democratic (Jeffrey Jones, 2007). North Carolina also returned more Democratic representatives in Congress than Republican ones. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that the North Carolina Democratic party is distinct from the national party, and party identification seems to be more of a factor in state and local elections. Indeed, when the focus groups were conducted in November 2007, the state had a two-term Democratic governor but had not voted for a Democrat for President since Jimmy Carter in 1976.

North Carolina is also a state in flux. Its growing population has been transformed in part by large in migration from the North and immigrants from other countries. According to the 2000 census, only 63% of North Carolina residents were born in the state (United States. Bureau of the Census., 2003). It is also home to the Research Triangle and major national banking firms. According to the Institute for Southern Studies, it is the South's growing urbanism that is making a difference in its resurgent Democratic party affiliation and voting ("Election 2008: How did Obama win NC?,"). For example, more than 300 thousand of the four hundred thousand additional votes that Barack Obama needed to win in comparison to John Kerry in order to prevail in North Carolina were picked up in urban areas. In fact, those election results were just one signal that whether a participant was a rural district or one of the state's major metropolitan areas was likely as important to their regional identity as well as whether or not they were from North Carolina. Accordingly, the comments offered by individual participants were probably the best indicator of regional influence.

White Participant Groups

In addition to participating in discussions, participants filled out brief questionnaires that provide some insight into their prior media use, prior exposure to interracial relationships and family socioeconomic background. Overall these questionnaires revealed

most White participants were heavy consumers of media who had been raised in upper income families by parents who had college degrees. While they had limited exposure to interracial relationships in their real life social networks, almost all had watched at least one movie or television show that depicted an interracial couple.

In order to get a sense of the participants' socioeconomic class, the questionnaire asked for their best estimate of annual family income and their parents' highest level of educational attainment. Almost all participants reported that their parents were college graduates. Just over half the White participants reported that their parents also held graduate degrees. A majority of participants estimated that their family income exceeded \$100,000 per year, with a few estimating family incomes in excess of \$200,000. Only one participant reported income which fell below the middle income range. The remaining attendees estimated their family income in the middle range, from \$50 to \$75 thousand per year. It's important to note that these are only self reported estimates, but they are indicative of the participants' perceived sense of their economic background.⁶⁶ Four students declined to answer or indicated that they did not know their family income.

All White participants reported that they used at least three or more media sources "regularly", which was defined as at least once a week on the questionnaire. They reported using the Internet, television and newspapers most frequently but many also used magazines and radio often as well. Broadcast networks were most commonly cited television outlets.

Looking more narrowly, group one, which viewed the movie *Something New*, was comprised of twelve journalism students aged 19 to 21. The median age in the group was 20. The group was fairly homogenous with regard to family income, education, and media

⁶⁶ Plus, as college students they would be required to have some knowledge of their parents' financial resources—either to file financial aid applications or having tuition and expenses paid by their family, they would understand that meant they had incomes in the higher range.

consumption. Median family income in this group was \$100 to \$149.9 thousand annually, and 92% of these participants had at least one parent who had graduated from college.

As in the sample as a whole, more women in the White group that watched *Something New* regularly watched broadcast television than cable. Whereas just 17% of participants in group one said they routinely watch cable television, all of them indicated that they watch broadcast networks on a regular basis. Everyone in this group also had prior exposure to media depictions of interracial couples. The television program *Grey's Anatomy* was by far the media depiction most often mentioned, but almost all of the respondents had also seen *Save the Last Dance*. The latter is a high school drama produced by MTV films that is the highest grossing interracial romance to date, surpassing even *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

Group two shared similar characteristics. Again, all participants were White female journalism students aged 19 to 21 and a median age of 20. Most of the women also reported that their parents were college educated and had high incomes. The median age for this group was 20 and median family income estimated to be over \$100,000 annually. Again, the overwhelming majority of these participants (91%) had at least one parent who had graduated from college. Sixty-four percent had a parent who had earned a graduate degree.

The media habits of women in this group were also consistent with their counterparts in the *Something New* group. Broadcast television was the most often cited television source for these respondents, although the gap between cable and broadcast television was smaller in this group. All of the participants in group two mentioned broadcast networks that they routinely watch, whereas just 55% cited cable television networks they watch on a regular basis. All of these participants remembered seeing interracial relationships depicted in specific films, and a significant majority (73%) could also recall seeing interracial couples

in specific television programs. In terms of specific depictions, the movie *Save the Last Dance* was cited most frequently, although not as often as in the first focus group. The MTV reality program *I Love New York* was also mentioned by many participants.

Black Participant Groups

Although all of the participants were of the same age and attended the same university, African American focus groups participants differed slightly from their White counterparts in terms of socioeconomic status, college major and recall of previous exposure to interracial relationships in the media. As discussed earlier, because there were fewer African American students in the Journalism and Mass Communication pool, their groups contained fewer participants, five and six participants each, still in the appropriate range for focus group discussions. Additional African American groups were conducted in order to balance the initial numbers.

In all, two of the African American groups were comprised of Journalism and Mass Communication majors from the research pool, and two additional focus groups were conducted within two weeks of the original ones, drawing African American students from the wider university population. Half of the African American focus groups viewed *Something New* – one Journalism and Mass Communication group and one recruited from the broader student population. The other groups viewed *Zebrahead*; again, one group consisted of journalism and mass communication majors and one not. For the purposes of creating comparable group profiles, the characteristics of Black participants are described here in aggregate according to the movie they viewed.

Socioeconomically, there were noticeable disparities between the Black and White participants. Black participants tended to come from more working to middle class backgrounds whereas the White students' family backgrounds placed them closer to upper

middle class. In general, Black participants reported lower family incomes than White participants and that their parents had completed fewer years of school than White students.

Thirteen African American participants in all viewed *Something New*. As a group, they reported median annual family incomes of \$25 to \$49 thousand range with 80% reporting family income over \$25 thousand. Slightly less than one-third reported family incomes that exceeded \$50 thousand annually. Nine of these students (69%) also reported that at least one of their parents had graduated college, and the remaining four said that at least one parent had completed high school or vocational school.

The fourteen African American participants who saw *Zebrahead* shared a similar socioeconomic profile. Their median parental income was also in the \$25 to 49 thousand range. More than three-quarters of the participants who responded to the income question reported that their annual family income was over \$25 thousand and 40% estimated that it exceeded \$50 thousand. The remaining African American women who watched *Zebrahead* indicated they either didn't know their family income or declined to answer the question. In terms of educational attainment, these respondents were somewhat diverse. Among the African American participants who viewed *Zebrahead*, six (43%) had a parent who had graduated from college, six participants had a parent who had completed some college, and two had parents who had finished high school or vocational training.

Overall, the median family income range across all African American focus groups was \$25 to \$49.9 thousand per year, compared with reported median family incomes of \$100 to \$149.9 thousand for White participants. Across groups, there were similar disparities in what White and Black students reported about their parents' education. A small majority of Black participants (56%) reported that their parents had college degrees; a wider proportion reported their parents had completed at least "some college". By comparison, the

vast majority of White participants reported that their parents had college degrees (91%) and a small majority (52%) reported their parents held graduate degrees.

The media habits of the Black students were more comparable to those of the White participants. Like their White counterparts, the African American women who participated in the study reported heavy media consumption on their questionnaires. In the groups that watched *Something New*, 85% of participants used at least three forms of media on a regular basis. All used the internet and watch television regularly, and over three-quarters also read print newspapers on a regular basis.

Similarly, among the African American participants who watched *Zebrahead*, 79% used at least three forms of media on a regular basis. Again, all consistently use the internet and watch television at least once a week. In addition, a smaller majority of students in these groups read print newspapers on a regular basis (57%).

Overall, across groups, 80% of Black participants reported that they used three or more media sources on a regular basis (at least once a week), and all Black participants used at least two media sources regularly. In terms of specific media sources, like the participants of European descent, all African American students reported using the internet and watching television regularly. A strong majority (67%) also reported that they read print newspapers regularly. Broadcast networks were most commonly watched television outlets. Although still very high, the proportion of Black women who reported using three or more sources regularly was lower than the proportion of White participants. This may be due to the difference in academic majors—fewer African American women in the focus groups were journalism or mass communication majors and media use is a requirement for several classes and simply of greater interest to students in these majors.

Turning to their prior exposure to interracial depictions in the media, like Whites, most African American participants reported substantial exposure to interracial relationships

through the media. Compared to their White counterparts, however, Black respondents on average recalled a greater number of movies and TV shows depicting interracial couples. Whereas most White participants could only recall having seen interracial couples on highly popular current programs like *Grey's Anatomy*, Black students also cited more obscure programs including *Boy Meets World* and *Nip/Tuck*.

All of the Black participants in the *Something New* groups recalled seeing films depicting interracial couples, and 77% recalled seeing television programs that did so. As a group, these women recalled an average of four specific interracial depictions from film or television. Similarly, 100% of the Black women who watched *Zebrahead* remembered seeing previous film depictions of interracial couples and 86% remembered television programs that featured interracial couples. Overall, Black women in the *Zebrahead* focus groups cited an average of six examples of interracial couples that they remembered from film or television.

Part of this difference in reporting is due to exposure. Some of the film and television depictions of interracial couples were in programs like *Moesha* and *A Different World*, which featured predominantly African American casts and were far more popular with Black viewers than with Whites (Gay, 1998). With both commercial ratings and academic studies showing that Blacks and Whites regularly consume different media, this is to be expected (Brown & Pardun, 2004; Entman & Rojecki, 2001).⁶⁷ Many of the films and television shows cited by African Americans as examples of interracial content, however, were more broadly

⁶⁷ Recent ratings suggest that the gap between the media Blacks and Whites prefer may be narrowing, however. Nielsen media research reports that during the 2006-7 season African-Americans shared 6 of their Top-10 rated programs with the general public. Just 10 years ago by comparison, there were no such commonalities. They specifically cited *Moesha*, one of the programs the women in this study mentioned, as an all-black cast show that has disappeared from list of most popular programs among African Americans (Mindlin, 2007a).

popular mainstream fare like *the Real World* and *Ugly Betty* and popular films such as Robert De Niro's *A Bronx Tale* and *Hairspray*.

Since so many of these popular entertainment products were not necessarily aimed at Black audiences, however, the nature of the programs do not fully explain the greater number of interracial depictions recalled by these participants. Although participants were not asked to directly address their recall of these relationships, the focus group discussions did provide support for two possible explanations. It's possible that African American participants were also more interested in this race related subject matter and, as a result, have actually watched a greater number of movies depicting interracial relationships than White participants. Alternatively, these Black respondents may be more attuned to racial issues, pay greater attention to such depictions when they appear and therefore have better recall of them. Regardless of the reason, there was a slight disparity in recall according to race. Furthermore, the medium that the interracial depiction appeared in seemed to matter as well for these women. Despite television's greater accessibility as a medium, among the focus group participants, more women recalled depictions from film than television. In all, 98% of participants (all African American and almost all White participants) remembered interracial couples depicted in movies as opposed to 84% who remembered depictions in television.

Race, Generation and Participant Attitudes: "It's Complicated"

Understanding the participants' race, economic position, and patterns of media consumption helps to contextualize the personal standpoints that they bring to interracial depictions, but these factors alone do not necessarily dictate participants' racial attitudes, and the latter are most central to this study.

Recent public opinion polls reveal significant generational differences with regard to racial attitudes. Younger Americans are much more likely to feel comfortable with Black leadership (including voting for President Obama) and to approve of and engage in interracial relationships.⁶⁸ Despite real generational change, however, these focus group participants expressed the entrenched ambivalence about race that Entman and Rojecki diagnosed as prevalent the general public (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Both White and Black students expressed strong doubts and fears about the other. Both Black and White students voiced strong misgivings and feelings of resentment. Within these groups at least the notion of a color blind generation no longer divided by race was laid bare.

Although there was some consistency in the participants' views on the state of race relations across the different groups, the participants' personal experience with and reactions to race were well differentiated along racial lines. In the focus groups participants were asked to talk not just in the abstract about race, but also to describe the role that race played in their own lives, to react to the fictional characters' situation in the interracial relationships, and to contemplate how they would act if placed in similar situations. As a result, over the course of the discussion, the women sketched what amounted to fairly robust portraits of their relationship to and strategies for dealing with issues of race. I would argue that the three distinct strategies for dealing with race emerged from this process: *containment*, in which one resists, denies and hopefully ultimately tries to transcend race, limiting its influence in one's life; *qualification*, emphasizing the other factors at work in their social worlds that impact the role of race; and *concession*, allowing that race is a source of significant ongoing difficulty, even personal struggle in American life.

⁶⁸ See Gallup polls on race and the 2008 presidential election: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/111817/Americans-See-Obama-Election-Race-Relations-Milestone.aspx> and on attitudes towards intermarriage here <http://www.gallup.com/video/28420/Race-Marriage.aspx> .

Furthermore, as illustrated in Table 5.2, I identified three dimensions of respondents' relationship with race. The first two address the importance that race plays in someone's personal life, both in terms of frequency with which one thinks about race and the magnitude or extent to which the respondent feels personally impacted by race. The latter dimension, personal impact comprises both one's prospects and one's behavior, whether personal behavior is dictated in some way by race, for example censoring the things one says in mixed company or feeling that one has to present a certain image in mixed company. Descriptions of the prevalence of thinking about and dealing with racial issues in the respondents' lives range from "never" or not at all to daily, constantly. Finally, the typology concerns the individual's perception and characterization of the current state of race relations. Perceptions ranged from no progress or change to a great deal of progress.

Table 5.2

Participants' Relationship with Race: Three Distinct Approaches

Strategy	Description	Dimension 1: Frequency of Thinking about Race	Dimension 2: Felt Impact of Race on Prospects & Behavior	Dimension 3: Perception of race relations
<i>Containment</i>	Resisting, denying and ultimately believing that one has transcended race, or at least allowing little influence in one's life. Whites more likely to take this approach.	Never or Rarely	Minimal Although someone may feel self conscious about race in mixed company, these occasions are rare and the felt impact is low.	Things are different now. Racial struggles are mostly in the past. Feeling race matters little in modern life.
<i>Complication</i>	<i>Qualifying the importance of race</i> by emphasizing other factors at work in their social worlds that impact the role of race. Both Whites and Blacks.	Sometimes, possibly depending on news, media.	Moderate influence in personal life. Other factors may have more influence such as class and gender, being a woman.	Progress has been made in some areas, but not others.
<i>Concession</i>	Allowing that race is a source of significant ongoing difficulty, conflict and personal struggle in their own lives and in society. Blacks more likely to describe this.	From almost every day to even "constantly"	Significant impact in life. Self consciousness. Racial composition of social group changes behavior.	No progress or change. Or at least not nearly enough. Blacks are perceived as occupying liminal status.

Looking at these factors in combination and connecting these dimensions to our three personal stances towards race, someone who primarily employs a strategy of containment would be more likely to describe race as having little impact in their lives, as something they rarely or never think about, and to report a generally positive view of race relations. Conversely, someone who *struggles* with race feels: that race occupies a

prominent place in her life, and that it is frequently or constantly on her mind. Accordingly, someone who struggles with race is generally more pessimistic about the pace of change in the United States. Between these extremes, someone who *qualifies* race sees race as just one of many factors in their lives, a variable that is complicated by other factors such as gender and class. Someone who qualifies race also thinks about race more occasionally rather than constantly and feels that significant progress has been made but much more advancement still needs to be seen. They are ambivalent in outlook, but feel only moderately constrained by race in their own lives.

These categories correspond to ways scholars have studied race in the past and the way pollsters often survey the public about race, but were primarily derived organically from the self-directed discussion about race in the early parts of the focus groups. Ultimately, there was a substantial amount of fluidity between these categories. One speaker may employ more than one stance or be moved from one to another given the circumstances, as I observed in response to the racial depictions viewed in the focus groups. All three strategies were used to some extent in both Black and White focus groups, but there were significant differences in the perceived magnitude of race in the participants' lives.

As a result, only one perspective on race was invoked with uniform emphasis among both groups. White and Black women were united in their belief and discussion of the variety of other social factors that qualify, complicate or intersect the influence of race in America—age/generation and geography especially but also gender and class. Surprisingly, Black and White speakers employed this discursive approach to speaking about race with similar frequency, and this was second in prevalence only to conceding or struggling with race. This relationship or stance towards race is reflective of the ambivalence that Entman and Rojecki argue most White Americans hold towards Blacks, acknowledging ongoing problems and racial conflict, but tempering that perception with caveats about class, gender and

geography. Within these focus groups, Blacks seem equally ambivalent about their relationship with Whites, although with different implications given the power differential American society.

In contrast with the similarities in the practice of *qualifying* race, Blacks talked much more about their struggle with race on a personal level. Black participants focused at length in the pre-film discussion about the ways in which race playing a significant role in their daily lives, with almost all of them avowing that it was something they had to think about, “deal” or “cope with” every day.

Like Blacks, White participants also talked about making concessions for race in their lives. However, despite the observations and personal stories, most also ultimately denied that racial issues had touched their lives in any significant way. So while acknowledging ongoing racial conflict, Whites were able to distance themselves from the impact. They did this by placing more emphasis on *resisting* the idea and relevance of race in their daily lives. As a result, they were more likely to avow that race played only a very limited or role in their lives, what I call a strategy of *containment*. This stance involves denial of race but is more complex than simple denial.

White Containment Strategies

The Privilege of Being Color Blind

In *Seeing a Color-Blind* future, law professor Patricia Williams talks about the dangers of practicing color-blind idealism. The ideal of transcending race is a goal to which Americans have long aspired. However, although we all want to judge others and be judged by the content of our character as Dr. King dreamed, Williams shows that refusing to acknowledge color is not the same thing as transcending it. Instead, this can lead to confusion and resentment. Williams tells the story of her young son, who was one of few

African American children at an exclusive private nursery school in New York. When asked what color the grass was her son would respond that he didn't know or "it makes no difference."

After several reports of similar events from his teachers, Williams grew concerned about her son's eyesight and took him to see an ophthalmologist who found that his vision was actually perfect. The root of the problem was something quite different. After much discussion, Williams found that her son had been repeatedly told by teachers that color makes no difference and that "it doesn't matter...whether you're Black or White or red or green or blue." As young children are wont to do, Williams' son took that advice quite literally and refused to note what color the grass or anything was, hence the confusion. The problem had originated in events that showed the teacher's color blind admonitions to be kind falsehoods, a well-intentioned reassurance to a young Black boy when his classmates' challenged whether it was even possible for Black people to play "good guys."

As nursery school kids, these children of privilege were too young to have much of a social filter and to censor themselves according to social norms. Growing up in a still highly segregated world and well soaked in the still highly racialized media environment, these Millennials see race. They see how it works in our society and they instinctively know it still matters. Williams' son's own experience belied the lesson he was taught. At a very early age, when they articulate these observations in ways that are uncomfortable for adults, asking if Black people can play good guys or rejecting the Black baby doll at the toy store, these children are trained to pretend, to pretend they don't see color, to pretend it doesn't matter. They absorb both these racial lessons— the ones on the playground and those taught by well meaning liberal teachers who say race doesn't matter. Williams argues that

this contradiction can create confusion as one is pushed and pulled in the gap between ideals and reality.⁶⁹

Like Williams' son, the participants of these groups grew up and were socialized in the nineties. Despite their great desire for a racial denial and containment, White participants talked about race extensively in ways that betrayed a complicated experience of race. Many admitted to feeling a strong sense of division between them and Black students on campus, and reported first or second hand experience with negative social pressure against interracial relationships. Although they attest to believing that race doesn't or shouldn't matter, they also concede that it often does. Reconciling these seemingly contradictory stances of racial resistance and concession, involved a probably instinctual strategy of normalizing racial conflict, admitting this conflict exists, but minimizing or even dismissing the significance of the problems they continue to experience.

Despite initially indicating that race was not something they thought about or considered important in their own lives, as the discussion progressed, White respondents also related a cohesive set of concerns about Black-White relations that ultimately pointed to the culpability of African Americans in ongoing racial difficulties in America. These problematic behaviors and attitudes included Black hostility and racism against Whites, oversensitivity to issues of race; expectations that White Americans owe them something for past wrongs, and the prevalence of a racial double standard of acceptable behavior for Blacks and for Whites.

Although these concerns had multiple dimensions, they converged around the idea of Blacks as a central source of tensions in current race relations and barrier to greater interracial social integration, including romantic relationships:

⁶⁹ This sort of well meaning but misguided version of color blind idealism has often been criticized. Most recently, Comedian and media satirist Stephen Colbert has a recurring bit he often does in which he says that he doesn't see color so he doesn't even know what color he is. It's absurd and it underscores the problems with this type of racial idealism.

I think that Blacks generally are more so like not wanting to have interracial relationships and White people don't really care as much. (Something New W1: 203)

No Offense

Although they may aspire to a race blind future, in both in the pre and post discussion, White participants repeatedly expressed concerns about race and Black racism, hostility and oversensitivity to issues of race. White participants characterized themselves as victims in the current racial regime, forced to censor what they say and judged unfairly by Blacks and the media. An essential part of the racial landscape described in these focus groups is the burden that Whites feel they suffer in relation to African Americans, including the need to constantly cater and conform to Black demands and sensitivities. In this view, the most common racial problem these participants encounter is trying to avoid saying the wrong thing around a Black person:

I feel like most of the time when it comes up [race] is when you're just trying to make it something you just said like not offensive. (Zebrahead W2:52)

This sentiment resonated with several participants. Another woman added in recognition:

I kind of agree with that. One of my roommates is African-American and it's almost like we're aware of it because we're trying so hard not to say anything that will offend somebody else in our apartment that we're aware of it because of that. (Zebrahead W2: 58)

So, within this framework of Black culpability and White inhibition, Whites continually self monitor and self-censor conversations in order avoid conflict when interacting with African Americans. Reflecting on the perceived unequal burden that Whites bear compared

with Blacks, Heather described tensions in her living situation because of her African American roommate:

I think this is more us not trying to offend her. I don't think she worries about it as much... (Zebrahead Group W2: 62)

Two things are evident here. The collective term “us” is defined along racial lines – meaning the White members of the rooming group. Second, “she” (the Black roommate) is positioned both outside of the group and insensible to its concerns. So whereas several White participants reported that they feel they must constantly monitor themselves for fear of making offense, in their view, Blacks seem relatively unburdened of such considerations.

So, along with being at the root of lingering tensions in America over race, Blacks were identified as the source of significant social pressure for Whites to censor their behavior and speech in mixed race settings. The pressure to self-censor, which is clearly articulated in the opening conversations, becomes more pronounced in the post viewing discussion. What issues are safe to talk about and which are not? In addition, there is also a grouping together of Black women as a monolithic group about whom one may or may not ask questions about appearance. This can be problematic and is one of the markers of racial attitudes studied in Entman and Rojecki's work, grouping a diverse array of people together in search of a blanket answer about what “they” are like and will accept or reject.

Connecting Race Blind ideology and Positive Perceptions of Interracial Relationship

Despite these concerns, Whites respondents generally felt that race played little role in their life and many claimed a “race blind” perspective on interracial relationships. One participant described her feelings about an interracial couple on a popular television drama to illustrate this position.

This might be really bad but when I think about that I think of Grey's Anatomy, Berg and Christina like together, and that's just normal. I don't think she's an Asian and he's Black. It's like oh, they're doctors and they love each other.
(Something New Group W1: 124)

This spontaneous mention of characters involved in an interracial romantic relationship on Grey's Anatomy came up when participants were asked to provide final comments about personal experiences with interracial relationships. Specifically, the moderator requested that the group “comment on anything about interracial relationships or race in your life or how it doesn't affect you or does affect you?” This respondent was compelled to revisit the subject of representation and reflect on how she responds to a popular example of interracial representation. Several ideas are packed into this brief commentary. Since this discussion occurred prior to the viewing the movie, it's notable that the example used to illustrate the participant's views is one taken from television, rather than her life. We have the expression of color blind post-racial idealism, a normative perception of an interracial relationship, and the description of the cultural object in referential terms, relating to and evaluating their situation as she would real people, rather than characters within a commercial production.

It's an important and revealing combination. First, the statement is prefaced by the disclaimer “This might be really bad,” again reflecting the idea expressed earlier that as young White women, they don't understand what is socially acceptable to say about race. So even in this positive and spontaneous discussion of a favorite television show you hear the previously described self-monitoring and self-consciousness about the bounds of acceptable commentary about race. In addition, within this comment, the young woman links the idea of not seeing race in an interracial couple - of being color blind—to seeing the

relationship in positive terms "they're doctors and they love each other." This sentiment is affirmed by other participants in the group:

First participant: Yeah, I think that's a good point. That didn't faze me at all.

Like I never even thought about that and I think a lot of people didn't, in our generation –

Second woman: Absolutely.

First woman: -- like she's just not. They're characters to us and it's like it's

Dr. Berg. It's not, oh that Black man. So, I think that's significant. (Something

New Group W1: 128-132)

As described here, among this group of women the positive perception of the interracial relationship is coupled with an overt dismissal of race, asserting "I don't think she's an Asian and he's Black." This is notable because in this way, deracialization, the stripping of race, color and culture in favor of professional status is repeatedly stated as core part of what they relate to in the portrayal, when a participant says, "they're doctors and they love each other." So, the legitimacy of the relationship is tied to the characters subsuming their racial and cultural identities to their professional ones. To these women, as viewers, it's significant that "It's Dr. Berg. It's not, oh that Black man." Berg and Cristina provide a very vivid, normative example of how interracial relationships can and should work in their view. They also reveal a preference for characters that can transcend race.

It's significant but not surprising that the participant used a fictional character to illustrate this normative race blind ideal. On the whole, the respondents' personal experiences with interracial relationships were much less idyllic. In the pre-viewing discussion, participants were asked to share any experience had with interracial experiences. One student related a story about her mother's friend:

My mom's college friend who has also, they married and I guess her root family thought it was really unfortunate that she married someone who's African American so she was kicked out of her family. So that was one of those dramatic kind of stories, but they're happily married with three kids. So it worked out OK. (Something New Group W1: 82)

The language this woman uses to describe the family reaction is important. There seem to be two somewhat contradictory ways of viewing the experience. On the one hand, the college friend's family were so opposed to the relationship that they "kicked her out of the family." This is acknowledged to be a strong reaction, one of "those dramatic kind of stories". But the family's feelings are also at first characterized more subtly, perhaps euphemistically, as thinking the alliance was "really unfortunate". Ultimately, the experienced is characterized as having "worked out ok" because the couple in question is still together. But this does not address or negate the woman's loss of her family connections. This story illustrates a willingness, to return to a positive ending and downplay negative experience. It reflects and demonstrates the hoops we go through to resist the pull and effects of race despite experiences to the contrary.

Consistent with this pattern, another student recounted a friend's near miss with an interracial dating:

A friend of mine from home was kind of talking to a guy who was half Black and half White, but she never ended up dating him because she felt that her parents wouldn't accept it or approve of it. So that caused some tension. But the other couple, they're just fine. (Something New Group W1: 86)

Two things stand out here. First, a common feature of these conversations was that they had internal contradictions. Many respondents simultaneously denied race as a factor in contemporary life while recounting and defending racial divisions and racialized views as

normal, expected, and understandable. A woman loses her family because they thought her choice of a Black husband was “unfortunate.” A girl avoids dating a young biracial man because she felt her parents wouldn’t accept or approve of it, and this causes “some tension.” This is mild language for stark realities that violate these young women’s stated norm of color-blindness. It reflects a pattern of *normalizing racial conflict* that is ultimately a key strategy in the practice of containment. In these conversations, containment, which is positioned rhetorically within the language of racial transcendence, often relies on the discursive combination of denial and justification of racial conflict and racism.

In addition, both stories, the friend’s near miss with interracial dating and the Mom’s friend, end on a positive note and indicate happy endings. This positive resolution restores the transcendent ideal. This pattern of racialized experience juxtaposed against a post-racial idealism, was typical, but some participants were more forthcoming about the potential struggle involved in crossing racial boundaries.

I think my grandmother really didn't like that my cousin, her granddaughter, dated a Black guy all through college. I think for her she found that like really awkward to talk about, which is sad, because it was a really big part of her life but just feeling like that wasn't acceptable. And I don't think my grandmother in any way would ever consider herself racist. But at the same time like wouldn't want her granddaughter to be in an interracial relationship.

(Something New Group W1: 90)

Unlike the other two stories, this one doesn’t end on a happy note. In fact rather than dismissing, or normalizing her grandmother’s feelings, in this instance the storyteller seems to acknowledge that these feelings violate presumed racial norms. She says, “I don’t think my grandmother in any way would ever consider herself racist.” She follows this statement with “But”, admitting that her grandmother “wouldn’t want her granddaughter to be in an

interracial relationship.” Without putting a label on her grandmother’s reaction, she juxtaposes the disapproval of the relationship with the disavowal of racism, and connects the two with a “but.” In doing so, the speaker simply but clearly acknowledges that there is something that does not quite fit about those two realities.

Complications and Qualifiers

Much of the initial discussions among the White participants alternated between this type of resistance, discussion of the ways in which race was contained in their lives, having little impact, and consideration of the social elements which still combine to complicate and make race matter in American society. Of these elements, age, generational differences, and regional differences were identified as most salient.

Generational change was a particularly vibrant topic of discussion as it intersects with family, which many of the White participants acknowledged as a source of substantial resistance to interracial relationships in their worlds. Several women compared their feelings about interracial dating to their parents’. There were striking similarities in their accounts:

I think there’s a big difference between our generation and our parents’ generation. Because I really don’t have any friends who think about that in a negative light at all but my parents and most of my parents’ friends like still have some kind of barrier against that, that they wouldn’t want that for their children. (Something New W1: 106)

I dated a black guy in high school and my parents were like pretty much OK with it, my mom definitely was but my dad like took the time to put emphasis on the fact that I might not want to stay in a long term relationship for it. And his reasoning was, he’s like if you get married to them think about how your kids are going to grow up not knowing what they are. And I kept wanting to be like, that might have been a big problem if you were growing up like mixed

and not so big of a problem if I was mixed but not really a problem at all if my kids are mixed, because I feel like by then it's going to be kind of a non-issue, at least for our generation. (Zebrahead W2: 88)

My mom cites the reason as that it wouldn't be fair for the children, like you said. But I just think that our generation especially, like, maybe it's because we're in an intellectual environment where you're more educated and there is a larger group of diverse people here, but I think our generation definitely doesn't see the problem with it like our parents. (W1: 106)

These statements are confident and clear articulations of what I described as the stance of racial *resistance or containment*, the position that one is unbound and unburdened by the racial problems of the past. Among these women, containment was inextricably tied to the idea that their generation sees things differently and will not struggle with race the way their parents did. Time and again, across both of these groups of young, White women, the message was, “there’s a big difference between our generation and our parents’ generation.” This sentiment reflects the perception so often conveyed in the media of a generation transcending race. It’s an outlook shared by several speakers, although seriously contradicted by parts of the conversation in which the women *conceded* to having extensive personal experience with ongoing racial tension, describing at great length all the ways that race continues to divide and challenge them.

Black Women in the White University

Some of the Black students shared this idealism and confidence in generational change, but many were much less sanguine about how things are now. Notwithstanding the experience of the White participant who felt she had to walk on eggshells around a Black

roommate who seemed unconcerned about her feelings, the Black participants in these focus groups expressed almost universal concern about White perceptions of them. These sentiments were typical of the Black women in the study:

I think coming to a White school I kind of have to be mindful of what I say when I'm with my friends or if I'm on the bus. Coming from DC where I went to an all Black school what you say, you don't really put a filter on it. But now you have to kind of realize your surroundings and the company that you are in. (Something New AA1: 65)

This was something White and Black women have in common, a sense that self censoring is necessary in racially mixed company. However, while the White participants were able to seemingly successfully “contain” or ultimately dismiss the importance of such feelings (in keeping with the stance of *resistance*), there was no such relief for most Black students. Instead, most Black students said they were aware of race in their daily lives. This felt presence seemed to weigh heavily in their thinking and lead them to ascribe greater importance to race.

For many students, the majority White university setting plays a significant role in raising this racial consciousness. In group four, one woman explained why she felt that the university location was especially important to African American students' sense of race:

I guess especially being at a university that is predominantly [White] and being African American at this university you have no choice but to deal with race relations. It affects pretty much our daily lives. We have to present ourselves in a certain way so that we don't portray a negative image to White people who pretty much will, some who they never experienced dealing with a person of another race, dealing with a Black person for that matter, outside of the university...(Zebrahead AA4: 44)

Several key ideas are brought together here. The felt personal impact of race is highlighted as well as the sense of race being present in Black students' "daily lives" and, again, the sense of performance and self-consciousness, being watched by and on display for Whites. Invoking a widely held (but acutely middle-class) Black concern about what Whites will think of them, this student cautions, "we have to present ourselves in a certain way so that we don't portray a negative image to White people." This idea of conscious performance is further validated by the comments of several other Black women in the same group. Each individual added her own personal take on the subject, but as a group they affirmed this central theme:

... because we are at a white majority school that we are kind of representatives of our whole entire race so when they see, when white students it's you're not just India, you're not just Diane, you're not just Kim,⁷⁰ you are your whole race and so you do have to conduct yourself, you can choose to conduct yourself in a manner to represent your race well as white people would call it and just try to show that individualism to the majority race. (Zebrahead AA4: 48)

Like Black marchers in the civil rights movement dressed in their Sunday best, these students come to school ready to be Black role models for their White classmates. In this case, instead of rights, they are trying to secure respect. In a related vein, connecting her own sense of having something to prove with the broader political landscape, another participant observed:

I think race relations is very prevalent in the world.... You have a Black man running and that's not even so much what his platform is that's important but

⁷⁰ All names within these participant statements have been changed to protect the privacy of the participants.

especially in the media one of the big factors is it's a Black man running and I think that just shows in itself a lot of people are concerned, OK, can a Black man run you know, the country. It's not really concern about whether he can but it's whether a Black man can because technically, I mean just based on history, Black people are considered inferior to the majority race which is White and a lot of people still hold that idea that Black people are not capable of doing the things that White people can. So in that we have a lot more to prove, I think, as a culture, as an identity, we have a lot more to prove to White people because we're still trying to break into the mainstream.... So I think we still have a lot more to prove as a race. (Zebrahead AA4: 56)

By saying that as “Black people” “we” are “still trying to break into the mainstream,” this young woman gives voice to the usually unspoken feeling of liminality that Entman and Rojecki describe in the *Black Image in the White Mind* (2001). Rather than simply something that lives in the White mind, however, here this sense of liminality is internalized among these Black students.

For the African American women in this study, this all adds up to a heightened, palpable sense of performance and elevated racial awareness. Yet another woman in one of the African American groups that watched *Something New* summarized her feelings of race this way:

I would say in the past, in the past meaning like before I came to college, it wasn't as big of an issue. But I feel like now coming as an African American woman at a predominantly White school, I feel like it's something that if not affects me every day, it's something I think about and I'm conscious of all the time. (Something New AA5: 46)

The word “conscious” is significant here, as well as the sense of temporal ubiquity associated with being conscious “all the time.” There was simply no equivalent expression of race being constantly present in the lives of the White participants. This is one characteristic of the new divide between Blacks and Whites with regard to race. Blacks and White participants had very different feelings about the role that race plays in their lives. We hear expressions of acute, constant awareness among Blacks and relative detachment among White participants. This statement also highlights the central importance of the environment to these feelings. It is being “an African American woman at a predominantly White school” that heightened the felt presence of race in this woman’s life (and those of her peers who voiced similar feelings).

In addition to conveying more emotional reflections on the personal impact of race, African American participants articulated distinctive views about the external racial environment in America. This perception gap was consistent with the established and enduring racial divide between Black and White Americans on a variety of racial matters (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Newport, 2009). Contemplating whether or not real racial progress had been made, some of the Black women voiced deep misgivings from the start of the discussion. An African American journalism major described what she viewed as a lack of progress in racial matters, saying:

It’s almost like there’s no progress. It’s almost sickening to me. Like Jena 6, that’s probably one of the hugest disappointments of like the whole month. That I heard about. I was just so saddened by that because it just feels like, we can’t win. Just between Black people and White people we can never find some common ground or some common level of respect or just human decency for one another. (Something New AA1: 69:69)

This discussion highlights Black participants' greater emotional investment in the controversy, which came to be known as Jena 6 and their distinctive interpretation of what Jena 6 indicated about race relations. This incident was held up by several African American speakers as a particularly resonant one that reflected negatively on the state of race relations. In 2006, less than a year prior to the focus groups, six black teens were convicted of beating a White teen in Jena, Louisiana. The case attracted a great deal of press coverage and debate; marches were held in multiple cities in September 2007 to protest how the case was being handled. For Blacks and others who sympathized with the young African American men, the charges were seen as excessive and racially discriminatory (Krugman, 2007). Though the filing was later reduced, the prosecution initially charged the teens as adults; one was charged with second-degree murder. Critics pointed to White students who had been involved in other violent incidents and were treated more leniently. As the Times reported, "civil rights advocates, who have called the punishment of the arrested youths disproportionate, say the case has raised the questions of how much race still plays a part in the workings of the legal system in the South" (Newman, 2007).

This news was prominent in the fall of 2007 and fresh in students' minds when this study took place. While Jena 6 came to symbolize painful racial disparities in the American justice system for some, for others, the violence and protests were reminders of how volatile racial tensions could still be or simply reinforced existing perceptions about the south. Within the African American focus groups, Jena 6 was described in terms of its great personal and emotional impact. This woman describes herself as being "saddened" and the events as "sickening" and "one of the hugest disappointments" (Something New AA1: 69:69). But, her feelings are also presented as connected to larger, disturbing lessons about race. As she

surmises, “It’s almost like there’s no progress” and “Black people and White people we can never find some common ground.”

