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Race and Teen TV: A New Cycle of Representation?



Module Code: MODL5300M Research Methods and Projects for MAPLIS

Programme of Study: MA Professional Language and Intercultural Studies

Year of Study: 2020-2021

Supervisor: 

Word Count: 9,123

Abstract

Whilst Teen TV is a thriving and popular genre, it remains underrepresented in academic literature. This is despite the genre's strong links to political, cultural, and social events. One such area that has been influenced by shifting societal sensibilities is the representation of race. This project builds upon existing research into race representation in Teen TV dramas that aired before #BlackLivesMatter and the election of Donald Trump. There has not yet been research into race representation in Teen TV after these events. Therefore, this project uses textual analysis and critical media industry studies to analyse and discuss the representation of race in two recent Teen TV dramas: *Good Trouble* (2019-Present) and *Grand Army* (2020). Drawing from Critical Race Theory, this project argues that the two selected Teen TV dramas specifically acknowledge race, racial discrimination, and racial difference. An intersectional and structural approach is taken to analyse the narratives, which reveals not only the shows' acknowledgement of race but also of difference to all hegemonic norms. This project concludes that the racial specificity in the narratives and productions of *Good Trouble* and *Grand Army* are indicative of a new cycle of race representation in Teen TV dramas.

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Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the popularity and cultural relevance of Teen TV programmes have soared. Focusing on the lives of young adults and the melodramatic events that affect them, current examples within the genre garner sizable audiences. The second series of The CW's *Riverdale*, for example, premiered to an audience of 2.3 million viewers (Otterson, 2017). Netflix's *Sex Education* was estimated to have had some 40 million viewers during its first month on the streaming platform (Jarvey, 2019). Advents in streaming technology and increasing globalisation has also led to a spike in non-English-speaking dramas such as *Elite* and *Skam*. Television is part of popular culture, and for young Americans, popular culture *is* culture (Schaefer Riley & Rosen, 2011: ix-x). As Bauerlein argues, contemporary Teen TV:

“doesn't just showcase adolescents working through teen angst or plotting hijinks while parents and teachers carry on with their duties. They impart a whole universe of experience, a complete habitat in which adolescent values and interests dominate” (2011: 62).

Therefore Teen TV offers “a crucial space for the negotiation of political, social, and cultural issues” (Ross & Stein, 2008:1). For example, in the 2010-2011 television season there were twice as many non-straight characters depicted in Teen TV than in the entirety of the preceding decade (Peters, 2016). Teen TV is positioned in direct relationship to historically shifting sensibilities in politics and the socio-cultural landscape.

Yet, despite the popularity, pervasiveness, and political relevance of the genre, it has received inconsistent and relatively superficial academic attention. The reason often cited for this lack of attention is the genre's close relation to women's television and the soap opera; which brings with it the criticism that Teen TV is low brow, trivial, and overly commercialised (Mathias, 2017. Wilks, 2019. Ross & Stein, 2008). The “rapid

obsolescence of most television” (Lealand, 2005: 128) might also be the cause. Recently, there has been a renewed interest in the representation of certain thematic issues in Teen TV, such as mental health (Jenney & Exner-Cortens, 2018), gender (Moore, 2020. Berridge, 2011) and sexuality (Sarkissian, 2014. Peters, 2016). The recent focus on the representation of such topics, which cannot be described as trivial, demonstrates that whilst the genre may be filled with melodrama, it also frequently deals with real-world issues and a “wide range of culturally weighted categorical divides” (Ross & Stein, 2008: 9). Therefore, Teen TV should be established as a cultural product worthy of academic investigation.

For those born in the latter half of the 1990s and early 2000s, Teen TV programmes were an inescapable part of growing up in the digital age. As television and the internet “yield a whole new youth lifeworld” (Bauerlein, 2011: 64), I envisage that there will be a renewed interest in the genre as the subject of academic scrutiny. There is a wealth of source material on offer and a variety of theoretical approaches one can use to analyse it. Teen TV is “back for a new generation and for fans and scholars of the genre” (Marghitu, 2021: 1). This generation, which includes me, “is the most ethnically and racially diverse and highly educated generation to date” (Marghitu, 2021: 158). Despite this, one area that has not yet been investigated sufficiently is the representation of race in Teen TV programmes.

It has previously been argued that Teen TV dramas have been “unapologetically whitewashed” (Warner, 2015: 95). It has also been argued that Blackness on television operates “squarely within the boundaries of middle-class patriarchal discourses about ‘whiteness’ as well as historical racialisation of the social order” (Gray, 1995: 10). As Woods puts it; “From *Dawson’s Creek* to *Pretty Little Liars*, US Teen TV has been dominated with upper-middle-class, white ensemble dramas with

underlying conservative tendencies (2016: 12). The only substantial work on the representation of race in Teen TV comes from Wilks (2019) who conducted a comparative analysis between two eras of Teen TV – which they refer to as ‘cycles’ – using *Felicity* (1998-2002) and *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012) as case studies. However, the two cycles that form the basis of Wilk’s analysis have arguably come to an end. It has been almost a decade since *Gossip Girl* came off the air and there has already been a reboot for the generation Z audience (IMDb, 2021). Shows such as *Never Have I Ever* (2020-Present), *On My Block* (2018-2021), and *Blood & Water* (2020-Present) which feature non-white characters in racially specific main roles suggest “a new approach to engaging with Blackness and other markers of difference from the hegemonic norm” (Wilks, 2019: 112) that Wilks was unable to locate in *Gossip Girl* and *Felicity*.