In contrast with this interpretation, when Jena 6 was raised as an example of contemporary racial conflict by a White participant, who is also a journalism major, its significance was qualified and contained:

I think it really has a lot to do with regional differences in our country especially. There are people that, I guess you could call them behind the times and aren't up to date on the advances that we've made in improving race relations and I think that's a perfect example of it. (Zebrahead W2: 74)

These comments implicitly draw a retaining wall around racial problems using spatial and temporal terms. The student draws an important line between people like herself, whom she identifies collectively as “we” and describes as having made “advances...in improving race relations” and others who are “behind the times” and “aren’t up to date.” She attributes what remaining racial conflict there is in the U.S. to “regional differences,” thereby recognizing the relevance of this racial conflict while distancing herself from it and also affirming the idea of progress or “advances” over time. By describing the Jena six controversy as a “perfect example” of the failures of an isolated group of people and a unique region, this discussant ensures that the idealistic vision of an increasingly race-blind America to remain intact, a very different conclusion than that reached by Black participants.

These were not the only comments about this incident among the White students, however. In the *Something New* Group, a woman offered a different view, saying “the Jena 6 incident kind of brought it back to more consciousness a little bit. So that kind of reminded us that it is still a problem and it's not just from the sixties and that it is still persistent.” While not rising to the level of concern that the Black student expressed, this participant

acknowledges race as “persistent” and a “problem,” even if cautiously qualifying that problem as just “a little bit” more in the collective consciousness.

Black women and Interracial Relationships

Like the White participants, Black women expressed important concerns and ambivalence about interracial relationships in the first half of the focus groups, when the participants talked about prior experiences. Having family members who oppose interracial dating was a universal theme across all of the groups, but the African American women also had some concerns that were unique. They questioned the motive of people who date interracially, speculating that some were likely attracted to Whites’ money and higher class status. They also talked about the shortage of available romantic partners for Black women.

The women’s discussion of how they and their family felt about interracial dating was closely linked with these latter issues – its perceived prevalence and the shortage of suitable mates within the Black community. One woman summarized her family’s position:

when I was growing up my parents would prefer... a Jamaican or a Caribbean person, but then as time went by like now, they look at the stats and they're like well, if you want to date outside the race that's cool too. So it's like they started off being real strict. They wanted them to be Jamaican black, and now they're just like OK, well we see that there's not a lot of black men out there, so you can date outside the race, it's fine. (Zebrahead AA3: 218)

Other women related similar experiences. Several speakers said their parents had changed their views over time or had mixed feelings on the subject:

My parents, my mother is very liberal, she is very accepting of other people. She says, whoever you bring home, like Frances said, as long as they're respectable, I'm happy for you. My dad's a little bit more conservative in his

views of who I should date. He would prefer that I date within my race, so it's a little frustrating because you have those opposing views in your family, and it's like who am I trying to please, when I should be trying to please myself...

(Zebrahead AA3: 220)

An important element in this discussion, that was unique to the African American discussion groups, was that respondents read how people feel about interracial dating to be an indicator of how they feel about race in general and African Americans in particular. The woman with the parents who were split on the subject also said the following about her friends:

...as far as other people's views, it kind of hurts me. I have a friend from India, and we'll be sitting together, we'll talk about guys we think are attractive, and she'll point out an African American male and say oh, you know, he looks really good. I really like him. I'll say why don't you go for him? And she's like, because my parents would kill me. I would never be allowed to bring home anyone other than an Indian. And that kind of hurts me because it's like what do you see against my race? Like what's wrong with a male from my race? I bet he treats you as well as any other Indian male. There could be some potential there, but the fact that she just said, she's like no, I cannot date a black guy. It kind of hurts me a little bit that she won't even consider it. (Zebrahead AA3: 220)

As this woman's relates her thought process to the group, she reveals how personal issues of race are for these African American women. Invoking the phrase "my race" twice, asking "what do you see against my race?" and "what's wrong with a male from my race," a

friend's personal boundaries become a statement about how the friend sees/feels about African Americans in general and by extension this speaker in particular.

Ironically, both participation in and avoidance of interracial dating is linked to racial hierarchy or bias in these conversations. This sort of personalized interpretation is complex to navigate and can easily metamorphose and constrict. Too little interracial dating among non-Blacks means anti-Black bias; conversely too much interracial dating among Blacks is perceived as linked to anti-Black bias. Neither full acceptance nor disapproval feels racially egalitarian or seems to fit. Everyone's motives are questionable.

Some of the women justified these seemingly contradictory feelings about interracial relationships as based on the perceived desirability of the African American men who date non-Black women:

sometimes even though it is accepted in our minds though, and I'm just saying this based on being a black woman, it still kind of is like a pinch or a stab in the heart because a lot of times you'll see like these prestigious black men, these men who are doing things, and they're with a white woman.

(Zebrahead AA4: 386)

Here again there is a striking, visceral description, as a psychological hit becomes a "stab in the heart." Also, the complication of prestige or status is further compounded by the perceived ubiquity among the elite and most desirable men. Similarly, within another African American group, remarking on the prevalence of interracial dating, some women perceived interracial dating to be omnipresent among celebrities, in the media, and in their own social environment at an elite university. Addressing the latter setting, one woman explained:

I, by no means, have any problem with interracial couples. I believe what I have a problem with is, for example, on our campus when the ratio of African American females to males is already so, well, it's not proportional. There's a

lot more black females than males and it really upsets me when black guys only date white women. I think that's the only thing that upsets me. I don't feel like love should have a color or anything. (Something New AA1:145)

So these women expressed significant concerns about whether they fit in within this new social landscape. Rather than seeming more egalitarian, this new interracial regime seems to some to be erecting another racial hierarchy in which they are excluded and “black guys only date white women.” While their feelings are supported by polling and census figures that show much higher rates of interracial marriage among Black men than Black women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b), these women also exaggerated those rates substantially. Some indicated that they think almost all Black male celebrities only date or marry White women, even naming ones who are married to African American women as examples of this trend.

Part of the Problem: Media Criticism and Online Social Networks

As discussed, many of the women in this study had concerns about race and interracial dating that were specific to their racial background, upbringing, and the setting in which the study was conducted. However, there was a subject about which all groups agreed: the media do an inadequate job of covering racial issues.

While both Black and White participants were critical of media coverage of race, however, the substance of this criticism varied greatly. White students were more likely to criticize the media for hyping and exaggerating trivial events having to do with minor verbal slights:

the news makes things seem so much more like extreme, too, and it highlights like every individual [instance] of that so you think that it's happening more often than it is. (Something New W1: 68)

Similarly:

They just kind of, the media sometimes just show like the controversial things and don't show the continuum of how race relations have been changed and affected over the years... You see Jena 6, you see like the racial remarks and stuff and we just keep all these negative images. We don't really ever get anything positive. There might not be but we don't even know that.

(Something New W1: 118)

Another participant affirms this media criticism:

I agree. I think there's not as much coverage on it as it used to be. But I think when it is covered I think it's more in the negative. (Something New W1: 120)

Black participants were also critical of the mainstream news media and its lack of serious race related coverage. In contrast to White apprehension over a lack of news about racial progress, however, Black students were concerned about Black a lack of race-related coverage in mainstream media of racial problems and conflict, including attacks against Blacks. They said that they relied on alternative, new media to get information about stories before they are covered by the mainstream press. In particular, several attested to first hearing about Jena 6 on Facebook. Remarking on the value of peer to peer sources of news, one student noted, "I found out about Jena 6 in Facebook" (Something New AA1:85).

Several others attested that they had similar experiences. One woman referred to the little reported rape and torture of a Black woman in Virginia as further proof of the need for alternative news sources. In the first of the focus groups with African American women, this was an extended topic of conversation. One student summarized the prevailing sentiment, "Yeah. Facebook again. It wasn't covered in traditional news media until it, like, exploded and went to the porch" (Something New AA1: 89). In this and other students' view,

the mainstream press can not be relied upon to cover race. Instead, the social networks were the source for breaking news on this story, and the media followed only after the issue “exploded” or became so dominant it could no longer be ignored.

This was just one vivid instance of a serious divide in perception. While many White students felt race was covered in the media a great deal with regard to White offenses, especially verbal ones, Blacks felt that the Black community is mostly ignored in the mainstream media. Within this context, person to person contact and online social networks were a vital part of how minorities kept informed of issues that mattered to them:

I feel like the media basically does like White celebrities. If it's somebody Black then it's either a celebrity or if you're a criminal. I don't see like any good news about Blacks normally in the media. I don't see very good news about minorities in general actually, but it depends on where you go, like the Facebook group, I actually did go to CNN and it was on their website. They did have a video of it, but you actually have to go look for it. Like it wasn't just plain, my mom actually heard about it and told me, and then I went on Facebook and of course a bunch of my friends had already joined the group.... (Zebrahead AA3 123:123)

The media's inattention to stories that concern minorities was actually pointed out as an indicator of the continuing importance of race by more than one respondent:

I think that on Facebook there are a lot of Facebook groups that you can join that will raise awareness of issues that have not been brought up within the media... there was a woman who was raped by a group of White people in a community, and she was held hostage by them, but the media wasn't covering it because there were other things going on, like OJ Simpson got arrested for stealing something from the Hall of Fame in Las Vegas, I think it

was. So little things like that just make me aware that race is still an issue.

(Zebrahead AA3: 70)

Here again, the story of the woman who was raped was cited as an example of media's failure to cover news about African Americans. This time it's juxtaposed against disproportionate media treatment of O.J. Simpson's legal problems. It's important to note that these comments were offered in response to general questions about media coverage of race. At no time did a moderator prompt participants for their opinion on a particular story. Rather, this story just seemed to resonate with women across the multiple African American groups. It became emblematic of their perception of the media:

I saw that thing on Facebook that Lauren was talking about, where the girl got raped, and I was like shocked that I hadn't seen it at all, because every morning I turn on CNN and just listen to it while I'm getting ready.... It was ridiculous. (Zebrahead AA3: 104)

As these discussions reveal, the media are perceived by Black and White participants in very different ways, but both indicated that the media were part of the problem in contemporary race relations. Peer-to peer communication on *Facebook*, on the other hand, was frequently cited as a trusted source for important news.

Summary

Far from "color-blind", Black and White students alike related substantial racial concerns. Both Black and White students talked about the problems they see and the self-conscious behavioral adjustments they make to live in a multiracial environment. To a similar extent they also described factors like geographic location and generation that complicate issues of race in America.

Despite these similarities, Black and White students were significantly divided in their perspectives on the importance of race in their personal lives. Black students were less willing or able to dismiss and contain the impact of those problems. In part, this reflects the pattern of normalizing conflict which was prevalent in the White focus groups.

In addition to differences in the felt presence of race in their lives--Black students felt race with them on a daily basis whereas Whites did not-- there is also a gap in what these women perceived to be the important racial problems in society today. White participants focused attention on the problem of Whites being unfairly persecuted and censored as a key racial problem.⁷¹ They identified the media as a key contributor to this problem, saying that the most frequent race related topic they heard about in the news was a White person saying something about race that was considered inappropriate.

Whereas White participants expressed concerns about Black racism, hostility and oversensitivity, Black participants were concerned with a continued lack of racial progress, the sense that Blacks were still marginal in American society, and that it was their burden to project a positive image to Whites. They also felt the media were inattentive to racial issues that mattered.

Ultimately, these differences in perception and definition led to distinct patterns of representing race, reflecting what I see as the participants' overall stance or relationship with race. Although participants across all groups made most often concessions to the persistence of race, describing race-related problems at length, and also complicated or qualified race with other key considerations, White participants also simultaneously (often in the same discussion) held steadfast in their *resistance* to the idea that race is an important problem. This juxtaposition did not prevail in the Black focus groups.

⁷¹ These women were not alone in feeling victimized on the basis of race. A recent Gallup poll conducted in October 2009 showed a substantial percentage of non-Hispanic Whites feel racism against Whites is widespread in the United States. The proportion has risen recently and is now at 46% (Newport, 2009).

Taken as a whole, the focus groups and the participants' varying stances towards race show that the key differences or divide between participants in the Black and White focus groups is not simply whether one group is more optimistic or less aggrieved – both talk at length about racial problems and resentments. Rather these different patterns of talking about race are closely tied to differences in life experience. White participants in this study balanced the contradiction of complicating and partially conceding the place of race in their lives while containing its impact. Black women complicated or qualified race in their conversations as well, but they also consistently talked about the highly personal concessions they make in light of the central role that race holds in their lives. Race remains a more central and personal issue for these African American women, especially within the context of a majority White university.

Because the stakes are different for them, these students showed different levels of tolerance for racial conflict. White students had a higher threshold for acceptable conflict. They often tempered discussion of problems with language that countered or diminished the significance of racial conflict. They also perceived Black racial sensitivity to verbal offenses as being overblown and deleterious to race relations. Overall, what these initial discussions had in common was that they showed that comity is still something longed for rather than achieved.

Chapters six and seven explore the conversations that followed the movie screening. They investigate how their different stances towards and experience with race shape how these women respond to the representation of race and interracial relationships in films. In addition, these chapters also assess reception from the other direction, exploring whether viewing the films seemed to have any impact how the women talked about race and interracial relationships.

Chapter 6: White Reception of Interracial Movie Romance

Reception plays an important role in the content of films with racial content and in the films' perceived ironies, parodies and politics. Race in films is always in dialogue with current political and social policies... (Codell, 2007, p. 220)

Dear US Press: No one is being fooled by your attempt to portray discomfort w/interracial relationships as a black thing – Adam Serwer (2009)

This chapter uses evidence from focus group discussions and individual written questionnaires to examine the dominant themes that emerge when young women of European-American background view and then talk about the representations of interracial romance in popular film. My aim is to address two central questions. First, how were these conversations influenced by the racial background and standpoints of the participants? Second, how did the group discussions reproduce or transform predominant media discourse about race embedded in these interracial romance films? In more theoretical terms, how did the audiences' individual standpoint and preexisting attitudes and opinions influence their reception of these films? In conjunction with the analysis in the following chapter of Black women's responses to the same media content, this discussion may help demonstrate how standpoint and framing work together to shape reception when race and sex are involved.

There were two groups of young women in the study, who identified themselves ethnically as White. Each group viewed a single movie that exemplified one of two very different ways of viewing interracial couples, either the conflict frame or the multicultural

frame as described in Chapters three and four. My analytical approach to these discussions emphasizes the ways in which standpoint helps shape the audience's reading, in particular bearing in mind the three personal stances towards race I delineated in the previous chapter— complication, concession and containment. I also consider the extent to which the women seem to embrace or challenge the dominant frames conveyed in the films and why. These conversations are understood in relation to both Hall's original encoding/decoding model of reception with its preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings and Gamson's belief that laypeople mix three sources of knowledge within conversations of political subjects including race, media discourse, experiential knowledge, and received wisdom. As a result, ultimately the direction this dissertation takes is to acknowledge both the multidimensionality of audience reception and the power of the text, realizing that, "cultural forces, textual features, and social pressures on the individual receiver all intersect and articulate meaning to the receiver"(Moffitt, 1993, p. 234). This framework allows us to be more inclusive in our interpretation, recognizing that cultural readings encompass, "the fantasy of the text; the ideologically and culturally charged social, gender and labor positions of the receiver; and currently felt, so-called 'real' lived experience of the receiver" (p. 235).

Within this context, in choosing the specific films to show, I had to consider a number of factors. I needed one film that was predominantly supportive of interracial romance and one that primarily presented it critically/problematically. In addition, the films for the study needed to be contemporary films that prominently feature the mixed race romance and I preferred that the films were not ones which had already been widely seen and publicly dissected prior to the study. *Zebrahead* and *Something New* were chosen as exemplars of their respective representational frames. The universe of separatist/conflict oriented films was somewhat narrow so I began the selection process with that category in mind. *Jungle Fever* was ruled out both because it had been debated at such length and because its focus

on an elicit affair added an element that might prove difficult to navigate. After excluding *Jungle Fever*, I chose *Zebrahead* to represent the separatist frame, and then it was a matter of choosing a film that would be its mirror in terms of the race and gender mix of the leads. Given how much gender complicates reactions to couples who cross racial barriers, it was also important to choose films with the same general race-gender composition-- either the female protagonists in both movies had to be White women involved with Black men or Black women with White men. *Something New* fit these criteria. As a consequence of this selection process, the two films feature African American women as protagonists. As shown below, this dynamic likely affected how the participants related to the films.

As discussed in the Research Design, the focus groups were semi-structured interviews with five to twelve women in each group. The focus group was designed to allow the participants to help direct the conversation to what they felt was most important. So the first question following each screening was always the most simple: what did you think about the film we just saw? Then the conversations proceeded, with the moderator asking the women to describe what they liked and didn't like and more specifically what they thought of the main characters actions, and how the women would have advised the characters had they been their friends.

On the whole, although the participants were more positive about *Something New* than *Zebrahead*, most White viewers were ambivalent about both of the films presented. Their critical and analytical responses called into question many of the choices made by the filmmakers. This evaluative stance suggests that these women had maintained significant intellectual distance from the material. Their comments also seemed to reflect negotiated rather than preferred reading of the films presented. These viewers did not reject the films in their entirety, however; based on these conversations, the women seemed to feel that there were valid lessons in these films about race and more broadly about love and human

nature. Rather, the women were very selective in the insights they gleaned from the films. Several themes dominated the conversations: they didn't like the films and felt it was difficult to identify with many of the characters, especially the Black female leads; they were concerned about Black racial attitudes and these concerns were reinvigorated by the film portrayals; many were skeptical about the likelihood of couples overcoming family resistance to interracial relationships.

White Reaction to Zebrahead and the Racial Conflict Frame

Zebrahead, which is an older film than *Something New*, elicited strong, often negative reactions from many participants across all groups regardless of race, but there were also some significant differences in the way Black and White audiences received the film. Within the White audience groups, the discussion often focused on *Zebrahead* being extreme, inaccurate, and intense. Although there was a range of reactions in both groups, these reactions were far more likely to come from White participants. In particular, many White participants specifically used the words "exaggerated" and "extreme" to describe the narrative. As you will see in the subsequent chapter, this differs sharply from the responses of many of the African American participants, who felt that the film accurately represented racial tensions and opposition to interracial relationships.

Importance of social realism and audience standpoint

In the previous chapter, I identified three distinct approaches to dealing with races: complicating, conceding/struggling with race, and containing it (maintaining a personal distance from racial conflict), and argued that while both Blacks and Whites make use of all of these approaches, the White students seemed more able to contain race as an issue that had limited relevance in their lives. A related but distinct pattern of more distanced observation dominated the discussions of these films among White viewers.

Within the White participant group, the conversation usually took a critical, distanced tone in which the speakers talked about the film as a production, a product of choices made by the filmmakers. Even the viewers' most visceral reactions were sometimes discussed analytically in relation to those creative choices. The distinction between a critical interpretive position and what Ien Ang describes as a "self-referential" standpoint is an important one here. The critical voice is cool, more distant, relies on rationalization and external evidence to validate the reaction rather than feeling (Liebes & Katz, 1990). When the speaker talks about the film in critical way, they often compare its representation of reality to what they think an empirical, "objective" evaluation of the situation would reveal.

In this discussion, speakers in the White groups often used this type of critical voice and less frequently used a "self-referential" standpoint to evaluate the films (1985), praising the films in relation to how they personally identify with the characters as people. When audiences reflect on fictional entertainment content and take a referential stance, relatability and relevance to individual personal experiences figure most prominently in the evaluations. Since experiential knowledge of racial issues diverged greatly across the Black and White focus groups, experience became an important source of differentiation in how the participants talked about these films. Viewers who liked and related to the characters were more positive about the film's value, felt they learned from the films, and talked about the characters as one would people in real life that you know.

Conversely, when the viewer takes a more critical, coldly rational and analytical stance, a distance is created between the audience and the content. This is in keeping with the findings of Ien Ang's extensive television audience study *Watching Dallas*, where perceived realism and identification were found to be closely related to audiences' enjoyment of that television program (1985). In the White focus groups, the critical voice was dominant and the evaluations were often negative. This critical distance seems consistent

with the contained, detached discussion of race in the earlier part of the discussion. In keeping with this critical stance, the dominant descriptions of the film involved it being extreme, exaggerated, and unrealistic:

... I thought that it really represented an extreme of racial relations, I think.

And though realistic, I guess, I don't think it is something that, well I guess I can't really speak to that but I just thought it was really extreme and to me that's why it was so intense. (*Zebrahead* W1:161).

Here, the speaker who feels *Zebrahead* is extreme is responding to another's evaluation that the film was intense and discounting that reaction as being one that was a byproduct of, even proof of the film's extreme depiction. The disclaimer, "well I guess I can't really speak to that" is a good example of a speaker tempering her comments by warning that her limited personal experience renders her unable to fully evaluate the movie's social realism. Since the critical stance relies on evidence, this disclaimer is a significant one. That said, the main point is clear and receives immediate reinforcement from another participant, who responded succinctly, "This is Anna and I just agree." So, although the intention is to ground this type of criticism in rationality and evidence, ultimately, no evidence is necessarily provided. The critical evaluation is just as instinctual as the other responses.

In another example of how the critical stance is used, an audience member compares *Zebrahead* to an episode of *Boy Meets World*, arguing that the latter is probably a more realistic treatment of interracial relationships:

I think it's the difference between like the reality too is that like this show could have like an interracial couple and they would like never have problems except for maybe like one episode and that's like more like reality. You know, it's not like, they probably don't have like a lot of problems on a daily basis but then maybe like occasionally they'll have someone who's like ignorant

and will say something, but I'm sure that happens like very rarely. So I feel like a movie like this doesn't give an accurate portrayal of the reality.

(Zebrahead Group1, W1: 243:243)

Here, the external evidence the speaker invokes is intertextual but it is conveyed in the same, rational manner as real world experience. These characteristics – extreme, exaggerated, inaccurate--were a barrier to both enjoyment and identification for several participants, who admitted they could not relate to the events and circumstances *Zebrahead* depicted. These distanced, critical responses to *Zebrahead* seem to echo the contained, removed discussions of race described in the early conversations. In these conversations, in other words, the audience's preexisting standpoint of containment and complication of race, helped produce critical distance towards these films that confronted race. The film's perceived lack of social realism, the fact it failed to reflect a reality that these women could recognize appreciably accentuated this distance.

White participants and identification

In addition to questioning the film's realism, participants voiced specific, very serious concerns about the movie's characterizations, even describing the film's antagonist, Nut as: "the kind of character that like White people would make up." As the film's key (but not only) antagonist, "Nut" strongly (and ultimately violently) opposes the interracial relationship between Nikki who is Black, and Zack, who is White. Throughout the discussion of the film, it was clear that Nut was the most problematic character for this audience:

I think that made it like annoying for me, the ending, was that the Nut didn't even show any remorse. Like I feel like any kind of human character should have shown, like I think it was an accident, I don't really think he meant to kill Dee. You know, I think it was just a stupid like ...type thing but I feel like they should have made that apparent by making him regret it and it was just like a

weird ending. The way he went up to Nikki I just didn't even understand like that whole like exchange. It was just weird. I just think that part, it was like just [...] the movie. But on the part of the writers they just like messed up, I think. (Zebrahead W2: 179)

This passage is notable for its concurrently critical and referential stances towards the film. In using multiple stances, this speaker reflects some audience members' contradictory views about the film. This last line exemplifies the critical stance, acknowledging that Nut's actions are the result of the choices the film's writers made. On the other hand, in contrast within the same passage this speaker talks about Nut as if he was otherwise a real person whose motives and actions they could predict and understand saying "I don't really think he meant to kill Dee." In this way, Megan makes him into a person who according to the internal logic of his world, would have felt remorse had the writers not "messed up."

Another speaker's comments about Nut were particularly striking. Here, the speaker overtly challenges the validity of the characterization:

I don't really think that it's like that but I mean I didn't go to an inner city school in Detroit so maybe I don't know but it seems like that's the kind of character that like White people would make up. It just seems so extreme. Because he was just so ludicrous. He didn't even make sense when he talked. You couldn't take him seriously as a character which invalidated his actions in the movie, not that they could ever be reasonable but it didn't give him any personal background to follow. (Zebrahead W2: 171)

As these participants point out, Nut is deeply troubled. It is not surprising then that the audience judged him harshly and that this judgment was universal. Beyond moral judgment, the audience also questioned Nut's existential validity as a character that relates

to or represents someone found in real life. Everyone in the group who directly spoke about Nut affirmed that the character made little sense and was beyond their ability to empathize. Some speakers were self reflective about it, acknowledging that a lack of identification with the characters was an obstacle and talked about their own backgrounds as limiting to their ability to relate.

In addition to Nut, the film's authority figures were also criticized for not recognizable or realistic characters:

I thought the role, like I mean not that I know everything about like parents or anything but I thought all of the roles of the authority figures like parents and like teachers were just like overly exaggerated like weak and like not interfering at all. Not that, I mean they always are. It was just weird how there was no strong authority figures in it at all. Because I mean it was high school and it was just weird. (Zebrahead Group1, W1:187:187)

Here again, like several other participants, Anna qualifies her comments with a disclaimer about personal experience: "not that I know everything about like parents or anything."

More surprising and potentially more important than the criticisms aimed at Nut and the myriad of absentee or simply inadequate authority figures who occupy the movie's background, many White participants also couldn't relate to Nikki, the African American female lead, or her circumstances. Since the film hinges on the relationship between Zack and Nikki, the audience's inability to identify with a lead character was an important barrier to the appreciation of the film. While most of the film's characters were criticized because their actions not seem authentic or realistic and they didn't seem multi-dimensional, the criticism aimed at Nikki had a more affective component underneath the usually analytical evaluations. As Maya stated, "Nikki was just, I just could not tolerate her."

This was not an isolated reaction. This comment was perhaps most illustrative of the group's feelings:

...I don't know if this, I didn't like Nikki. I just didn't like her. I don't think that she and I would get along. [LAUGHTER] I think that, I didn't really like any of the characters, I don't think. But I think that the extent of her character was her position as a Black woman and I think that she could have been really developed more into a person interrelating with Zack rather than all the communication they kind of had in the movie, and I guess it's a matter of time, you can't make a movie that's too long, but the extent of her character was really I'm Black and you're White and so that was their relationship, there was nothing beyond that. So I think that's probably what fueled my dislike for her. (Zebrahead W2: 207)

Although she returns to a critical stance at the end of her comments, this speaker describes the character in direct, personal and emotionally evocative terms, saying, "I just didn't like her" and adding, "I don't think that she and I would get along." In these comments, Meredith treats the character as one would a person. The characteristic she most objects to in Nikki is that she is one-dimensional. Everything about her is about race. As she points out, "the extent of her character was really I'm Black and you're White and so that was their relationship, there was nothing beyond that." Ultimately, the speaker acknowledges, this one-dimensionality was "probably what fueled my dislike for her."

In contrast with their feelings about Nikki, several women were more sympathetic to Zack, her love interest, and even talked about identifying with his situation. In her individual written response, Philippa said, for example, "I identify with the fact that Zack did not feel welcome among Nikki's friends. Even my own roommate still refers to "those White people"

and doesn't even realize it." (Zebrahead W2 participant profile: In 317). Along the same lines, another participant empathized with Zack because of the movie's violent conclusion:

I feel like if I was Zack there was no way he could have seen like what happened coming. Because he didn't know that she was hanging out with Nut or anything. All he did was apologize to his girlfriend and go try and hang out with her and get back with her and then he went and defended her when she was in a fight with that kid and he pulls out a gun. So I mean Zack kind of acted how I would act and how I would advise him to act. I'd be like, OK, good, you apologized, now go sweet talk her a little. [LAUGHTER]

(Zebrahead W2: 305)

This is one of the most sympathetic and perhaps most direct demonstrations of character identification in the entire discussion. Here the speaker places herself in the character's position and concludes that Zack, "acted how I would act." This speaker's approving, self-referential evaluation of Zack is in marked contrast to group's thorough disavowals of Nut and Nikki. Although Zack's race and middle class upbringing are characteristics that these women share and that helps to create common ground, in this statement, it is really his actions that the audience focuses on and relates to.

We can compare this empathetic reaction to the previous descriptions of Nikki, which highlighted her one-dimensionality and lack of likeability. These evaluations are grounded not just in the speakers' different backgrounds, but also the film text's highly differential treatment of its lead characters. As we saw earlier in the textual analysis, Zack was fleshed out in romantic detail from *Zebrahead's* first scenes, which showed us his family, his passion for hip-hop, his work ethic, his knowledge and immersion in African American culture, and full embrace of urban Detroit. Beyond her attraction to Zack, the viewer learned almost nothing about Nikki save that she was new to the neighborhood, she was Dee's cousin, and

was adamant in demanding “respect,” in contrast to her apparently drunken, careless mother. This unbalanced characterization did nothing to coax these skeptical viewers towards a sympathetic reading of the African American characters. Rather, it seemed to help compound the preexisting distance from the subject matter.

Along with portraying mostly extreme, unrelatable situations and characters, the film was also criticized by these viewers as being stereotypical in its representation of Black characters and of race relations. While praising the film for raising questions and opening up discussion, Susan summed up the characterization in her written response, “The movie, I think, portrayed the Black characters very stereotypically.” (Zebrahead W2 Participant Profile, In 707-708). Similarly, another participant commented:

I don’t know if this is going to sound out of line but maybe it's because I'm White but I feel like Nut's character is such a stereotypical gang banger character.

Second WOMAN: Yeah.

Third WOMAN: Yes.

(Zebrahead W2: 165-169)

This comment strikes a chord with the other participants as evidenced by their immediate verbal acknowledgments. It's qualified by the acknowledgment of racial difference, “maybe it's because I'm White” but also a cautionary concern about being judged, “I don’t know if this is going to sound out of line.” This statement is reminiscent of the feelings the women expressed earlier—that they felt pressure to self-censor when talking about race. Although this group was not racially mixed, which would presumably mitigate some of this pressure, it's likely that the participants felt a heightened sense of awareness because of the focus group setting, the presence of the moderator, who may

have assumed a symbolic role as an older authority figure, and because the sessions were being taped.

Regardless of how they are prefaced, however, these kinds of critique are one consistent way a critical, distanced stance towards media content is manifest. Unlike responses that accept the characterization as valid and talk about the characters as real people, reactions that focus on the quality of the film as a cultural product maintain a critical detachment from the subject matter. Along these lines, a smaller but still significant number of participants made intertextual references in their comments, recognizing *Zebrahead* as part of a pattern. One speaker even referenced other, similar race related texts in her evaluation:

Maybe I've seen too many stereotypical race movies now but I was just like well, one of them's going to get shot, it's just a matter of how long. Because like you see that in like *Stomp the Yard* and *Step Up* and like every other movie that's based on like some sort of racial tension premise. But it was depressing. (Zebrahead W2:159)

The statement "one of them's going to get shot" is critical and distanced. It also treats the characters as undifferentiated pawns in the filmmakers' stock collection. So, in contrast with Zack, the Black characters seem like thinly drawn negative caricatures. The following comment, made in response to the initial statement about Nut being "ludicrous", shows how closely related these two themes --extremism/exaggeration and stereotypical characterization --are for the audience:

.... You couldn't take him seriously as a character which invalidated his actions in the movie, not that they could ever be reasonable but it didn't give him any personal background to follow.

2nd Participant: ... I agree with that. It kind of made me not as into the movie, I think. Because I mean I didn't go to school in Detroit either but I did go to a pretty, very diverse high school and it wasn't like that at all. I mean there was definitely a divide and everything but it wasn't like that. And also after Dee was shot and everything and they're in the classroom and the teacher brought it up and was like asking people, like trying to figure out where he was and stuff like that, I just don't think that was realistic at all. I think one of my high school teachers would have like brought up sensitive, I don't know, I just, too exaggerated. (Zebrahead W2: p 171:173)

One important element that distinguished Valarie (the second speaker) from the previous ones is the establishment of her personal credentials, her ability to judge the movie in reference to her own situation. Rather than disqualifying herself, Valarie uses her personal experience and background as a way to establish the validity of her standpoint, saying, "I did go to a pretty, very diverse high school and it wasn't like that at all." This adds greater weight to her evaluation that the film is "just, too exaggerated."

Emotional impact

Despite these barriers to becoming involved with the material, several participants expressed strong emotional responses to the movie. After watching *Zebrahead* one speaker said:

I guess I just thought the ending was really sad. I don't feel like anything was resolved. Zack and Nikki, but I mean everybody else was still fighting in the end. I don't know, I just thought it was really sad. (Zebrahead W2:177)

Similarly, another speaker's response to the movie was also strikingly emotional. In her written feedback Philippa wrote:

The entire movie seemed to me to be unfair-no one was welcome and I was on edge watching it, waiting for the tension to burst.All in all the movie made me overwhelmingly frustrated because everyone is so resistance [sic] to change. The fact that the movie ended with races fighting made me feel as though nothing had been accomplished by D's death. (Zebrahead W2: In 316 - 319)

This particular speaker described her feelings even more dramatically within the context of the group discussion:

I kind of felt like the whole time I was walking on pins and needles, like you were just waiting for the tension to just burst. Like the moment when Dee got shot I was waiting for it the whole movie because everything just felt so like stressful and frustrating like on the brink of breaking. (Zebrahead W2:157)

This viewer repeatedly uses strong, emotionally evocative language to describe her response to the movie. She describes herself as feeling "overwhelmingly frustrated" and "walking on pins and needles", "waiting for the tension to burst", and even "on the brink of breaking." These comments stand out from many of the others because of its vivid language and also because it's an instance in which the speaker is not holding herself away from the film, or speaking in the voice of a critic making observations about aesthetic value. Instead, in these comments this speaker takes the much more personal, less common in this context, referential stance, relating to the events in the movie as though they were happening in real life. In reference to a character's shooting, she says that she was "waiting for it the whole movie" because of these feelings, because "everything just felt so stressful and frustrating like on the brink of breaking."

So, even though participants more often said they couldn't relate to the film, *Zebrahead* still managed to strike an emotional chord in many White viewers. This proved to

be the case with one woman, who talked at length about what she perceived to be the film's major weaknesses – a lack of realism and often stereotypical characterizations. In spite of those failings, she still felt a stir of emotion as a viewer, describing the film as "depressing." In a similar vein, another speaker connected the film's intensity, which she somewhat begrudgingly acknowledged, and its aesthetic failings. Saying: "I just thought it was really extreme and to me that's why it was so intense," rather than powerful, this viewer judged the film to be manipulative, forcing its emotional responses rather than earning them. This reading was defiantly oppositional, insisting on critical detachment even in the presence of emotional involvement

Audience frames

Ultimately, despite strong objections to many aspects of the film, and the fact that these failings seemed to reinforce these viewers' built in detachment from (and containment of) the racially charged material, there were indications that some audience members still embraced the film's preferred frame to some extent. This is notable given that so much of critical/cultural audience reception studies have shown that when film and television present worldviews that clash with viewers' values, the viewers actively resist that content or read it in oppositional ways that contradict the dominant meaning. If, as argued earlier, *Zebrahead* is an example of a film that primarily paints Black-White race relations as being significantly and inherently, perhaps even irretrievably marked by conflict, then there are indications that the film was partially successful in conveying this point of view even when it clearly conflicted with these women's perspectives on and experience with race. By that I mean, several participants who didn't speak about race as problematic before the film seem to have been convinced that race relations are more conflict ridden after viewing. This is important since it speaks to the audience's relative openness to the text. When we are sure of our convictions, rather than going along with the text, we feel empowered to push back on

it or reject it. This was shown rather dramatically in the Press and Cole study discussed earlier, for example, in which pro-choice women routinely were shown to rather vehemently criticize and speak back to pro-choice bias in popular television programs. There, the women positioned themselves in opposition to the text. Here on the other hand, the speaker was not as consistent nor as confident in her stance:

I think that, although perhaps exaggerated, the film depicted the general public's perception of interracial relationships. It allowed the viewer to see both viewpoints of the relationship. (Zebrahead W2 Profile, 861:863)

So, unlike the pro-life women who reject pro-choice leaning media content out of hand, despite the caveat that the film was "perhaps exaggerated," this speaker ultimately affirms its representation, describing the film as having accurately reflected public attitudes. This qualified perspective is also evident in another participant's written comments:

The movie we saw was moving but a little outdated. I know situations like this are evident in many environments. It is hard for society to accept interracial couples. The movie scared me and made me think about how much lack of progress we have made (if this is an accurate portrayal). However, I know it exists, and I have friends that couldn't bring home a person of another race. It does make me sad. Even though the film was dramatized, there are people who still wouldn't want their children to date someone outside of their race. The film did open my eyes because I feel like at UNC we don't seem to be aware of race relations and that race problems are out there. In high school I felt like I had more awareness than here. The movie helped remind me that America has much more to improve upon. (Zebrahead W2 Participant profile: 476)

Here we see the participant's emotional response ("it does make me sad") is closely intertwined with self-reflection and tentative acceptance of the movie's framing of race relations. As she writes, the film made her think. It also made her "open my eyes" and even caused her to think about her own social network and acknowledge, "I have friends that couldn't bring home a person of another race."

Despite the ambivalence evident in her caveat about the movie being "a little outdated" and the multiple qualifications ("if this is an accurate portrayal" and "though the film was dramatized"), ultimately this reaction reveals that the film resonated with her. This speaker describes the movies as having definite and multi-faceted effects. At different points in the comments, she notes that the film "scared me, ""made me think about how much lack of progress we have made," and that the reality of the racial situation it portrayed "does make me sad." She even acknowledges some personal impact, saying that the film "did open my eyes because I feel like at UNC we don't seem to be aware of race relations." In the end, *Zebrahead* "helped remind" her of racial issues she feels are often overlooked at UNC and also convinced her that there was a "lack of progress we have made" and that "America has much more to improve upon." This is a pivotal conclusion, because implies that the movie's worldview has really been internalized. It's possible that Robyn's complex and nuanced reaction demonstrates how a personal connection can make an audience member open to influence (framing) as she relates to the situation and finds resonance and validity in its representation. However, it's also extremely important to note, as I showed in the previous chapter, that these participants were always mixed in outlook, more ambivalent in their positions on race than some of their contained statements about race indicated; race was always more complicated than contained in their lives. The responses to *Zebrahead* then should be seen as operating in a context of ambivalence. In this context, the nuances of negotiated, rather than oppositional, reading are not unexpected.

This reaction to the movie is one of the strongest in the group. A third participant voiced some similar sentiments but gave a somewhat negotiated reading that was perhaps more typical of the group's sentiments:

My personal opinion is that the film and the situation depicted were outdated, however this could be due to my own experiences. I thought the film was effective in communicating the consequences of interracial relationships, whether romantic or otherwise. Though the circumstances in the film were realistically portrayed, they represented one extreme of racial relations.

(Zebrahead W2 Participant profile: ln 77-78)

In another example, within the group discussion, this viewer calls attention to the historical context of the film and the role of the filmmakers in shaping the film's meaning:

I think going based on what you said, Megan, I think that probably the ending was, you know, and the lack of authority, the lack of strength in the authority figures, however you want to put it, was an effort on the part of the filmmakers to take a stand, I guess, on what they feel the state of race relations was, at least at that time. And that's probably why, rather than making it even though we look at it and we've seen a million movies since then, like you mentioned, you know, *Save the Last Dance* and *Stomp the Yard*, at that time maybe that was something that was not portrayed in movies. You know, early 90s. So that's like, it could have been their effort to make a stand and really show what the state of race relations was and I think that's the point. (Zebrahead W2: 191)

Here, the speaker adopts a critical stance, talking about the film as a product of filmmakers' choices. She also makes intertextual references to other contemporary movies about race. In this case, however, the speaker *complicates* the context of her reading,

placing the film in the "early 90s," she makes some concession to the validity of the filmmakers' vision of race relations "even though we look at it and we've seen a million movies since then like you mentioned, at that time maybe that was something that was not portrayed... it could have been their effort to make a stand and really show what the state of race relations was..." Prompted by the moderator to elaborate, this speaker goes on to say:

Right, because there's always someone pushing back and there's always the person that has the traditional view on things and I guess it was maybe in an effort to say that there was no progress and that there wasn't going to be progress based on what the kids were experiencing and where their authority was coming from. (Zebrahead W2 191:191)

It's important that this viewer prefaces her comments with qualification. In this way, although the participants sometimes talk about the film being outdated, they also embrace the idea that *Zebrahead* represents at least the partial truth about race relations. Theirs are what could be characterized as negotiated readings, articulated in language that seems to affirm the film's legitimacy and downplay or limit the importance of their conflicting personal experience that contradicts it. These readings are also very much in keeping with the idea of a complicated, rather than contained stance towards race.

Confronting black racism

Another key facet of these discussions was that several White participants tended to emphasize the impact of Black racism against Whites. The seeds of this line of thought were present from the start as evidenced in the first part of the focus groups. This concern seemed to be reinforced by the film narrative, and became a major focal point in the post viewing discussion. During the discussion, one woman offered this perspective on racial conflict and communal responsibility for acute incidences of racial conflict:

I also thought that the film made an interesting point about not only portraying Nut and like that race relation but also just the people at the high school that were I guess you could say the pro African-Americans and while they didn't kill and they didn't incite the violence like with force it was kind of like everybody who believed that was propagating it and so it was harder to pinpoint one guilty person because it was like an entire group think. So I thought that was interesting. (Zebrahead W2:199)

Similarly, the same woman later observed:

I think the point was to show that it's not just about the guy who pulls the trigger and it's about all of the people involved in race relations and all of the people pushing one way or another that don't actually have like a physical part in the outcome but they contribute just as much to like the negative race relations. (Zebrahead W2: 331)

In her individual written response this speaker also noted:

I thought the most frustrating part was the "brothers" who were the pro-African and disrespected Nikki because she was dating outside her race. They were propagating all the violence and strife (yes, Nut was the one that shot D but they were all just as guilty of the murder because they made the White/Black issue so polarized) (Zebrahead Participant Profile W2: 314-315)

Although this speaker struggles awkwardly with the terms of her racial discourse at times (the term Pro-African Americans for example), this speaker's ideas are clear and forceful. In multiple comments, this speaker invokes consistent racial ideas. By stating, "they contribute just as much to ...negative race relations" and "they were all just as guilty of the

murder,” she indicts the Black community as a whole as being a primary driver of the characters’ (and the country’s) racial problems. In this view, Black racism is endemic. This theory of collective, universal group culpability means that regardless of whether an individual was the one who pulls the trigger or not, all members of the community were guilty. In isolation this may seem to be an “extreme,” perhaps isolated perspective, but this is an idea this speaker (and others) returned to multiple times, both in individual written reaction and group discussion.⁷²

Philippa’s closing observation in the first comment-- that the movie was "interesting" seems oddly neutral in this context, coming after such strong statements, but is quite frequently often used in discussions of how Blacks are characterized in this film. "Interesting" seems to be a way to confer appreciation and some acknowledgment (if only tentatively) while not fully embracing the film’s perspective. Similarly, another speaker stated the following within the group discussion:

I thought it was interesting that it portrayed like the Blacks being prejudiced against the Whites. I feel like a lot of times people are so concerned about being politically correct that they don’t like address that it goes both ways. I feel like everybody knows that at one point in time or still today Whites are prejudiced against Blacks but I feel like it was interesting to see it portrayed from the other side. (Zebrahead W2:239)

⁷² The concept of collective responsibility for our racial and political environment has strong corollaries in our current political conversation. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama was held responsible for the incendiary rhetoric of his controversial pastor Reverend Wright. Senator McCain was held responsible for the more extreme comments and actions of his followers who attended McCain-Palin rallies and shouted accusations about Barack Obama’s citizenship. Similarly, Senator Clinton was held responsible for the tone of her campaign. When a Floridian shouted “kill him” at a rally in Tampa, in reference to then candidate Obama, it was taken seriously and Governor Palin was taken to task for stirring people into a frenzy with her rhetoric.

This speaker also uses this somewhat ambiguous adjective "interesting" more than once in a nuanced individual response (written prior to any group discussion) that implies this representation of Black racism is a welcome change from what she's used to seeing:

SUSAN: I thought this movie was interesting. I'm not sure if I've ever seen a movie portray an interracial relationship so dramatically. I thought it was interesting because it's kind of taboo for prejudice to be portrayed from the other side. Everyone knows that a long time ago, most Whites were prejudiced towards Blacks, but it's not often talked about where Blacks are prejudiced against Whites. I think people have a hard time talking about race because they are afraid to seem prejudiced themselves. The movie, I think, portrayed the Black characters very stereotypically.

I'm not sure if that was intentional or not, but the dynamics in the movie help open the floor for discussion. (Zebrahead Participant Profile W2: In 706-708)

Here again, while White prejudice is described as being something that happened "a long time ago," Black prejudice is described as a current problem, one that is further exacerbated by Whites' discomfort in talking about race and fear of being labeled prejudiced or even racist.

Experiential knowledge and reception

As evidenced here, personal standpoints with regard to race were a prominent part of these discussions. This was expected. Moreover, as described in the previous chapter, each participant's experience of race is different, so there was variation and a range of perspectives even within each group notwithstanding these participants' shared economic and racial common ground. Nonetheless, by far the biggest differences in opinion were found between the participant groups of different races, comparing Black groups and their White counterparts, rather than within the single race group discussions. Prior to the movie,

this distinction was most vividly manifest in the participants' descriptions of their felt experience of race. Within the atmosphere of the university, most Black students reported that they thought about race every day and that race had great personal impact on their lives. In contrast, White students had strong opinions about race, but were likely to say they rarely think about it and also emphasized their ability to push aside the racial concerns they experienced.

As we've seen, these distinct, personal experiences also figured very prominently in the focus groups discussions about the films when the women made use of the referential standpoint to evaluate the films, either praising or criticizing the film's realism making reference to their own experience. Since experiential knowledge of racial issues diverged greatly across the Black and White focus groups, experience became an important source of difference in how the participants talked about these films.

The young White and predominantly middle class women in these groups found the characters, setting and plot of *Zebrahead* to be extreme. In addition, the Black characters in particular seemed to them to be stereotypical and unrealistic. As a result, the film often seemed to repel this audience and put them at a distance from the film, leading to clinical critiques of the movie. This seems to be in keeping with Len Ang's findings in her extensive television audience study *Watching Dallas*, where perceived realism and identification were found to be closely related to audiences' enjoyment of that television program (Ang, 1985).

I would have expected the White participants' lack of identification with *Zebrahead's* central characters and their perception that it provided extreme and outdated depictions of race to be important barriers to embracing the film's predominant messages about racial conflict. On the contrary, *Zebrahead* elicited emotional reactions from many viewers and also seemed to be incorporated or negotiated into their ultimately complicated (*not* contained) perspectives on race. After seeing the film, however, this group who previously

downplayed the presence of racial conflict in their lives on the whole seemed to embrace the film's portrayal of pervasive racial conflict as realistic. So, although the participants sometimes talk about the film being outdated, many accept the idea that it represents the reality of race relations.

On the whole, the White participants' reactions to *Zebrahead* were mixed and deeply ambivalent. Some audience members thought the film was effective and realistic, especially in its representation of problems and "Black racism" or extreme beliefs in the Black community. More often, White viewers selectively praised these aspects of the movie while also describing the film as extreme, exaggerated and dated. While most of this audience resisted the idea that the film was relevant to their lives, in the end, the most serious criticisms of *Zebrahead* were tempered by the acknowledgement that the film's setting may be realistic but alien to the viewer. So the common ground seemed to be that *Zebrahead* was both extreme and intense, but that it also accurately represents racial tensions and successfully ignited conversations and contemplation of race. If, as I argue in the textual analysis, this film manifests the idea of racial egalitarianism undermined by Black separatism, if the filmmakers' preferred meaning and intention was to highlight endemic racial conflict driven in large part by Black racism, then rather than failing to connect, this film was rather resonant in its framing of race relations.

White Negotiation and Complication in *Something New*

In contrast with *Zebrahead*, *Something New* provides an example of a how a film may contain an arguably dominant, if complex racially egalitarian preferred meaning and still not quite hit its intended mark due to the multifaceted, open nature of the film text. As discussed earlier, based on the textual analysis and the quantitative content analysis, the film seemed to carry a fairly strong individualist version of the multicultural frame, overtly

suggesting that following one's own heart and not the dictates of race, family or other social grouping is the most important human imperative. In addition to the narrative resolution, which supports the idea that cultural differences can be overcome, the underlying value placed on cross racial unity, the idea that what unites us as people is stronger than what divides us, and that love is a supreme, universal imperative, is explicitly voiced by several main characters including Kenya's father and two of her closest friends.

The film's overarching racial frame was well articulated in its marketing campaign which emphasized the topicality and social relevance of the film. The movie garnered extensive publicity; much of it centered on *Something New's* cultural importance and transcendent themes. Lead actress Sanaa Lathan captured the film's essence when she said, "[The movie] is really just about trying not to care so much about what others think and following your heart" ("The Oprah Winfrey Show," 2006). On the internet, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* web site reinforced this message, quoting Lathan and promoting Lathan and Baker's appearance on the program by explicitly linking the movie to current social trends:

When the movie was first released, the Washington Post reported it was all the buzz in Internet chat rooms. *Something New* has also sparked discussions about black women who choose to date outside their race.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, interracial marriages have more than doubled over the past decade. Sanaa, a Tony-nominated actress who attended the Yale School of Drama, says the movie has a universal message that applies to all types of relationships.

Elsewhere, Lathan summarized her attraction to the role citing this connection with contemporary social challenges:

I identify with this character and I know that this is a character we haven't really seen on screen before. We have not seen an interracial issue dealt with

from a black woman and white man's perspective in this way. And, usually, it's a black man, white woman. I loved the fact that it wasn't about the couple being against the world or the couple against the family. I loved the fact that it was her dealing with her own prejudices that came up, her own guilt, her own shame and embarrassment about what her peers thought. ("Sanaa Lathan tries 'Something New'," 2006)

Here the actress touches not only on the issue's contemporary relevance but also on the tug of war between the individual and her social network, the interior pressure that comes from internalizing the boundaries imposed by external authority. Later in the AP interview she added, "I think it's very universal in that, first of all, it's a love story at the core. It's really about following your heart. ...Seeing what's there that might bring you your highest happiness." ("Sanaa Lathan tries 'Something New'," 2006). Ultimately, Lathan advises, "But then you think about it, you should love who you love." Or, as Oprah.com summarized, "Kenya and Brian may seem like an unlikely match, but they have one important thing in common—they're madly in love...with each other!" ("The Oprah Winfrey Show," 2006). In interviews, online, and television, to paraphrase jazz great John Coltrane, the message was consistent: love is supreme.

While a multicultural message may seem to be clearly manifested in the film's narrative, character development and its marketing, as we have seen before what audiences make of filmic content is neither clear-cut nor easily predicted. Some audiences (especially the film's *target* audience) may embrace the expected, preferred reading; others may receive the film's embedded racial discourse in a completely different way or negotiate with select parts of it based on different cultural knowledge and experience. Still others may perceive certain cultural signifiers as intended, but be critical and oppose or reject the

dominant meaning. Alternatively, the racial frame may simply not be as dominant as it seemed in my analysis.

Although *Something New* was marketed by a major studio and promoted in a variety of national media including *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (Terry, 2006), its core audience remained African American women like its protagonist. Racial pride was subtly acknowledged in the marketing, which touted the film as “making history” as well as “making audiences cheer,” and when star Sanaa Lathan described it as “the first studio film to be directed by a black woman (Sanaa Hamri), produced by a black woman (Stephanie Allain), starred in by a black woman (Sanaa Lathan) and written by a black woman (Kriss Turner)” (“The Oprah Winfrey Show,” 2006).

In both age and race, the young White women in this study were outside of the implicit target audience of a movie made primarily by and perhaps for Black women. Nonetheless, they constituted a key demographic that the film needed but failed to attract to become a broader hit as a romantic comedy. Some of the reasons the film resonated with Black women but failed to connect with a broader audience are apparent as one compares the responses of the African American and White women in this study.

Complications and concessions

The first thing that becomes evident discussing this film with young female audiences is the racial disparity in the audiences’ enjoyment of the film and acceptance of the lead character. While most of the African American women immediately responded to the film with praise, among the White participants, an uneasy combination of abstract race blind idealism, coupled with resentments about White burdens and Black prejudice seemed to weigh heavily in the participants’ evaluations, stimulating a great deal of self referential evaluation of the film in relation to their own experiences. Often in the post-movie conversations, the underlying stance of complicating, rather than containing racial conflict

seemed to be the unifying thread, but there was also greater concession or acknowledgment of racial difficulties as these speakers contemplated the layers of racial, gender and class issues embedded in the film.

In one of the most animated parts of the discussion, when asked to talk about specific scenes in the film that stood out, a participant described the fight that ensues over Brian's criticism of Kenya's artificially enhanced hair:

Brian asked Kenya about her hair and she automatically just like was very defensive. And maybe he was just wondering like wanting to know, not trying to be offensive or anything. But she took it automatically like ignorance almost instead of maybe he just doesn't know" (Something New W1: 303).

This comment sparked a broader conversation of racial etiquette and racially determined "politically correct" expectations. The women complained of a double standard in terms of interracial behavioral expectations. They compared the conflict between the interracial couple in the *Something New* to their own difficulty navigating the boundaries of what is acceptable to say to a Black person. In this context, Kenya's perceived overreaction is indicative of broader problems. The lengthy discussion included the following exchange:

1st speaker: I definitely feel like it is a sensitive subject and it's not something that I would ever really mention with someone I'm not close to. I would never ask about anything like that. Just because I feel like anything I would say would be taken as offensive. I mean, as much as I don't know about the different, grooming I guess is the right word. But I don't ask and I don't get asked. It's not like I don't want to know. It's that I just don't want to offend anybody, like you said. (Something New W1: 321)

2nd Speaker: I think it was a completely different situation because they were in bed together. It's not like it was hey, girl, you don't know me, what's up

with your hair? He was curious. He's been with her for, I don't know. You know. I didn't [think] it was that weird. I thought it was weird that she got upset, because of how close they'd been. I guess since like obviously we're supposed to see race as an issue in the entire movie it's not surprising she got upset about that.... too, but I went to Target the other day and got like clear mascara because I was going to put it on my eyebrows and the girl that was checking was a Black girl. She asked me, what does White girls need this for? That's all she said. I thought that that was just funny. I was like, that's an honest question. She hasn't, her eyebrows were probably not as terrible as mine and she didn't need it. So I just thought that was interesting. Kind of related. (Something New W1: 323)

3rd speaker: But it is interesting how there's such a double standard where if there was a White woman cashier and a Black girl checked out something like that and she said something like that, you'd probably get jumped in the parking lot. I just think that there is, we try so hard not to step on people's toes sometimes and I think, I don't know, I think it should be the same way the other both ways. I think it's great she asked that though. But you know what I mean? It should be the same way with everything. (Something New W1: 324-25)

This part of the discussion was particularly lively, with affirmations of recognition and laughs from several different participants as different women shared their stories and feelings about this scene and their related experiences. The women also touched upon talked about other instances of racial double standards including the problem of the School having a Black Journalism Students association when “you definitely couldn't have a white student [association]” (W1: 329).

As wide-ranging as the conversation became, it's emblematic of the distance between the participants and the film's heroine. When a White viewer likens Kenya's response in her fight with Brian to the speaker's experience with a Black cashier at Target who asked her about one of her purchases, another woman in the group affirms that if the situation had been reversed, if the White student had asked a Black woman about her grooming habits, "you'd probably get jumped in the parking lot." Far from identifying with Kenya, the point of the comparison is to show how imbalanced the racial etiquette is and how wrong Kenya was to react as she did. These statements contain several of the elements which were most prominent in the White focus groups: the "us versus them" construction, the need for self-censorship in interracial interactions, and the reference to negative racial stereotypes about Blacks ("you'd probably get jumped in the parking lot"), even while avowing racial neutrality or openness.

There is another aspect of this statement that is worth noting. It's a strong, specific and critical statement, but here again it's couched in neutral terms. The speaker says, "it's interesting how...". During these focus groups, several women described somewhat controversial, dramatic scenes, ones in which something that was particularly racially charged happened. They described these scenes as "interesting." This seemed rather an understatement and potentially a way of partially endorsing something as being valid without going all the way out on a limb and saying "I thought this was valid," or "I thought this was true" or "this really resonated with me." The social psychology research on implicit attitudes may be relevant here. According to Mahzarin Banaji, some critics have attempted to redefine an implicit attitude as one that a person on some level endorses. This is wrong, Banaji notes, because to endorse something is to publicly state one's support and approval (Banaji, et al., 2004b; Dasgupta, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2003). An implicit attitude is one that a person does not consciously acknowledge or recognize. If one does not fully recognize

something internally, you most certainly are not going to publicly acknowledge it outwardly. What ever the exact feeling was, it was some note of resonance.

These ideas about implicit attitudes seem especially relevant to this discussion in light of the predominant racial standpoint in both of the White groups. It's one of contained distance from racial problems--careful, overt conformity with prevailing social norms mixed with nods to the complications of gender, class, and geography that intersect race. This contained but complicated stance is evident in the disclaimers that precede or follow many of the disclosures (I don't know or this may be bad, but..), but what comes either before or after the caution is often a clear racial concern. So, in these conversations, when the discussion veers off into controversial territory, it may be more comfortable to use neutral adjectives when expressing ambivalence or attitudes one worries violate societal norms.

In this context, there were likely important underlying attitudes at work. Since focus groups help and can help bring some attitudes to the forefront, some feelings may surface during discussion, which had previously been hidden. Even so, implicit attitudes may drive reaction but still remain unconscious. Or during the course of the group deliberation they may start to surface but pose or seem to be a cause for concern so the speaker does not fully express the attitude and instead the reaction comes out in a halted or muted fashion. I think that's what's happening here. The speakers acknowledge that they find something notable in a scene or a depiction, such as "I thought it was interesting that just all signs of racism were coming from Kenya and her family and the other black people." (W1: 203). In some instances, other speakers affirm, "I think that's how it is in real life." Or "That seems right." Others may not be that convinced. Or they may feel uncomfortable. "Interesting" is neutral and it is safe. It's *not* fair or accurate to say that "interesting" alone implies acceptance. One can think something is interesting and reject. You can say that's interesting and repulsive. But in the example here, the comment is taken to imply some truth

or resonance and is challenged by another participant, who says that the overt nature of this seemed false: “I thought it was kind of unrealistic when they were so forward and open to him about him being white.”

Given all the social pressure to say that we are color blind and to be egalitarian to respect the norm of equality and, even, to see Blacks as racial victims of discrimination at least historically, given the preponderance of social pressures pushing an audience to reject the idea that “the Blacks are the racists,” to not express that rejection, to remain neutral and say that this representation is simply “interesting” is meaningful. You can’t be neutral about something you know is wrong. There would be no need. Whenever possible, when there was ambiguity, the moderator asked for elaboration, but the free-flowing nature of the discussion sometimes meant allowing the participants to interject, agree or disagree and sometimes even move the discussion past some of these ambiguous statements.

Dancing on eggshells, tiptoeing around

The concept of Black racism struck a particularly meaningful chord with many participants, so the discussion of Kenya’s weave, and double standards for Blacks versus Whites ignited an extensive exploration of this issue that extended way beyond the cashier at Target. Watching the conflict between Kenya and Brian in *Something New* also inspired several participants to talk about other instances in which they felt inhibited around Blacks because of their oversensitivity about race. So great is the pressure, Whites reported, that even identifying a Black person as such was fraught with potential danger. Several statements reinforce this idea:

I’m almost hesitant to call people Black or African American. I mean, I’m White obviously but I don’t get offended. I feel like I’m dancing on eggshells sometimes like about the topic. It shouldn’t be a big deal, but it is, I guess. It’s

like, what do you say without someone else getting mad? (Something New W1: 341)

Some people don't like the term African American because they're like, I'm not from Africa. Then some people don't like the term Black... (W1: 345)

In the first statement, the participant recounts what she sees as the untenable, gray situation in which Whites are sometimes placed, between those who object to one term and those who object equally to the use of another, it seems there is no right answer. In addition to “dancing on eggshells” around Blacks, White resentment takes aim at the perceived behavioral “double standards” that seem to govern race relations in American society.

As in discussion above, in many other instances there were palpable currents of caution and resentment among White participants about social constraints that “shouldn't be a big deal” but, in their experience, inevitably are:

I don't really know where you draw the line at being politically correct. Like which things are you supposed to ask and be politically correct? Like if I'm asking you about your hair, do I have to be politically correct about asking you about your hair? Do I have to be politically correct about asking about your nails? I'm like, where do you draw the line? (W1:307)

...actually the largest minority is Hispanics now so, but there doesn't seem to be that big of a tension or that, you know, it's not like anyone's tiptoeing around that minority but for some reason I feel like there's a lot of, I mean not for some reason, I know the reason, but I mean I just feel like it's not like, even though a lot of people pretend like it's not a big deal any more like it is to them. Or, see, I even feel like saying them as a group is like horrible. (Zebrahead W2:70)

Recognizing that hair is a subject of some significance and, she expects, sensitivity in the Black community, this participant questions whether the sensitivity boundary also extends to other aspects of appearance like nails. On one level, it's a straightforward question, but the language and rhetorical structure of the quote is used is revealing. In the first part of this quote, the participant invokes the somewhat loaded term, "politically correct" and asks "where do you draw the line," implying that the way things are now is problematic and in need of clarification, that some things just should not matter.

The second speaker also makes a comparison between Blacks as a group and Hispanics, saying "it's not like anyone's tiptoeing around that minority" (meaning Hispanics as the latter group). In doing so, the speaker underscores the idea that America's social tensions reside if not exclusively then certainly predominantly within the Black community. This point is underscored by other comments. While several White participants noted how *Something New* portrayed the realities of Black prejudice and oversensitivity, at another juncture, one woman took a more sharply critical stance towards the film, focusing on its perceived failure to fairly portray the reality of Black racism against Whites:

The way that they portrayed the White peoples' racism toward Black people as opposed to the Black racism toward White people, I didn't like it because I felt like the way they portrayed it was more out of hatred and thinking... but I felt like when they did the way Black people are racist to White people I felt like it was more of culture differences. I feel like in most movies that's how it is portrayed, that it's like a Southern thing or Whites thinking they're better, as opposed to just it being a culture difference. I felt like in this movie they really, really did that stereotype. They showed that it was the old White man thinking that a Black woman couldn't do it and then the Black family thinking

that maybe the White not being able to understand the barbecue or just stupid stuff like that, the stereotype of it. (Something New W1: 277)

Here the participant focuses on the way "they" (the filmmakers) failed to fairly represent the ways in which Blacks are racist to Whites and complain of the portrayal as perpetuating negative stereotypes about Whites.

While framed in the context of reaction to the film, this interpretation was consistent with the concerns about Black-White race relations voiced by these participants in the initial discussion. There were similarities of both content and form (language). While noting that the film addressed the issue of Black racism towards to Whites, this particular viewer argued that the portrayal reflected both "stereotype" and bias against Whites. While arguing that Whites are the victims of unfair cultural representation in the film, this viewer also demonstrates how preexisting attitudes from life experience and intertextual knowledge from other cultural works connect with the audience's reception of the film. It reflects the speaker's racial standpoint and recalls the specific concerns discussed earlier. Although this speaker's version of racism is disputed-- this speaker uses it as a synonym for personal prejudice rather than societal, institutionalized discrimination-- her usage is not isolated. It aligns with what many White Americans understand when they avow that racism against Whites is widespread in the U.S., as reported in the Gallup polls discussed in the previous chapter (Newport, 2009). It's also important to note, however, that this perspective was just one of many expressed on this subject. While many of the women talked about the problem of Black racism and its many confusing manifestations, double standards, and rules, these speakers generally thought the film represented that reality and at least one thought the film went too far rather than not far enough.

Reactions to the female protagonist

Unlike the Black participants, this group of women seemed disinclined to accept or focus much attention on the film's preferred meaning as it related to racial transcendence. In part, as other researchers have found, this more oppositional reaction is often associated with a lack of identification with a work's main characters (Liebes & Katz, 1990). Given distance from the character, it's easier to be more critical, as the speaker was in comparing the film's portrayal of White racism versus Black racism. With *Something New*, although audience members often referred to the characters as people and related situations in the film to their own life, they did so positioned in explicit opposition to, rather than in alignment with, Kenya. This seems contrary to the custom in the romantic comedy genre, from the 1940s through Bridget Jones. Even when flawed, the heroine is meant to be lovable; audiences are meant to root for her to find romantic and personal fulfillment. Since neither of the female leads is White, it's possible that this disconnect may be at least partially related to the difficulty audiences may have identifying with characters across racial lines. Such a barrier should not be taken as definitive, however. In recent years, the cross-racial appeal of a star like Will Smith, who has commanded broad audiences while maintaining his sexuality (unlike previous African American male stars), has demonstrated the potential to transcend such barriers. Smith has topped the box office playing a series of likeable heroes, not villains.⁷³ Moreover, people of color have enthusiastically consumed screen images that don't contain images that look like themselves (even while longing for ones that do). Recent ratings reports reveal that American media habits are increasingly becoming more consistent across racial lines, meaning people of all races are now more often watching the same programs than in the past (Mindlin, 2007b).

⁷³ In 2009, Smith topped the box office list, with films averaging \$459 million in worldwide box office, according to a survey of more than 100 movie buyers and sellers ("Will Smith tops Forbes.com's bankable stars list," 2009).

While viewing is not the same as identifying, given these stars' successes and the increasing prevalence of cross-racial media consumption, we can't take for granted that White viewers in this study were inherently unable to relate to Kenya McQueen because of her race. Instead, it's helpful to look at the specific elements of the characterization that seemed to alienate the White audience. In this case, the White audience members were particularly critical of Kenya's complaints about race. In each group, the discussants were asked for their perception of the problems the couple faced and what, if any, unique challenges they faced because of race. As with the earlier hair dispute, in describing challenges, the participants concentrated on Kenya's role in their problems:

I thought it was interesting when they were in the grocery store and they were talking about he doesn't want to listen to it because he's had a rough day and blah blah blah. And she said you know, I live in a White world and everybody else in the grocery store wasn't White at all. There was like a Chinese guy that walked by, there were Black people at the checkout line. There were no White people in the store. I don't know if that was the area they were in, but I thought it was interesting how she thought she lived in a White world when it's really not, in that case. (Something New W1: 261)

The moderator then pressed this speaker to elaborate on her observations, which began with the value neutral phrase, "I thought it was interesting..." but ended with the judgment, "she thought she lived in a White world when it's really not, in that case." The group's moderator pressed this speaker to clarify her understanding of Kenya's misperception, asking, "So did you think her perceptions might even be, she might be highly sensitive to something that she doesn't need to be sensitive about?" The response was a qualified, "Yeah. Maybe a little skewed." A second speaker went further:

I mean, she got partner. How much more validation does she need? Like it's not like she's doing all this hard work and not getting any rewards. Like every time he's like hey, really good job. We rely on you. So I don't know why she feels like she has to prove herself. She's at like the top of the chain, so. And she's telling White guys what to do. So I feel like she thought her life was a little more difficult than it was, as far as facing racial challenges. I thought she kind of in her mind blew things a little bit out of proportion. (Something New W1: 267)

In this contained exchange, the grounds for the audience's discontent with our putative romantic heroine are fully laid out. The first viewer observes that Kenya's perspective about the world she lives in is faulty. This is evidenced by the racial composition of the grocery story in which the couple is shopping when they have their breakup fight (the scene is described in detail in Chapter four). Furthermore, Kenya's unreasonableness is reinforced by the second speaker's comment "she got partner. How much more validation does she need?" and "she blew things a little bit out of proportion." While it's notable that at the time of the scene in question, Kenya has not yet made partner, both speakers' points are well supported by the details they recount.

As depicted here, Kenya's concerns are out of proportion to her circumstances. The audience has seen her comfortable, affluent circumstances and prickly overreactions and responded with distaste. What the audience has almost never seen—what the filmmakers left out of the film—is any concrete foundation for Kenya's racial sensitivity and constant worries. Moments later, addressing the same scene, a speaker expands on this theme, connecting Kenya's problems with Whites at work and how it affects her relationship with Brian:

the comment she made about the plantation while they were in the grocery store was just kind of like she was throwing that in his face, like it was his, like he couldn't experience anything like that, when I'm sure he's been discriminated against maybe for being so close with the Latino community or something like. It's not that White people don't experience discrimination. (Something New W1: 305)

This speaker revisits the idea of White victimization from discrimination and Kenya's insensate, single-minded attention to her own racial problems. The audience's feelings about Kenya were further complicated by her focus on race to the exclusion of gender and class considerations they felt were also important:

I was just interested in that whenever she was feeling racism or discrimination in her corporate life she always attributed it to her race and not necessarily to her gender. She was like the only woman in the corporate setting really in those meetings. I thought that might have had maybe a little more to do with it or just as much to do with it. (Something New W1: 221)

As viewers talked about what they perceived to be Kenya's oversensitivity to race, they also noted that this contrasted ironically with her and her family's discriminatory attitudes about class. When the group was asked to talk about particular scenes that they thought were striking or important, one woman recalled a class-implicated scene as particularly notable:

PARTICIPANT: The scene that stuck out to me is when her brother won't shake Brian's hand and then he says, what, he's the help. Like just that that's the same kind of like prejudice and I don't know, that stood out to me more. Like they can complain about instances of racism that they face when at the

same time they're looking down on someone else for what they do for a living. And this is a college-educated person who. You know what I mean?

MODERATOR: So you saw it as he wouldn't shake his hand and it was a class, social class kind of issue.

PARTICIPANT: Yeah.

MODERATOR: Or do you think it was a race thing, but he pretended like it was a social class issue? Or do you know?

PARTICIPANT: Um, I don't know. I guess it's kind of like a hybrid of the two things. I guess because he comes from this well-educated, affluent family that in that way he thinks he's better than someone who's a gardener, who does manual labor for a living. You can't make a judgment like that. He'd know something about him and that he is an educated person. I don't think so. (Something New W1: 291-299)

In this exchange, this woman calls attention to how race is made more complicated by issues of class. She also emphasizes that this affluent Black family is guilty of class prejudice and that their actions are morally wrong, that “you can’t make a judgment like that.” This is an important but not fully developed aspect of the film. It is one important way the film complicates the racial narrative in ways that echo the women’s earlier conversations but are ultimately unsatisfying to the audience. The gender and class implications of Kenya’s struggles at work and in her relationship seemed to put these women at odds with her as she focuses on race but never really confronts these other issues. These are also issues that the film raises but does not resolve to this audience’s satisfaction.

The dissatisfaction in these comments is rooted in the participants’ initial ones about racial double standards and Black racial hypersensitivity. After the movie, however, these ideas dominate the conversation and are better developed, as the movie added fuel to pre-

existing concerns. In another example, a viewer describes Kenya's appearance and her behavior towards Brian as contradictory:

In that case her getting a weave is like trying to make herself like have features more like a White person would have, like straight hair. And all he's like, he wants her to have her natural hair, like that is accepting of like her culture and background. So I just don't understand how she got mad about that. She complains that he won't listen when she wants to talk about these things but then she's doing things to make herself fit into the White community at her job or whatever herself. (Something New W1, W1: 305)

In the end, the film was like an accelerant that ignited a more generalized discussion of a variety of White concerns, not about interracial dating, but about Black expectations and Black people's focus on past wrongs. Like her singular focus on race, Kenya's complaints about having to work harder than others to get where she is professionally (what she termed "the Black tax") were a source of contention for several participants. White reactions to that are best captured in the following statement:

I feel like everybody has to work hard to get to where they are unless you're lucky and it's handed to you. But my whole life I've grown up, every time we talked about slavery in school, you know, all the Black people started crying and taking it out on, or blaming White people, and it's like, I'm sorry that that happened to you. It didn't actually happen to you, it happened to your ancestors and your family but I feel like that's carried on from just way too long. And, that it's taken into the workplace now, and it's well, you know, my ancestors were slaves so I have to work really hard to get where I am because I haven't always been free. Or something like that. And it may sound

very, not ignorant of me, but just not P.C. I find that it's taken to an extreme when people talk about Black tax. (Something New W1: 373)

In the precipitating incident this speaker describes, Kenya receives pushback from a White client who doubts her qualifications to handle his account. Over the course of a few workplace scenes, the client's discomfort seems to derive from a combination of factors including Kenya's younger age and relatively new role leading an account, but also certainly her race. This conflict is quickly resolved with the support of her well meaning White supervisor. When Kenya complains about this situation to Brian, the resulting fight in grocery store is handled somewhat ambiguously, to the dissatisfaction of the audience, as recounted earlier. The film provides indications that Kenya is partially justified. She is being tested and questioned, and it does appear to be racially motivated. But she also seems to be overreacting and taking it out on Brian, who has had enough racial discourse. As a result, the two break up until both can come to terms with how to handle such situations, ultimately trust each other and put the relationship above their racial differences. It's a multifaceted situation and the film raises complex issues about institutional racism and bridging different perspectives that are only cursorily treated and resolved within the confines of this romantic comedy.

Interracial Representational Strategies and Audience Reception

As articulated in the comments above, participant reactions to the film seem to expand upon the harsher racial views expressed in the initial discussion, rather reflecting a potentially more sympathetic perspective of the female protagonist, which might be expected with such a female centered film in the romantic comedy genre. At least three alternative, but not exclusive explanations should be considered in order to understand this response. First, presuming that the filmmaker did draw the romantic heroine in predominantly sympathetic terms, rather than adopting the filmmaker's perspective, this

audience may have been unable to bridge the many differences in background between themselves and the Kenya, who is substantially older, established, and African American. As a result, they may have negotiated with the material, focusing in on and praising the elements that resonated most with their personal experience and casting a sharply critical eye on the elements that they feel are unrealistic or inadequate. As we saw in *Zebrahead*, the audience's connection with the characters is an essential part of this type of critical, detached reception.

Second, it's also important to acknowledge, however, that the idea of the preferred reading is not definitive. Erica Childs' reading casts *Something New* as a harsh treatment of interracial romance that reproduces many of the negative and inequitable patterns of representation employed by White filmmakers, despite the filmmakers' African American heritage and female identity. I also acknowledged, although to a lesser extent, the inherently harsh critique of the Black community embedded in the film. So the film text, despite the many multicultural aspects that I detail in my analysis, gives the audience much to work with in their critique.

Finally, a third, rationale helps to explain why this audience had so little affection and sympathy for the film's ostensible heroine. This last consideration revolves around the idea of genre that I would argue is also essential to understanding audiences' objections to this protagonist. My interpretation of the film's preferred meaning emphasizes the latent sexism inherent in its characterization of Brian as savior and Kenya as a somewhat stereotypical, driven professional woman in need of rescue. My argument is that films with such built in sexist representations encourage audiences to more harshly judge their female protagonists and idealize the males. So these young women are in large part responding to the film's highly gendered representations (in a seemingly uncritical way). Whereas the film's overt, self-consciously classed conflict invites you to see class as a false barrier that should be

overcome (much like race), the film's portrayal of gender does not coherently challenge or even clearly acknowledge gender assumptions. The caricature-like portrayal of Kenya's mother in contrast with her benevolent father, and the Father Knows Best-style denouement also reinforce rather than disavow masculine, patriarchal authority.

Ultimately, Kenya's growth, her love of Brian, her embrace of the more fulfilling life he offers, and his devotion to her *could* have softened Kenya's rougher edges, inviting the audience to root for her despite her initial failings. This, however, is where this audience really stops short. Their readings may be negotiated, but they don't require much of a departure from the text as the filmmakers certainly give the audience much to dislike over the course of the film, especially if one is prone to be less than sympathetic.