It is my intention to expand on Wilks’s work on race representation in Teen TV dramas and to further contribute to the academic literature on the genre. I shall do this by examining two recent dramas; *Good Trouble* (2019-Present) and *Grand Army* (2020). Given the significance of race in America post the #BlackLivesMatter movement (henceforth BLM), it is my aim to examine whether Teen TV dramas have changed the way they approach portrayals of race and racial difference. The research questions that fuel this project are:

- Do current Teen TV dramas actively engage in race representations that acknowledge the realities of racial difference in America?
- To what extent does the representation of race in *Good Trouble* and *Grand Army* signify a shift to a new cycle of Teen TV dramas?

Throughout my project, I shall argue that Teen TV dramas are cultural artefacts (Newman & Levine, 2012) and, as such, act of sites of cultural politics. Therefore, analysing the ways in which diverse characters are represented in Teen TV dramas has important consequences for real-world discourses on race and racial differences in America.

Literature Review

This chapter will provide an overview of the existing scholarship upon which this project has been built. As the genre of Teen TV is underrepresented in academic scholarship, particularly where the representation of race is concerned, the following literature review draws upon research from several fields adjacent to the study of Teen TV itself. The first part of this review discusses the scholarship of film and television genres. This has important consequences for this project as it will help to define the genre of Teen TV – which is broad in content and varies in generic conventions – and the strings that link seemingly unrelated programmes together. Previous literature on popular Teen TV dramas will also be discussed in this section.

As this project aims to interrogate the representation of race, racial difference, and multiculturalism in Teen TV, the second part of this literature review will discuss Critical Race Theory. Special attention will be given to the role of Critical Race Theory in media production and media studies. The theoretical frameworks discussed in the section on methodology are based upon a Critical Race perspective. A working definition of each of the terms relevant to this project – multiculturalism, assimilation, and colour-blind casting – will also be given in this section.

It should be noted that in this project I will be using the term Black over African American or Person of Colour. This is because “the term *Black* is simultaneously a racial identity assigned to people of African descent by the state, a political identity for petitioning that same state, and a self-defined ethnic identity” (Hill Collins, 2004: 17). The term Person of Colour can be used by people who do not identify as Black but at the same time also do identify as white. Similarly, not every person who identifies as Black will identify as African American. For example, one of the characters chosen for analysis in this project is a second-generation Haitian American and it is possible that this identity may not be congruent with the label African American (See: WBUR News, 2010). In this project, the word Black will be capitalised in recognition of a shared culture of discrimination. I will not be capitalising the word white in recognition of my own racial privilege that allows me to separate, more easily, the colour of my skin from my identity.

It should also be noted that this project will use the term young adult to refer to characters on Teen TV. This is because the audience of Teen TV shows does not fit neatly into the thirteen-to-nineteen age bracket. This is, arguably, the reason behind the continued popularity and relevance of Teen TV programmes (Carson, 2020.

Reilly, 2021). The characters featured in the dramas that will be discussed in this project tend to be over sixteen. The majority have already reached the milestone of their eighteenth birthday or meet the milestone during the course of the show.

Similar to Wilks (2019) who selected the university-set *Felicity* as a case study, *Good Trouble* focuses on post-high school young adults. Therefore, whilst I shall be discussing the genre of Teen TV, I will frequently refer to both the characters and the audience as young adults in order to encapsulate the “liminal position” (Ross & Stein, 2008: 7) that Teen TV represents.

The Genre of Teen TV

The most comprehensive collection of academic scholarship on Teen TV is the 2004 collection of essays compiled by Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson: *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption, Identity*. It was one of few examples of in-depth analysis of Teen TV and demonstrates what can be gained from researching the genre. In the introduction, one of the most pertinent questions to consider when analysing Teen TV is posed: "Is there a teen genre *per se*, or is what we call Teen TV simply a collection of different, previously existing genres, mutated in order to take adolescent sensibilities into account?" (Davis & Dickinson, 2004: 5). This is an important question because numerous traditional generic categories are represented in Teen TV; from Sci-Fi (e.g., *Smallville*, *The 100*), through melodramatic high school soap operas that took up the mantle of Afterschool Specials (e.g., *Dawson's Creek*, *Degrass*) to mysteries (e.g., *Pretty Little Liars*, *The Wilds*) and even horror (e.g., MTV's *Scream*).

Stein (2005) uses the term *transgenericism* to define the Teen TV genre. Teen TV defies traditional understandings of the genre, instead, it meshes "generic discourse" to create an "overall meaning, effect, and affect of the program" (Stein, 2005: 12).

For Marghitu (2021: 3) this effect is to tell a coming-of-age story; in which "the specificity of teen issues" present in Teen TV "alters and sometimes innovates genre conventions". Therefore, Teen TV cannot be analysed through a lens of genre in a way that might suit film or other television genres. It must be viewed as a genre in itself that contains within it blurred boundaries of multiple generic conventions.

To better understand the concept of Teen TV, some researchers have sought to unpack the meaning behind "teen" and its role in the medium of television. *Teen*

Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom (Ross & Stein, 2008) is another edited collection that presents a variety of responses to the topic. They define adolescence as "inherently contradictory" and a "transgressive experience" (2008: 6). This may explain the generic variety in Teen TV. It could be argued that young adults are not drawn to any particular narrative, visual, or generic style but rather watch Teen TV shows that best reproduce their liminal position in life (Ross & Stein, 2008). Valerie Wee's essays within Ross & Stein's collection argues that the broadcaster *WB* was successful in attracting a large, young adult audience because they:

"adopted an attitude of humanism in its narratives, addressing difficult, often controversial and significant issues that were particularly relevant to its teen and youth audience" (2008:51).

The broadcaster found its success through its representation of contemporary teen culture. Teen TV functions as entertainment but it is also "charged to prepare the audience for adulthood by shaping them as politically liberal citizens" (Green, 2004: 148).