In keeping with this negotiated, selective reading of the film, there are several clear commonalities between the interracial discursive strategies identified in the textual analysis of *Something New* and audience discourse about the film and about race. The most compelling subjects for this audience –the ones they talked about in greatest detail and with the widest consensus were Black racial attitudes and the movie's atypical treatment of class. Perhaps not incidentally, both topics represent ways in which the Black characters are at fault and learn to overcome their default positions over the course of the film.

Again, although this may not be a preferred reading of the film, it is supported by the film text. As discussed earlier, whereas a film like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* acknowledged both Black and White opposition to racial integration, in these contemporary, ostensibly liberal films set in the Black community, the role and fault of the Black community in racial strife is much more prominent. Black-instigated racial violence (*Zebrahead*, *Save the Last Dance*), Black prejudice against Whites, Black hypersensitivity and overreaction to racial offense are all showcased almost to the exclusion of any other racial problems. So these women's reactions bring to the forefront a subtext that has become prevalent in

contemporary films dealing with race but has thus far received relatively little critical attention.⁷⁴

Still, it's important to recognize that these problematic, complicating elements of *Something's New's* representation of the interracial relationship are only part of the picture. Overall, the film explicitly portrays the romance as loving, passionate, and built on mutual support and love as well as physical attraction. This is also film in which the romantic leads' physical and emotional connection and intimacy was manifest on screen in more than fifty percent of the scenes and in which the legitimacy of the love relationship was affirmed by both leads and at least her family members (his are absent). So while the film does offer both class and gender conflict as complications to the lead relationship, it also offers the couple a substantial amount of affirmation as well. As a result, this audience's dominant emphasis on *Something New's* most problematic complications should be seen against this broader backdrop of the film as a whole and the audience's explicitly personal connection/resonance with this particular aspect of the representation.

The experience-driven nature of these readings was manifest in many comments. Addressing the origin of their ongoing ambivalence about race relations and interracial relationships in particular, these young women most often pointed to social pressure they felt still prevailed, sometimes from peers, but more often and importantly from their families. This was one element of the film that some of the women identified with.

I liked also that they showed him, like he wasn't comfortable at the party when he was talking to their friends. I liked how they showed that, that he did feel out of place at one point. (Something New W1: 215)

⁷⁴ Important exceptions are Frances Gateward's examination of Hollywood's tendency to problematize interracial romance in teen movies (2005) and Erica Childs' recent book *Fade to Black* (2009).

Similarly another woman reacted positively to the film's scenes involving Kenya's friends and family's disapproval of her relationship with Brian:

I think that is was sort of realistic in the sense that there was more resistance to it on the Black side than there was on the White side. I think that Blacks generally are more so like not wanting to have interracial relationships and White people don't really care as much. (Something New W1:203)

Finally, in a free-flowing discussion about what they most liked or disliked about the film, one woman summarized her reaction to the film in the following way:

I thought it was interesting that just all signs of racism were coming from Kenya and her family and the other Black people. Like he didn't say anything that would suggest, I don't know, just the differences or whatever. They were all more vocal about making comments in situations that really had absolutely nothing to do with race. They would still bring it into the situation. I can imagine his frustration with that. When he's doing everything right and still being, I don't know, held accountable for something he has nothing to do with. (Something New W1: 217)

As we see here, contrary to the assertion of Adam Serwer, currently a fellow at political journal *The American Prospect* and popular commentator on race and American politics, apparently quite a few people do seem convinced by media portrayals of discomfort with interracial relationships are “a black thing” (Serwer, 2009). In all three instances here, liking or praising the film as “realistic” is intertwined with its portrayal of critical Black racial attitudes towards interracial couples and Whites in general. Not all respondents agreed with the disparities in how Black and White opposition to interracial dating was portrayed, however. While some women appreciated the representation of this issue in *Something New*, others questioned the movie's realism in this respect, and felt the film did not go nearly

far enough in depicting the social pressures the couple would face, including the likely pushback from their White peers and family members:

I thought it was portrayed as way too accepting. I feel like a lot of times you'd have your friends and they'd talk behind your back and say bad things about why is she with that White guy? I feel like it would have been like that in real life. (Something New W1: 201)

Yeah. Just because, I said it before but just, I guess my parents' perceptions and what that would be, that I couldn't ever separate myself from that. So I do think it matters. Like in theory that would be the ideal situation, if you just liked someone and you saw them as they truly were and that was it. But I don't really think that's the case for a lot of people. [Something New W1, ?]

Similarly, another speaker challenged the film's depiction of Kenya and Brian's disparate comfort levels with the interracial aspect of the relationship:

I thought that it was pretty accurate in the way that her family and friends acted. I thought he was a little too accepting of it. Like oh, just go with the flow and let it be natural, there's no difference. I felt like he was a little too accepting, but maybe he thought it was his lifestyle. (Something New W1:197)

While these participants often seemed to position themselves in qualified negotiation rather than agreement with the film, *Something New* also employed several narrative strategies that are recognized by film scholars as building audience sympathy for a romantic couple bucking social restrictions, and these strategies *did* resonate with this audience. One element that several White respondents appreciated was the atypical class positions of the Black and White characters:

I thought it was interesting they did it from a very cultured, very articulate Black family because I feel like most of the times when they do interracial relationships you get it from the like stereotypical African American that's not as cultured or not as wealthy or affluent and that was a very interesting, just the way they approached that I thought that made it easier to see what she had to go through like day to day, like in the office and that sort of thing.

(Something New W1: 205)

And how they made Brian like a gardener, which was kind of the opposite.

Usually you'd have the stereotype, like the Black person might have been the laborer. She was the one who had the corporate executive job. (W1: 211)

Although, as we saw earlier, the women objected to the way Kenya's family abused their status, both of these women identify the film's perceived class inversion as a positive element that strayed from depictions in other movies. In praising the film's handling of class, they used consistent terms, noting that it went against expectations and the usual "stereotypical African American." This positive reaction to the characters' class positions is no accident according to Wartenberg, who identifies this as one of several recurring narrative and representational strategies in unlikely couple films that work to destabilize social hierarchies of class and race. These include: inversion of hierarchy (as just described), counterexample in which the presumed inferior is made into an exemplar,⁷⁵ and displacement in which the hierarchy is shown to be an inadequate and faulty way of understanding the world (1999). This discussion demonstrates that these types of strategies can make an impression and they may be influential in how films are these social differences are perceived by audiences.

⁷⁵ Sidney Poitier's Doctor in Guess Who's Coming to Dinner is a classic, often criticized idealized exemplar.

Responses to the absent parent in *Something New*

As discussed earlier, in race-focused unlikely couple films, the absence or diminishment of a main character's parents helps to facilitate the pairing of two people from different backgrounds. Rather than confront the older generation's attitudes about race, these films render the parent absent (through death or abandonment) and/or irrelevant in order to break the familial bond, which tends to favor conformity and tradition. In doing so, the films manifest an accelerated version of generational change. This absent parent narrative device figures prominently in many of the films studied. In *Something New*, as some women noticed, the absence of family is more obvious since Brian hardly has any ties that are shown beyond his developing romance with Kenya. While Kenya's parents feature prominently in the film, Brian's are not even mentioned (when an older White man hugs Brian in the wedding sequence, there is no dialogue so it's unclear if he's the father). In fact, only two characters in the film are tied to Brian rather than Kenya – a Hispanic woman at the community garden and Brian's ex-girlfriend. Neither makes more than a cursory appearance.

In context of these focus groups in which peer and parental resistance looms large as a barrier to interracial intimacy, the absent parent narrative strategy proved problematic. The women felt the film's presentation of the couple's social network provided an incomplete and unsatisfying picture of the challenges the couple would face. Towards the latter part of each discussion, the women were asked to comment on how accurately the film portrayed either their experiences or those of their friends when dating outside your race and to evaluate what they thought of the choices the characters made. In response, the groups talked about how the story would be resolved if Kenya inhabited the real (their) world. While one White viewer thought *Something New* did a good job of representing Kenya's internal

struggle, others focused on its failure to accurately represent the opposition the couple would face:

The conversation she was having with her family, I mean like I almost wish there was a grandmother in there because you were talking about your grandmother. I know my grandmother would mind ... that he was Black or he was Hispanic. She just doesn't have like a filter. But it's something you deal with, I guess. (Something New W1: 245)

I'm not really sure that ... in reality she would have picked Brian over Mark, considering how much pressure was put on her by her family and friends. Mark was a good guy, like, that's what she wanted her whole life, so, while I don't doubt the fact that she loved Brian I don't know that she would have chosen him. (W1:355)

I know if I brought a Black date to my cousin's wedding or something like, my family would talk about it and they would, it would be a big deal, but if I, even if I brought a Hispanic person to a wedding who didn't even speak English, that would be just as big a deal. I don't, if they weren't White it would be something that my family's not familiar with. It doesn't mean that they wouldn't eventually accept it, but it would definitely be something that they would have to get used to. (W1: 389)

... I think a lot of people through watching that relationship and weighing in on it they had to face their own issues and most of them seemed to come over. Her Dad was like, yeah, he's the one for you. Her mom was smiling and

watching them dance. Everyone seemed to be OK with it at the end, which may be unrealistic. It happened really quickly that everyone got over all those long-standing issues from their childhood, but it was cute. (W1: 395)

It would be a lot easier for you to tell your friends to go ahead and just pursue it, if it's love, because you don't have to deal with the family issues and the things that go on. You're not the one in the awkward situation and you're just like, oh, my friend's happy and in love, but it would be harder if it was you. (W1: 401)

Here, women who felt that they were already highly accepting of interracial relationships and generally racially tolerant declared the issue to be "old news" in the post viewing discussion *even while* recounting race-based doubts, resentment, and negative stereotypes. Given a limited range of choices on an opinion poll, were they to label their views about race, these participants might easily check boxes as do the great majority of Americans, avowing that they approve of interracial relationships and have no racial animus or prejudice. In discussion, however, their responses to these fictional interracial couples resembled the complex racial attitudes articulated in the pre-viewing discussions. They were complicated and qualified but also concerned. There is an important distinction between ambivalence, meaning wavering or instability, and qualification, meaning that the attitude depends on the specific context. It seems that the responses to these films reveal more of the latter among this group of women.

The predominantly critical interpretations presented here may run counter to the overarching theme of the film, but they are directly rooted in and supported by *Something New's* narrative structure and the characterization of its African American lead. These readings reflect the multidimensionality of the film's preferred meaning. While "follow your

heart” as Sanaa Lathan says, was the dominant message about love, the film contained subtler key messages about race. First, the film puts Kenya’s world, her friends and family and their community at its center. In addition, in keeping with the absent parent (and absent social world in this case) narrative, Brian’s friends and family are invisible in this film. If Whites bear any residual racial resentment against Blacks or if there is institutional racism in the contemporary American workplace, those aspects of Black-White race relations have little representation in this film. They may have taken part in the final wedding scene, but if so they have no speaking roles. As a result, all of the resistance the couple encounters comes from the Black community. Also, Kenya does talk about race at length in the film. Although she grows beyond this over the course of the film, Kenya is sensitive to any type of criticism or judgment, especially, it seems, when that judgment is rendered by Whites, whether at work or in her romantic life.

The criticism of Kenya voiced by these White participants reflect specific choices made by an African American filmmaker to portray Kenya as flawed but able to change and overcome her personal barriers. Rather than helping the audience to identify with the human weaknesses of the protagonist’s perspective, however, this portrayal seems to validate the audience perception of socially destructive character flaws like racial oversensitivity and Black anger that they feel are pervasive and unacknowledged among Blacks. This interpretation persisted despite the film’s dramatic romantic resolution, with Kenya overcoming her reservations in favor of love and the couple celebrating their wedding in the final scene. Instead of praising the resolution, several women rejected it as too easy, quick, or unrealistic. The conversation flowed from complaints that the characters were too driven by racial hostility and resentments to criticism that they too easily overcame their racial differences. In doing so, this audience’s responses seemed to focus in on existing concerns and resentments.

Reverse racism and the multicultural romance

For both films, the focus group format revealed elements of the interracial narrative that had meaning for the audience but might otherwise be overlooked and unchallenged even with careful textual analysis. As discussed, both White male romantic leads were almost entirely without family and friends in the films the audience viewed. The absence of a meaningful social network around the White romantic lead eliminated the issue of White resistance to the relationship almost entirely. In contrast with the White protagonists, the Black characters had parents, other relatives and relatives who were in their lives and openly expressed opposition to their relationship. Furthermore, both films took place almost entirely in the Black community. So both the resistance to the relationship and the racial barriers that needed to be overcome for the relationship to survive also originated in the Black community. In the most dramatic event depicted, the interracial relationship even acted as a catalyst for a tragic act of violence within the Black community.

Some of these narrative choices were discussed at length with some critical distance among this study's White middle class audiences, but the discussion also focused in a personal way on the "fact" that in these films "the Blacks were the racists." As a result, if the interracial relationship was meant to be a symbolic vehicle of social progress as is theorized about unlikely couple films, then for these viewers of these particular films the major impediments to that progress reside solely within the Black community.

These elements were all part of the films' structure and were easy enough to identify. However, the extent to which these elements would stand out and shape the audience's perceptions of the film and their subsequent statements about race was not anticipated. One of the perhaps unintended consequences of telling this type of story is that some audiences seem to grab onto them, seeing them as indicative of our racial reality, validating the resurgent belief in some quarters that the only important impediments to further racial

progress in America are the resistance, reverse racism and internal pathologies of the Black community. If so, rather than bringing people together, such stories may have a corrosive effect and help to push us further apart.

Chapter 7: Black Women and Interracial Romance

Audience reactions to films tell much about their subjective, everyday sense-making. In our media saturated culture, we learn how to think about the world through cinematic gaze, thus blurring the boundary between cinematic experience and “real” experience

Particularly for socially charged issues such as race, sex or gender, and class, films provide common sites for diverse audiences to reflect and engage...

--Etsuko Kinefuchi and Mark P. Orbe (2008, p. 71)

As Kinefuchi and Orbe argued, “different standpoints mean different realities. While “European Americans tend to emphasize the universality of human experience” and “believe that racism is largely a historical issue, “ “people of color see their experiences being racialized and thus are different from those of European Americans” (2008, p. 71). As a result of their different experiences and vantage points, “European Americans and U.S Americans of color have different—even possibly oppositional—understandings of the world” (Kinefuchi & Orbe, 2008, p. 73). Recognizing these differences but also bearing in mind that race is an important but far from singular component in standpoint, this chapter examines how young Black women engaged with and responded to different

representations of interracial romance in popular film. Examining the transcripts from four focus group discussions and individual written survey replies, the responses of African American women to two types of depictions—one that endorses a conflict driven conception of interracial relationships (*Zebrahead*) and another that frames the interracial relationship in a more supportive light (*Something New*) – are addressed. In addition to examining Black women's reactions to these two different films, this analysis also contrasts reception of these films across racial groups. As in the previous chapter, my aim is to address two central questions: How were these conversations influenced by the racial background and racialized experiences (i.e. the standpoints) of the participants? And how did the group discussions speak to and transform the predominant racial frames embedded in these interracial romance films?

Black Responses to *Zebrahead*

In contrast with the predominantly critical responses expressed by White participants in this study, Black viewers frequently praised *Zebrahead* (Dowd, 1992) for being realistic and thought provoking. While Black audiences are used to negotiating meaning from negative portrayals (as Bobo and others have found), the predominant mode of interpretation seemed to be not struggle to find something positive in a negative representation, but recognition, the acknowledgment that many of the problems they see in the world (and had already articulated in the pre- movie discussions) were being represented on screen. As a result, these African American participants were more emotionally involved with the film, its characters and plot than their White counterparts were. They felt more identification with the characters and resonance with the film's situations. This personal reaction is manifest in the content and form of the African American responses. Although some of these young women were critical of the film's young African

American leading woman as their White counterparts, overall they had strong praise for the film and openly embraced its perspective on race and interracial relationships. Rather than seeing the film as negative, they read it as realistic and cautionary and even explicitly talked about it as a positive learning experience on tolerance.

Social realism and resonance.

From the start, the Black participants' comments about *Zebrahead* sounded different from those of the White participants. As in the White groups, the facilitator's first question asked was always the simplest, "So what did you think?" Given the film's 1992 setting and violent end, some pushback was to be expected, either regarding the time period, which was likely to feel dated or the racial violence could have been viewed as stereotypical or melodramatic as it had been in the White focus groups. Neither of these predicted critiques prevailed. Based on the textual analysis, the film also seemed to be somewhat polysemic, however, so this too was not particularly surprising. Having already listened to the White responses, I expected variation, but did not necessarily expect to find such polarized responses to the film across racial lines (unlike *Jungle Fever* for example which may seem to have a more clear cut message). Nonetheless, there were very strong differences in reception that broke down along racial lines.

The most dramatic differences between Black and White reception hinged upon the participants' evaluation of whether or not the film was realistic. Whereas White participants quickly arrived at consensus that the film was exaggerated and extreme in its portrayal of race relations, Black participants praised the film for its realism. Black speakers almost universally and explicitly identified both with the film's settings and characters to a significant degree. In contrast with their White counterparts who often prefaced and qualified their statements with the caveat that they had no personal knowledge of such settings and situations, Black participants rarely made such disclaimers. Instead, they talked about how

realistic it was and how much the film resonated with them personally. This differences in readings bears some resemblance to that observed by Kinefuchi and Orbe (2008) in their audience study of the movie *Crash* (Haggis, 2004) . African American students in that study more often responded to the film in a racialized context and evaluated it from a personalized, attached position, relating closely to the film and identifying with its characters and scenarios.

These two differences, perceived realism and personal identification, seemed to be pivotal in the audience's acceptance or rejection of the movie's themes. Whereas the White groups were ultimately somewhat dismissive of the film, the Black groups embraced its point of view on interracial relationships and race in general. The differences between White responses and Black responses to these interracial depictions seem to reflect, I suspect, some of the predominant divide between Black and White views on race and race relations.

Black participants' initial reactions set the stage for the discussion that followed. Whereas "extreme" and "exaggerated" had been essential descriptors for White audience members, this group frequently used variations on the word "real" or accurate to describe *Zebrahead*.. Black women praised the film, recalling anecdotes from their own personal history that paralleled particular incidents in the movie. As the viewing experience stirred up memories, those personal experiences became a major part of the conversation.

In particular, there was a great deal of discussion that explained why they liked or respected the film's take on race. Heather's comment on the representation of peer pressure and friendship in the film is a typical example of that:

I think the portrayal of her [NIKKI's] girl friends was pretty accurate because in my circle of friends you've got like people that are all over the place as far as that goes. I mean they're all going to still be my friend, but if I was in a situation like that, probably be one of those like, ahh, he's white or something

like that. The rest of them are cool, but like at the very end and that one girl is like, it's about ignorance, I was thinking to myself, like that's so true. And some people understand it. (*Zebrahead* AA3: 404)

Here the speaker uses two important adjectives to describe the portrayal of Nikki's friends, "accurate" and "true". The second to last sentence in particular offers a subtle but illustrative summary of her response to this aspect of the film, saying, "I was thinking to myself, like that's so true." This statement is telling because in it the speaker describes not a subsequent judgment, but a contemporaneous recognition, a moment of resonance during the viewing. We also see that this perceived realism is closely intertwined with this personal resonance and recognition.

These participants singled out several scenes among friends as ones to which they could relate. A pivotal scene in *Zebrahead* in which a group of White guys question and tease Zack about what it's like to date a Black girl reminded one participant of an awkward moment with a White male friend:

Well I've even had, like I had this friend who came to me and he said, he was like, you know, I was going to make out with a black girl the other day, but I just couldn't get over the fact that she had big lips. And I was like

2nd Participant: Wow, what a dick. [LAUGHTER]

....1st Participant: He said that to me, and I was like, well what do you want me to say? Oh well, I'm friends with all people, so I'm just going to accept your comment, I'm open. No, that's not OK in any sense. I don't know.

(*Zebrahead*, AA3 500-507)

A similar sense of recognition was sparked when another woman recalled a scene in which Zack, the White lead asks his friend Dee how he feels about his dating his cousin. Her

reasons for choosing this particular scene highlight the importance of personal experience to the cinematic experience for this film. This speaker discloses that she felt the scene was important because it convincingly portrayed the issue of peer attitudes and influence in her own life:

... also when Zack was talking to Dee about talking to his cousin, and he's like, oh yeah, like he comes up with all these things and finally he's like, well, yeah, and you know I'm white, and I was kind of like you know, he knows you, that's your friend, why would you, I didn't understand why he would bring it out, but it was kind of like throwing it in there like trying to see like gauge his reaction I guess. And I think that does happen in real life, like people kind of want to test and see what their friends say before they actually go out and see. (*Zebrahead*, African American Group1 AA3 675)

As discussed earlier, the idea of “pleasure” in the consumption of popular culture being “first and foremost a pleasure of recognition” is central to understanding Black women’s responses to these interracial films (Ang, 1985, p. 20). As indicated, in the earlier comments above, the speakers recounted scenes from *Zebrahead* that they felt were most striking. In the last quotation, the women were specifically prompted to address what they thought about the characters’ views on race. In both cases, as a key part of making those evaluations, the African American women plainly offered realism as a contributing factor in the chosen scene’s appeal.

Regardless of the question asked, on multiple occasions, the scenes viewers singled out were ones that they said resembled how people deal with racial issues in the real world. These scenes seem to recall or reinforce the participants’ existing predispositions. Whereas White participants thought the scenarios were extreme and overly dramatic and the

characterizations stereotypical, the Black participants focused in on the many scenes and exchanges that felt real to them.

Even at their most skeptical, Black participants generally endorsed the film's representation and characterizations:

I thought it was semi-realistic. I don't really know what it was like to live in 1992, so it's pretty hard but, yeah. Like there was nothing in it that struck me like, ahh, why would they put that in a movie or anything like that, it was kind of thought provoking because like, I've had a couple white guys who talked to me before and like I mean I wasn't really interested, it wasn't necessarily because they were white, but not thinking about it, maybe it was like subconsciously. I don't think about that. (AA3:352)

Later in the discussion this speaker summarized her feelings about the film:

I just felt like it had a lot of messages, but at the end, and there was like kind of two main messages. There was like Nikki and Zack who were still like friends after the whole situation, and then there was the other people that were fighting in the hallway, that was happening simultaneously, and it just like, that's really how it is in the world, there's people that are just going to accept like interracial relations, and then there's people that are going to fight it. (*Zebrahead*, African American Group1 AA3, 760)

Overall, this speaker gives consistent if sometimes cautious praise for the film, describing the depiction at different points as “good”, “thought provoking” and “really how it is in the world.” Even though this speaker’s assessment was one of the most reserved compared to her peers, the film also made her rethink about her own reactions to the idea of interracial dating, noting, “maybe subconsciously” her lack of interest was related to race. Her comments above specifically affirm the idea that there is “nothing” in the film that was

overtly troublesome and sound quite different from most White viewers' more critical assessments. Another viewer in the same group described the film as "very realistic". In fact, rather than faulting the film for exaggerating, one woman in that group felt the film had possibly not gone far enough:

I thought it was big for the time it came out, I could see it, like I could see them taking it a lot further today, because maybe we just tend to get more extreme with passage of time, but I thought it raised all the relevant issues, and I think they did a good job with showing that the problems don't end with the movie. It ended with the fight, and it ended up with most people still not getting the point of what happened, so in that sense it was very realistic.

(*Zebrahead*, AA3: 356)

In this part of the conversation, the speaker affirms *Zebrahead's* social realism and again connects the film's message to the real world. Contrary to other viewers who felt that perhaps the film might be outdated in its overt representation of racial conflict, this participant speculates that a more current film might take the same story "a lot further today." She also says that "we just tend to get more extreme with passage of time," not less so. The weight of her assessment is strengthened by the rhetorical form it takes. She doesn't say that films have gotten more extreme, but that "we" have. She also points to the symbolic, stylized fight in the hallway, describing this ending as one factor in the film being "very realistic." In doing so, both what this young woman says and how she says it underscores the idea that she takes the film seriously and personally. These evaluations also underscore the Black perception of race relations as characterized by concession and concern—the parts of the film that were singled out here for being realistic and resonant often pertained to racial conflict.

Concerns about Representation

Despite generally positive responses to the way the film represented the issues surrounding race and interracial relationships, some aspects of *Zebrahead* did raise concerns for these women. Two issues in particular stand out. One area of resistance involved the film's representation of what racism sounds like when it's coming from authority figures. In the film, a White school administrator advises Zack against continuing his relationship with Nikki, even telling him to stick with his own "tribe." Here, several Black participants objected. Contending that racial progress has been made, at least in social etiquette if not reality, they rejected the idea that racism and separatism would be espoused so openly. One of the African American viewers described her reaction to that as surprise and tried to understand the teacher's perspective:

The environment at the school like when the principal pulled Zack aside and was like, stick with your own tribe, I should have kicked you and Nikki before, like that. I didn't know that was an issue. You kind of feel like it's an issue at school, but I guess I don't take into account what the teacher, you know what they have to deal with as well, you know the conflicts between the students and then regulating it.... (*Zebrahead* AA Group 3, 609)

Similarly, in response to this scene, another African American woman said: "It's unrealistic. I don't think anyone in real life would have the guts or boldness to say something like that to someone" (*Zebrahead* AA3: 625). When asked as a follow-up if they had ever heard similar comments, these participants said no and one simply responded, "I didn't really take it seriously." (*Zebrahead*, AA3, 617). Coupled with the last speaker's earlier overall assessment of the film-- "I just...I thought it was a good movie"--this comment is revealing.

Ultimately, with regard to this aspect of the film, the representation of public responses to the interracial relationship, most Black discussants allowed that some elements in the film were unrealistic or just didn't jibe with their own experience. Nonetheless, they also made it clear that they did not take these facets of the film literally, and these elements did not preclude their enjoyment.

Similarly, the movie's portrayal of the African American romantic lead elicited strong reactions and ambivalent responses. Although they were more sympathetic toward Nikki than White audience members had been, some Black women were troubled by what they viewed as Nikki's promiscuity. This criticism was complex. These women talked about the character in two different ways. At times, they drew connections between the way African American women are portrayed and the characterization of Nikki in *Zebrahead*, blaming the filmmaker for shaping the representation in that way. In this vein of discussion, Nikki is described as a troubling reminder of well-worn, stereotypical images of African Americans:

I think for the movie in general I think that just kind of goes with the black women Jezebel thing. I don't know, that was just what I thought. (*Zebrahead* AA4: 804)

These women also, however, sometimes made more critical and self-referential statements, treating Nikki as a person of whom they disapproved and directing their disapproval at the character, not the writer or director. This pattern is articulated in the following exchange between two participants in the second African American group that watched *Zebrahead*:

So it's not necessarily like it's OK for, well actually that's basically what she's saying. She's saying it's OK for a black guy to call me a slut, a bitch, a ho, dadada, but if a white guy doesn't even say that ... but in the film the character says the blacker the berry the sweeter the] juice which if it came

from a black guy would be considered a compliment but because ... she is basically creating her own double standard. (*Zebrahead* AA4: 786)

The first night she met him she's up there kissing him and then the first like time she spends alone with Nut she's kissing him. I don't know if she didn't have like enough male attention because [she] didn't have a father.

(*Zebrahead* AA4: 796)

she was just, I mean she talked about she wants respect but you're not even respecting yourself by sitting there just giving it up to these guys so easily. I just felt like even in that kind of, the stereotypical black Jezebel. You know, these women are promiscuous, these women are easy to get, this woman with this white man ... this white man. Not saying that's necessarily how it is but some people can look at that like she's this, you know, white man's sexual toy or whatever. Because he just hug up on her and she just straight up goes for it. So I don't know, I just felt like she doesn't really have any I guess respect for herself let alone demanding other people to respect her because if she respected herself more she would make them work for it.

(*Zebrahead* AA4: 808)

Other comments from various groups reflect these sentiments as well:

I was pretty mad, this is Heather. I was pretty mad at Nikki after they broke up, for even entertaining him. I was like, oh really, Nikki leave him alone.

[LAUGHTER]

I mean, it doesn't matter, like what color he was or whatever, but just leave him alone, he's been used, you know what I mean? (*Zebrahead* AA3: 705-709)

A double standard but also like she tried to change what respect was contingent based on who it came from. (*Zebrahead* AA4: 782)

In these moments, while discussing Nikki, it's as though she is a person rather than merely a character. These women express frustration about her choices and are animated in discussing each wrong direction in her life. Their repeated laughter, concern and even their judgments reflect a certain level of emotional attachment. They may not like Nikki, but they are caught up in her story.

In part, as discussed, the African American students' more intense involvement with the film reflects that pleasure of recognition that seems to inform so much of these conversations. The contrasting reactions are not just related to individual experience, however. There is also a sense among these African American women of being *implicated* by these films, a belief that the film reflects on and speaks to their position in society. These participants were self-consciously aware of Nikki as just one of many problematic representations of African American women in American culture, especially the stereotype of the sexually promiscuous Jezebel, which is explicitly referenced here.

In the context of the Southern university, among these predominantly middle and working class young Black women, there are several dimensions of meaning built into this figure. This Jezebel is analyzed at length in feminist media criticism (Collins, 2000). Also, as more than one speaker indicated, it's also a specter the students would have encountered in African American studies as a symbol of how popular culture helps to objectify and devalue Black women. The idea of Black sexuality as deviant is also one that is pertinent to film and cultural studies.

Beyond the academy, the Jezebel is also highly salient to Black conservative values, which are especially prevalent among the African American middle class and among African Americans from the South in general (Harris-Lacewell, 2004). These values were

prominently manifest in these discussions, not surprising since most of the participants were from these very groups (as described in the earlier audience profile). In the initial part of these focus groups, these values were central to the discussion as the women talked about their lives on campus, the need to always be vigilant of their behavior in mixed company, and to represent the Black community in the best light possible. Implicit within these post-film discussions is the sense that these women's desire to be and to be seen as model Black citizens is directly undercut by the specter of the Jezebel.

Further complicating these comments, the women's self-aware racial conservatism, is intensified by sexual conservatism. Perhaps because the character is in high school and only a little younger than the participants, these young African American speakers may feel they are well positioned to judge her sexual behavior. They make strong moral judgments about her, comparing Nikki's kissing a boy to being a "stereotypical black Jezebel," noting that such women are "promiscuous" and "easy to get." These concerns implicitly presume that Nikki is being looked at and judged by Whites (and that all Black women are by association). Nikki, this woman argues, may be looked at "like she's this, you know, white man's sexual toy or whatever." Even though Nikki is a fictional character, and the Jezebel is itself a representational type, neither fact reduces the high level of emotional involvement and attachment the women carry throughout their dissection of how Nikki fits that type.

Invoking the idea of the "Jezebel" figure within the discussion of this particular cultural text is also an indicator of the importance of intertextuality. It also reflects on the central importance of the scholarly environment in some film responses. As stated, these particular women live and study in a culturally aware environment and many of them specifically referenced feminism, African American studies or film classes as specific

influences. So their readings and responses to Nikki are partially shaped by and specific to that prior exposure, as well as their values, fear and expectations.⁷⁶

This strong critique also shows that the women were not afraid to criticize the film despite its Black romantic lead. They weren't just negotiating, making the best of a negative portrayal in exchange for the pleasure of seeing someone like themselves on screen. If that sentiment was felt, it was not prominently discussed. Although they empathized with her, these women maintained a respectful distance between themselves and *Zebrahead's* film's flawed female protagonist. Instead, they praised the aspects of the film that resonated and soundly condemned the facets, like Nikki's character, that offended them.

Still, despite these serious concerns about the character and the image of Black women in relation to White society, unlike the White viewers, several African American women empathized with Nikki and were able to identify with her choices and her fears:

It is hard when everybody's been telling you that you're going to get disrespected by someone, you know, you're going to get disrespected by this person who's dating you and you like him, and you don't want to believe it, and it's always on the back of your mind, and then you hear it. Of course you're going to jump to conclusions, and of course you're going to get mad because that is disrespectful, and that's nothing you want to hear at the party where you already feel uncomfortable because of the people there. I probably would have been just as angry... (*Zebrahead* AA3, 713)

This is again is a highly personal reaction to the film. In these comments, the speaker uses the subjunctive voice to imagine herself in Nikki's position, having the

⁷⁶ In a similar vein, Will Brooker's study of audience reactions to the *Phantom Menace* showed that exposure to critiques can influence how people interpret cultural representations. Audiences who were aware of the critique about racial and ethnic stereotypes in the *Phantom Menace* were much more likely to see the film as racist (Brooker, 2001).

warnings of others “always on the back of your mind”. Given those circumstances, she says, with the external forces warning against the interracial involvement and the potential for disrespect, Nikki’s initial actions, even her rejection of Zack, become understandable, even obligatory. The speaker calls attention to this point with her repeated use of the words “of course”: “of course, you’re going to jump to conclusions, and of course you’re going to get mad...” She also imagines: “I probably would have been just as angry.” Here there is explicit understanding of the character in this viewer’s comments. Also implicit in these comments is that by imagining herself in Nikki’s situation, the viewer places herself in the world as the writer-director first imagined it. One has to also accept and imagine that the world within the movie is a believable one.

Under those circumstances, there is justification for even Nikki’s most problematic choice in the film, the decision to spend time with Nut:

It would seem to me at that point for me, because I'd go crazy, [LAUGHTER]
honestly it would seem to me that everybody's against me anyways, I think
that's what drove her to even be in the presence of not like really, that she
was like, well everybody's telling me that this is the way it's supposed to be,
well it's going to be this way, and he's most accessible person in the room.
Like he's already all over me all the time anyway, so, why not try it? But then
you know she realized it and I was crazy, and it was like maybe not with his
guests. (*Zebrahead* AA3, 717)

So instead of railing at the film’s depiction of the reaction to the romance, within these comments the speaker accepts the terms of the fictional world Anthony Drazan created and empathizes with the emotional reaction of his protagonist. In her view, Nikki’s actions are not overreaction. These two dominant reactions to Nikki—the self-consciousness

and fear of White perception as well as empathy for her—also come together in the following exchange:

1st Participant: ...I just felt like she doesn't really have any I guess respect for herself let alone demanding other people to respect her because if she respected herself more she would make them work for it.

2nd Participant: I kind of disagree with that because I feel like that is any woman's role in movies, that they, and I don't think that it's wrong because just like a man, like you want to express yourself sensually or sexually like, well not sexually, I think that's wrong, but like sensually like that's not a problem. And I think sometimes, especially when we see, like if it was a black man and she would have kissed him it would be nothing wrong with that because it's not necessarily like she's giving in to this white man and what he wants her to do. (*Zebrahead* Group 2, AA4: 808-810)

In this dialogue, the accusation of sexual promiscuity, which underlies the women's criticism of Nikki is challenged. The interracial story both prompts them to reproduce certain assumptions about race and sex and also inspires some of the women to push back on these assumptions. The question of whether or not Nikki deserves respect is challenged by taking the element of race away in two ways: comparing Nikki to other romantic heroines in other movies, and also by comparing their reaction to her actions with Zack to what may have happened if Nikki had been paired with a Black man. In both instances the speaker attempts to take away some of the expectations that are imposed when gender, race and sexuality are mixed. In doing so, the second speaker refutes the assumption of sexual exploitation that is introduced by the interracial pairing. There are stricter sexual boundaries imposed on Nikki in part as a reaction to wanting to refute negative stereotypes. This is another way in which the speakers question the racial boundaries and code.

Intersections: Framing Race and Sexuality

Interracial intimacy and its many ramifications are far more central to American life than many people appreciate or are willing to acknowledge.

...The shadow cast by race on sexual notions, experiences, and feelings is apparent at every level of the culture. - Randall Kennedy (2003, pp. 13-14)

Zebrahead's framing of race seeps through in a multitude of creative choices and the audience's acceptance of that frame is evidenced a variety of ways, including some that have already been discussed. The participants' avowal of the film's realism, for example, implies that its racial representations are valid. Sometimes, however, the way the film frames its views about race is more than implied. At several points in these discussions, the Black women who watched *Zebrahead* seemed to explicitly validate the key themes that form the dominant or preferred meaning of the movie. One of the immediate reactions of these viewers was to affirm the film's conflict ridden representation of race relations and interracial relationships:

It made me think like... how much things haven't changed really. I mean maybe they, I don't know. In some ways they have, and some ways they haven't, I don't know. (*Zebrahead* Group1 AA3: 348)

In this statement, the speaker wavers. Two contrasts are interesting to make. First, how were the discussions prior to viewing compared with those after? In this case, having been raised by a White family and identifying with both the White and Black communities, prior to the film this speaker was one of the most positive about race relations. After viewing

the film, her initial reaction was that she's not so sure how much things have changed.⁷⁷

Also consistent with the dominant racial outlook conveyed in *Zebrahead*, the racial problems depicted in the film were sometimes interpreted by viewers in this study as being widespread. For example, when asked to reflect on what made the film thought provoking on this issue, one woman said:

...when Nut killed Dee. Because throughout the movie, I think we all knew Nut did not want her to be with the white boy but I didn't think it was like he had a strong hatred until when he killed Dee for trying to break them up or whatever. And that's when I was like whoa, like you never know what people are thinking and he was really adamant about a black girl being with a black guy and a white guy being with a white girl. So I was just like, wow, that was just really eye opening. (*Zebrahead* AA4: 488)

In describing the fundamental premise that “you never know what people are thinking” as “eye opening,” this speaker validates the idea that extreme racial bias and even violence is realistic. This idea was, for this speaker, something new given her own multicultural family background. For other African American participants, *Zebrahead* represented the darker racial fears and feelings they already had and made them dramatically manifest. Although the film's violence is shocking, it's also ironically stabilizing in that it reinforces the idea of racial conflict as inevitable and dangerous and that these relationships are fraught with pitfalls and doomed to failure. The following comments are representative of these feelings:

⁷⁷ This participant described her family background as follows during the opening discussion: My brother and I are both black, I don't know, I'm mixed, he's Spanish and Black. But we grew up together, and both my parents are White, and I have one cousin who's adopted and he's Black too. He lives in Texas, so I don't really see him ever. But yeah, my parents, it was never an issue. (*Zebrahead* AA3, 203)

I mean it put like every issue in one movie, but I know it's hard to date somebody outside my race. It's just hard. That's why I've had so many, probably it's hard to make it work out. (*Zebrahead* AA3: 583)

Something always go wrong, and it might be racially motivated, it might not, you just never know, and sometimes I just don't want to. (*Zebrahead* AA3: 587)

As reflected in these comments, *Zebrahead* affirmed rather than introduced the racial conflict and victimization lens through which Black women sometimes view their interactions with Whites. The phrasing “I’ve had so many” and “sometimes I just don’t want to” indicate continuity and shows that the perspective being articulated preceded the viewing.

One of the cinematic tropes most often encountered in representations of interracial sexuality is the equation of interracial romance with exploitation and deviance (Bogle, 2001; Collins, 2000). This trope is present in the cultural output of both Black and White artists. With the former, it reflects, among other things, the deep seated fears among Blacks that a White man interested in a Black woman is acting out of sexual fetish rather than genuine affection. As discussed in both the literature review and textual analysis, this is an idea that is explored in *Jungle Fever* and one that has deep historical roots. After all, as Randall Kennedy documented, “the shadow cast by race on sexual notions, experiences, and feelings” affects every level of our society (Kennedy, 2003, p. 14). So, despite the youth of the discussants, their conversations showed that these ideas have not receded very far into our cultural memory, at least among certain segments of our culture. That the psychological association of interracial intimacy with deviance still lurks in the subconscious mind is reflected in the following comment:

The part when Zack was talking with his friends in the kitchen, they were like, her full lips and her big butt, or whatever he was saying, it just took me back.

I was like wow, so that's what they think about me? Well yeah, I was wondering, I'm like, I'm wonder if white guys really think that. It's like they're more infatuated, they might be more infatuated being with a black woman than really wanting to be with them. That always worries me. (*Zebrahead* AA3: 482)

As this speaker indicates here (“That always worries me”), the film brought out feelings and fears the women already had. Furthermore, as they watched the young White men gather and joke about Black female sexuality, the film “just took me back,” causing her to wonder, “so that’s what they think about me?” In that instantaneous reflection, the speaker was transported and the distance between Nikki and the women in the study evaporated. That question effectively demonstrates just how closely implicated in the racial drama some of these women sometimes felt.

Looking at the discussions from a different angle, we can compare the racialized views expressed before and after viewing among groups of viewers who share the same racial identification but viewed different films. There were four groups of African American women. For almost all the African American groups, the tenor and mood of the discussion after viewing *Zebrahead* was consistent with the views participants voiced about race prior to it. The racial position of concession and struggle, as expressed in stories of personal impact of race dominated the conversations among African American women before and after watching the movie. So, unlike one of the speakers quoted above, after watching *Zebrahead*, for most participants, the responses often showed consistency with their initial comments, although with slightly greater complexity and even greater sadness. This was not the case with White participants, for whom concessions to racial conflict dominated the post viewing discussion but not the conversation prior to it, when the women discussed their own experiences with race.

As can be expected, however, the mood of the discussion after *Zebrahead* did differ somewhat, however, from the conversation after watching *Something New*, as we will soon see later in this chapter. For the most part, with the partial exception of the Jezebel critique, when Black participants voiced concern about *Zebrahead*, they were passionately critical of the characters, not the representation of the characters. They praised the film, and complained about the characters' actions. They expressed great frustration with the Black characters for their role in creating rifts and tension between Blacks and Whites, especially Nikki and Nut. They also talked at length about the elements in the characters' relationships that complicated and made peaceful coexistence more difficult:

people are fighting a lot of different fights and that for some reason, reasoning race as anchor for it. Like I don't think all the things that they were fighting about, I think the only reason why they had to do with race is because it's easier to deal with different problems that way, when you could categorize it. Like I think in this day and age we shouldn't have to be looking at race. We've come so far in terms of every other aspect like technology, communication, things like that. But then we're still stuck on race, so I think that's a lot of the problem, because we use race, culture, and ethnicity to deal with problems we have with bigger things. (*Zebrahead* AA3: 770)

These comments, which closely mimic the point of view expressed by the film's writer-director, are striking. The words the speaker uses here are especially important. This participant talks about people as "fighting a lot of different fights and that for some reason, reasoning race as anchor for it." In these comments, this young woman articulates the essential characteristic of a complicated (as opposed to contained or conflict acquiescent) position on race. She acknowledges that there are multiple factors at work in the characters'

lives, but that race becomes the “anchor” for these issues. Later, she says, “we use race, culture and ethnicity to deal with problems.”

Here then is the essence of the idea of complicating race, the idea that other factors, economic, gender related, etc. are centrally important, but we tend to exclusively or predominantly focus in on race. Reactions to the film also echoed the idea, articulated so clearly in a viewer’s response to the film’s ending: “I think they did a good job with showing that the problems don’t end with the movie. It ended with the fight, and it ended up with most people still not getting the point of what happened, so in that sense it was very realistic.” (*Zebrahead*, AA3: 356) In these statements, the participants reproduce the dominant but potentially contradictory ideas conveyed in the film—that contemporary race relations are marked by struggle, but at the same time more complicated than we allow. While some of these sentiments were expressed within a White focus group, in general White viewers focused more on racial conflict in reaction to *Zebrahead* rather than complication.

In addition to accepting the idea of perpetual racial struggle, the women’s embrace of the film’s point of view on race was also indicated in their responses to the film’s central character, its boundary-crossing hero Zack. As discussed earlier, Zack is the focus of the film and its central protagonist. While Nikki was a fundamentally problematic figure for audiences, Black women liked Zack (as had their White audience counterparts) and there was little opposition to or even questioning of his idealized sensitive yet heroic characterization. This view was typical of the dominant response in the African American groups:

..I think he kind of defied the odds of the average male because not just black or white because usually you know guys aren’t, you know, for expressing themselves and stuff like that. But after they broke up when he went to Nikki’s

house and he was able to tell her I don't know my mother, like you're lucky.

And I think it gave her the chance to maybe like give him another chance

because he really doesn't know how to treat a female. His dad does

whatever he wants to do and encourages him to do the same thing so –

(Zebrahead AA4: 544)

Concerns and complications.

As we've seen in the excerpts above, many of these comments reflect a pattern that was present in the early conversation but perhaps made clearer in response to the movie – that of complicating race, taking into account the different aspects of our social world such as gender and class that intersect with racial identity. In doing so, Black participants spoke from a perspective which reflected perhaps their greatest point of commonality with White participants. While both Black and White participants focused a great deal of their attention in these discussions on racial conflict and describing the racial concessions they faced personally, the target of these concessions was markedly different. Whites' main concerns were Black or reverse racism. Blacks, in contrast, focused on persistent issues with Whites and on Black intragroup conflict, so there was little substantive overlap when participants took a concessionary position in relation to racial conflict. The complications of race, class, and gender, however, did provide some common ground.

The film inspired several speakers to explicitly and extensively question what they perceive to be the constraints of race, gender and ethnicity. This questioning of social boundaries and expectations is evident in the following exchange, which addresses why the budding romantic relationship between Nikki's cousin Dee and his Asian classmate was not treated as controversial while Zack and Nikki's was:

1st Participant ...I was thinking about them and how nobody really made a big deal about the two of them together, and it was like two different people but it

was OK, and I was wondering like why was the big issue between the white and the black couple, and it was OK with the Asian and black couple.

2nd Participant: When you see it today, at least I see it today, it's a lot easier if you're of Middle Eastern descent or if you're Asian, it's a lot easier to go in between races and mix where you want to go, people think less about it because you kind of, like for some reason black people aren't allowed to have an individual identity, like it's black people period, like they're all the same. But you can have an Asian that hangs out with white people, or an Asian that hangs out with black people, or you can have an Indian that does the same. For some reason, I don't know, I guess the whole black race has been like put into one, like into one person. Other countries get more mobility, or not countries but ethnicities. (Stephanie *Zebrahead* Group 1 AA3:802-804)

There are multiple ideas and complaints packed into this exchange. On one level, the central complaint here is that social restrictions are more narrowly proscribed for Blacks than members of other ethnic groups. Women who are Asian or of Middle Eastern heritage flow freely among different groups of people including Blacks: "it was OK with the Asian and black couple". But, Blacks find themselves reduced "into one person" and don't have that "mobility".

Immediately following on this exchange, in one African American group, the women questioned whether there were also different rules for Black women than for Black men:

I think, in general I think it's easier for black guys to date outside their race than it is for a black woman. Because I know even on this campus there are a bunch of black guys who date outside their race, and I've heard my black friends here. They'll see a Black girl with a White guy, and they're like, they're so upset. But I'm like look at all the black dudes out there, dating

outside their race, so what's the big deal? So maybe in general, I don't know if this is true, but maybe black women get just more, just more everything for dating outside their race. I don't know, just a thought. (*Zebrahead* Group 1 AA3:808)

The common thread in this observation about Black men and the previous one about other minority ethnic groups is a sense of unfairness and the conviction that social boundaries continue to narrow the choices they have as Black women, more so than for other people. These statements involve concrete claims about rates of social integration according to ethnicity and gender in American culture, but minimize cultural or religious factors that can limit the choices of women of Asian and Middle Eastern heritage and those of Black men.⁷⁸ It's also notable that Connie was a minor character with only a few lines a dialogue in the entire film, but she is the voice of racial reconciliation in two important scenes. Because of Connie's lack of screen time, these women's attention to the relationship between Dee and Connie is somewhat speculative; it's focused on aspects of the characters' relationship that were more sub textual than explicit. This attention to a brief but meaningful aspect of the film magnifies the importance of these comparisons and underscores the women's sensitivity to these issues.

African American women in this study revisited this theme, the unique and problematic social position of African American women, at multiple points. They also said that they saw this played out within the film when Nikki's actions are depicted as precipitating her cousin Dee's shooting. In a more explicitly critical discussion of the narrative, one African American student focused on the series of events leading to the shooting and how that affected and shaped Nikki's character:

⁷⁸ Since it's the ideas and beliefs that are the focus of the present study, I won't assess either the verisimilitude of representation or factual bases for the audience's comments.

Participant: But she still got blamed for everything. She got blamed for everything.

MODERATOR: What do you mean?

Participant: Like, it was sort of her fault for even making the choice to date a white person when she knew all this would happen, so she's responsible for her cousin's death, and she's responsible for, I mean of course the umm....

MODERATOR: So this movie made you think about how a lot of blame or focus was put on the woman for doing this?

Participant: Yeah, like she was back in the corridor where everybody was talking about this, like even her mother was like, why did you have to go and do that now? (*Zebrahead* AA3: 833-855)

In this exchange, the speaker reminds the group that several aspects of the film place Nikki at the center of the racial conflict. First, her relationship with Zack is a cause of tension, then her brief involvement then subsequent rejection of Nut gives an already unstable character a focus for his rage. This leads to Dee's death. Finally, if the audience didn't put those actions together, we have Nikki's mother, as Bettina points out, directly placing the blame on her daughter. This makes Nikki a very problematic character and one that despite her lead status is ultimately not sympathetically drawn.

Although specific elements in *Zebrahead*—particularly the representation of the relationship between Dee and Connie and the problematic depiction of Nikki—ignited the conversation, the discussion was often more self-reflective than focused on the film. As a result, I think it's also important to examine the emotions that underlie these statements, both about the limitations of gender and the comments about relative limitations of being

Black versus belonging to another ethnic background. Talking about the movie aroused a well of emotion. Many women expressed frustration with what they perceive to be narrow, even stifling, social restrictions that constrict Blacks in general but Black women most of all. They also mourned an absence of individual agency (or even individual identity) that can result from such tight social strictures.

These sentiments about African American racial identity echo those expressed by many Black women across several groups in the beginning of the discussions, when many of the women questioned multiple aspects of the popular discussion and representation of interracial relationships. One problem they pointed out was that these conversations were too narrow, typically only relating to Blacks dating Whites: “I would rather see just a mix, like more, not just Black and White. I feel like that's all that ever gets talked about.” (*Zebrahead* AA3:262) Another woman questioned why movies featuring couples of different races always had to centrally focus on the issue of race: “I would also like to see movies that have mixed races but aren't about mixed races. Like that would be OK with me.” (*Zebrahead* Group AA3:266) Similarly: “every time it has to be about oh, let's see what happens when the white person goes with a black person, and let's see what happens if the black person goes with the white person. Sometimes it's not about race but we make it about race.” (*Zebrahead* Group 1, AA3:274).⁷⁹

Dissatisfaction with *Zebrahead*'s narrative resolution (though not usually the film as a whole) and frustration with real-world gender and racial constraints are the most prominent parts of these critiques by Black women. These feelings are expressed most clearly in the

⁷⁹ These discussions took place over a year prior to the release of two movies, *Rachel Getting Married* (Demme, 2009) and *Away We Go* (P. Harris & Mendes, 2009), that did just that – represent Interracialism in a way that arguably included different cultures without being explicitly about race. Ironically, both movies, however, received a great deal of criticism for not dealing more directly with racial issues.

adverse contrast made by a woman who had seen the movie *Something New* prior to taking part in the *Zebrahead* focus group:

The main character, she had a lot of problems with dating a white guy with her family, like they didn't support her at all... Eventually she just you know, she did what she wanted, she fell in love. So I think that movie examines it really well. Love is love, it doesn't matter what the color is. (*Zebrahead* AA3: 830)

In this brief evaluation, the speaker expresses a preference for the more idealistic multicultural vision of race presented in *Something New*. Like many of the other comments, it also reflects an ideological rejection of social constraints.

To understand these women's fears and concerns about Nikki, it helps to put them in context and contrast with the findings of the textual analysis of the film and the intentions of the filmmaker. Thematically and politically, one of the dominant features of the film is that it is largely focused on illuminating Black separatism through the prism of White liberalism, or as I call it earlier, Black separatism in the White mind. Second, it is also primarily Zack's, not Nikki's story. In fact, according to interviews he gave at the time of the film's release, *Zebrahead* is writer-director Anthony Drazan's own story as well. For example, addressing Zack's fluency and affinity for Black culture Drazan draws a connection. As one interviewer observed, "Drazan feels a particular affinity for the character of Zack. 'I see myself as a crossover kid from 1973, whereas Michael [Zack] was a crossover kid from 1989'" ("Anthony Drazan," 1992, p. 76). Similarly, the *New York Times* noted, "Much of the \$2 million movie is autobiographical, and Mr. Drazan, who is 37 years old, had been working on the script for several years" (Schoemer, 1992, p. 11). Also, "Zack's best friend, Dee, is black; both Zack and Dee are from middle-class families...When Mr. Drazan was growing up in Cedarhurst, his best childhood friend, Douglas, was black" (Schoemer, 1992, p. 11).

In fact, even Zack's brotherly love for Dee and the missing mother storyline had roots in Drazan's life story. In the filmmaker's own words:

I would imagine that Doug [his childhood best friend] and I hit it off because he sat in the back left corner of the classroom and that's where I felt comfortable sitting too. I lost my mother when I was young, so I had a strong feeling of alienation from the mainstream. Anybody who's gone through something like that feels just completely different and outside. It's hard to fit in. (Schoemer, 1992, p. 16)

It can be confusing to try to parse out intentionality from promotional hype in the publicity that accompanies a film's release. Nonetheless, Drazan's worldview and his perspective on race were essential to how the film was made as well as how it was marketed. The story was conceived during Drazan's time at the Sundance Institute's Screenwriters Lab and Filmmakers Lab in 1987 ("Anthony Drazan," 1992) and the central character is modeled on director's life. Accordingly, the idea that *Zebrahead* represents one man's sincere view of his own story and that of those around him seems clear from the personal tone of the film and its attendant disclosures. But, it's also evident that this particular viewpoint is also demonstrably incomplete and problematic as a social critique.

One problem with the film is that there seems to be a significant gap between the filmmaker's intentions and the result. Drazan's perception of the film's message was fairly simple—"either we live together or we die." A version of this idea seems to come across in a small minority of audience comments, but this message was severely muddled for most audience members in this study. What's more, there was also the idea, according to executive-producer Oliver Stone, that Drazan's film would "cross the boundary of racial difference in order to expose our similarity" and that "today's youth can 'sample anything' culturally—friendship and even romance" (Dowd, 1992, p. 76).

This second point, that of common ground that crosses racial lines, seems much less in evidence in the film. There are glimpses of this view manifest in the scenes of musical fusion, in the parallel sexual stereotyping and curiosities of Nikki's girlfriends and Zack's guy friends, and in the friendship between Zack and Dee. An ironic, symbolic common ground of intolerance is also found in *Zebrahead's* lyrical but nihilistic final scene. In the film's close, two supporting schoolboy bullies— one Black and militantly Afrocentric, the other Italian and vaguely racist—are locked in endless battle as they tumble through the hallway. For the audience, these faint glimmers of common ground and especially the idea of cross-racial communal guilt are overwhelmed by an avalanche of bad choices (Nikki) and Black violence (Nut). It's also telling that while a great deal of the women's analysis focused on Nikki, in Drazan's interviews, Nikki is mentioned only in passing. Her almost complete omission in the interviews is another indicator that the movie was never really about her.

Black Responses to Zebrahead: Convergence and Divergence

In these discussions, it seems that while responses to the film differed according to the race of the viewer, there was more commonality in post viewing conversation across race than was present prior to viewing. One implication seems to be that the film encourages audience members to be critical of the role of the Black community in fomenting racial division. Another commonality among African American and White viewers seemed to be that the film sparked discussions in which the women talked about their desire to challenge assumptions about race, focusing on other "complicating" factors that contribute to strife in the movie and in real world.

Still, there were important differences between the two groups of viewers. The audience's openness and faithfulness to the movie's dominant frame seems to be differentiated along racial lines. Black and White women placed emphasis on different ideas and White women took less pleasure and meaning from the film. Among Black viewers, the

interracial romantic narrative in *Zebrahead*, which in part reflects a conflict driven view of Black-White race relations (despite the filmmaker's intentions), seemed to serve as a reminder, perhaps even amplifier, of preexisting Black conservative attitudes and fears about race and White Americans. These women affirmed the realism and resonance of the film's perspective, especially feelings that racism is endemic in American society, but also had complex and nuanced reactions to the negative portrayal of African American womanhood embodied in the main character.

The young African American women in this study may not have been "color-blind," but they did earnestly yearn to be less bound by color. This desire is reflected in their questions about ethnicity and in their defense of Nikki's sexual choices that hinged on the question of whether the same sexual criticisms would have applied if race had not been a factor. This recurring wish to transcend the expectations of Black identity was stoked but not satisfied by watching *Zebrahead*.

As mentioned earlier, Ien Ang writes that "popular pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure of recognition" (1985, p. 20). We certainly see that at work in the differential responses of Black women and White women to the story depicted in this film. Whereas White women saw exaggerations of racial conflict and difference to be a definitive flaw that detracted from their feelings about the film, Black women did not take each detail of the story literally, discounting certain elements of the film as "dramatic," but the overall vision resonated strongly with them and they were willing to forgive the aspects that did not. Building on the theoretical vision of Pierre Bourdieu, Ang also writes that "popular pleasure is characterized by an immediate emotional involvement in the object of pleasure" (1985, p. 20). Along with and closely entwined with the differences in prior experience that they brought to the viewing and discussion, that sense of personal involvement was one of the principal distinctions in the two groups' readings of this film. The Black women's responses

to the film were deeply personal. Even when they objected to elements in the film's representation, they also connected with them.

African American Reactions to Something New

Like reactions to *Zebrahead*, African American responses to *Something New* diverged in substantial ways from White responses. With a few exceptions, Black women responded positively to *Something New* (Hamri, 2006). They found the film enjoyable and often explicitly approved of the movie's romantic and multicultural lessons. But members of the group also expressed skepticism about certain parts of the film's representations and its presumed messages. Like their White counterparts, these women negotiated with the film. Rather than critical, however, as the White respondents had mostly been, among Black women the dominant stance towards the film was referential, contemplating and drawing on their values and personal experiences in their comments.

Even more so than with *Zebrahead*, the women clearly related to this heroine; the way they talked about the movie reflected that difference. The depiction of friendship among Black women was one of the first elements singled out for praise:

...I liked the movie and what really caught my eye was the interaction between the four girlfriends. Because I really could relate, like I thought that they were my friends or something. Like, you always have your friends telling you what you should do and you probably know most of the time you can't listen to them. You have to do what you want to do. And I like the way they were all successful, and, you know, doctors and lawyers, and I feel that we see that in society a lot. I think one of them was dating a cook. Like, a lot of times successful black women, we have to go after what's available and there

aren't as many successful available black men as there are women. So I liked that aspect of the movie. (Something New AA1: 197)

This comment touches upon the referential connection that many of the Black women felt with the film. The speaker moves fluidly between I, you, and we, noting the parts of the film that appealed to her as an individual – like the depiction of the interaction amongst friends—and also the elements like the plight of successful black women that she related to as “we,” a member of a larger group.

Although most reactions were positive and this audience seemed to feel the movie represented a perspective that was welcome, fresh and authentic, these women also had concerns and reservations about the film. There was a substantial amount of talk, in particular, about what the film left out of its representation of this interracial couple and about the movie's lack of depth. Black participants felt that the film neglected to address some significant aspects of interracial relationships and race relations.

One of the elements the participants questioned most frequently was the decision to portray only the Black community's reaction to the interracial couple. As a result, the face of the opposition the couple faces is almost exclusively Black and the supportive figures are White (Kenya's friend at work and her mother). Black women identified *Something New's* almost complete inattention to Brian's social world as a flaw. These women also expressed some resistance *Something New's* seemingly idealistic version of multiculturalism, as we'll see. These criticisms were relatively minor, though, compared with the pleasure and recognition the women experienced in viewing the film. The most striking element in the audience members' responses to the film was how much these young women related to and identified with Kenya. Rather than “they,” these women frequently referred to “we” when talking about *Something New*. They employed the first person when commenting on Kenya's choices, making a connection between the character and the community of African

American women of which they were a part. These African American participants accepted that she was an authentic character and reflected the struggles they confront in their own lives.⁸⁰

The Racial Frame – Embracing, Questioning and Complicating Perspectives on Interracial Couples.

In addition to showcasing a female heroine that they admired and related to, one of the most talked about aspects of *Something New*'s appeal for these African American undergraduate women was its generally positive but imperfect idealism about race and relationships. After viewing *Something New*, several speakers echoed the film's racial discourse in their discussion. There were two key values put forth in *Something New* that African American women later endorsed in conversation: romantic idealism expressed in actress Sanaa Lathan's instruction to "follow your heart" and multiculturalism. Reflecting romantic idealism, women avowed that Love more important than race. As one participant summarized, the movie's general thrust was: "Just that it doesn't matter, when it comes to love, if you love somebody it shouldn't matter" (Something New AA1: 277). Reflecting multiculturalism, or a belief in respect for rather than obliteration of cultural difference, African American women said they approved of Kenya's romance with her Brian in significant part because from the first meeting it was clear he "understood" what was going on and said this made him a more "realistic" mate for her.

Although these were values that the women were clearly already amenable to, many African American viewers also explicitly embraced the idea that the film had an impact on their perception of or feelings about interracial dating and marriage. This was evidenced in

⁸⁰ This finding is consistent with Liebes and Katz's cross cultural study of audience response to the television serial *Dallas*. Extensive use of the first person personalizes the meaning of the media content. See Liebes and Katz, Chapter 7, Referential Reading. (1990, pp. 100-113)

the signal phrases that several participants employed to describe their reactions. The women said the film had “opened their eyes” and made them rethink previous assumptions. The following comments articulate this idea at the start of the study’s first focus group among African American women:

I’ll go first. My name is xxx Just the overall movie, I really enjoyed it. I thought it was beautiful, plot-wise, the cinematography, all of that. I think, plot-wise, the love between the two really came across the screen. And I think that, for the viewer, it was undeniable that they love each other. So, despite the fact that they come from different backgrounds, or different race, whatever your feelings about interracial relationships, you can’t deny that if two people love each other. And I guess, maybe people who have ideals about black women being with black men, white women staying with white men, like, maybe they could open themselves up more. So I think that movie gives them an option to see past what they think. (Something New AA1: 177)

Although this speaker begins with a personal declaration of all the film elements she enjoyed, she ends her observations with a more outward looking statement of the text’s potential impact on unspecified others—the “people who have ideals about black women being with black men.”

While the focus group analysis is predominantly focused on the groups collectively as a dynamic whole rather than on isolated opinions, it’s helpful in the context of discussions of framing, to look at a few individual responses and the backgrounds of those speakers. In this instance, this speaker had an unresolved experience with interracial relationship in her own family. It was unclear whether the family was fully accepting because they rarely saw the family member who had married a White man. She also disclosed strong recent feelings of disappointment about race relations and discomfort in interracial settings. In sum, this

speaker's own experiences were hardly ideal; she had firsthand experience with racial conflict and its personal impact. Nonetheless but given the opportunity to see a more positive vicarious alternative reality, she seized it.

The film also made these women recall, think about (even rethink) events in their own lives —conversations, for example, with parents who had warned them not to cross the color line when they went off to college. This was often associated with acknowledgement that they had identified with a specific character or situation in the film. As another participant said, “I felt like it made me realize, like wow, I’ve said stuff like that” (Something New AA1: 311). In these statements, the participants use the language of teaching and learning, but what all of these comments reflect is *acceptance*, acknowledgment that there is truth in the screen portrayal and openness to viewing the world the way the film showed it. Despite some feeling that he was actually too good to be true, the women mostly praised Brian’s character and identified his sympathetic portrayal as another factor that made them rethink previous hesitance toward crossing racial boundaries.

The discussion in this group may also reflect some of the boundaries of framing when media frames run counter to the audience’s existing experience and values. In this group there seemed to be considerable skepticism about the movie’s representation of multiculturalism. Because of this uncertainty, rather than rather than accepting that multicultural ideology wholesale, the women tried to reconcile and integrate the racial transcendence of multiculturalism with their experiences and values. Sometimes, this proved to be difficult. These women talked about the need for solidarity among Blacks and longed to find respect and love within the black community, something some members thought was too often lacking among their generation. These are aspects of Black conservative thought that they felt were valuable and they wished they were stronger within their generation. So, within this group, the biggest barrier to the film having some sort of influence on the

conversations involved both personal experience and values. It was not just that the movie's setting and plot might not be recognizable in relation to the women's personal experience. It was also that it threatened positive goals and desires the women have for themselves and their community.

In keeping with these concerns, here is how African American women in two of the groups characterized their feelings about interracial romantic relationships and the importance of gender *prior* to viewing *Something New*:

AA Group 1: ...I, by no means, have any problem with interracial couples. I believe what I have a problem with is, for example, on our campus when the ratio of African American females to males is already so, well, it's not proportional. There's a lot more black females than males and it really upsets me when black guys only date white women. I think that's the only thing that upsets me. I don't feel like love should have a color or anything." (Something New AA1: 145)

AA Group 5: Well, listening to other people talk, it makes me realize how my perspectives teeter-totter back and forth about the interracial dating thing, because I know like going back to my best friend, he and I went through a lot with this particular issue. Because it kind of made me feel like, you know, you're not dating women of our race, as if to say, what's wrong with me, for the woman that I am. (Something New AA5:347)

Here the participants confront their ambivalence about interracial dating, recognizing that it may contradict other values they hold. Simultaneously, they also acknowledge the deeply personal roots and broader social implications of their feelings. When the second speaker says, for example, that "the interracial dating thing" made her feel, "what's wrong with me" there is no detachment between the speaker's views and how she feels about

herself. At the same time, these women are firmly committed to a more color blind ideal, saying "I don't feel like love should have a color." The extent to which this issue touched African American participants personally was evident in their choice of words and also in the extensive time devoted to discussing the peculiar problems of Black women with regard to dating and race.

Similar sentiments were voiced after the film, but in the wake of *Something New*, these feelings were also scrutinized and debated. Sometimes this resulted in speakers contradicting themselves. They employed simple linguistic equivocations like "On the one hand" and arguing both sides of a point. This self-aware ambivalence was manifest in African American another group that watched *Something New*. There, a participant reflected on her response to the film in relation to her reaction to a movie involving a Black man and White woman, the popular interracial romance, *Save the Last Dance*:

I don't know, when I was watching it [Save the Last Dance], the way I understood it was kind of the effect the movie was supposed to give you in the first place. I was rooting for the protagonists, so I'm like, Oh he's found his girl and oh that's great, but then when his sister kind of went off on the girl, I forgot all the character names, but I kind of thought about it like, he was that last one, like the last cookie and look, she just came and snatched it. You know, like, ah, [he's/she's?] going to Morehouse or wherever he was going, he's going to really make something of himself and it's like the same story that we keep going through as black women in this world and it is not fair to even blame him on that point. And I think that's why I liked this movie [Something New], because it kind of taught you that you can't keep thinking that way. But on the other hand I still understand what they were trying to say

and I still had mixed feelings through the entire movie. (Something New AA1: 439)

This response illustrates a number of key ideas that impact the way ideas about interracialism are received through the movies. First, like the speaker who confessed that her perspectives on interracial dating “teeter-totter back and forth,” this viewer’s value conflict is central to her response to the film. In order to discuss *Something New*, she is forced to reconcile competing impulses. To this point, the viewer references a defining moment in *Save the Last Dance* – the scene in which the Black protagonist’s sister Chenille explains why she was so hostile to her friend Sarah dating her brother. As the speaker recalls in words that faithfully recreate the Chenille words, “I kind of thought about it like, he was that last one, like the last cookie and look, she just came and snatched it. You know, like, ah, [he’s/she’s?] going to Morehouse or wherever he was going, he’s going to really make something of himself.” Here, the fictional sister’s ambivalence and the study participant’s are perfectly conflated. So like Chenille, this speaker concludes, “it’s like the same story that we keep going through as black women in this world and it is not fair to even blame him on that point.” So in spite of or partially because of the reality of these larger problems, Chenille ultimately but resignedly endorses romantic idealism and multiculturalism, and supports her brother’s relationship with Sarah, telling him, “You can’t help who you love, Derek, you’re not supposed to” (Cort, 2001).

Similarly, while *Something New* did not confront Black women’s underlying fears and frustrations as fully as *Save the Last Dance* did, as we learned through the individual questionnaires, a majority of participants had viewed the earlier film, and this viewer’s response to the present film (as recounted here) was informed by the previous one. In that context – informed by both personal reality and by fictional reference--*Something New* framed or at least contributed to this speaker’s thinking about race and interracial

relationships in a new way. In her words, it “taught you that you can’t keep thinking that way.”

It’s also notable, however, that the speaker uses multiple voices to talk about the lessons presented in the movies. She begins by describing her resistance to the perceived multicultural themes in *Save the Last Dance* in the first person singular – saying “I understood it was kind of the effect the movie was supposed to give you in the first place.” and “I was rooting for the protagonists.” Then, when she turns to consider and eventually praise the perspective offered up in *Something New*, this speaker employs the more distant second person voice, recognizing that “it kind of taught you that you that you can’t keep thinking that way.” The particular words this participant chooses to characterize the film are meaningful. The viewing relationship is implicitly didactic. One film has an intended “effect,” one it’s “supposed to give you.” Similarly, the other film “taught.” Eventually, her thoughts position her precariously on the shifting sands of complicated thoughts: “I still understand what they were trying to say and I still had mixed feelings through the entire movie.”

This speaker’s mixed reaction provides an example of a film challenging and accommodating different stances towards race and the audience’s awareness that her consent/buy-in was being coaxed into a position she might otherwise disagree with. Her retelling also shows that pedagogic reactions pertain to the normal viewing experience, not just within the confines of the focus group.

Beyond the Film--Broader Implications

As we begin to see in these comments, with some women, their responses to the film were inextricable from their views about race relations, not just interracial relationships. Another speaker went even further in connecting her ambivalence about mixed race couples to doubts about group solidarity and identification (two key concepts that have been proven to drive public opinion about racial matters):

about Tiger Woods. Like I'm not saying, well, I don't know about Kobe, but some of them just don't understand what color they are. So you know, he's married to a white woman. It's just that kind of thing. (Something New AA5: 488)

Often, the speakers were self-consciously aware and contemplative about the personal and societal contexts that informed their comments:

I've noticed a lot of black women have said they just have a problem with black men with white women because it just seems like, it was already spoken earlier, that's what they only want. Like that's their eyes set on that only, and it's like back in the day that was the forbidden fruit anyway for black men and now they have this freedom and it feels like that's all they can go to. And I think that's why we as black females sometimes rebel against that whole idea. Because it's first putting us out and we're the ones who have been here the entire time, but it's also just not being fair, basically. (Something New AA1: 403)

Fairness and exclusivity are pivotal ideas here. One woman acknowledged and questioned this line of thinking, saying "you think this is how you're supposed to feel." Some even said the film made them question the legitimacy of their own misgivings about interracial relationships. These speakers signaled that maybe it was time to let go of these feelings and the double standards they sometimes lead to despite the daunting marriage statistics and gender imbalances in the Black community. This last sentiment was perhaps the most striking as it allowed not just for the idea that the film might be instructive to "others," invoking an anonymous third party as audiences often do acknowledge, but also that it might also be salient to her own experience.

In these comments, we hear these women liked the *idea* of multiculturalism, but also frequently cited Black conservative principles of group self reliance and solidarity, values that people often feel are threatened by emphasizing interracialism. So, while these African American students never fully rejected what they felt were the messages of the film, they did negotiate them – qualifying and complicating the concepts and placing tentative limits around their application to their own lives.

This tendency toward explicit complication seemed to indicate that while the substance of their remarks differed, the Black women processed information from the films in ways that paralleled the White participants. They processed their reactions to the film through a filter motivated by the need to reconcile filmic depictions with personal experience and values. For the Black participants, the filter allowed them to individualize and exceptionalize and qualify the circumstances under which this multiculturalism can operate. In the world they lived in, the women explained, Black men were much more likely to date outside their race than Black women and, in their view, to do so exclusively, driven by a problematic mindset that betrayed "that's all they want" rather than by the call of true love as depicted in this film. So while the Black women almost universally and enthusiastically approved of Kenya's romance, they also defended some of the objections to other mixed race couplings like (or rather unlike) it.

It is also important that while the processes involved in reception were similar across different racial groups, the conclusions the women reached were distinctive. This is because the content of the Black women's complication and qualifications and the beliefs driving their negotiation with the film, were different from those of White speakers. Their responses reflected the sharp contrasts in predisposition discussed earlier. So even with similar thought processes, given their respective starting places--their different initial

predispositions around race and personal standpoints and values--it is not surprising that they ultimately arrive at such different conclusions.

One of the African American groups' most distinctive responses was to embrace the perspectives and even lessons of the film, while placing limits around the application of these lessons to their own lives. Another theme that clearly emerged within the conversations among Black women was that there should be no pretense that the goal of race being safely contained was within reach. So while another participant conceded that the film did "enhance my thinking" about interracial relationships, she also immediately contained that newfound knowledge within the boundaries of her personal situation, adding, "I just can't see myself in that place" because White men aren't attracted her. This speaker also questioned whether these fictional characters would have dated had they met under different circumstances: "if they had been on the street would he ever have approached her?" (Something New AA5: 776). By hypothetically placing Brian and Kenya on the street, without the benefit of their matchmaker, this viewer relates their romance to her own situation, attempting to place the characters in her world. Her question also presents these fictional characters as if they were real people whose behaviors should be speculated. It implies a certain level of taking these characters very seriously.

It's also notable that African American women's overall positional stances on race did not vary radically between the pre film discussions and those conducted afterwards, even when they embraced the film's framing. The women's conversations prior to the film more often than not reflected their personal concessions to racial struggle. This was also true of the post film evaluations. Their discussions of race were not more problematized in relation to *Something New* despite the problematic racial elements evident in the film. Instead, the film engaged them, allowing the women to explore the problems and fears they already had about race while also acknowledging more harmonious possibilities. This was a

distinct difference compared with the White audience members, who began the study detached from issues of race and were more focused on racial problems in conversations that took place following and in reference to the film.

Minding the Gaps.

That attitudes are firmly embedded in social context is not surprising, but it does highlight what's missing in both the films included in the study. Neither film substantively explored or provided specific context for Black opposition to the interracial relationship. This and several other errors of omission or misrepresentation were sources of concern for African American viewers in this study. In these focus groups and even in a brief interview with *Something New* actress Sanaa Lathan, the locus of Black opposition is easy to pinpoint. It's rooted in the need to defend against entrenched assumptions of racial hierarchy that take for granted Black inferiority, in legal inequality, and in fear of rejection and feelings of abandonment.⁸¹

The words and beliefs that young African American women invoke to describe their feelings are remarkably consistent with that of the African American starlet. Like the African American speaker who confided that a friend's dating non-black women made her think "you're not dating women of our race, as if to say, what's wrong with me," Lathan summarized her feelings about Black men and White women succinctly: "I don't know that society, like white society loves it or black women. When you see a black man with a white woman there is a feeling that you have and I think the feeling is an instinctual feeling of you want her you don't want me" ("Sanaa Lathan tries 'Something New'," 2006).

⁸¹ The historical roots of African American attitudes about interracial relationships are explored at length in Randall Kennedy's *Interracial Intimacies* (2003).

Similarly, in describing how she related to the film, Sanaa Lathan described her family and friends reactions to her breakup with a White boyfriend and her White boyfriend's family's initial reaction to her:

'Oh yeah, we had a party when y'all broke up. Hee hee hee.' And, you know, they laughed, and it was like light and a joke. But, you know, that's real. That was real and they let me know. And it's almost acceptable within our culture to be prejudiced toward whites because of our history. This country is loaded with racism ...