A genre is "one way that films and television programs are classified into recognisable groups and sub-groups by privileging similarities to (and dissimilarities from) other films and television programmes" (Stadler & McWilliam, 2009: 218). The research discussed above demonstrated that it is accurate to describe it as a genre. The thread that ties Teen TV dramas together is their focus on liminality and the way they deal with issues contemporary to the process of becoming an adult in the times in which they are produced. This is sometimes revealed through a mixture of generic subcategories, although this is not always necessary.

Outside of the scholarship on Teen TV as a genre, previous academic literature has tended to explore “issues within individual shows” (Mathis, 2017:35) rather than to examine trends across programmes. Where scholarship exists that does deal with Teen TV as an area of comparative investigation, as in some of the essays in the collections by Davis & Davidson (2004) and Ross & Stein, the programmes in question are relatively old. Wilks (2019) uses Klein’s (2011) theory of filmic cycles to explain the shifts in storytelling methods used in Teen TV. This is an unusual way to examine Teen TV as it demonstrates how real-world shifts in racial sensibilities have been realised in Teen TV. Yet, there has been little scholarship into race representation in Teen TV dramas released in the past five years. Therefore, it is time to revisit the questions raised by earlier literature on Teen TV and examine what modern additions to the genre can reveal.

Representing Race in Teen TV and beyond

As demonstrated above, Teen TV even when mixed with fantastical elements, draws heavily on real-world contemporary issues which have cemented the genre's place in popular culture (Magee, 2014. Williams, 2013). This makes it possible to analyse Teen TV in relation to specific thematic issues such as race. The aim of this project is to examine the way in which race is portrayed in recent Teen TV dramas. Central to this aim is Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory is a broad movement that finds its origins in the legal system but has since grown to be used for a variety of academic purposes. It can be used, therefore, to examine the issues raised in the Teen TV dramas selected for this project.

The basic tenet invoked by the usage of the term Critical Race Theory is that “racism is ordinary” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017: 7), which means that outside of the most

explicit and derogatory occurrences of racism, it can often be difficult to identify. Race and racism, according to Critical Race Theory, have become ingrained in Western societies. A result of this ordinariness is that “colour-blind, or ‘formal’, conceptions of equality” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017: 7) cannot solve the issue of racism. Critical Race theorists also argue that “racism is germane to the social core of Western civilisation” (Hall, 2018: 2139) and that those in the majority have “a vested interest in protecting their own position within the system” (Bhopal, 2018: 19). Similar to other critical theories, Critical Race Theory “holds that race and races are products of social thought and relation” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017: 7). This social thought and relation can be identified in cultural products such as Teen TV.

Whilst Critical Race Theory was not developed as a theoretical framework, it has, nevertheless, been used as one by academic scholars (Cabera, 2018: 20). For example, in pedagogy (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) and in media studies (Pimentel & Busey, 2018. Yosso, 2020). Dowie-Chin et al.’s (2020) analysis of the film *The Hate U Give* (a film aimed at young adults) provides an excellent example of how Critical Race Theory can be used in the analysis of cultural products. In their analysis, Dowie-Chin et al compare the novel and its film adaption and reveal “how the retelling of a Black girl’s experience became distorted as it moved from a Black-authored narrative to a white-authored narrative” (2020:130). Their research shows that: in order to use Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework, one must view the representation of race as multifaceted and one must also discuss the repercussions for power relationships.

When discussing representations of race, one must also consider the theory of intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1991) *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour* demonstrates the way race

and gender interact and argues against the essentialising of the category of 'woman' in feminism. Similar to Critical Race Theory, Crenshaw also posits that "categories we consider natural or merely representational are actually socially constructed in a linguistic economy of difference" (1991: 1296). Moore applies intersectionality to her feminist reading of the recent Teen TV drama *Riverdale* and shows that intersectionality "is helpful with understanding the layered complexities at stake when analysing diverse adolescents contending with oppression" (2020: 3). In her article, Moore also argues that women of colour fight sexism separately from their white peers whilst also contending with racism at the same time (2020: 12). Through a critical and intersectional analysis of race representation in *Riverdale*, Moore uncovers "an imbalance in solidarity efforts" (2020: 13) and demonstrates how racial difference can be analysed in Teen TV.

Gray (1995) has written extensively about the representation of race on American television. His main conclusion was that "contemporary images of African Americans are anchored in by three kinds of discursive practices" (1995: 84). These are "assimilationist (invisibility), pluralist (separate by equal), and multiculturalist (diversity)" (1995: 84). Arguably, most American television series are assimilationist, whereby racial difference and Blackness becomes an invisible character trait. As was the case for Vanessa on *Gossip Girl*, Elena on *Felicity* (Wilks, 2019) and Bonnie on *The Vampire Diaries* (Warner, 2015). This invisibility stems from the belief that "race should have no real significance" (Gotanda, 1995: 270). Whilst a television series may appear aesthetically diverse, it becomes a question of whether this aesthetic diversity transforms into a sustained representation of the realities of racial difference in America.

Kristen Warner's *The Cultural Politics of Colourblind TV Casting* (2015) presents an interesting analysis of race in American television by investigating the cultural choices that inform casting. Although not mentioned within the book, this approach is led by Critical Race Theory, as Warner demonstrates that casting choices are representations of power imbalances. Warner shows the assimilation of Black characters with a focus on primetime American television shows, including the Teen TV drama *The Vampire Diaries*. Wilks (2019) builds upon Warner's work and focuses exclusively on Teen TV. Both studies found that whilst there were Black recurring characters, their storylines did not recognise their Blackness in any meaningful way. Furthermore, when their difference was acknowledged it was done in a way that "confirm and authorise dominant social, political, cultural, and economic positions and relationships" (Gray, 1995: 88).