Even in Lathan's brief comments, the central idea of Black prejudice against interracial relationships is historically situated. It's also recounted within the context of White opposition when Lathan describes her boyfriend's mother:

"I went to meet his family and I think that they probably didn't know they had a problem with it until he walked in with me. And they definitely had issues. Mom had issues with it. Could not, didn't want to see her son. And I don't think she had anything against me. But it was about her son bringing me home. And I don't think she had anything against me. But it was about her son bringing me home. And I felt that for the first time. ("Sanaa Lathan tries 'Something New'," 2006)

Like the focus group discussions, Lathan's remarks provide more information about the roots of racial fears and subtle prejudice than either film did. They also depict a more balanced picture of how some friends and family react to interracial relationships, since, as Erica Child's qualitative study showed, subtle opposition to interracial relationship persists among both Blacks *and* Whites (Childs, 2005). Moreover, as indicated earlier, contrary to what is seen on screen in *Something New*, both Blacks and Hispanics are more supportive of interracial dating than Whites as recent Pew and Gallup polls indicate (Keeter & Taylor,

2009). This is not the impression that *Something New* gives, and this disconnect proved important to the participants' discourse and readings of the film. The misrepresentation of interracial opposition was even taken as fact by some White speakers. African American women, in contrast, more often found the depiction to be problematic, not persuasive.

In either case, the audiences' consistent attention to the racial makeup of opposition to the couple was unprompted. As detailed in the Methods chapter, the moderators guided participants to discuss their general reactions to the film; to evaluate the characters, the choices the characters made, and the problems the characters faced; and to articulate and assess what they felt were the major themes presented in the film. Assignment and evaluations of blame for problems were a prominent part of the discussions, but they were offered of the audience's own volition, not part of the plan.

Even so, rather than absenting one parent and eliminating an entire community from the story as *Something New* did, these conversations consider a wide variety of influences informing racial attitudes. The film's omission did not block African American women from enjoying the film, but the oversight also clearly did not go unnoticed. As one speaker remarked:

I think it showed, the movie as a whole, how focused on race black people are. I think the writer made a conscious decision not to have any of the White characters say anything racist. Not that, there were other white characters besides Brian but they didn't play a big role in it. (Something New AA1: 299)

This was not an isolated observation. Describing the film's core themes, another woman in this group contended that the exclusive focus on Black opposition to the relationship was a central part of the movie's presentation of the relationship:

I think, the black family, just their emphasis on keeping the black family theme reoccurring I guess. Because they were pretty surprised. They didn't

just say you're dating a white man? OK. They did have problems with it. They said, maybe you should date someone else. And her friends were just like, well, have fun but don't get serious because you're not supposed to be with a white male. So maybe the portrayal of the black people really think that interracial relationships are not long-term or not appropriate relationships. (Something New AA1: 279)

In another group, an African American woman lamented the lack of attention to Brian's side of the story and its impact to the romance as a whole:

the thing that I think they didn't reflect was the thing that I talked about earlier was, we don't see Brian's side of it, and why Brian particularly liked Sanaa's character. Not necessarily he had to particularly like her, but just like we talked about earlier about how you wonder when somebody goes to the other side as far as going to another race and dating somebody outside of their race, like what are their motives? And I would say that he had a motive, he had been dating Penelope but he didn't really get into you know, he had said he dated black women before but he didn't really get into what made, I would have loved to have more background on what made him. (Something New AA5: 768)

As we seen in these comments, far from incidental or peripheral to audiences, telling Kenya's story rather than Kenya and Brian's was a dominant part of the movie's framing of race. Consistent with both my and Childs' readings of *Something New*, and the quantitative content analysis, this audience response underscores the inherent problems in one of the most prevalent representational practices in interracial depictions. Every filmmaker must be selective in content, but some of these missing elements—especially the social context of Black opposition and ambivalence to interracial dating-- are central to the issue of mixed

marriage and dating and they were central to these conversations about the films among Black women even though the films themselves fail to address them. This absence was suspicious to the women. They accepted the idea that Blacks may well be “focused on race” as the speaker in group one noted, but they also noted that the film provided an incomplete and inadequate rendering of the complexities of race.

This evaluation raises questions about the nature of a filmmaker’s responsibility in rendering social issues. When critics fault films for their failure to address issues that are part of the broader social fabric, it can be awkward and even controversial. This line of questioning challenges creative authority and may stretch the bounds of film criticism. Those issues are beyond the scope of the present study, but it is relevant to acknowledge the limitations of a critique based on social realism. That is to say, a film can be completely true to its purpose and focus and still feel to inauthentic and unrepresentative to some audiences.⁸²

Bearing this in mind, it’s fair to say that the present critique, informed by these audience reactions, does not encroach on the filmmaker’s authority. It doesn’t ask the filmmakers to go outside of the logic of their story or beyond the universe they created. Rather, this critique simply asks the filmmaker to convincingly show the audience a little of what informs the thinking and feelings they have chosen to represent on screen, to help the audience understand the characters so that they can believe in them.

We can also understand the audiences’ responses to these films by considering them in relation to certain genre and storytelling conventions. From film studies, we

⁸² The 2009 interracial romantic comedy *Away We Go*, for example, was faulted by one scholar for what he felt was its inauthentic and, he felt, inherently conservative representation of race relations. In his view, the film was dishonest. It implied through omission that the insensitivity of hypocritical liberal character was the worst racial issue the couple had to face. In the context of that film, however, which depicts two weeks in the lives of an interracial couple who had been together for nearly a decade traveling across country to visit their closest family and friends, those minor racial tensions might have been the most challenging race related problems they faced in their day to day lives.

understand that, in addition to wanting to feel a spark of recognition of the world shown on screen, the establishment of character is an essential part of traditional storytelling. Our fictional heroes don't need to be perfect to be loved. They may pout and complain and prejudice (see *Pride and Prejudice*). Or they may even kill and be consumed with vengeance (*Gladiator*, *Rome*, *Dirty Harry*, and *Munich*). But they must make sense within the context and environment of the film's fictional universe. And, in a conventional narrative film, they must have justification for their actions. This is why *Gladiator* begins with the loss of the hero's family, as does *Braveheart*. Given a reason, an audience will justify, even empathize with, and cheer on a character's revenge-seeking for past grievance. But we need to see the hero's beautiful family before it is torn from him first. Even with the revenge is for something as well known and recent as the Holocaust as was the case in *Inglourious Basterds*, it is helpful in traditional narrative storytelling to begin with or at least revisit the first wrong. With certain types of stories industry insiders call this the character's origin story. For super heroes the origin story is the critical foundation for fan legend and studio prequels.⁸³

Of course, genre matters. Romantic comedy is not the same superhero adventure or even historical drama. With romantic heroes and heroines, there is less of an entrenched formula. Nonetheless there is no lesser need to secure the audience's empathy. When a romantic protagonist behaves badly, when she flouts our expectations of common courtesy, we need to know why so that we can justify our continued support for her. In this case of *Something New*, the filmmakers may have assumed their audience would know why Kenya was difficult, why she bristled at the first sight of Brian, why she overreacted to his questions, and why the male members of her family felt they could be so openly rude to him. They may have thought these things were understood, but these conversations demonstrate

⁸³ Such is the audience's thirst for context, that Star Trek, Superman and Batman franchises have recently had great box office success reimagining their heroes' origins – *Batman Begins*, *Superman Returns* and *Star Trek* were all leveraged this formula.

that even amongst the Black women who constituted a key audience for the film, this was not the case. And the characters' motivations were even less comprehensible to the White audiences who participated in this study.

Another aspect of the film that Black women struggled with was the way Black characters, Black men in particular, responded to Brian and Kenya's relationship. Some but not all of the Black women were skeptical about this aspect of the film. While they generally identified a great deal with the film, this aspect of the representation did not feel as authentic. Of Black men's disapproving of Black women dating White men two women commented at length in one of the discussions:

I think something that was, that showed realism and didn't at the same time is the whole male thing. I feel guys are less attentive to the fact. Like if it was a more realistic situation I don't think the guys would have heckled him as much. They would have just been like, OK, you know whatever, she's going out with him, he's another guy, welcome to the club, you want a beer?

Right, I don't think it would have been this big issue where he's white, he's just another guy for them, because it's not the opposite sex. He's just another guy, whatever, OK, want a beer. Let's watch football. As long as they have the same commonalities. He likes football, you want to get drunk one night, OK, I'm fine, you're cool. Let's hang out. (Something New AA5: 610- 614)

"I think when it comes to the race and interracial dating issue they would, like I say about the black men, so sure it is like women are very sensitive about the interracial dating thing. They have a lot of options, but for a black

woman who wants to stay within her racial boundaries you don't, and so you are sensitive to who another black man is dating, it means something to you. Whereas I feel like now more so when it comes to black men as well, they're not really limiting themselves just to black women, so you date doesn't matter to me. (Something New AA5: 618)

Black women around me make it a serious issue, and black men don't, from what I know of. (Something New AA5: 626)

The imbalanced gender dynamics of interracial dating (with more than three times as many Black men as women dating outside their race),⁸⁴ were a source of resistance to interracial dating throughout the group discussions. This was especially true in regard to the perceived cost of interracial dating for Black women. Particularly within the context of a majority White campus as we've seen, Black women often described themselves as outsiders to this new multicultural paradigm. They liked that *Something New* changed that dynamic. Several women, including all of the women in one of the African American focus groups, even admitted that their approval and enjoyment of the film might have been diminished had the gender roles been reversed. So one aspect of the film that several women praised was that it defied their race and gender-related expectations about interracial relationships.

Similarly, African American participants liked that the film reversed the expected class dynamic between the Black and White characters as well. As shown in the previous

⁸⁴ Statistics vary depending on the type of relationship being counted. Census data indicate that 12.5 percent of Black men who are in cohabiting living situations (either marriage or living together) have a White partner compared to only 4 percent of Black women (*Intimate relationships between races more common than thought*, 2000).

chapter, the following comment, which reflects that appreciation, was similar to ones made by several White respondents:

I liked how, I thought it was kind of a change like she was the upper class African-American woman who, you know, came from a good family. And then you have this white male, who didn't. I mean, well, he possibly did, but his profession now doesn't show that he's not a real rich white guy who has the average African-American female falling in love with him. It was the other.... (Something New AA5: 538)

Ironically, even in this comment, the speaker's appreciation that the movie defied stereotyped portrayals of White socioeconomic advantage is tempered by her realization of what the film left out. Midway through her comment, the speaker realizes that Brian's class background is only vaguely established on-screen, but rather assumed from his vocation.

This speaker's reaction and other patterns that dominated responses to these films are neither inexplicable, nor wholly predictable. They are firmly grounded in the images the filmmakers put on the screen, but they also reflect the prevalent ideas about race that have the greatest currency in the present culture, depending on how one is situated within that culture. The cultural specificity of audience reception dictates that how different elements of each film shape the audience's perceptions of it can not be fully anticipated. In light of the connection between the feelings stirred by these films and the participants' feelings about race, they do, however, merit detailed exploration. In this case, the net result was that Black audiences had their fears confirmed in the case of *Zebrahead*, and their hopes encouraged in *Something New*.

Chapter 8: Through a Glass, Darkly⁸⁵

Commentary on race relations in the United States can be usefully divided into two broad traditions. One is a pessimistic tradition that doubts either the wisdom or the possibility of achieving racial harmony on the basis of racial equality... Running counter to this current is an optimistic tradition that affirms both the wisdom and the possibility of bringing into being a racially egalitarian society in which individuals may enjoy their freedoms with racial constraint. – Randall Kennedy (2003, p. 519)

Looking at the representation of interracial couples in film is much like viewing our reflections in a warped glass. We clearly recognize ourselves in the image, but the mirror exaggerates and bloats some features (danger, violence, Black opposition), while obscuring others (White concerns). Much like a funhouse mirror or caricature, films also highlights select features depending on the angle of approach.

Even given these distortions, however, while we can not look to films for clarity about race, there are important insights to be gleaned from them. At the start of this research I asked several questions about the nature and reception of film depictions of interracial romance. Most important, this project asked how these films have framed race relations--to

⁸⁵A widely quoted Bible passage explains the paradox of reflected knowledge: "For we know in part, and we prophesy in part....For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." - King James Bible, 1 Corinthians 13 ("1 Corinthians 13," 2000)

what extent are these frames negative and focused on persistent oppression and interracial conflict, or positive and focused on reconciliation and progress? What ideologies of race -- beliefs about race and race relations -- are conveyed both implicitly and explicitly in these depictions, and what sorts of normative prescriptions or solutions have these film depictions suggested to the historical problem of contentious and unequal Black-White relations? And it also explored whether these patterns and beliefs have changed over time.

Then, turning to reception, I also investigated how audiences respond to different depictions of interracial romance: Which elements in these films do audiences find to be most meaningful? How do viewers' preexisting standpoints (including racial identity and personal experience) shape their responses to the film? Finally, how did the film depictions contribute to the interpersonal discourse and judgments about interracial relationships among Black versus White female audiences?

Key findings

Dominant Patterns

As we've seen in the present study, on the subject of race, filmic representations draw upon existing cultural beliefs, many of which exploit intergroup conflicts and fears. They also reproduce, and may even have the potential to reinforce racial conflict and inequality. However, they could not do so without the raw material, the existing social cleavages and the historic images that linger in our collective memory. Rather than conspiratorially, however, films draw upon cultural rifts automatically and unconsciously because they are products of our psyche; they do so for dramatic effect; and to leverage social controversy for profit. Moreover, as we saw in the previous chapters, audience reception is complex and not easily predicted. It would be difficult to understand the social

and political implications of these cultural texts without exploring both the content and audience reactions to these films.

It's not surprising that the movies analyzed in this study are, of course, distortions of social reality. The specific ways these movies transform reality are often, however, unanticipated. My textual analysis indicated that there were four discretely identifiable ideological frames present in interracial romantic depictions. Egalitarian, pro-integration frames included racial reconciliation and multiculturalism. These sit at the opposite end of the belief spectrum from the separatist frame, and ambivalence lies in between.

At a higher level, however, this study also assumes (as Randall Kennedy contended), that on the whole films tend to coalesce around two major perspectives, framing the possibility of cross racial comity and equality within either an optimistic or pessimistic overall perspective on race. As outlined in the chapters on representation, in terms of outlook for the future, our multiculturalism and reconciliation frames articulate an optimistic perspective and the separatist frame reflects pessimism.

Moreover, across the spectrum, the content analysis confirmed that the rendering of interracial couples in American films has often been, as Childs, Gateward, and others argue, observably, and quantifiably problematic. Most importantly, the vast majority of interracial depictions contain interracial violence on-screen and strong opposition to the relationship from family and friends. In the most extreme, negative cases, implicitly through these practices and also as a result of explicit ideological discussions that take place among characters, films like *Jungle Fever* and *Zebrahead* present racial pessimism as social realism, reflecting the deep seated, essentially separatist belief that different races could not in fact coexist in difference, equality and peace.

There are also, however, more optimistic and racially egalitarian themes in even some of the earliest known renderings of such relationships. In films like *Something New*,

Pieces of April and *Save the Last Dance*, this optimism is conveyed through the romantic endings, the eventual embrace of the relationship by family and friends, and through the legitimizing of the love relationship as genuine. Moreover, rather than being predominantly pessimistic or optimistic, racially separatist or egalitarian, the predominant mode has become deep ambivalence. The uncertainty of the racial ambivalence frame is seen in films like *Monster's Ball*, *Liberty Heights* and *A Bronx Tale*. The most prevalent type of depiction is one that frames interracial relationships in a complicated and contradictory manner. Rather than reflecting a cohesive belief system, ambivalent depictions operate between these two poles, reflecting a mixture of contradictory ideologies. Mainstream popular films often include messages of social criticism along with a qualified acceptance as Wartenberg argued and uncertain outlook for the future. In terms of numbers, in all but the most recent decade, separatism and ambivalence have been much more common than liberal multiculturalism and racial reconciliation frames.

Along with ideas about race, depictions are often bound up in beliefs about the role of the individual versus group identity. One of the most important and unexpected results of the textual analysis was the persistent tension between egalitarian ideas about race and deep suspicion of collective action and group identity. In a wide array of interracial films across the nearly 60-year time period studied, from *A Band of Angels*, *Night of the Quarter Moon* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* to the more recent *Save the Last Dance* and even the seemingly apolitical *Away we Go*, when racial harmony and egalitarianism are envisioned, it is notably tied into an assertion of individualism and personal autonomy, often explicitly at the expense of the lead character's group ties. As detailed in the textual analysis, these films position individual fulfillment as the containment and ultimate transcendence of group identity. This representation diminishes the need for, and even the integrity of, broader social change.

While certain tropes of interracial interaction have remained common across long periods of time, in spite of major social change, there were also important differences in representation between the different periods studied. The most prevalent representational practices across time periods were the association of interracial relationships with social costs from peers and family and friends, the tendency to present the interracial romance as one that is less likely to be long lasting and fully realized, and the near ubiquitous association of interracial romance with violence.

Looking at the results of the quantitative content analysis, in terms of differences across time, most strikingly, the 1990s and the current decade stand out for presenting the most extreme interracial depictions. The 1990s produced some of the most racially pessimistic and the 2000s the most romantically optimistic films, all within the span of the last 15 years. With the spike in conflict oriented movies in the 1990s, the more recent movies have not always been the most egalitarian. It is also true that interracial representation has not evolved in a simple or consistent direction towards acceptance of mixed race couples and optimism about race relations. If, as Willnat and Zhu argued, movies may be viewed as lagging cultural indicators (Neuendorf, 2002), then these films may well be accurate reflections of the racial fears and dreams of the recent times in which they were conceived. The most common representational frame across time periods remains ambivalence, a tentative and qualified or complicated acceptance of interracial romance.

Consistent with this finding, three conspicuous and potentially problematic practices surfaced in the textual analysis of these films, especially the more contemporary films, practices that stand in both the ambivalent and the more supportive films. First, as discussed, there was the tendency to emphasize individualism at the expense of collective action and broader social justice statements. Second, these films often sever the interracial

couple from social networks and ties by placing the couple within what I call the absent parent narrative. Whether through death or dysfunction, parental authority and influence is often diminished if not entirely absent in interracial romance, and this absence helps facilitate the relationship as though the relationship might not survive were the social networks intact. This places the interracial couple and their happiness as individuals at odds with the human need for social connections. Third, while the content analysis showed a tendency to present explicit separatist arguments more often than egalitarian ones when ideology is expressed openly on-screen, upon closer examination it appears that the story is more complicated and potentially problematic than this simple finding suggests. It is not just that separatist ideas are still circulated and debated in interracial romantic films. It's that separatist beliefs and even doubts are presented as the almost exclusive province of Blacks. This is conveyed both through dialogue and through plot. Modern interracial romantic films often represent a one-sided opposition to the relationship with the Black community acting as the symbolic hostile center from which the most dangerous racial conflict emanates. The Black family in particular is either disappeared from the frame or the primary cause of tension in the narrative. And when separatist racial ideology is voiced openly, it is often through African American characters.

Whose Ideology?

Looking more closely at the specific beliefs communicated in interracial film discourse, we've seen that the depictions of interracial romance that I analyzed in this study communicate racial frames that are mostly driven by Black ideas and social movements. Put another way, it's helpful to ask the following: when mainstream filmmakers represent interracial relationships and openly confront race, whose ideas are they engaging? Since the 1960s, it seems, both Black and White filmmakers have mostly presented and critiqued Black racial ideologies.

The first and best known articulation of a more optimistic racial outlook is the liberal integrationist or racial reconciliation films reflecting the teaching of Martin Luther King, Jr. In the latter 1990s, optimism takes on a different, approach to achieving racial comity. Multiculturalism emerges. Emphasizing difference as well as equality, multiculturalism is not primarily White, Black or Other. It doesn't require the absence of difference or assimilation. Without idealizing it, it's fair to say that its origin, like the prescribed outlook is multicultural. Multiculturalism is not only or primarily of the Black community. It is legitimately claimed by Whites alongside Blacks, Latinos, Asians and the multicultural communities. As discussed, two of the most popular films of the 2000s, *Something New* and *Save the Last Dance* manifest this vision.

At the other end of the spectrum from Integration and multiculturalism, separatist depictions manifest the principles of solidarity advocated by both Black Nationalists like Marcus Garvey and Black conservatives like Booker T Washington and Shelby Steele even as they incorporate stereotypical images of Black deviance that are prevalent throughout American culture. This confounding juxtaposition of imagery and ideas is perhaps rendered more understandable in light of the fact that most of the movies about interracial relationships are written, directed and produced by Whites, primarily for White audiences, within a White dominated studio system. *Zebrahead* is problematic because it's partially a bastardization of and White critique of Black Nationalism. An inherently Black Nationalist film text like *Jungle Fever* represents White opposition more robustly, whereas *Zebrahead* fixates on Black pathologies in the hood and Black culpability for racial tension. It also elevates and reinterprets the image of the liberal White hero so popular in American film.

Between these two poles, ambivalent films reflect the modernist vision of a pluralist society embraced by liberal leaders. Unlike Canada and some South American countries in which multiculturalism is officially embraced through government policy, the idea of a

pluralist culture remains controversial in the United States. To some, it feels too relativist, too idealistic and is even associated with social displacement. Egalitarianism is a widely held, core American value, but at the same time English-only policies and controversies over the Census reflect some of the tension associated with the ongoing browning of America. In this context, especially among Whites, ambivalence may be the most appropriate articulation of American attitudes towards race.

Given the inherent value conflict and ambiguity in contemporary American race relations, it makes sense that ambivalence was the most prevalent ideological vision of race among the films studied. It is the frame that accommodates both a norm of racial equality in the abstract, and suspicion about concrete policies designed to foster racial egalitarianism. Ambivalence also encompasses fears and distrust about the willingness of Blacks to contribute to the amelioration of racial tensions. Since White voices have largely been missing from public discourse about race except in reaction or rejection to Black ideologies they feel are too extreme, the anxious ambivalence we see in films about race seems to be among the clearest popular articulations of White racial ideas at the turn of the 21st century.

The belief system in these middle ground films of the 1990s may seem hard to define, but these texts are full of racial thinking. Ambivalent interracial films like *A Bronx Tale* and *Monsters' Ball* can be seen as ones that not only critiques existing racial ideologies as inadequate, but also present the outlook for multiracial coexistence as uncomfortably unresolved. As explored in the textual analysis, this type of film presents and rejects the idealism of Integrationism and multiculturalism as well as the isolation of Black Nationalism, Conservatism, and White supremacy. In keeping with the emphasis on realism, they also stop short of offering any definitive or even alternative way forward.

Looking across all four racial frames, we see that depictions of interracial romance in the post civil rights era seem to either endorse explicitly Black or minority-driven racial

ideologies (liberalism, multiculturalism) or critique them without offering alternate vision (separatism, ambivalence). At the same time, this seemingly strange combination of mostly White filmmakers and Black ideology is informed by the reality that discussion about race has been driven mainly by Blacks since the civil rights movement. Even as implicit racial appeals remain a potent force in American public life (Mendelberg, 2001), save for conservatives from the far right decrying “reverse racism” and the universally appealing but highly selective praise for the color blind ideals associated with Martin Luther King Jr. , White leaders have tended to avoid potentially volatile, explicit discussions of race in public discourse since the civil rights movement.

In academia as well, like African American studies, the study of race relations and interracialism, is deferred to those engaged with racial concerns. Even if the majority of those doing these studies are White, since the latter half of the twentieth century, they do so steeped in the traditions of Black intellectual thought and liberal goals as well as in majority American culture.

Black ideology was certainly not always central to interracial narratives, however. Exclusively White ideologies of race dominated popular culture in the earlier part of the 20th century. For example, racially themed films like the 1934 and 1959 versions of *Imitation of Life*, and the even more powerful and archetypal civil war epics *Birth of a Nation* (Dixon & Griffith, 1980) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) confronted racial issues both implicitly and explicitly. However, these older films told the story of the relationship between Whites and Blacks from a distinctly White American perspective.

Furthermore, in the late 20th and early 21st century, interracial narratives stand out because most recent films tell us about race by omission or exclusion— with all White casts, or through the narrowness of the mostly peripheral roles that African Americans inhabit, or through casts that are multicultural except for Blacks. This exclusion, the invisibility and

absence of Black characters, is much like Tuchman's symbolic annihilation of women (Dow & Condit, 2005; A. L. Press, 1991).⁸⁶

While race neutral casting and narratives aspire to post-racial transcendence, critical film scholars argue that, in a multitude of ways, older White ideologies of racial exclusion and hierarchy are all around us by default in most mainstream films (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009). In contrast, interracial films engage in racial discussion that is by definition more inclusive than that. Even as they emphasize and essentialize racial difference, interracial films engage audiences in questions about racial difference and confront racial tension as an ongoing, open ended struggle. So while this study does validate the critical perspective that mainstream film depictions of interracial romance reproduce problematic images of race, it also shows that these films engage audiences in a dialogue with race that positions African American concerns as central.

A Racial Divide in Reception

Given this complicated and often problematic mix of racial messages, what audiences bring to their consumption of interracial film depictions is particularly important. Even in films that manifest clear ideologies, we'd expect polysemy in the text and variance in reception. With the preponderance of mixed messages in movies depicting interracial romance, these films would seem to be even more open to interpretation.

In the audience study, we saw that the racial divide in public opinion that Kinder and Sanders diagnosed in public opinion on political issues extended to the reception of cultural products dealing with race. Initial standpoint, ideological predispositions and personal experience weighed heavily in audiences' reading of the films studied. As a wealth of

⁸⁶ The widely seen and praised comedy *Wedding Crashers*, for example chronicled the sexual exploits of two White men crashing weddings of almost every cultural stripe except African American. See Salon Magazine essay by Debra Dickerson (2005) and *Fade to Black* by Erica Chito Childs (2009).

audience reception studies have shown, fiction is polysemic, and the women in this study were selective and biased in how they processed the information in these fictive representations. They negotiated with this content, focusing on the parts that they agreed with and rejecting the parts with which they didn't agree.

Despite their boundaries and racial predispositions, however, there were also indications that these film representations also mattered and have the potential to influence the way that the women talk about race relations and interracial relationships. The conversations often positioned the fictional depictions of interracial relationships that the women viewed as social truth. Participants referenced the films they watched as proof not only of the challenges "inherent" in interracial relationships, but also as indication of the status of race relations, racial progress, and how members of "the other race" view them.

Even more important, this audience study demonstrated that there can be multiple, sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory, ideological frames operating in each film even when one frame is dominant. As a result, the preferred meaning is not always definitive. In *Something New*, for example, a romantic idealism that is consistent with multiculturalism dominated, but the racial conflict frame was also compelling. In *Zebrahead*, racial conflict and separatism dominated, but the film also made an unmistakable plea for racial comity and transcendence. So although the audience in this study was certainly "active" in a cultural studies sense, the text itself must be looked at as encompassing multiple viewpoints. Perhaps this is for commercial reasons. As critics have pointed out, there are financial advantages to straddling the fence in terms of racial and political messaging in entertainment. Whatever the reason, the result is the same.

In the *Black Image in the White Mind*, Entman and Rojecki argued that Whites seem to be easily pushed in either a polarized direction or an egalitarian direction depending on a combination of factors including media discourse. In this study, however the women who

were most influenced, most demonstrably moved by the films' framing of race relations were Black. The fact that both female protagonists were Black women in the movies viewed and that both movies were set primarily in different echelons of the Black American community seemed to make these films more accessible, relatable and impactful for Black women than for White.

The audience study also suggested that people are more sophisticated cultural readers than scholars and critics have often assumed. Even subtle subtext matters and is detected by audiences, helping to shape the way they respond to films. The choice to portray only one protagonist's family and therefore only resistance and opposition to the interracial relationship from one "side" was discussed extensively and challenged by both Black and White audiences, for example. White and Black viewers noticed and sometimes questioned why there was more attention to Black opposition to the interracial couple in these films and no depiction of White resistance. While a few felt there was some truth in the portrayal, others were critical, arguing that this made the representation unbalanced. Although the research setting may have contributed to this sensitivity, even without the heightened attention of the focus group, we should expect audiences to be sensitive to differences in portrayals of people of different races.

In comparing the ways in which young women of different racial backgrounds respond to film depictions of interracial relationships between Blacks and Whites, ultimately, the question of reception boiled down to this: to the extent that there is a racial divide, how is audience reception of popular depictions of interracial relationships impacted by race and other factors including life experience and preexisting attitudes and opinions? This comparative analysis enhances our understanding of how predisposition (standpoint) and framing converge to shape reception. In addition, this research assumes and demonstrates

that individual responses to entertainment media content are meaningful and can contribute to our understanding of contemporary racial attitudes and divisions among the young.

Above all, although more subtle, these conversations seem to affirm that deep racial cleavages remain, even among the Millennial generation, at least within the groups of women who took part in this study. These films seem to frame race within clear limits and boundaries set by the viewers' personal experience and values. The viewers were willing to believe in and use as evidence of the way the world works these fictional portraits of interracial romance. At the same time, however, when these depictions contradicted their own views, the women pushed back. This pushback was particularly noticeable among White participants, who found little to which they could relate in these films. In the Black focus groups, in contrast, personal experience was somewhat overruled by the deeply felt desire for a more racially amicable and equitable world. *Something New* may have contradicted the women's own experience in racially mixed but still socially segregated or otherwise problematic settings. The women were willing to set this aside since they believed in and wanted to find truth in the movie's multiculturalism and romanticism, even if they weren't sure that such ideals would ever be attainable in their own lives. With *Zebrahead*, the negative experiences and fears of Black participants were reinforced by on-screen despair and endless, violent conflict.

One reason the boundaries of framing seemed to operate differently in these groups may be what happens when values and experience diverge. As we heard in the pre-film discussions, the Black women in the study had almost universally experienced or witnessed secondhand the pervasive nature of racial discrimination. Nonetheless, they still aspire to racial progress, to transcend racial boundaries, to live the "post-racialism" that has been heralded of late. This can be a confusing confluence of experience, belief, and aspirations, and it seemed to open them up to influence, either pushing them especially towards

complication and qualification of race or reinforcing existing concessions to racial pessimism and despair.

Within this differentiated personal context, African American women seem to be more open to embracing the films' messages despite their clear, substantive concerns about the way that mainstream media represents race. So these women were easily persuaded and saddened by *Zebrahead's* cautionary racial drama. The story resonated with their experience and fears. But they were also at least equally open if not more so to the upbeat racial romantic comedy *Something New*. Like the women who watched *Zebrahead*, the viewers of *Something New* also began the group discussions expressing skepticism and disappointment in the status of Black-White relations. The multicultural, ultimately optimistic romantic comedy resonated not with their experience or fears as African American women, however, but rather with their aspirations of racial transcendence. It appealed, in other words, to their deeply-held egalitarian values. For their part, African American women responded positively, albeit with all the caution, caveats and qualifications that come from just as deeply held Black conservative principles. The personal stakes were neither as high nor the racial ideology as salient for White participants, and they did not embrace the films as openly.

Biased Processing and audience reception

As I've described, this study explored how people incorporate information about race relations from fiction into their knowledge and beliefs about race relations in the real world. We can better understand the findings presented above in the context of the social psychology research on information processing presented earlier. This literature helps explain how the observed differences in how Black women and White women participating in this study learned from and interpreted information about race relations from film depictions of interracial relationships may have come about. As Prentice and Gerrig

showed (1999), people process informational content from fiction differently than they do from nonfiction, and readers/viewers may actually be more open and vulnerable to influence when consuming fictional content than nonfiction, which triggers more critical thinking. Just as important, cultural readers also process fiction in keeping with their preexisting attitudes. So, conservative viewers of *All in the Family* often perceived Archie Bunker to be a working-class hero, while liberals viewed him as the target of well-earned derision. Despite their different interpretations, both conservatives and liberals praised the show for its honesty. Both thought the show was in keeping with their values.

A similar process seems to pertain with interracial film content. With *Something New* and *Zebrahead*, White viewers, who were concerned with Black racism going into the viewing, became more vocally focused on this issue afterward. The depiction of Black opposition to the interracial couples in the movie was seen as proof, evidence of how “the Blacks are the racists.” Black women, on the other hand, put less stock in this aspect of the representation. They were, in other words, selective in their processing. With *Something New*, most African American speakers in this study focused most on the movie’s perceived multiculturalism and the message that love (and the desires of the individuals involved) should conquer all. Some African American women, however, did raise questions about the role of the Black community in race relations following both *Zebrahead* and *Something New*. For this minority of Black women, their concerns were consistent with those expressed by Whites.

Why Rush Is Wrong: Lessons on Race and Symbolic Politics in the Obama Era

Overall, while Entman and Rojecki showed that the majority of Whites may tilt towards either racial amity or comity in their attitudes depending on a variety of factors including media discourse about race, the focus groups show that Blacks are similarly

ambivalent and open to influence in how they feel about race relations. Exposure to fictional media discourse about the acceptance or ostracism of Black-White interracial couples seems to have important meaning for Black women, making them feel more or less optimistic about and included in American society.

In the time that has passed since this research was conducted, several events lend further credence to the idea that public discourse and symbolic politics hold great sway among African Americans. In the political realm, it's clear that Barack Obama's election held great symbolic meaning. Studies indicate that it may even have precipitated substantial positive shifts in how Blacks feel about race and their own prospects for success in America both during the post election period and one year afterwards (*Blacks Upbeat about Black Progress, Prospects A Year After Obama's Election*, 2010). Even though the material conditions of African Americans had not yet changed, one year post election, Obama's victory was still potent on a symbolic level for African Americans as a signal of full citizenship and equality.

Events in the summer and fall of 2009 provide helpful contrast for the views expressed in the focus groups. Along with a series of interviews concerning the new interracial romantic comedy, *Away We Go*, public reaction to the nomination of Judge Sonia Sotomayor shows that the views expressed by these young women are not isolated, and that a conversation about the personal impact of race easily becomes a conversation about race and politics. The two are closely intertwined. They also illustrate the complicated way that racial grievance and racial resistance have come to dominate our approach towards race.

In the focus groups, the White students expressed a sense of grievance that things had become unbalanced with regard to race, gone too far to the side where Whites were now the aggrieved party. This is consistent with the racial discourse that has emerged in the

early days of the Obama administration, especially the dialogue emerging in reaction to the nomination of Judge Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court. In May and June of 2009, the sense of grievance expressed in the focus groups reverberated throughout our public communication, with Rush Limbaugh's calling Judge Sotomayor and President Obama racists. Others, like Newt Gingrich, have expressed similar ideas, calling the Judge and the President "reverse racists." Glenn Beck went so far as to surmise that the President has "a deep-seated hatred for White people or the White culture" ("Glenn Beck: Obama Is a Racist," 2009).

Several commentators have even used the opportunity to call for an end to affirmative action policies that they feel reflect this imbalance and reverse racism against Whites. In one column, writer Stuart Taylor commented on Sotomayor and the issues her nomination raised, even calling for judges to overrule legislators when given the chance (as in Sotomayor's New Haven firefighter case) by ruling affirmative action policies to be unconstitutional and a violation of civil rights. (Others dispute this recommendation labeling it a call for clear judicial activism).

Taylor's argument is based on the idea that the legislators, despite strong public opinion opposition to affirmative action, are too intimidated by the electoral landscape to do what is right, so judges, who are often not elected, are in a better position to serve the public interest. Although it's difficult to quantify how widespread these feelings are, Stuart Taylor's call to arms on affirmative action, along with the volume of dialogue in conservative media about the New Haven case and Sotomayor nomination, shows how strongly felt feelings of White racial grievance are.

High ratings for conservative talk radio and cable news this summer also indicate that this type of discourse resonates with a large swath of the American public and that there is currently a real collective sense of fear and need for protection among many White

Americans. Simultaneously, a sense of marginalization (or liminality) is felt by Blacks. Online hate speech escalates at fever pitch; racial threats against the President have increased at an alarming rate according to monitors; and clumsy but controversial racial verbal slip-ups rebound fast and furiously from left and right. As Charles Blow recognized in his New York Times column, “We are now inundated with examples of overt racism on a scale to which we are unaccustomed” (Blow, 2009).

Despite it all, however, Rush Limbaugh was wrong when he diagnosed that Blacks are “down” since Obama took office. With public dialogue in the new Obama era so closely mimicking an unmediated, unmoderated, and dangerously oversubscribed national focus group on race, ideas that would normally be suppressed in polite society are now on public display, as evidence by any number of racially charged remarks made by Rush Limbaugh. Race has become one of the far right radio host’s preferred topics of conversation:

“The Black frame of mind is terrible, they're depressed, they're down --
Obama's not doing anything for 'em. How is that hoax and change workin' for
ya?” – Rush Limbaugh - December 8, 2009, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*

Yet, in spite of these challenges—despite the pronouncements of right wing talkers and controversial comments uttered at the Sotomayor hearings and shouted at health care town halls—there are indications that the African American “frame of mind”, as Rush Limbaugh says, continues to be surprisingly upbeat or at least buoyant. In fact, when Pew Research conducted a comprehensive study of race nationwide in the fall of 2009, they found that, despite a crushing recession, the percentage of Blacks feeling optimistic about prospects for progress showed more improvement in the past two years than they have in the last twenty-five years (*Blacks Upbeat about Black Progress, Prospects A Year After Obama's Election*, 2010). Charles Blow cautions against putting too much stock in optimistic poll results about Black opinion, writing, “the racial animosity that Obama’s election has

stirred up may have contributed to a rallying effect among blacks” (Blow, 2009). That’s certainly possible and may well be part of the explanation for the seeming gulf between surging optimism and sinking reality. Moreover, as discussed at length in the literature review, quantitative opinion surveys are not always the most effective way of probing sensitive social issues.