On the other hand, Banks' (2018) thesis investigated three Shondaland prime time television shows, which included *Grey's Anatomy* one of the programmes also investigated by Warner, and found that in the 2017-2018 season there were efforts to engage in racial discourse: "Even in the colour-blind cast, post-racial utopia that is Shondaland, they are now engaging with racism at a structural level, facing issues that they have ignored in the past" (2018: 3). It is important to note the air dates of the episodes analysed in these studies. Both Warner (2015) and Wilks (2019) analysed episodes from before the BLM movement and election of Donald Trump; whereas Banks chose to analyse episodes that aired after these events. This has led me to consider the hypothesis that the recent events in America have led to more multicultural narratives in Teen TV dramas – and television dramas more broadly – that actively engage with characters' Blackness and its consequences in American society.

The binary between assimilationist and multiculturalism is useful in analysing whether there has been a shift away from the assimilationist representations found in Warner's (2015) and Wilk's (2019). Assimilationist casting and narrative discourses constitute representation without challenge. Multiculturalist narratives "operate at multiple levels of class, gender, region, colour, and culture" (Gray, 1995: 91). This project recognises that:

"any substantive multiculturalism has to recognise existential realities of pain, anger, and resentment, since the multiple cultures invoked by "multiculturalism" have not historically coexisted in relations of equality and respect." (Shohat & Stam. 1994:358-359).

Multiculturalism is a useful term that demonstrates that "we live in a society composed of many groups" (Marks, 2000: 7). For a Teen TV programme to be considered multicultural is must prepare its viewers for the realities of racial differences in America.

Methodology

This project will survey the current landscape of the representation of race in two Teen TV dramas that have aired in the past three years. It aims to examine whether there has been a shift away from the cycles of assimilationist representation found by Wilks (2019) and Warner (2015). In order to achieve this aim, I have selected two dramas to act as case studies for this project. The dramas selected are *Good Trouble* (2019-Present) and *Grand Army* (2020). *Good Trouble* airs on Freeform (previously known as ABC Family); a basic cable channel that targets those "who are experiencing adulthood for the first time" (Crouse, 2016). The second selection for this project, *Grand Army*, is available on Netflix and is listed under the 'Teen' category.

It should be noted that some researchers argue that it can be difficult to measure the popularity, reach, the cultural power of television shows that air digitally (Lotz, 2021). Nevertheless, “Netflix’s global co-productions have caused TV companies in other countries to think increasingly about the worldwide reach of streaming” (Shattuc, 2020: 160) and has “come to define the global cultural experience” (Shattuc, 2020: 162). *Good Trouble*, for example, is also available on streaming platforms (BBC iPlayer and Disney+) globally. The purpose of this project is not to make claims about the cultural power of the texts; which once could be “reasonably presumed” in the era of terrestrial television (Lotz, 2021: 11), but rather to examine “the significance that can be found in *identifiable patterns*” (Lotz, 2021: 11). Therefore, my analysis is comparative; identifying the similarities and differences between *Good Trouble* and *Grand Army* but also comparing the results of my analysis to previous work on the topic.

I have chosen these two series as case studies because they both feature diverse ensemble casts living in two metropolitan centres of the US – New York (*Grand Army*) and Los Angeles (*Good Trouble*) respectively – with non-white characters featuring as main characters in both series. More importantly, there exists within both texts, a clear attempt to engage with multiculturalism. Ross (2008:4) defines a multicultural text as one in which “characters’ racial, national, and ethnic backgrounds are issues – openly discussed and part of the narrative”. Therefore, it is possible to conduct meaningful textual analysis on both of the programmes.

As discussed in the literature review, Critical Race Theory is central to my understanding of race relations and racial differences. I aim to demonstrate how social, political, and cultural contexts influence the specific narrative reconstructions of reality that the two series constitute. A methodology based upon Critical Race

Theory is one that foregrounds race in the research process but also separates discourses on race, gender, and class and examines how these intersect to affect experiences (Solorzano & Yosso. 2002: 24). However, Critical Race Theory lacks the theoretical framework required for the completion of a textual analysis of the two selected Teen TV dramas. Therefore, I have looked to film studies and media studies to create my methodology.

My narrative analysis will be based upon structuralism (Stadler & McWilliam, 2009: 162). This approach identifies the binary oppositions and character functions within a text (Stadler & McWilliam, 2009: 162). The binary oppositions relevant to my analysis are racial; but also intersect with class and gender. As both of my selected Teen TV dramas feature multiple non-white characters – that in itself is noteworthy in comparison to Wilks (2019) which by default had to analyse the only two reoccurring non-white characters in the shows – I have chosen to centre my analysis on two characters. For *Grand Army*, I have selected Dominique Pierre and for *Good Trouble*, I have selected Malika Williams. I have chosen these two characters in particular because they are both politically active and their storylines acknowledge their difference to the hegemonic norms. Similar to Wilks (2019: 24) the episodes I have selected to analyse include the character's introductions to show and an arc that demonstrates the "show's engagement with the character's non-hegemonic characteristic". However, I will not be analysing the character's concluding narrative arcs as *Good Trouble* is currently still airing, and *Grand Army* was abruptly cancelled during the time of writing this project. Nevertheless, as Dominique and Malika are main rather than reoccurring characters, there are substantial narrative moments to analyse.

Television media is character-driven (Stadler & McWilliam, 2009: 172). Therefore, central to my analysis of the narrative arcs of Malika and Dominique are the interactions they have with both white and non-white characters. By examining the ways in which the narrative structure privileges certain characters and places characters in opposition I will reveal "ideological assumptions or world-view underpinning the narrative" (Stadler & McWilliam, 2009: 158). Furthermore, the way in which a character is presented – their appearance, their settings, and the language they use – also reveals the creators' priorities. Through a critical consideration of how the plot lines and interactions of the non-white characters are depicted, I will demonstrate how *Good Trouble* and *Grand Army* specifically engage cultural and ethnic differences in their contexts (Jacobsson, 2017).

According to Shohat & Stam (1994), the term 'multiculturalism' is deeply flawed and can be used without any real consideration of its meaning. They argue that discussions of multiculturalism must be handled rationally. Therefore, whilst my narrative analysis might lead me to name my chosen Teen TV shows as 'multicultural' because they feature non-white characters in main narrative arcs. This would be too simplistic and naïve of an investigation. "Media does not present reality like transparent windows or simple reflections of the world because media messages are created, shaped, and positioned through a construction process" (Kellner & Share, 2005: 374). Therefore, consideration must also be given to the production of *Grand Army* and *Good Trouble* because:

"Any substantive multiculturalism has to recognise the existential realities of pain, anger, and resentment since the multiple cultures invoked by 'multiculturalism', have not historically coexisted in relations of equality and mutual respect" (Shohat & Stam, 1994: 258-259).

In the chapter following my analysis of the native arcs of Dominique and Malika, I shall investigate the external factors influencing the representation of race in these two shows. This includes the production and – in the case of *Grand Army* – the cancellation of the dramas.

To analyse the extra-textual influences on race representation, I will use Havens et al.'s (2009) critical media industry studies framework. It should be remembered that "representations in commercial network television are situated within the existing material institutional hierarchies" (Gray, 1995: 10). Whilst there is no scope in this project to conduct a large-scale investigation into how media companies change their programming in response to economic or socio-political influences, and to do so would detract from the specificity of this project, a critical industry studies approach will provide some much-needed contextualisation to my narrative analysis.

I shall do this by critically examining the socio-cultural influences on representation at a producer/writer level – that is from the perspective of the showrunners and the scriptwriters. By incorporating interviews and press coverage about my chosen series, I hope to bridge the gap between "political economy's concentration on larger economic structural forces and much of cultural studies' analyses of end products such as media texts and audience interpretations" (Haven et al., 2009: 247). I will also use this critical media industry framework to argue that the shift away from assimilationist to multicultural representation can only be considered complete when the production practices, *as well* as the narrative structures, create a multiculturalism that is three-dimensional – existing both as a visual multiculturalism on screen and a cultural acknowledgement in the script itself.

Textual Analysis of *Grand Army* and *Good Trouble*

This part of the project will analyse a selection of scenes relevant to the discussion of race representation in Teen TV. This includes the introduction of both of the characters and how their Blackness is first depicted and whether it is acknowledged. In an effort to ascertain whether there has been an effort to engage in multiculturalist discourses, the scenes selected for analysis have been chosen because represent Blackness and difference as routine facts of everyday American life (Gray, 1995). They also show how the individual character's storyline relate to wider systemic and institutional racism within American society.

Dominique Pierre – Grand Army

We are introduced to Dominique (Odley Jean) in the first scene of the first episode of *Grand Army*: "Brooklyn 2020". In a crowded locker room, a diverse group of teenagers are yelling the lyrics to Cardi B's *Bodak Yellow*. Although the impromptu acapella session is started by a group of Black girls, the camera pans over to reveal that a group of white girls have joined in with the rap. The groups are separated physically by a central walkway, subtly revealing to the audience that this is a high school with a sizable minority population but the two groups do not mix. Dominique is approached by her friends, Tamika (Brittany Adebunola) and Sonia (Naiya Ortiz) to give her the money that they owe her for her hair services. We learn that Dominique has spent considerable time doing both Tamika's and Sonia's hair and for a reduced rate: "I'm cheap, actually. Your hair took me eight hours. Sonia's deadass took me over six". Dominique's character is established as someone that has a part-time job – a familiarity for many high school students – but it also acknowledges and signifies her Blackness and her ties to her group of Black friends as hair is second only to skin in racial visibility (Mercer, 1987).

As the school bell rings, Dominique walks out of the changing rooms alongside Joey Del Marco (Odessa A'zion), the only white leading character. It is clear from their uneasy side glances and short conversation that the pair are neither friends nor enemies. When Joey suggests that Dominique might have time to catch her crush John Ellis (Alphonso Romero Jones, II) as he walks out the door, Dominique simply tells Joey: "Stop". Earlier in the scene, Dominique had accepted light teasing from her friends about her crush. From Dominique's introduction, the viewer learns that she is supported by a tight-knit group of Black girlfriends, that she earns money outside of school styling Black hair, and that she shares a respectful yet distant relationship with the white Joey Del Marco.

.This opening sequence demonstrates that Dominique's character has been specifically written as a young Black woman. Her race is acknowledged within her introduction. Therefore the casting decision for this character could not be considered colour-blind. However, the visual imagery of the separated changing room, Tamika's complaints at the white girls joining in with their rendition of Cardi B's song, and Dominique's short exchange with Joey, have also created a binary between the Black and white characters.

Throughout the series, Dominique is presented as a highly intelligent and hardworking young woman. The school, *Grand Army*, is fictional but it is mentioned in the show that students must pass the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT), which is a real maths and English test for admission to top state-funded schools in New York City. In her essay on racial presence versus racial justice, Cristina Beltrán argues that the increased visibility of minorities in the political sphere:

“is blunted by a liberal logic that, despite its historic exclusions, continually reframes equality and inclusion as something familiar and commonplace ... today’s public rhetoric affirms a universal commitment to equality by emphasizing our increasingly diverse body of elect and appointed representatives” (2014: 138).