Nonetheless there’s another important possibility that should be given equal consideration, given both the Pew Research Center’s extensive experience and track record in polling social issues and the fact that a similar sense of buoyancy and optimism was evident among African American participants in this study. Even if we assume supportive African American respondents are rallying to the President’s cause, the results of these focus groups and of the Pew Polls may indicate that another phenomenon may be at work—it is quite possible that Rush was simply wrong. Perhaps the Black frame of mind is not “terrible” at the end of the first year in the “Age of Obama.” Just as it was not terrible at the close of 2007, when these young women gathered to talk about movies and race in a dark classroom on the campus of a southern university. At that time, the women expressed disappointment about the Jena 6 alongside excitement about the Obama candidacy, and pleasure at seeing a romantic heroine they could relate to on-screen. If anything, the African American frame of mind is open, vulnerable to suggestion. It’s also multifaceted, fluid and flexible.

In this film study and in the later Pew poll, African Americans reveal themselves as open to change, willing to yield to the optimistic symbolic politics offered by the promise of America’s first Black president and a popular first lady. They (we) are also surprisingly amenable to the comity represented by optimistic tales of romance that cross racial lines. So, despite ripples of resentment and discontent, there are both in current popular culture and among these women in this study, a rising willful *resistance to* racial polarization and a

sense that other issues (class, gender, family, even individual circumstances) may be more important than race.

Rootlessness, Resistance and *Away We Go*

The 2009 independent film *Away We Go* might be the quintessential cultural symbol for this particularly complex and confounding, not yet “post-racial” period and an aspirationally (if superficially) color-blind generation.⁸⁷ The film’s lead actors and director Sam Mendes gave a series of interviews which revealed a great deal about their thinking on race even while disavowing its importance. Several of the principles agreed on this fact: one of the film’s strengths was that it has a mixed race heroine and a mixed race couple at its center, but the issue of race is never overtly discussed.

The cast and crew also said that this reflected the attitudes and experiences of their generation. Two of the actresses are themselves children of Black-White interracial unions. The film’s treatment of race is one that Maya Rudolph, the heroine, and Carmen Ejogo, who plays her sister, both endorse and in fact said they have been waiting and hoping for. Theirs is a perfect articulation of the new color-blind ideal. Director Sam Mendes expressed this point-of-view particularly well:

“We’re talking about an era in which probably the most important person in the country is mixed race, and you’ve got this mixed-race person (in the movie) who’s part of this couple and that’s never commented on. Which I always loved about the movie – it’s just a fact that oh yeah, Burt and Verona, they’ve been living together since college. Yeah, they’re mixed race, so

⁸⁷ In fact, it’s fitting that President Obama identified *Away We Go* as one of his favorite films of 2009 in a January 2010 interview with People Magazine. In the quantitative content analysis, this film was also the highest scoring film on the positive side of the pro-integration scale.

what's the big deal? Nobody even thinks about it. That all is part of why hopefully it speaks to people now. (Gilchrist, 2009)

Along with filmmakers' underlying approach on race, the film's structure dictated that race be a subsidiary or non issue. The film portrays an established couple, not one that is just falling in love. The mature stage of the relationship dictates the narrative. The pair has been together for years. Presumably they would have had racial discussions in the past, but many of the initial hurdles would be long past and deliberately put aside on a day to day basis. Racial issues would presumably also be less top of mind for their families as well, although the parents are also largely absent in their lives and the need for family is the primary subject of the film.

Rather than race, what drives this couple is the search for a real home before the birth of their first child. So this non traditional couple, who is both interracial and unmarried, embarks on a quest for connections, a place to put down the roots they lack since neither individual has parental support. The female character's parents are dead. The male lead's parents are comically self-indulgent--more interested in traveling the world than spending time with their first grandchild. So, even though *Away We Go* is not a traditional interracial romance in any sense, it is a romantic story of two people of different racial backgrounds and like the typical interracial film, *Away We Go* has at its center an absent parent narrative that reflects changing social norms and family structure. The absent parent, and more broadly, the dysfunctional, disaffected American family, in addition to being a device in interracial dramas, is also a prominent motif in contemporary American culture. As mentioned earlier, this idea is explored at length in Michael Rosenfeld's *Age of Independence* (Rosenfeld, 2007). Rosenfeld argues that the declining influence of the traditional family has been a key catalyst of what many would see as positive social change. This declining parental role can also, however, be seen as leaving a hole in the social fabric.

It is this missing family connection that many contemporary interracial romances, including *Away We Go*, leverage to dramatic effect.

As well as being a distillation of the racial idealism and familial longings of their generation, the cast and crew's discussion of the film also reveals some of the contradictions and challenges which remain in achieving their ideals. Maya Rudolph's comments about why this film spoke to her effectively communicate what it means to live a race-blind existence today. In one interview Rudolph responded to a question about race and why there aren't more roles for African American women:

I plan to keep doing what I'm doing because race is just not a part of the way I look at the world and the way I live my life. I think that was a minor, key thing in the way that Dave and Vendela wrote the script. Verona is mixed and Burt is White but nobody talks about it. That felt realistic to me in my day to day life. People expect race to be an issue and I was raised in a house where it was never an issue. My parents were interested in having us feel like we were normal whatever that is. (Silverstein, 2009)

This is a great articulation of the evolving idea and practice of racial containment or resistance. It's not that race no longer matters in any sphere (although its role is diminished). It's more accurate to say that this resistance is an ideal and a choice, a willful stance someone takes that race is not something they place high value in and will not dictate their choices, or dominate their life. While acknowledging the influence of race and history in dictating the opportunities of African American actresses, Rudolph also vows to just keep doing what she's doing and not get focus on that, saying that "I don't even know if there is an answer" and that it's not her place to say.

Praising the film's minimal attention to the couple's race, Rudolph also says it "felt realistic to me in my day to day life." Having already said race is "just not part of the way I

look at the world and the way I live my life,” this comment adds an important nuance with the qualification “in my day to day life.” So it’s not necessarily a blanket statement that race is never discussed, but the idea is that at this stage in her day to day life, it’s not something with which the actress has to struggle. This sentence brings together two ideas – one is that of a personal belief system – “the way I look at the world” and the other is the personal impact - “the way I live my life.” The latter speaks directly to the felt presence of race. It’s a key part of what distinguishes the stance of resistance taken by White participants from that of engaged struggle, which is conveyed by Black participants.

Although at one point Rudolph says that she was raised in a house in which race “was never an issue,” she also talks about being aware that her parents made a conscious choice to make it so, that they were “interested in having us feel like we were normal, whatever that is.” Here, the actress introduces the idea of intent. Her parents were “interested in” creating this sort of environment for her. It did not just happen. Being a child of mixed race was not like having brown eyes or being left handed (as some believers in a race blind idealism would advocate), uncontroversial identifying traits which describe someone but are truly almost never discussed. A parent doesn’t have to make an effort to have children “feel normal” despite having brown eyes. So the very fact that she can acknowledge that her parents “were very interested” in creating and instilling this feeling in their children implies that had that not been the case race still could have been an issue, that it was something at least *partly made through conscious effort* to be less of an issue.

Furthermore, in addition to being a choice, in these comments race blind normality rather than mixed race marginality is portrayed as a state of mind that one maintains for oneself. As discussed, Rudolph’s parents ensured that race “was never an issue” in her house growing up, and this helped Maya and her siblings “feel like we were normal”. So, even if on the outside her family strayed from the norm, within the home her parents were

able to maintain an unexceptional atmosphere. Finally, by saying that her parents made them *feel* like they were normal “whatever that is” Rudolph conveys the idea that normal is in itself undefined and therefore subjective. This brief paragraph offers us a fuller view of the contours of racial resistance and post-racialism. It’s a value system and a construction of race that insists race doesn’t matter, but is also one that must be supported by a willful decision to *make* race unimportant through one’s own actions even if the outside world is not yet fully onboard with the idea.

These interviews bear a striking resemblance to the comments of the focus group participants. They reveal complicated and sometimes contradictory racial perspectives. To be sure, there has been substantial progress in race relations over the past few decades and there is also increasing insistence on resisting the racial labels and debates of the past. Nonetheless, these focus groups also reveal the challenges, cleavages and internal contradictions that remain as a new generation insists on race blind resistance while still carrying forward feelings of racial grievance.

At this Moment

In the 2009 summer of Sotomayor and Gates and Beck and Limbaugh, public discourse seemed to be of two minds. While the public struggled to reconcile its racial ambivalence, recent Hollywood films on interracial romance embraced multiculturalism and post-racial transcendence (*Away We Go*, *Rachel Getting Married*). While Whites more fiercely critiqued the problematic renderings of race in *Zebrahead* and tentatively enjoyed the multiculturalism of *Something New*, the Black women in this study acknowledged both frames as valid. The supportive film, which could have easily been dismissed as feel good fantasy, may well reflect our values and hopes, especially those of people of color, while the ambivalent Black Nationalism engaged in *Zebrahead*, which seemed so quaint to some, may still even more accurately reflects all our fears.

For the most part, Black audiences in this study did not focus on the idea possibly contained in the film that the only important impediments to further racial progress in America are the resistance, reverse racism and internal pathologies of the Black community, but many White audience members did. As the comparison of White and Black responses show, the disparities between different social groups' readings of cultural texts like the ones presented in this study are real, and sometimes dramatic.

Still, while the polysemy of cultural texts is not imagined, it may yet be exaggerated. There are *not* within a given society an infinite number of relevant interpretations. Moreover, the cultural text's importance shouldn't be underestimated just because its meaning is not singular. There are real dangers to stories that exaggerate one group's culpability in a social problem and negate another's. For audiences who felt they could relate to or supply the context for the characters' actions, *Something New* made sense even with the contextual gaps detailed in this study. Without that personal context, however, an unintended consequences of telling this type of story is that it may tend to further implicate the attitudes and actions of some in our ongoing racial conflicts (especially African Americans), while ignoring those of others (in this case Whites). Within this study, the result was that Black audiences had their fears confirmed in *Zebrahead*, and their hopes encouraged in *Something New*. For White audiences, however, who brought less familiarity with racial struggle to their viewing, both stories only seemed to inflame and provide further justification for already problematic and polarizing preconceptions about why we remain so far apart.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Major American Films Prominently Featuring Black-White Interracial Romance

The following films produced between 1954 and 2009 feature Black-White, heterosexual interracial romantic relationships as a central plot point or conflict around which the film is structured.

Criteria for Inclusion

For inclusion on this list, a film had to be produced and distributed widely in the United States as indicated by published box office receipts, focus on the romantic relationship as the central narrative or focal point, and feature a consensual interracial romantic relationship. Because the relationship had to be consensual, a plantation drama like *Mandingo* (De Laurentiis, 1975), which depicts sex between slaves and their owners was not included in the study, whereas *Band of Angels* (Walsh, 1957) was. In the latter film, the relationship becomes consensual once Amantha is given freedom and financial security, but chooses to follow her former master, whereas in *Mandingo*, the relationships are consistently coercive. Because sexuality is such a volatile complicating factor for racial ideology and representation, movies dealing with non-heterosexual romance were also beyond the scope of this research.

Major American Films Prominently Featuring Black-White Interracial Romance

Period	Year	Film Title	Dominant Racial Frame ⁸⁸
1950s: 5 Films	1957	Band of Angels	Ambivalence
	1957	Island in the Sun	Ambivalence
	1958	Kings Go Forth	Ambivalence
	1959	Night of the Quarter Moon	Ambivalence
	1959	The World, the Devil and the Flesh	Ambivalence
1960s: 2 Films	1965	A Patch of Blue	Ambivalence
	1967	Guess Who's Coming to Dinner	Liberal egalitarian/Integration
1970s: 1 Film	1970	Great White Hope	Separatism/Conflict
1980s: 1 Film	1986	Soul Man	Liberal egalitarian/Integration
1990s: 9 Films	1991	Jungle Fever	Separatism/Conflict
	1992	Zebrahead	Separatism/Conflict
	1993	A Bronx Tale	Ambivalence
	1992	Love Field	Ambivalence
	1992	The Bodyguard	Liberal egalitarian/Integration
	1994	Corrina Corrina	Liberal egalitarian/Integration
	1998	Bulworth	Ambivalence

⁸⁸ Dominant frames were determined in the coding process detailed in Chapter 3: Quantitative Content Analysis. Please see Table 6 on page 125 for a summary description.

	1999	Black and White	Separatism
	1999	Liberty Heights	Ambivalence
2000s: 12 Films	2001	From Justin to Kelly	Ambivalence*
	2001	Monster's Ball	Ambivalence
	2001	"O"	Ambivalence
	2001	Save the Last Dance	Multiculturalism
	2002	Far From Heaven	Separatism
	2004	Pieces of April	Liberal egalitarian/ Integration
	2005	Guess Who	Liberal egalitarian/ Integration
	2005	In the Mix	Multiculturalism
	2006	Something New	Multiculturalism
	2008	Lakeview Terrace	Ambivalence
	2008	The Family That Preys	Ambivalence
	2009	Away We Go	Liberal egalitarian/ Integration

*There was some discrepancy in the coding for this film.

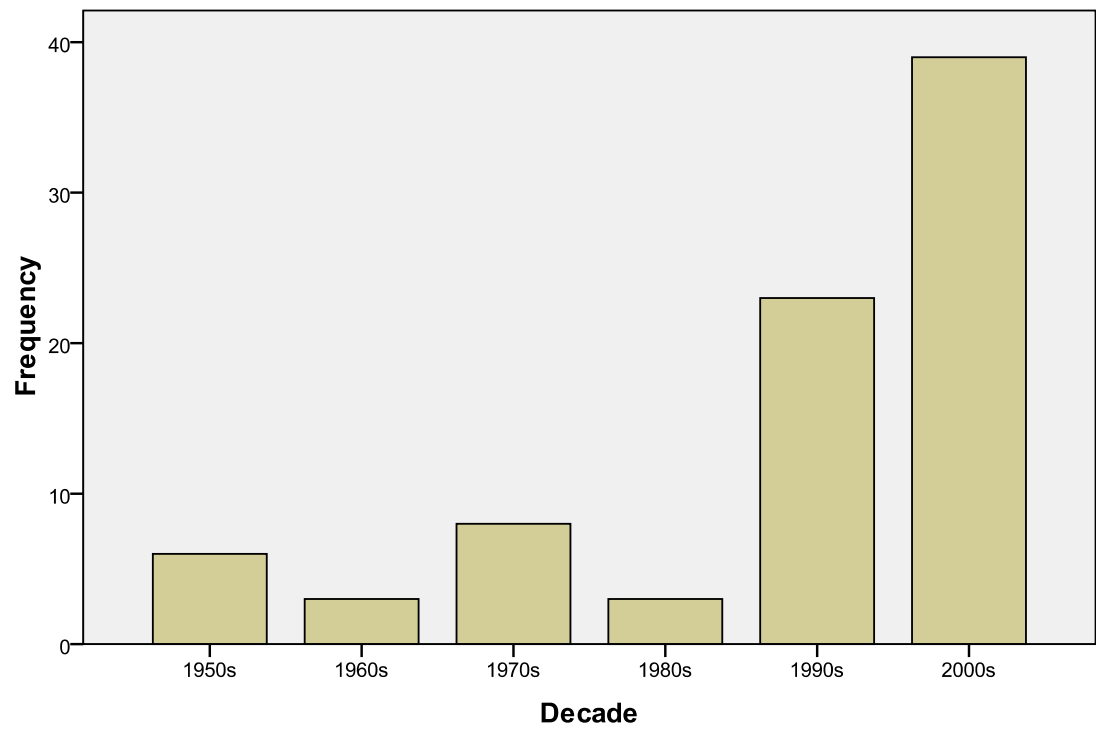
Appendix B Major American Movies Featuring Interracial Couples 1954 to 2009

(Includes both Prominent and Minor Depictions)

Decade of Release	Film Title	Year of Release
1950s	Band of Angels	1957
	Island in the Sun	1957
	Kings Go Forth	1958
	Night of the Quarter Moon	1959
	Shadows	1959
	The World, the Devil and the Flesh	1959
1960s	A Patch of Blue	1965
	Guess Who's Coming to Dinner	1967
	The Story of a Three-Day Pass	1968
1970s	Great White Hope	1970
	Liberation of LB Jones	1970
	The Landlord	1970
	Live and Let Die	1973
	Blazing Saddles	1974
	Mahogany	1975
	Hair	1979
1980s	American Flyers	1985
	White Nights	1985
	Soul Man	1986
1990s	Q and A	1990
	Jungle Fever	1991
	A Bronx Tale	1992
	Love Field	1992
	One False Move	1992
	The Bodyguard	1992
	Zebrahead	1992
	Made In America	1993
	Corrina Corrina	1994
	Pulp Fiction	1994
	Bad Company	1995
	Waiting to Exhale	1995
	Rich Man's Wife	1996
	Jackie Brown	1997
	One Night Stand	1997
	Bulworth	1998
	He Got Game	1998
	How Stella Got Her Groove Back	1998

	U.S. Marshalls	1998
	Black and White	1999
	Cruel Intentions	1999
	Liberty Heights	1991
	Mystery Men	1999
<i>2000s</i>	Boiler Room	2000
	High Fidelity	2000
	Mission Impossible II	2000
	Shaft	2000
	From Justin to Kelly	2001
	Monster's Ball	2001
	O	2001
	Save the Last Dance	2001
	Swordfish	2001
	The Royal Tennenbaums	2001
	The Score	2001
	Die Another Day	2002
	Far From Heaven	2002
	The Truth About Charlie	2002
	Undercover Brother	2002
	Bringing Down the House	2003
	Crossroads	2003
	Holes	2003
	Malibu's Most Wanted	2003
	Marci X	2003
	Barbershop 2	2004
	My Baby's Daddy	2004
	Pieces of April	2004
	Alfie	2005
	Guess Who	2005
	In the Mix	2005
	Idiocracy	2006
	Something New	2006
	Feast of Love	2007
	Hairspray	2007
	Perfect Stranger	2007
	This Christmas	2007
	Lakeview Terrace	2008
	Pride and Glory	2008
	The Family That Preys	2008
	Away We Go	2009
	Not easily broken	2009
	Obsessed	2009
	Rachel Getting Married	2009

Prevalence of Mainstream American Movies Featuring Interracial Couples by Decade



Includes both Prominent and Minor Depictions.

Appendix C: Content Analysis Intercoder Reliability: Scene Variables

	Mean % of Scenes	Percent Agreement (%)	Cohen's Kappa
Physical Intimacy	24.07	92.6	.804
Emotional Intimacy	23.83	93.5	.818
Physical violence or extreme sexuality	1.13	100	1.0
Emotional or verbal abuse	0.27	100	1.0
Positive outcome: cultural exchange	6.43	87.0	.157*
Positive outcome: friends and family unite	1.83	100	1.0
Negative outcome: Friends and Family Disapprove	10.87	88.0	.551
Negative outcome: Public Disapproval	4.27	95.4	.556
Negative outcome: Racially Motivated Violence	5.47	99.1	.901
Negative outcome: social ostracism		96.3	.218
Explicit pro-integration or racial egalitarian statements from a main character	3.77	95.4	.620
Explicit anti-integration or racial separatist statements from main character	4.77	97.2	.162*
Explicit pro-integration or racial egalitarian statements from a supporting character	1.97	98.1	.648
Explicit anti-integration or racial separatist statements from supporting character	7.38	86.1	.552
Explicit pro-integration or racial egalitarian statements from any character	5.50	97.2	.822
Explicit anti-integration or racial separatist statements from any character	11.74	84.3	.517
Average		94.7	.660

Reliability for scene level variables was calculated based on a 10% random sample of eligible films, or more than 60 scenes in all. Variables identified as being dominant or most prevalent in the content analysis (Chapter 3), are highlighted in bold.

* Variables with reliability below the “fair to good” range based on guidelines suggested by Banerjee et al (1999) were excluded from the index scores reported in the content analysis.

Appendix D: Content Analysis Intercode Reliability: Film Level Variables

	Percent Agreement (%)	Cohen's Kappa
Romantic resolution	89	.81
Racial outlook	65	.45
Racial outlook - binomial	84	.42
Dominant frame – original four values	50	.32
Dominant Frame – positive or negative binary	76	.51
Gender of White lead	100	1.0
Violence involving interracial couple	87	.72
Sexually consummated relationship	86	.72
Mutual love	80	.62
Positive outcome: cultural exchange*	73	.49*
Negative outcome: social ostracism*	92	.57*
Average	79	.58

Reliability values for film-level variables were calculated based on the full census of films fitting the criteria for inclusion.

*The following variables were originally coded at the scene level but transformed to the film level during data analysis for greater reliability of results: positive outcomes - cultural exchange, negative outcomes - social ostracism. The film-level versions of these variables were included in the calculation of the index scores.

Appendix E: Annotated Filmography

Away We Go (2009). Directed by Sam Mendes. Produced by Harris, Pippa and Sam Mendes. Written by Dave Eggers and Vendela Vida. Starring Maya Rudolph and John Krasinski. United States: Focus Features.

Burt and Verona are a close-knit, interracial couple in their thirties. When they learn that they are expecting their first child, they take stock of their lives and decide they need to shape up and put down stronger roots. Although both have solid jobs and have been together since college, they feel like they've never really grown up. Indeed, they never married or made a real home for themselves. Despite their steady incomes and college education, they live in a trailer with inadequate heat. As a result, as they take stock of their lives, they worry that they just might be “losers,” a disturbing realization for two people about to be parents.

Their first thought is to move closer to Burt's parents since Verona's are dead. The soon-to-be grandparents, however, can't offer the stability the couple wants as they are about to enjoy the next phase of their retirement halfway across the world. So Burt and Verona look for somewhere else to live, embarking on a mishap-plagued journey through America and Canada, visiting friends and scoping out potential places to call home. On this journey, each place (and indeed, each loved one) they visit disappoints in mostly humorous ways, except one, the beautiful but neglected and rural home of Verona's deceased parents. In the end, they learn that they are all the family they need. It is notable that the subject of race rarely comes up in this film save for a few scenes. In a film about a couple that has already been together a decade this seemed appropriate to me. However, *Away We Go* was praised and critiqued for this minimal treatment of race. It also gave many observers the sense that the authors didn't much like any of the characters in this film save for Verona and Burt (assumed to be stand-ins for the writers Vendela Vida and Dave Eggers), a charge that seems borne out by the film's isolated ending. Nonetheless, the love between the two is believable and a joy to watch.

U.S. Box office: \$9.4mn⁸⁹

Band of Angels (1957). Directed by Raoul Walsh. Produced by Raoul Walsh. Written by Robert Penn Warren (story), John Twist (screenplay), Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts. Starring Clark Gable, Yvonne De Carlo and Sidney Poitier. United States: Warner Bros.

Set on a southern plantation during the civil war era, *Band of Angels* is mainly the story of Amantha Starr, a beautiful mulatto slave, played by Yvonne DeCarlo, who falls in love with a plantation owner, Hamish Bond, depicted by Clark Gable.

Amantha was raised in privilege and always believed she was White. When her father dies and his plantation is taken over by his creditors, however, her fortunes shift dramatically, and she discovers the truth of her mother's partial African heritage. Although she is sold into slavery, the plantation owner who buys her is considered to

⁸⁹ All box office data are reported from IMDBPro and include receipts from theatrical domestic sales only. Film synopses are based in part on the official product descriptions published by the studios.

be kind and treats Amantha as his valued companion, if not an equal. The film also features a young Sidney Poitier, in a role quite different than those for which he became famous. Here he is bold and resentful, conveying the historically appropriate separatist belief that Amantha should forget about her White Man and stick with her own kind. Though Amantha is played by a White actress, this movie was controversial for its time just for portraying the idea of true love between a person of mixed race and a White man. It is perhaps an interesting metaphor that the central conflict that separates the two lovers is not Amantha's race-- Gable's character was always aware of it and not only grants her freedom, but wants to marry her nonetheless--but his past involvement in the slave trade. In the film's denouement, it's she, the former slave, who must forgive her former owner in order for them to be together.

U.S. Box office: not available

Black and White (1999). Directed by James Toback. Produced by Daniel Bigel, Michael Mailer and Ron Rotholz. Written by James Toback. Starring Brooke Shields, Robert Downey Jr., Gaby Hoffmann, Claudia Schiffer, Bijou Phillips, Mike Tyson and Alan Houston. USA: Palm Pictures, Screen Gems.

Set in New York City, James Toback's *Black and White* is a partially improvised ensemble piece featuring several loosely related stories about race and sex among overlapping social groups in New York City. At its center is a pair of documentary filmmakers, Sam (Brooke Shields) and her husband Terry (Robert Downey Jr.), following a group of white teens as they try to fit in with Harlem's Black hip-hop elite. The teens are mostly privileged private school students who not only listen to the music, they also attempt to adopt its style of dress and mode of speech, but it's all done in such an exaggerated way that the whole thing seems shallow and absurd and the characters distasteful. Rather than cultural fusion, the film portrays superficial and pretentious appropriation. Instead of belonging to a culture they admire, the young people end up being exploited underage groupies and hangers on. The multiple interracial relationships depicted on screen are similarly thin.

U.S. Box office: \$5.2mn

The Bodyguard (1992). Directed by Mick Jackson. Produced by Lawrence Kasdan, Jim Wilson and Kevin Costner. Written by Lawrence Kasdan. Starring Whitney Houston and Kevin Costner. United States: Warner Bros.

The Bodyguard stars Whitney Houston as a pop-music star and Kevin Costner as the high level bodyguard assigned to protect her after she receives several death threats. In addition to the mystery of who's threatening the singer's life, there is conflict as the two personalities struggle for dominance. Farmer is a consummate professional and a former secret service agent who never lets his guard down. Rachel is a volatile artist whose glamorous and unpredictable life often puts her at risk. Each one expects to be in charge. Though initially repelled by each other, attraction grows stronger as the danger increases. This was Whitney Houston's film debut and it was a box office hit. It's a genre thriller that capitalizes on the star's appeal and ability to crossover among multiple audiences. Race is one of the things the leads don't have in common but it's certainly not a focus.

U.S. Box office: \$122 mn

A Bronx Tale (1993). Directed by Robert De Niro. Produced by Robert De Niro. Written by Chazz Palminteri. Starring Chazz Palminteri, Lillo Brancato and Robert De Niro. USA: HBO Savoy Video.

Set in New York during the turbulent 1960s, in *A Bronx Tale*, a hard-working bus driver must stand up to the local mob boss if he is to keep his son from a life of crime. Directed by Robert De Niro, the film is a coming of age story about a boy, Calogero ("C"), whose life is guided by two father figures, the bus driver played by De Niro and the smooth but dangerous Mob boss Sonny, played by Chazz Palminteri. Though he is neither violent nor racist, whether because of loyalty or his need to fit in, as a teen "C" spends much of his time with a gang of Italian boys who are both those things. Despite their differences, the older men try to persuade "C" to keep away from them and focus on school. C's life is further complicated when he meets Jane, an African-American girl. He is instantly infatuated, despite the obvious racial tension in their neighborhood.

This film doesn't make overt social statements. Its greatest strength may be its subtlety and moral ambiguity. The characters and relationships in *A Bronx Tale* are all complicated and imperfect--Sonny is a mobster, but when Calogero's friendship with the boys threatens to lead him down a dangerous path, it's Sonny who saves him. It's also Sonny who gives him the most helpful advice in his fledgling relationship with Jane. Calogero's choices are questionable as well--he's dazzled by the mobster and ashamed of his hardworking father. He also watches as his friends beat Jane's brother severely for simply riding through their neighborhood. Yet "C" also tries to help the boy avoid getting seriously hurt, and his feelings for Jane are sincere. This moral ambivalence seems a fitting treatment of the complex subject matter.

U.S. Box office: \$17.3 mn

Bulworth (1999). Directed by Warren Beatty. Produced by Warren Beatty and Pieter Jan Brugge. Written by Warren Beatty and Jeremy Pikser. Starring Warren Beatty, Halle Berry and Oliver Platt. USA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment.

This broad, satiric comedy stars Warren Beatty as the rarest of creatures, a politician who tells the truth. Believing his career is over, the Senator takes out an enormous insurance policy and a contract on his own life. His impending death emboldens him, and he becomes fueled by an outrageous desire to break the rules and tell it like it is. Along the way he romances a beautiful young African American woman, played by Halle Berry, who has her own agenda and who is not at all what she seems.

Bulworth was well received as a black comedy and commentary on our political system and racial politics, but it is a bit of a mixed bag. As much as it skewers our prejudices, the film also reproduces stereotypes with exaggerated, reductive stock characters of people of color, many of which are not clearly challenged.

U.S. Box office: \$26.5 mn

Corrina, Corrina (1994). Directed by Jessie Nelson. Produced by Paula Mazur. Written by Jessie Nelson. Starring Whoopi Goldberg, Ray Liotta and Tina Majorino. United States: New Line Productions.

In the 1950s, Corrina, an outspoken and unconventional Black woman (Whoopi Goldberg) goes to work as a housekeeper for a grieving Jewish family after the mother dies. Corrina gives comfort and laughter to the depressed little girl (Majorino)

and love to her father, an advertising writer (Ray Liotta). As their relationship transitions to friendship and then crosses over into tentative romance, the reactions of family, friends, and neighbors and even their own misgivings threaten to break them apart.

U.S. Box office: \$20mn

Far from Heaven (2002). Directed by Todd Haynes. Produced by Jody Patton. and Christine Vachon. Written by Todd Haynes. Starring Julianne Moore, Dennis Quaid, Dennis Haysbert and Patricia Clarkson. USA: Focus Features, Universal Studios.

The perfect set-up for a melodrama: on the surface, Cathy is "the perfect 50s housewife, living the perfect 50s life -- healthy kids, successful husband, social prominence." As always, however, there's a worm in the perfect apple. Into this sunny tableau comes a sudden, irreparable disruption; Cathy finds her handsome, successful husband having sex with another man. As her life conventional life begins to unravel due to a secret she dare not tell even her closest friend, Cathy takes solace in the companionship of her sympathetic and Poitier-like gardener, Raymond. Tongues soon begin to wag, however, threatening not just her social standing but even her safety and the wellbeing of those around her. Ironically, her husband has an easier time with his same sex affair than Cathy does with her innocent friendship..

Beyond its subject matter, *Far From Heaven* is well known for its striking style, which is a painstaking homage to the Douglas Sirk movies of the 1950s; in particular it is reminiscent of the Jane Wyman feature *All that Heaven Allows*. Hayne's reproduction of the 1950s melodrama is rendered all the more dramatic in light of his injection of the very modern, sexual subplot. It's a bold choice and is also very well executed.

U.S. Box office: \$15.9mn

From Justin to Kelly (2001). Directed by Robert Iscove. Produced by Robert Engelman. Written by John Agoglia. Starring Kelly Clarkson and Justin Guarini. USA: Twentieth Century Fox.

A skeptical singing Texan waitress (Kelly Clarkson) meets Pennsylvanian college student/party promoter (Justin Guarini) during a spring break trip to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Though the two fall for each other, their inevitable coupling is hampered when various romantic complications and misunderstandings arise. Essentially a star vehicle for two of the original American Idol stars, this romantic musical comedy was born of the desire to extend the wildly popular American Idol franchise beyond the small screen. As such, it is clearly aimed at the television show's teen audience and the film takes full advantage of the star brand. The movie title and the lead characters even share the same first names as the stars, and the simple plot mainly provides a showcase for the movie's musical numbers. Though there are two interracial romances in the film, the primary one involves Kelly Clarkson, who is White, and Justin Guarini, who is biracial but whose ethnicity may be somewhat ambiguous for the audience. There is little if any reference to race although some of the plot complications involve talk of class-related conflict.

U.S. Box office: \$4.9mn

The Great White Hope (1970). Directed by Martin Ritt. Produced by Lawrence Turman. Written by Howard Sackler. Starring James Earl Jones and Jane Alexander. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment.

Loosely based on the life of boxer Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight champion boxer of the world, this fictional dramatization of his rise and fall depicts the battles he fought in and out of the ring, including the challenges he faced because he refused to comply with the proscribed racial restrictions of his time. Like Johnson, one of the most controversial aspects of the fictional boxer Jack Jefferson's life (played by James Earle Jones) was his relationships with women, including several who were White. Eventually the unconventional choices he makes render him a target and land him in significant legal trouble, diminishing his career. James Earle Jones gives a commanding and multifaceted performance in the lead role. Earle's Jack Jefferson is a complex man who can be admirable and generous at times, but mercurial and frustrating at others. The film does not gloss over the more troubling aspects of the story. This is one of the least known but most compelling and daring films in this study.

U.S. Box office: \$6mn (estimated)

Guess Who (2005). Directed by Kevin Rodney Sullivan. Produced by Betty Thomas. Written by David Ronn. Starring Zoe Saldana, Bernie Mac and Ashton Kutcher. United States: Columbia Pictures.

Guess Who is a very loose, more slapstick remake of the 1967 film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. As the film's promotional materials describe, "when Theresa (Zoë Saldana) brings fiancé Simon Green (Ashton Kutcher) home for her parents' 25th wedding anniversary, she has neglected to mention one tiny detail -- he's White." Unlike in the earlier film, the White suitor's parents are not part of this film. The humor is derived mostly from Simon's attempts to fit in with his fiancée's suspicious middle class Black family. It's an uphill battle. From the moment he meets Simon, Percy, played by Bernie Mac, is determined to break his daughter's engagement. Theresa's younger sister howls with glee that her usually perfect sister has finally done something so outrageous as to overshadow her own transgressions.

The very broad humor at the center of this film derives from exaggerated, sometimes stereotypical cultural contrasts. Ultimately, however, in keeping with the film on which it was based, *Guess Who* is decidedly supportive of the interracial couple. It just calls attention to and takes full comedic advantage of what the filmmakers imagine are the hurdles the couple have to face along the way. Forty years after *Loving v. Virginia* made interracial marriage legal throughout the nation, the question this film raises is no longer simply whether such a match can survive. Rather, the film has a fairly simple message about how best to handle the challenges that remain. It's not accidental that much of the conflict between Theresa and Simon flows from his attempts to shield her from bad news. When his supervisor makes disparaging racial remarks that suggest Simon would be better off without Theresa, he loses his job in defending her. The real problem, though, is not the loss of income, but the potential loss of trust. The solution, Theresa suggests, is not that they won't face opposition or that they should ignore it, but that they must face it together.

U.S. Box office: \$68 mn

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967). Directed by Stanley Kramer. Produced by Stanley Kramer. Written by William Rose. Starring Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, Sidney

Poitier and Katharine Houghton. USA: RCA/Columbia Pictures Home Video.

When the doted upon daughter of well-to-do, White liberal parents plans to marry a Black doctor, both families must sit down face to face and examine each other's level of intolerance.

Despite its many critics, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is the most famous, most honored, and most financially successful film of its type. It won several awards including multiple Oscars and was a major box office hit. It is also an overt message movie that scrutinizes American racism, race relations, and liberalism. In fact, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is the archetypal liberal integrationist interracial film. The Black romantic lead is John Prentice, a world-renowned doctor, played by Sidney Poitier, who is designing a way to export Westernized medicine to Africa on a mass scale. By stacking the deck so much in Prentice's favor, the filmmaker compels the audience to approve of the match, to judge these characters not "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (King, 1963).

U.S. Box office: \$56.7 mn

In the Mix (2006). Directed by Ron Underwood. Produced by Bill Borden and John Dellaverson. Written by Jacqueline Zambrano. Starring Raymond Usher, Chazz Palminteri and Emmanuelle Chriqui. Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment.

Like *The Bodyguard* and *From Justin to Kelly*, this is another market-driven cross over starring a popular music star. In this case, a young African American DJ Darrell (Usher) is hired by Italian mobster Frank to play at a surprise party for his beautiful daughter Dolly. During the party, a group of gunmen fire at Frank and Darrell takes the bullet. Convinced that his family may be in danger, Frank insists that his daughter hire a bodyguard. She resists, but eventually chooses Darrell. The two are childhood friends and a romance soon blooms, but it is not long before the couple are quarreling and encountering considerable resistance from her traditional, male dominated Italian family.

U.S. Box office: \$10.1 mn

Island in the Sun (1957). Directed by Robert Rossen. Produced by Darryl Francis Zanuck. Written by Alfred Hayes and Alec Waugh (novel). Starring Harry Belafonte, Joan Collins, Dorothy Dandridge, Joan Fontaine and James Mason. United States: Twentieth Century Fox.

This ensemble drama depicts racial and political conflict brewing on a fictitious Caribbean island. As the promotional copy for the DVD describes, "four different love affairs simultaneously wreak havoc in the lives of the inhabitants of a tropical paradise. A wealthy plantation owner plots murder when he suspects his wife of having an adulterous relationship. At the same time, his sister-in-law is drawn to his enemy, a dedicated black labor leader [played by Harry Belafonte] and a governor's aide is torn over his scandalous affair with a native woman [Dorothy Dandridge]."

Reminiscent of the tragic mulatto films of the 1940s and early 1950s, in addition to these overtly interracial romances, there are two relationships involving ostensibly White characters, who may or may not secretly have mixed blood. The result is a complicated and ambiguous mix of melodrama and social comment. While one Black character (Dandridge) seems to successfully flout boundaries and get her happy ending, the plantation owner (James Mason, playing a literally "tragic" mulatto as it is revealed) is driven by jealousy and self-hatred into a murderous rage, belonging

neither in the plantation class to which he belonged nor comfortable with the Blacks of the Island whom he despised.

U.S. Box office: \$8mn

Jungle Fever (1991). Directed by Spike Lee. Produced by Spike Lee. Written by Spike Lee. Starring Wesley Snipes, Annabella Sciorra, Spike Lee, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee and Samuel L. Jackson. United States: 40 Acres and a Mule/Universal Pictures.