Similarly to the supposed equality of democratically elected politicians, it could be argued that entrance examinations such as the SHSAT increase equality and inclusion on the basis of a meritocracy. It should be noted that 70% of high school students in New York City are Black or Latinx, yet combined only 10.6% of offers went to students in this category in 2019 (Abrams, 2019). Nevertheless, in the series, Dominique has successfully passed this admissions test, has a high GPA, and is interested in going to Washington or Hopkins for university. This would suggest that equality has been achieved. However, Dominique's narrative arc demonstrates how her intersectional identity as a Black, 2nd generation Haitian-American, and female student dispels the myth of American liberal meritocracy and quality.

In her case study of *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010), Molina-Guzman (2010) argues that ethnic and racial difference is assimilated so that the titular character Betty achieves "personal, professional, and economic success regardless of their class or ethnic background" (2010: 121). In the chapter, Molina-Guzman further argues that the televisual landscape is based upon the postracial and liberal tenets of American society. For a television series to be considered multicultural, therefore, the racial difference must be acknowledged as it poses challenges to the success of a character. This liberal sense of meritocracy presented in American society is confronted in the seventh episode of *Grand Army*. In “Making Moves”, Dominique simultaneously tackles and acknowledges the challenges that affect her due to her

racial difference as she interviews for a summer internship with the mental health organisation *Sisters Thrive*.

During the interview, Dominique gives an emotionally impactful speech that addresses the inequality she faces and how it has affected her mental health.

“I was late today. I accidentally set my alarm for P.M. instead of A.M., which was careless. I own that. But see, I went to bed at 5 a.m. this morning. Same thing yesterday, and the day before that. Because there’s just not enough time to do all the things I have to do to go after the life I want. And, I’m tired. And if I’m telling you the truth, it makes me angry. But see, that’s the one thing I can’t allow myself to be because then I’m just what they expect me to be, right? And they don’t wanna see my anger. Because who’s actually allowed to be angry? That’s a privilege like everything else, and my anger doesn’t count. But, all those feelings, they’re still there, and they have nowhere to go. There are all these girls and women out there, like me, with no one to say these things to. So we just push them down. Keep them inside or whatever. But it’s there. It’s painful.”
(Making Moves, 2020. 00:13:10-00:14:28).

This speech portrays Blackness both as an individual struggle and as well as an institutional struggle. Dominique also demonstrates that her class identity – which prevents her from focusing only on her academic and professional development as she must earn money to support her family who is at risk of being evicted – and her identity as a woman intersect with her Blackness to create the challenges she faces. She alludes to her fear of being viewed as a stereotypical 'angry Black woman' (Kent, 2021. Kretsedemas, 2010.) The stereotype lies at the intersection of both racism and sexism and disallows Dominique from speaking out about her experiences of inequality. Furthermore, Dominique's monologue shows her awareness that her struggles are shared by other Black people living in a white-dominated world. At the end of her speech, she adds; "95% of mental health care

workers in this city are Caucasian ... It matters who hears you, who says, 'I understand'. It just matters.” Unlike the characters of Elena in *Felicity*, Vanessa in *Gossip Girl* (Wilks, 2019) and Bonnie in *The Vampire Diaries* (Warner, 2015), Dominique's Blackness is not isolated or individualised. As the interview takes place in front of two Black women for an internship at a Black-led organisation that aims to improve mental health services for the Black community, this scene is explicitly framed by Dominique's Blackness.

Malika Williams – Good Trouble

Malika (Zuri Adele) is briefly introduced at the beginning of the first episode of *Good Trouble* “DTLA”, as she briefly welcomes new residents Callie (Maia Mitchell) and Mariana (Cierra Ramirez) to the communal living space, *The Coterie*, and warns them not to leave anything in the fridge or it will get stolen. As the cast of *Good Trouble* is significantly larger and the series length longer than *Grand Army*, it is unsurprising that Malika's first appearance on screen is brief. *Good Trouble* is also a spin-off of Freeform's *The Fosters* and therefore initially follows Callie and Mariana as the show makes the jump to Los Angeles. However, later on in the episode, we are introduced to Malika's defining narrative trait – she is a political activist, campaigning for justice for the fictional Jamal Thompson (Spence Moore II), an unarmed black man who had been shot by the police five years prior to the start of the series and whose case is only now coming to court. The storyline bears intentional similarity to incidents of police brutality in America such as the George Floyd case.

Midway through the first episode, the residents of *The Coterie* are sitting down for dinner. The conversations held during this meal set up the conflicts that will define

Malika's narrative arc throughout the first and second series. We learn that similarly to Callie and Mariana, Malika was in the foster care system. Although she makes it a point to say that she was never adopted. It is left unsaid that it might be easier for Callie, who is white, and Mariana, who is light-skinned Latina, to be adopted than Malika who is Black. Later in the series, we find out that when Malika was fostered she was separated from her brother, whereas Callie and her brother were kept together ("The Coterie").

Malika then asks Callie which judge she is clerking for.

Malika: "So you're clerking for a federal judge?"

Callie: "Yeah."

Malika: "Not Judge Lawrence?"

Callie: "No. Wilson. Why?"

Malika: Lawrence is working on the Jamal Thompson case. You heard of about it?"

Callie: "I don't think so. No."

Malika: "Yeah. Just another police shooting of a Black man. It's been five years, so with a new shooting every week, it's hard for people to remember these things once they finally get to trial, if they do at all."

(DTLA, 2019. 00:29:35 – 00:29:56)

This short conversation aligns Malika's character to contemporary social discourses about race. It also sets the tone for the various residents of *The Coterie's* relationship to the issue of racism and police violence in America. When the tension rises at the end of this conversation, the other residents – none of whom are Black – are quick to change the subject and offer more wine. In this scene, Malika's Blackness is individualised as it demonstrates how easy it is for the other characters to change the subject because it is not something that directly affects them every day of their lives.

In "Swipe Right", Malika meets Isaac (Sarunas J. Jackson) at the bar where she works. She recognises him from a dating app where she failed to match with him but he does not recognise her. Isaac says that he is "more of a Kate Hudson guy to be all the way real", implying that his type is white blonde women. Hunter (2007:241) notes "It can be difficult to imagine how colourism operates on a day-to-day basis. Colourism, like racism, consists of both overt and covert actions, outright acts of discrimination and subtle cues of disfavour". Later, when Isaac asks Malika for her phone number she asks to see whom he has matched with on the dating app. When she sees that all of his matches are light-skinned, she tells him "I just don't feel right giving my number to somebody who, subconsciously or not, wrote me off without a thought". This scene shows how Malika's race intersects with her identity as a female but also shows how colourism is a persistent part of racial discrimination even from within the Black community.

The issue of colourism is revisited in the episode "Less Than" when an old video of Jamal Thompson in which he says "Black women be less than" and "Dark women, darker days". Later in the episode, Malika's housemate Davia (Emma Hunton) questions her decision to continue with the protest for Jamal's court case. Another white housemate Kelly (Anastasia Leddick) and Isaac are also present.

Davia: "Wait, you're not still going through with the protest? After all that shit Jamal said?"

Kelly: "Well I'm not going 'cause I stand with Black women.

Malika: "You were never going anyway so don't use this as a convenient excuse."

Kelly: (scoffs) "I was going. Probably."

Malika: "Yes, I am still doing the protest. I am still marching and fighting for Jamal. Okay?"

Davia: "I just don't understand why you'd work so hard for someone who thought so little of you."

Kelly: "Would you still march for a white guy who said those things?"

Malika: "If he was unjustly gunned down by the police, then yeah, I'd still think he'd deserve justice. Or... Do you think Jamal deserved what he got?"

Davia: "No, of course not."

Malika: "Okay. So the point is you don't get it."

Davia: "Well, then explain it to me."

Malika: "Why? Why is it on me to educate all my white friends? You went to Brown. Read a book, Davia. Do some research.."

Isaac: "Okay. Here's what it is. What Jamal said was messed up but that doesn't matter right now because those are two separate issues. We need to focus on justice for Jamal."

Malika: "Yeah, so these issues are not separate. We need to focus on all of it. And not leave behind the most marginalised in our group which happens to include Black women."

(Less Than, 2019. 00:18:24 – 00:19:29)

Not only does this episode reveal a more overt form of colourism on the part of Jamal, but it also raises several other issues such as the marginalisation of Black women and white privilege. Malika is visibly upset when Isaac claims that the issues of gender and race are separate. As "discourses of inequality cannot simply be explained by one single factor (such as race), other competing factors operate to produce different outcomes of social and power relations" (Bhopal, 2018:47), it is important for Malika that her partner acknowledges that she faces different struggles as a woman than he does as a man. This is especially important to her when considering the fact that Isaac overlooked her when they first met. This scene also critically interrogates Davia's and Kelly's privilege as white women and this is a theme that continues into the second series. Davia cannot understand why Malika would continue to fight for someone who held those views because her position of privilege affords her the choice not to protest. Malika does not hold the same privilege.

Examining the Production of Good Trouble and Grand Army

In this section, I shall analyse the production of *Good Trouble* and *Grand Army*. Newman and Levine (2012: 38) argue that television shows are “products of human agency” and “some shows are more often identified with their authors in discourses of production”. In his book *Race and Cultural Industries*, Saha (2018) argues that minority producers are often side-lined in competitive media markets. Henderson (2011: 146-147) notes a ritual othering of writers of primetime television and that this is “particularly significant when one considers how personal backgrounds and beliefs of writers influence on-screen narrative”. Therefore considering the authorship of *Grand Army* and *Good Trouble* can further one’s understanding of the representations that are made within the programmes.

The controversy of Grand Army’s cancellation

Grand Army is based upon the play SLUT by Katie Cappiello. The play’s narrative centred solely on the character of Joey Del Marco, therefore the four other main characters – Sid Pakam, Leila Kwan Zimmer, Jayson Jackson, and Dominique Pierre – were created specifically for the programme.

The day the trailer for Netflix’s *Grand Army* was released on YouTube and Twitter, one of the show’s writers, Ming Peiffer, tweeted:

"Me and the 3 writers of colour who worked on the show quit due to racist exploitation and abuse. The showrunner and creator went full Karen and called Netflix HR on the Black writer in the room for getting a haircut. Yes you read that correctly. Who wants to interview us?" (@Mingpdynasty, 2020)

Another Twitter user also questioned the trailer, asking “why does the movie gotta be depressing time [sic] every time y’all get a black girl lead???” (@UNGODLY00N, 2020) to which Peiffer responded that the Black writer on the show asked the showrunners not to make Dominique’s storyline poverty porn. The showrunner, Katie

Cappiello, never responded to the allegations and one of the show's stars Maliq Johnson also denied them (Harp and Robinson, 2020), so there is no way to verify the veracity of Peiffer's allegations. Nevertheless, the controversy raises interesting questions about the ability of white people to tell the stories of Black people and the authenticity of Dominique's characterisation.

Garcia et al.'s (2014) *From Uncle Tom's Cabin to The Help: Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narrative of Black Life* deals extensively with literary and filmic depictions of Black life and argue that "racial ventriloquism" may lead to untrue stereotypes. Katie Cappiello receives "Written by" credit on all but one of the nine episodes of *Grand Army*. However, this project does not level claim that *Grand Army* represents racial ventriloquism as it is impossible to determine how much of the script was written by Cappiello and how much was added by the numerous script editors, story writers, and producers involved in the programme. Regardless of authorship, *Grand Army* still operates within a discursive space and encourages its viewers to engage in Black experiences from multiple perspectives, which is a criterion for multiculturalism (Gray, 1995: 90). It could also argue that the allegations levelled at the showrunner and writer have only served to increase the audience's engagement in political discourse on racial difference and develop racial literacy as it prompts critical engagement with race. This argument has also been by Dowie-Chin et al. (2020) in their text on the film *The Hate U Give*.