Black architect, Flipper Purify (Wesley Snipes), begins an affair with his working-class Italian secretary (Annabella Sciorra), which causes them to be scrutinized by their friends, cast out from their families, shunned by their neighbors and even the target of violence in this moving view of inner-city life and racial division.

I argue that *Jungle Fever* is the quintessential portrait of interracial romance from a separatist perspective. Multiple instances of racially motivated violence, deep social ostracism and loss result from the pairing and the film presents an almost uniformly pessimistic outlook on race relations. In addition to highlighting deep racial divisions in the New York communities that Lee depicts, this film shines a light on problems within the Black community.

U.S. Box office: \$32.5mn

Kings Go Forth (1958). Directed by Delmer Daves. Produced by Frank Ross and Richard Ross. Written by Merle Miller. Starring Frank Sinatra, Tony Curtis and Natalie Wood. United States: United Artists Corp.

Kings Go Forth is a not entirely successful blend of different movie genres. Rather than breaking new ground, this film recycles the well-worn plots of previous dramas. With its setting in the European theatre during World War II and multiple battle scenes, it's a war movie, but there's also a dramatic love triangle that propels the story. Complicating matters, the sheltered and beautiful young woman at the center of that triangle (Natalie Wood) has what is meant to be a shocking secret. Although her mother is White, and she herself appears to be White, her father, now deceased, was an African American. Tony Curtis is convincing as the charming but caddish officer who betrays her and Frank Sinatra plays the more honorable colleague who loves her. Though she is greatly desired, like the protagonist in *Pinky*, Wood's character is a sympathetic but likely lonely figure, who ends up devoting her life to caring for others. When her mother dies, she turns their gracious home into a refuge for war orphans.

U.S. Box office: not available

Lakeview Terrace (2008). Directed by Neil LaBute. Produced by James Lassiter and Will Smith. Written by David Loughery and Howard Korder. Starring Kerry Washington, Samuel L. Jackson and Patrick Wilson. USA: Screen Gems
Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.

In this thriller, a young interracial couple, played by Kerry Washington and Patrick Wilson, move into their new home in a Los Angeles suburb and are immediately terrorized by a neighbor, the African American police officer next door (Samuel L. Jackson), who disapproves of their relationship.

This film is unique in the study in that it is essentially a genre movie, a suburban thriller that mixes classic themes like emasculation and sexual jealousy along with contemporary takes on multiculturalism and Black racism to bring a modern twist to a

well-worn form. That Jackson is a Black policeman abusing his power by harassing an interracial couple also puts at least a superficially unique (if misdirected) gloss on the issue of police brutality and government authority as a threat to individual autonomy.

U.S. Box office: \$39.3 mn

Liberty Heights (1999). Directed by Barry Levinson. Produced by Barry Levinson and Paula Weinstein. Written by Barry Levinson. Starring Adrien Brody, Ben Foster and Joe Mantegna. United States: Warner Brothers.

Academy Award-winning director Barry Levinson examines a pivotal time in U.S. history through the eyes of a Jewish family: Nate and Ada Kurtzman, sons Van and Ben, and their friends. The interracial relationship between Ben and a classmate is just one part of that change.

It's no accident that 1954, the year this film study begins is also the year that tests and transforms the familiar lives and identities of these characters. As Warner Brothers proclaims "the year is 1954; and everything is changing." The scope of the social transformation this film so ably depicts is well-known but still staggering to contemplate. As the film's promotions note: school desegregation is happening for the first time, bringing Black and White children from different neighborhoods into the same classrooms; rock'n'roll is also new and is giving teenagers a musical genre that will be uniquely their own; and the American automobile becomes a powerful social force, allowing people unheard of mobility and privacy, and the ability to travel into worlds that were previously unknown to them. As a result of all this change, excitement and trepidation abound in Levinson's Baltimore. Within this context, the men of the Kurtzman household are also making bold moves. Younger son Ben falls for the pretty daughter of an African American doctor, his older brother admires a Blonde gentile with a taste for danger, and the elder Kurtzman gets into trouble with his not so kosher business dealings. Both funny and dramatic, *Liberty Heights* is a valuable rendering of American social history told through fiction.

U.S. Box office: \$ 3.7mn

Love Field (1992). Directed by Jonathon Kaplan. Produced by Pillsbury, Sarah and Midge Sanford. Written by Don Roos. Starring Michelle Pfeiffer and Dennis Haysbert. United States: Orion Pictures.

The premise is simple: "on November 22, 1963, America lost a president and a generation lost its innocence" (Pillsbury & Sanford, 1992). Against this backdrop and the reality of a nation united in mourning but still bitterly divided by race, *Love Field* depicts an unlikely friendship between a sheltered White Dallas housewife and a handsome Black man, on the run with his young daughter. The woman, Lurene Hallett (Michelle Pfeiffer) feels such a strong personal connection to her idol, Jackie Kennedy, that when JFK is assassinated, she defies her husband and takes an eastbound bus, determined to attend the funeral. On the way, she meets a mysterious black man (Dennis Haysbert as Paul Cater) traveling with a sad, quiet little girl. Lurene is a fanciful, somewhat pathetic character at the start of the movie. Her husband bullies her and she's obsessed with the Kennedys to the point of distraction. As a result of her well-intentioned but ill-advised meddling and vivid imagination, the three travelers —Lurene, Paul and his daughter-- end up on the run from the police and Lurene's husband. By the end of their journey, however, the

once lonely and conventional suburban housewife has taken several bold actions. She defies her husband and the police, enjoys an implicitly sexual, relationship with the handsome traveler, and forges a relationship with his daughter.

U.S. Box office: \$1.9 mn

Monster's Ball (2001). Directed by Marc Forster. Produced by Lee Daniels. Written by Milo Addica and Will Rokos. Starring Halle Berry, Peter Boyle, Heath Ledger and Billy Bob Thornton. United States: Lions Gate Films.

In Marc Forster and Lee Daniels' Academy Award-winning but controversial drama, Hank is a death row corrections officer and Leticia the soon-to-be widow of an inmate whose execution Hank helps conduct (Daniels, 2001). In the aftermath of that execution, both Hank (Billy Bob Thornton) and Leticia (Halle Berry) lose their children to violent deaths. At the lowest point in their lives, an unlikely bond is forged in their common pain and need. Eventually, however, the relationship grows stronger through mutual respect and consideration.

At first, the relationship is explicitly sexual, and Berry's role in the film attracted a great deal of criticism for that reason. But, the filmmakers also take the time to show the growing connection between Hank and Leticia that sparks a personal renewal for both parties. Hank quits his job and starts a business; Leticia's growing comfort is evident in her demeanor and her actions. But the nascent relationship is threatened by Hank's former life and the secrets he still hides from her, including his father, a bitter, unreconstructed racist and former guard, who lives at home with him. Though Hank makes changes to protect the relationship, even at the end it's unclear whether their future is still threatened by the past, a situation that I argue works well as a metaphor for the state of race relations.

U.S. Box office: \$31.3mn

Night of the Quarter Moon (1959). Directed by Hugo Haas. Produced by Albert Zugsmith. Written by Franklin Coen and Frank Davis. Starring Julie London, John Drew Barrymore, Agnes Moorehead and Nat 'King' Cole. USA: MGM/UA Entertainment Company.

Chuck Nelson (John Drew Barrymore) is a shell-shocked war veteran and the scion of a wealthy San Francisco family. On a fishing trip in Mexico, he meets and quickly marries a local girl Ginny (Julie London), despite her revelation that she is of mixed heritage and knows this will be a problem for his family back in the United States. When the couple returns to California, the beautiful bride is enthusiastically embraced by Chuck's family and the press. This reception quickly sours, however, when the press and her mother-in-law (Agnes Moorehead) discover Ginny's partial African ancestry. Evicted from the honeymoon suite, the newlyweds encounter further hostility when they move to a suburban neighborhood with restrictive covenants. After a fight with locals, Chuck's mother arranges to have him declared mentally ill and tries to have the marriage annulled on the grounds that Chuck was confused and did not know of Ginny's heritage when he married her.

Though seemingly farfetched, *Night of the Quarter Moon* is loosely based on the infamous 1920s marriage and divorce of a wealthy White scion of a very old New York family and a woman of mixed heritage. The film differs from the tragic mulatto dramas that preceded it in critical ways that indicate a progressive turn in racial

ideology (2008). Most important, the couple is reunited at the end despite all opposition. The film also treats sexuality more openly than previous films, and *Night of the Quarter Moon* upends assumptions about the psychological implications of crossing racial boundaries. Whereas Chuck is tortured and damaged by war, Ginny is happy and strong. Unlike the tragic heroines of the 1940s and 1950s racial dramas, her psyche is not tormented, and she is not trying to pass for White. When Ginny and Chuck first meet in her native Mexico, he is a broken man, recovering from two years as a prisoner of war in Korea. Their love stabilizes him. It's also a stylistically striking film that often uses modern jazz to heighten the dramatic effect, a practice that was common to its time and to the melodramatic genre but no longer in style.

U.S. Box office: not available

"O" (2002). Directed by Tim Blake Nelson. Produced by Eric Gitter, Daniel L. Fried and Anthony Rhulen. Written by Brad Kaaya (screenplay) based on the play by William Shakespeare. Starring Mekhi Phifer, Josh Hartnett and Julia Stiles. United States: Trimark Home Video; Lions Gate Home Entertainment.

"O" is a modern-day retelling of Shakespeare's classic "Othello" set in an exclusive boarding school. In this update, scholarship student Odin James or "O" (Mekhi Phifer) is the school's best basketball player and an NBA hopeful. He is adored by all including his coach and a beautiful classmate Desi (Julia Stiles), who is the principal's daughter. "O" also has a troubled friend, Hugo, who is the coach's son and deeply resentful of his father's preference for "O" on and off the court. Motivated by this resentment and jealousy over "O's" star status, Hugo plots to destroy those bonds (and ultimately destroy Odin) by planting seeds of doubt in Odin's relationship with Desi. This sets into motion a disturbing and showily violent chain of events that are a mostly superficial update to the stage play's still surprisingly relevant themes.

U.S. Box office: \$16mn

A Patch of Blue (1965). Directed by Guy Green. Produced by Pandro S. Berman. Written by Guy Green. Starring Sidney Poitier, Elizabeth Hartman and Shelley Winters. United States: MGM/UA.

Sidney Poitier is Gordon, a well-spoken office worker who befriends a blind girl he meets in the park. The young woman, Selina (Elizabeth Hartman), has been exploited and abused by family and strangers alike most of her life, including her mother (Shelly Winters), a loud, domineering alcoholic who accidentally blinded the girl when she was five years old. Gordon is kind and much more sophisticated than the people she is usually surrounded by in her working class tenement. He teaches Selina how to get along in the city that she has mostly been cut off from most of her life, but he is reserved and mindful of the difference in their ages and race. The relationship and Selina's future are threatened, when her domineering mother finds out that Gordon is Black and forbids Selina to spend time with him. Though the move is supposedly for the girl's own good, the older woman's true aim is to exploit her daughter's looks and disability for money.

Released in 1965, *A Patch of Blue* was ground-breaking in its depiction of social intimacy between a Black man and young White woman. The relationship is not sexually consummated, but there is emotional closeness between these characters, and they share a brief on-screen kiss. Considering that this was two years prior to the Supreme Court ruling on interracial marriage laws, this was still a daring choice

on the part of the filmmakers.

U.S. Box office: \$6.8mn

Pieces of April (2003). Directed by Peter Hedges. Produced by Gary Winick. Written by Peter Hedges. Starring Katie Holmes, Derek Luke, Oliver Platt and Patricia Clarkson. United States: Metro-Goldwyn Mayer.

A series of mishaps occur when a truly dysfunctional suburban family gathers for Thanksgiving dinner at the Lower East Side apartment of their estranged eldest daughter April (Katie Holmes). Even as a child, April was never been on good terms with her mother, Joy (Patricia Clarkson). Now that she is in a solid relationship with her live-in boyfriend Bobby (Derek Luke), an affectionate and supportive young African American man, she volunteers to host her family for Thanksgiving in their cramped walk-up apartment. From the first frame, it's clear this is the most stable and probably happiest April has ever been, but her efforts to host the perfect dinner are thwarted by technical difficulties, a lack of preparation, and her thorough ignorance of how to cook. Added to these obstacles are the family's skepticism about April's ability to do anything right and their racially tinged fear that they're being carjacked when they pull up to the gritty building and an enthusiastic but disheveled Bobby greets them on the street. Nonetheless, with a great deal of help from a diverse group of generous neighbors, April ultimately succeeds.

U.S. Box office: \$2.4mn

Save the Last Dance (2001). Directed by Thomas Carter. Produced by Robert Cort. Written by Duane Adler. Starring Julia Stiles and Sean Patrick Thomas. USA: Hollywood, CA : Paramount, 2001.

When her mother suddenly dies, Sara must abandon her plans to become a ballerina and join her estranged father on Chicago's gritty, predominantly Black South side. She feels out of place until she is befriended by an African American classmate Chenille and Chenille's handsome brother, Derek. Sara and Derek's shared love for dance leads to romance but not without significant opposition from family and friends. In emphasizing growth through cultural exchange and the overcoming of barriers, *Save the Last Dance* exemplifies the multicultural frame. Although the move to Chicago is a culture shock, Sara quickly learns to enjoy her new life. Along the way, she is transformed in multiple ways, from how she dresses to how she dances and eventually in her understanding of urban life. Although this makeover begins as an attempt to fit in, Sara's cultural education deepens over time. Through her relationship with Derek (and to a lesser extent, Chenille), she becomes a more outgoing, confident person and more versatile dancer. Eventually she is even able to tap into the creativity she lost when her mother died and understand enough about the African American experience to understand and overcome their friends' objections to the relationship. This and her boyfriend's encouragement help her succeed in her dream of gaining admission to Julliard.

U.S. Box office: \$91 mn

Something New (2006). Directed by Sanaa Hamri. Produced by Allain, Stephanie. Written by Kriss Turner. Starring Simon Baker, Mike Epps, Donald Faison and Sanaa Lathan. USA: Focus Features.

Something New is a romantic comedy of manners that has class and racial prejudice as its central conflicts. The film's heroine, Kenya McQueen (Sanaa Lathan) is a classic, type A career woman with a hyperscheduled life, lots of friends and a

supportive but pushy family. She has almost everything, but few opportunities for love. Her romantic life is the one thing in life that she can't control, and it's not going well. When she and her friends make a Valentine's pledge to "let love flow," Kenya finally allows a White coworker to set her up on a blind date. To her surprise, the date turns out to be a handsome, free-spirited, White landscaper named Brian (Simon Baker). The relationship is passionate and has an obviously positive effect on her, but Kenya is sometimes still torn about whether she and Brian can bridge their differences in the long term. When she is introduced to her theoretical "ideal Black man" (Blair Underwood) courtesy of her brother, Kenya must decide between the relationship that she thinks makes sense and the one that makes her feel loved. Though imperfect, *Something New* confronts some of the cultural expectations and prejudices that can get in the way of cross-cultural romance without resorting to caricature.

U.S. Box office: \$11.4 mn

Soul Man (1986). Directed by Steve Miner. Produced by Steve Tisch. Written by Carol Black. Starring Rae Dawn Chong James Earl Jones C. Thomas Howell. USA: Anchor Bay Entertainment,.

When his parents refuse to pay for his graduate school, Mark Watson decides to go to Harvard Law School on a Fellowship for an outstanding black student. Since Mark is White, he swallows a handful of experimental tanning pills. Instantly black, Mark finds himself seduced by an uppercrust white coed, jailed without reason, attracted to a beautiful but reserved Black student, and the butt of obnoxious, racist pranksters. When his deception is discovered, Mark nearly loses everything including his place in school and the respect of the woman he cares about. Ultimately, however, his experiences give him a better understanding of what it's like to be Black and how to take responsibility for his actions, earning her respect and admiration.

U.S. Box office: \$27.8mn

Tyler Perry's the Family That Preys (2008). Directed by Tyler Perry. Produced by Tyler Perry. Written by Tyler Perry. Starring Alfre Woodard, Kathy Bates, Sanaa Lathan, Rockmond Dunbar, Cole Hauser and Taraji P. Henson. USA: Lionsgate.

Wealthy White socialite Charlotte Cartwright and her dear friend Alice Pratt, a working class African American woman of high ideals, have enjoyed a lasting friendship throughout many years. Their lives become mired in turmoil as their adult children's extramarital affairs, unethical business practices and a dark paternity secret threaten to derail family fortunes and unravel the lives of all involved. Alice's self-centered and materialistic daughter, Andrea, is having an affair with her boss, who is also Charlotte's son, William, and who is himself married to Jillian. William's true focus is to replace the COO of his mothers' lucrative construction corporation. The families are torn apart when the affair and other secrets come to light, revealing the racial conflicts that still divide them. Throughout, however, the friendship between Charlotte and Alice survives.

U.S. Box office: \$37.1 mn

The World, the Flesh, and the Devil (1959). Directed by Ranauld MacDougall. Produced by George Englund. Written by M.P. Shiel (novel "The Purple Cloud"), Ferdinand Reyhe (story "End of the World") and Ranauld MacDougall (writer). Starring Harry Belafonte, Inger Stevens and Mel Ferrer. USA: HarBel Productions and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).

This little known film depicts the struggles that ensue when three people--one White woman and two men, one Black and one White, are the only people left alive in New York after a nuclear disaster. At first, Ralph (Harry Belafonte), a mine engineer, believes himself to be completely alone in the world. After some time, he meets Sarah (Inger Stevens). The two are plainly attracted to each other, but even when they believe they may be the last two people on earth, prejudice, social convention, and mistrust still keep them apart. When a third survivor shows up, a White man, played by Mel Ferrer, the situation is further complicated by sexual rivalry. This independent film was a personal project for Belafonte and his political aims are clear. It is a creative science fiction parable that highlights the madness of certain social conventions, especially racial ones, while dramatizing the potential horrors of nuclear war.

U.S. Box office: not available

Zebrahead (1992). Directed by Anthony Drazan. Produced by Jeff Dowd. Written by Anthony Drazan. Starring Michael Rappaport and N'Bushe Wright. USA: Ixtlan.

When a young White man begins dating a Black transfer student, the relationship worsens racial tensions at their high school. Set and filmed in Detroit in the early 1990's, the film tries to realistically represent the social conflicts that were prevalent in many urban schools at the time. It is based largely on the similar experiences of its writer/director Anthony Drazan, who is actually from New York, and some of its themes of intrinsic conflict are reminiscent of Brooklyn-based filmmaker Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*. The school is full of tightly drawn factions--there are white cliques and Asian cliques and Afrocentric ones. Zack, however, tries to straddle multiple worlds through his music. The scenes in which he deejays, mixing a wide variety of contemporary Black and classical music are the exception to the racially polarized norm. Nonetheless, despite his deejay skills and even despite Zack's very longstanding friendship with a popular Black student, Dee, no one seems comfortable when Zack begins dating Dee's cousin, Nikki. The parents and teachers express serious concerns and offer unsolicited advice. Black students toss insults and accusations, and Zack's White friends make insulting sexual jokes about Black women. The biggest problem though is pride. When the couple fight, Nikki's pride leads her into the arms of a troubled neighborhood kid, aptly named "Nut." When Nut's pride is ultimately hurt, racial tensions are accelerated by sexual jealousy and a simple rivalry quickly turns into violence.

U.S. Box office: \$1.5 mn

Appendix F: Interracial Representation in Film--Final Coding Guidelines

Film Title: _____

Coder: _____

Overview

Purpose: This coding scheme documents in quantitative terms how interracial relationships (IRR) and race relations are depicted in American films that prominently feature a romantic relationship in which one romantic lead character is black or biracial and the other is white.

Overall organization and unit of analysis:

- There are 21 variables. The coding is divided into three sections and requires two different units of analysis.
- In part 1 there are 14 descriptive variables to be coded at the scene level:
 - ☐ In scene-level coding, each variable present counts just once per scene regardless of the number of individual occurrences.
- In part 2, the unit of analysis is the film as a whole. This section includes just 2 variables, romantic resolution and racial outlook. These should be coded at the end of the film.
- Part 3 also uses the film as the unit of analysis. This section is comprised of just one pattern level variable, overall racial frame. This should be coded at the end of the film.
- Assigning weights (point values) and numerical codes:
 - ☐ **IMPORTANT:** For almost all variables, you need only choose between presence and absence and assign the numerical code 1 or 0 accordingly as instructed below in Section 1.
 - ☐ Different weights are assigned to each variable depending on the impact on the narrative, but these weights are applied automatically via formulas embedded within the coding sheet.
 - ➡ For example, in the relationship outcomes category (1b), racially motivated violence resulting in death is a definitive, narrative defining event that carries the greatest weight compared to other variables (Weight = -5).
 - ➡ Social ostracism from family and friends carries greater weight than verbal disapproval from family and friends, but less than violence resulting in death. (Weight = -3)
 - ☐ Category totals are also calculated automatically within the spreadsheet for all of the scene level descriptive categories in Section 1. **So, no manual calculations are required.**
- Capturing other observations: In addition to the 17 required variables, throughout the film you can also take note of any particularly striking scenes or ways in which you observe ideas about race being conveyed that are not otherwise captured by this

coding scheme. Please make notes within the lines provided in each section or at the end of this worksheet.

Section I: Scene Level Descriptive Coding

Section I Coding Instructions

Record the presence or absence of each of Section 1 variable at the scene level. So if there are 20 scenes in a film, with 14 variables to be coded per scene you will have 48 scene level coding decisions in all in Section 1. Do not skip variables or leave any cell blank in Section 1.

Assigning numerical codes:

Most but not all variables in this study and all but one in Section 1 are dichotomous (exceptions: V9, V15, V16, V17).

For each scene, observe the presence or absence of each dichotomous, descriptive variable and assign one of two numerical codes as follows:

- ☐ Code each scene including any occurrence of the specified variable as 1
- ☐ Code each scene in which an element is not present at all as 0

For example: If there are three instances of verbal disapproval from family and friends in one scene, code just once for that scene, 1. If there are two instances of physical intimacy in one scene, still only code once, as 1.

NOTE: Since this rule does not apply to the racially motivated violence variable (V9) in category 1b, or the variables in sections 2 and 3, specific instructions are provided below for each of those variables.

Section I Coding Categories

1) Romantic relationship

1A) Intimacy and abuse – is the central interracial couple shown in intimate or abusive situations

- **V1** Physical intimacy – romantic or sexual – characters engage in physically intimate behavior, including kissing, having sex, holding hands, etc.
- **V2** Emotional intimacy – any instances of the romantic characters exhibiting real closeness- honesty, sharing personal secrets, vulnerability, support, mutual concern.
- **V3** Physical violence, aggression or graphic, explicit sexuality within the IR relationship. This is distinguished from sexually intimacy by its explicit nature. Such scenes violate norms of romantic representation and would be jarring or out of place in a mainstream romantic film.
- **V4** Emotional/verbal abuse (beyond minor everyday mutual conflicts between loved ones). Emotional/verbal abuse is distinguished by insulting and degrading language that is aimed at demeaning its target and would be jarring or out of place in a mainstream romantic film.

- **V20 Gender of white lead - Code 1 for male; 2 for female.** This is coded just once per film.
- **V22 Sexual relationship** - Not just affection – sex explicitly referred to or partially or wholly shown on-screen (e.g. kissing in bed, cut to next

day)

- This is a dichotomous presence/absence variable.
- You do not need to gauge whether the sex is romantic or graphic. This does not have to be sex in a negative or positive way. Just any sexual relationship.
- The two characters not having sex is sometimes discussed.
- Or there is just a kiss, hand holding, no scene in which sex is talked about as having happened or indicated by nudity or the two being in bed and looking as though they were going to have sex.

- Notes: _____
- _____
- _____

1B) **Relationship Consequences: What events result from the interracial pairing?**

- **Positive outcomes:**
 - ☐ **V5** cultural exchange or other cultural benefits including: characters benefit from enjoyment, appreciation, learning about a different culture – music, dance, traditions, language, and history. This exchange may result in the creative collaboration, better understanding between races and cultures, or just a personal gratification for the individual character.
 - ☐ **V6** family and friends unite: the relationship drives racial reconciliation in the couple's social network, with family and friends from different, often polarized groups coming together.
- **Negative outcomes:**
 - ☐ **V7** disapproval from friends and family - conveyed verbally or visually (through explicit, pronounced gestures, looks).
 - ☐ **V8** public disapproval from strangers – conveyed verbally or visually
 - ☐ **V9** racially motivated violence – IMPORTANT, there are more than two options. Assign numerical code based on degree of severity of the violence:
 - Fighting without weapons, (even if there are injuries, bruises):1
 - gun or knife violence or other weapon, violence resulting in death, hospitalization, severe, life-threatening injuries, or one-sided beating: 2
 - No violence, 0

- ☐ **V10** social ostracism: loss of friends, family relationships—characters in the IRR are shunned by family, excluded from social circle, events.
- ☐ **V21 Violence against interracial couple** - This is a dichotomous presence/absence variable. The severity does not need to be measured.
 - ➡ Includes any observed physical attack on or fight involving the couple after they begin the interracial relationship (grave or life threatening or not), regardless of what the exact nature of the precipitating factor seems to be or who gets hurt in the end—
 - ➡ An attack on the couple that hurts their friend or family member instead also counts. So if Amy is in an interracial relationship and she is attacked but her friend Greta is standing next to her and accidentally gets slapped instead because she's standing next to Amy, that counts.
 - ➡ The only violence that would not count would be a sanctioned contest.
- ☐ Notes: _____

- _____
- _____

2) Racial beliefs, ideology

Code for EXPLICITLY verbalized expressions of racial beliefs.

Note: There are four separate variables for this section in order to distinguish between beliefs voiced by a lead versus supporting character.

- Lead characters: include the romantic couple and their immediate family (parents, brother, sister), closest friends. When a leading character voices an opinion on race relations, often as stand-in for filmmaker's perspective:
 - ☐ **V11** Code Pro racial integration expression by lead character
 - ☐ **V12** Code anti-integration or separatist expression by lead character
- Supporting characters: supporting/peripheral character from the lead couple's social network, workplace, or community. When they voice opinion on race relations, they represent the views of the broader community or social network:
 - ☐ **V13** Code pro integration expression by supporting character
 - ☐ **V14** Code anti-integration or separatist expression by supporting character
- **Explicit Pro integration expression:** espousing any of the following beliefs:
 - ☐ All human beings are equal and that what people have in common (especially love) is more important and powerful than what separates people.
 - ☐ America as melting pot or color blind
 - ☐ Integration and/or multiculturalism as positive.
 - ☐ Diversity as a positive element, strength

☐ Examples:

- Dr. King's I have a Dream speech is the most famous articulation of this perspective.
- More recently, Sen. /Pres Obama has also repeatedly put forth this viewpoint, at the DCC in 2004 and in the Philadelphia race speech during the 2008 campaign.

▪ **Explicit Separatist/Anti-integration expression: espousing the belief that:**

- ☐ Blacks and whites can not get along and are best left separate.
- ☐ People who cross a color line are "selling out" or betraying their race.
- ☐ Racial differences are persistent and important and will always be so.
- ☐ Diversity is a problem for society
- ☐ Famous articulations of this perspective include the early teachings of Malcolm X, Nation of Islam leader Farrakhan, and Marcus Garvey, who stressed the need for blacks' solidarity, nationalism, and even a movement back to Africa. Also white leaders like David Duke.

- Notes: _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Section II: Film Level Coding

Section II Instructions and Variables

There are two categories in this section, with just one variable in each category. Code both variables at the film level.

3) V15: Romantic resolution

- Is the romantic coupling viable in the long-term? Choose only one resolution for each film.
- This category has three options. Code as strictly as possible based on what is shown on screen, not on your interpretation of the couple's viability. Assign numerical code as follows.
 - ☐ **Negative:** couple breaks up by the end of the film, (-5)
 - ☐ **Positive:** couple is still together at conclusion, (+5)
 - ☐ **Ambiguous:** couple's future is unresolved at the end of the film (0)
- Notes: _____
- _____
- _____

4) V16: Dominant racial outlook/status of race relations/racial environment

- Is the atmosphere surrounding the couple one of racial comity and integration or racial conflict and separation?

Unlike variables 1 to 15 which were descriptive, this category requires you to interpret how race relations are characterized in the film as a whole.

- Select ONE of the three coding options below. Choose the code that best represents the overall portrayal of race relations in the film and record the numerical code as specified below:
 - ☐ **Comity:** evidence of racial progress and/or generally positive interactions between Blacks and Whites in the environment independent of the central IRR. Only minor evidence of racial conflict. (+5)
 - ☐ **Conflict:** races are polarized, with no or very little social integration; there are substantial racial conflicts in the community independent of the central relationship (preexisting rifts, issues). (-5)
 - ☐ **Mixed** – evidence of coexistence, progress and serious conflict. (0)
- Notes: _____
- _____

▪

Section III: Pattern Coding

Instructions

There is just one variable in this section, racial frame. Code it at the film level. This is a qualitative, categorical variable and will not be added in the total score unlike variables 1 to 16.

5) V17 Dominant Racial Frame:

There are four racialized “frames” or thematic patterns described below. All connect the representational elements documented in Sections 1 and 2 to ideological perspectives on race relations. The key question is: which overarching racial frame best fits the representation of race in this film?

To answer this question:

- First, please read the detailed guidelines provided below for each pattern carefully.
Think about the elements you recognize that are present in the film.
- Bearing in mind your detailed observations in sections 1 and 2, the film’s predominant characteristics, and your overall impression, choose the single category that you feel best represents the overall perspective conveyed in the movie as a whole.
- Assign a numerical code as follows:
 - ☐ 1=Integration/racial reconciliation
 - ☐ 2=Separatism/conflict
 - ☐ 3=Multiculturalism
 - ☐ 4= Ambivalence

Section III Codes

1. Pro-integration/Racial Reconciliation Frame

- Interracial relationship is a vehicle for overcoming racial divides, not just for the characters who are romantically involved, but also for the people around them.
- Key characteristics
- Romantic intimacy
- Idealized Black lead figure
- Positive/optimistic romantic resolution
- Optimistic racial outlook

- Lack of violence
- Couple overcome obstacles
- Conventional racial ideology - overt articulation of 1960s pro-integration ideology (Dr. King)
- Race blind ideal

2. Separatism/Racial Solidarity & Conflict Frame

- Interracial relationship is a vehicle for revealing insurmountable racial division, racism
- Key characteristics
- Racial polarization, conflict
- Pessimistic racial outlook. Emphasis on racism, lack of racial progress.
- Draws sharp, race-based contrasts between cultures, people of different races
- Characterization of romantic lead characters as troubled and/or misguided, driven by curiosity not genuine love
- Negative romantic resolution – couple is not viable because of racial and cultural differences and/or their environment
- Relationship is not characterized as being strong, genuine love
 - Lack of romantic intimacy
 - Physical relationship is highly sexual but not emotionally intimate
- Social costs of being in the IRR are high:
 - Racially motivated violence
 - Crippling social ostracism
- Racial ideology:
 - Black Nationalist or just emphasizing need for black solidarity.
 - Personal choices are political. Problems in black community require racial solidarity for improvement.
 - Integration, assimilation, racial mixing seen as a drain on black community.
 - Overt allusions to and/or articulation of 1960s style racial separatism (Malcolm X)

3. Multiculturalism Frame -

- A contemporary perspective on race and ethnicity which holds up as ideal a society in which ethnicities, races and cultures remain distinct but are equally respected and valued. Multiculturalism does not seek a unified, color-blind American culture but

allows members of distinct groups within society to celebrate and maintain their cultural identities as a way to promote social cohesion.

- Key characteristics:
- Aims for “realistic” presentation – positive and negatives characterization of black and white characters and their environments
- Draws sharp, race-based contrasts between cultures, people of different races
- Setting - mainly or at least partially set inside “Black community”, which is separate and distinct from the “White community”
- Racial challenges presented and barriers overcome
 - ➡ Racially motivated violence
 - ➡ Social isolation, ostracism
- Racial comity is achieved (at least partially) in broader racial context,
 - ➡ Core romance is not the only example of social integration
- Positive romantic resolution - true love, couple overcomes obstacles
- Romantic intimacy presented
 - ➡ Strong physical and emotional connection
- Racial ideology:
 - ➡ Separatist ideas discussed and dismissed, usually by a supporting character
 - ➡ New racial idealism -- understanding through cultural exchange
 - ➡ NOT color blind -- universal and culturally specific
 - ➡ Departure from the melting pot ideal in which individual cultures are subsumed into one
- Rather than negating cultural differences, these films celebrate them
 - ➡ Presentation of minority culture -- art, clothing and music, poetry, ideas
- Often caters to younger audiences

4. Racial Ambivalence Frame

- This perspective characterizes race relations as being problematic, complicated, and unresolved, with no clearly endorsed path to progress.
- Key characteristics:

- Ambiguity: key elements including the romantic resolution and racial outlook may be undecided by the end of the film.
- Multiple perspectives are expressed in the film with no clearly dominant view. The film may seem to validate several different perspective including integration, separatism and multiculturalism or none of the above.
- May incorporate various elements of the racial reconciliation, multicultural and separatism/ polarization frames including:
 - Substantial social costs from IRR:
 - Social isolation, ostracism
 - Racial violence
 - Drawing sharp, race-based contrasts between cultures, people of different races
 - Racial ideology – separatist ideas discussed, but not endorsed.
Integrationist ideas may be voiced but discounted.
 - Often but not always expressed by a supporting character, not by the leads
 - Racial comity ideal may be endorsed but not necessarily represented as realistic or within reach.
- Romantic resolution is unclear. There's no happy ending. The film leaves open the possibility of the viable interracial relationship, but does not guarantee the couple's future. At the end there may well be a real connection, but there are also grave doubts and conflict between them.
- Racial outlook – mixed or undetermined. A resolution is yet to come.

Misc. Notes:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Appendix G: Focus Group Interview Guide

Part I

1. Please go around and introduce yourselves.
2. I'm interested in studying the issue of race and race relations. Do you think of race relations between different groups as an abstract thing that doesn't affect you or does it come up in your life as something you have to think about?
3. Are racial issues generally covered in the news that you read or hear? Is it covered too much or not enough? What sorts of things have you read or heard discussed about regarding race?
4. What do you think about recent events involving race? Do you feel things are getting better or worse in terms of relations between blacks and whites?
5. One of the racial issues some people are talking about today is the issue of interracial relationships. Did you ever know anyone (a friend, family member or one of you if you want to talk about this here), man or woman, who is involved in a romantic relationship with someone of a different race? Can you tell us about that and describe some of the issues that relationship brought up that you wouldn't mind telling us about here?
6. How did you feel about the relationship? What about other friends and family?
7. What do you think of the decisions made by the couple involved about how they handled these challenges?
8. What would you have done if you were in his/her position?
9. Do you think the increasing numbers of interracial relationships presents a problem in any way or is this something that should be encouraged?

--View Film--

Part II

10. Please take 5 minutes to complete the questionnaire and write down your reactions to the film we just saw.
11. What did you think of the movie in general? Was there anything about this film that you really liked? Anything you disliked?
 - a. Prompt if needed: was the movie realistic, thought provoking, well made?
12. Did the movie accurately portray either your own internal struggles when dating outside your race or the sorts of conversations that go on between partners?
13. What about the issues/challenges that the couple faced in the relationship depicted in this film? Did the couple in the film face unique issues or challenges because of race?
14. Looking back, was there anything in particular in the film – a specific scene or moment - that really stood out while you were watching, maybe something that struck you, either reinforcing something you were thinking before or changed it?
15. What do you think of the decisions made by the characters and the opinions expressed in the film about race and interracial relationships?
16. What would you have advised this person to do about the issues they faced in this relationship?
17. What would you have done if you were in his/her position?
18. Do you think the increasing numbers of interracial relationships presents a problem in any way or something that should be encouraged?

Appendix H: Participant Questionnaire

EXPLORING THE RACIAL POLITICS OF ON-SCREEN INTERRACIAL ROMANCE FROM A YOUNG WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE: PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Full Name of Research Participant

Date

Name Used in Group Discussion (if different)

1) Which forms of media do you use at least once a week (circle all that apply)?

- a) Internet
- b) TV
- c) Radio
- d) Newspapers
- e) Magazines
- f) Others
- g) I use only the Internet

2) Please circle below any of the television networks you watch on a regular basis, at least once a week:

- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| a) ABC | i) HBO |
| b) NBC | j) Showtime |
| c) CBS | k) FX |
| d) Fox | l) Other |
| e) CW | Please specify |
| f) Lifetime | _____ |
| g) TNT | _____ |
| h) USA Network | _____ |
| | _____ |

3) Have you seen any movies that depicted interracial relationships before?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If Yes, please list

4) Have you seen any television shows that depicted interracial relationships before?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, please list:

5) Please circle below the category that best describes your racial background:

- a) White/Caucasian (non Hispanic)
- b) Black/African American
- c) Mixed background (please describe _____)
- d) Hispanic or Latino White
- e) Hispanic or Latino Black

6) What is your current age? _____

7) Which education level do your parents have (please mark the highest level attained)?

- _None, or grades 1-8
- _Some High school (grades 9-11)
- _High school graduate (grade 12 or GED certificate)
- _Business, Technical, or vocational school AFTER high school
- _Some college, no 4-year degree
- _College graduate (B.S., B.A., or other 4-year degree)
- _Post-graduate training/professional school after college (Master' degree/PhD., Law or Medical school)
- _Don't know/Refused

8) If known , please circle the category that best describes your family's total household income per year (from US Census categories)

- a) Less than \$10,000
- b) \$10,000 - \$24,999
- c) \$25,000 - \$49,000
- d) \$50,000 - \$74,999
- e) \$75,000 - \$99,999
- f) \$100,000 - \$149,000
- g) \$150,000 - \$199,999
- h) \$200,000 or more
- i) I don't know

[illegible]

[illegible]

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