BLM's involvement in the writers' room of Good Trouble

Good Trouble's writing team is led by two white men, Bradley Bredweg and Peter Paige, and one white woman, Joanna Johnson. Therefore, the same criticisms could be levelled at *Good Trouble* as *Grand Army*. However, *Good Trouble* distinguishes itself as an 'authentic' text because of the showrunners' decision to bring in one of

the co-founders of the BLM; Patrisse Cullors to work on the show. Cullors appears in eight episodes of *Good Trouble* and received a writing credit for the second series finale "Trap Heals".

Petermon and Spencer (2019) argue that "mediated representations of BLM have immense power in contributing to public perceptions and public memory of BLM". In their examination of episodes of *Scandal* and *Orange Is the New Black*, Petermon and Spencer found a consistent erasure of Black (queer) women in representations of the BLM. These shows show racism as individualised to the actions of one person rather than a systematic injustice. For example, in the episode of *Orange Is the New Black* in which Poussey – a queer Black woman – is murdered, the episode focuses on the storyline of Officer Bayley rather than Poussey (Petermon and Spencer, 2019). In the case of *Good Trouble*, Patrisse Cullors was specifically brought in to work on Malika's storylines (Petski, 2019). Although onscreen Malika's character is straight, the actress who plays her (Zuri Adele) is bisexual (Gilchrist, 2019). Through the casting choices and Patrisse Cullors' involvement in the writing room, *Good Trouble* rebukes the "male washing and cis/straight washing of civil rights histories" (Petermon and Spencer, 2019: 351).

Discussion and Conclusion

Two questions were posed in the introduction chapter. The first of these questions was whether current Teen TV dramas actively engage in race representations that acknowledge the realities of racial difference in America. The hypothesis behind this question considered recent political developments in America and the rise of the BLM movement and argues that these events have led to an increase in the acknowledgement of racially specific casting and narratives.

From the evidence provided in my analysis of the storylines that feature Dominique and Malika, it is clear that these characters were created with race in mind. The casting and writing decisions made in the show's production lack the "ethnic ambiguity" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019:10) present in postracial film and television. In the case of *Good Trouble*, the writers involved Patrisse Cullors in the scriptwriting process. Whilst there is some controversy over the writing of *Grand Army*, the characters' races were a consideration when creating the show. Aspects of the narrative of these characters occur to them specifically because they are Black. These stories would not function if the characters were from another race.

"Assimilationist television discourses treat the social and political issues of Black presence in particular and racism in general as individual problems" (Gray, 2005: 85). Whilst some of Dominique and Malika's experiences are individualised. For example, Dominique faces a specific set of academic and economic challenges based upon her intersectional identity. Malika is faced with colourist discrimination on a dating app. This is not the summation of their experiences as Black characters. Both characters actively involve themselves in BLM movements – Dominique in her school after the suspension of one of her classmates, Malika as an activist for Jamal Thompson. The shows present racial differences as both individualised and institutionalised. *Good Trouble* and *Grand Army* demonstrate an approach to storytelling that rejects the notions of assimilation and colour-blind casting.

Whilst the results may be limited in scope owing to the fact that only two Teen TV dramas have been analysed, it should be noted that the previous research on the topic (Wilks, 2019. Warner, 2015. Petermon & Spencer, 2019. Banks, 2018), only selected two or three series in their research. Therefore, my results are on par with previous literature on the topic. However, a larger scale content analysis that

quantifies the racial engagement present in Teen TV (such as the one conducted by Signorielli & Bievenour in 2015 on sex) could provide valuable quantitative evidence to support the critical qualitative data presented in this project.

The second question this project addressed was the extent to which the representation of race in the two dramas analysed signify a shift to a new cycle of Teen TV dramas. At the end of her research, Wilks concluded that:

“a specific Whiteness, tied to other hegemonic norms related to middle- to upper-class status and heterosexuality, is the unnamed organising mode of social and cultural structures existent in each of the fictional worlds” (2019: 106).

This is not the impression that I, as both viewer and researcher, gathered from *Grand Army* and *Good Trouble*. The shows both contain diverse characters in terms of race, gender, sexual identity, and economic status. These characters present an opportunity for further analysis. This could also suggest that a new cycle of representation in Teen TV has begun. Outside of the two shows discussed in the project, there are further examples of highly diverse Teen TV shows. *Never have I Ever*, *East Los High*, *On my Block*, *Euphoria* are examples of shows that acknowledge difference from the hegemonic norm. However, since there has been much political and cultural change in the past decade, it may be too soon to determine what course this new cycle might take.

Nevertheless, *Grand Army* and *Good Trouble* are signifiers of the new cycle of Teen TV dramas which has begun at the end of the 2010s (Wilks, 2019: 112).

This project has successfully added to the existing literature on Teen TV because it has demonstrated that Teen TV programmes are influenced by the political, social, and cultural currents of the time in which they are produced.

This is because Teen TV raises “considerations of marginality on a regular

basis” (Ross & Stein, 2008: 8) and acts as a site of “confrontational cultural commentary” (Bolte, 2008: 93). Teen TV is, therefore, deserving of academic scrutiny. This project has found that, in two recent Teen TV dramas, there has been a significant increase in the acknowledgement of race and racial difference in comparison to the assimilationist practices found by Warner (2015) and Wilks (2019) in earlier Teen TV programmes. This arguably signifies a new cycle of representation in Teen TV. It will be interesting to see how this cycle develops and to return to the topic of Teen TV in the future to determine how real-world events influence fictional depictions of young adults.

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