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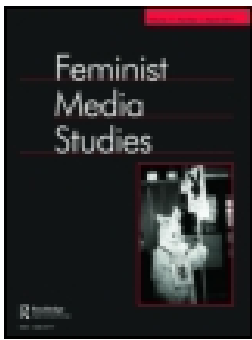Sisson, Gretchen
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"I can't believe your mixed ass wasn't on the pill!": race and abortion on American scripted television, 2008-2019

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ABSTRACT

Racial identities provide important context for understanding reproductive experiences, including abortion. However, this context is often not fully reflected in popular cultural narratives about abortion, including on American television. Because onscreen depictions have the potential to influence public understandings of abortion, it is crucial to examine the messages these plotlines convey about the relationship between race, racism, and abortion access. We analyze a decade of onscreen abortion depictions, finding that the vast majority contain no racially-specific content. When plotlines do portray a character of color obtaining an abortion, these depictions can be both progressive in making race visible and regressive in relying on problematic racial tropes. These patterns differed by race: Black characters often obtain abortions while wrestling with and reinforcing racial stereotypes; Latina characters' abortion stories are predominantly concerned with Catholic judgment. Plotlines featuring Asian or multiracial characters are largely absent. In contrast, white characters' stories comprise the vast majority of abortions on television, and none of these plotlines substantially address issues of race. These disparate patterns obfuscate structural barriers to abortion access and may contribute to the skewed beliefs that the American public holds about abortion.

Introduction

In the second season of Netflix's *Dear White People* (2018), Coco Conners (Antoinette Robertson), a Black woman, realizes she's pregnant. An ambitious student, Coco is the President of the Coalition for Racial Equality, one of the leading Black student organizations at the fictitious Ivy League-like Winchester University. As Coco discusses her pregnancy options with her roommate Kelsey (Nia Jervier), Coco remarks that she came to college "to take everything the world denied my mother, and dared to deny me," referencing the poverty she endured in her childhood. Although Kelsey suggests that Coco should continue the pregnancy, she reassures Coco that she will be there for her no matter what decision she makes, offering her tea and laying next to her as she looks up information about abortion. While in the abortion clinic waiting room, Coco daydreams about carrying the pregnancy to term, envisioning a life where she delays finishing college and her daughter matriculates at Winchester, pursuing the dreams Coco put on hold to parent. As a nurse calls her name, Coco

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walks confidently towards the camera, presumably towards her abortion and a future of her own creation.

Coco's story is noteworthy in television depictions of abortion, because while real Black women are overrepresented among American abortion patients (Rachel Jones and Jenna Jerman 2017), they are underrepresented among characters obtaining abortions on American television (Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport 2016). This discrepancy makes it all the more noteworthy when characters of color do obtain abortions: in the popular press, women of color respond when abortion stories that reflect their own are told. In *Teen Vogue*, journalist Kellee Terrell covered the *Dear White People* storyline:

> There are plenty of Black women who end up at this crossroads and their stories need to be seen. We need stories that realistically convey the power and complexity of Black women taking control of their own lives, on their own terms. (Kellee Terrell 2018)

Similarly, Latinx writers who have had abortions discussed the importance of an abortion storyline on The CW's *Jane the Virgin* in 2016, in which Venezualean-American Xiomara has a medication abortion (Sam Romero, Jack Qu'emi Gutierrez, and Diana Diaz 2016). Depictions of Asian, Black, and Latina characters choosing abortion have consistently received attention because of the racial representation of these characters (Renee Bracey Sherman 2015; Romero, Qu'emi Gutierrez, and Diaz 2016). These stories have the potential to resonate with audiences who have consistently failed to see their abortion experiences reflected in entertainment media.

Racialized experiences of reproduction

To analyze the experience of characters of color in obtaining abortions, it is important to consider the concept of race broadly, and the ways in which reproductive healthcare is accordingly stratified.

Understanding that the concept of race is both fraught and necessary, we turn to sociological scholarship to understand race not as a biological reality, but a social construct. We draw on Michael Omi and Howard Winat's conceptualization of race as an "unstable … complex of social meaning constantly being transformed by political struggle," acknowledging that however defined, race "continues to play a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world" (1994).

One way in which this structuring is prominent is in the experience of obtaining reproductive healthcare in the United States (U.S.). Reproductive healthcare access is shaped not just by national policy, but also by the intersecting identities of the person seeking abortion care, including race, class, gender identity, age, sexuality, ability, and immigration status, among others. This experiential meaning-making is shaped by stratified reproduction, a process by which the state sanctions and supports the chosen reproductive trajectories of some groups, often white women of economic privilege, while penalizing, criminalizing, controlling, or otherwise limiting access to all reproductive options for others, often poor women and women of color (Rickie Solinger 2007). The discrepancies in service provision, availability, and insurance coverage that often correlate with race and class contribute to systemic support of motherhood for white, married, middle-class women, while simultaneously discouraging motherhood amongst

anyone who does not fit those demographic categories (Ann Bell 2009). These structural stratifications reflect, perpetuate, and compound other cultural forces that shape under-standings of "acceptable" motherhood, particularly stigma.

Abortion, a stigmatized and legally restricted procedure, provides a unique opportu-nity to apply the stratified reproduction framework. The majority of people in the United States who have abortions are women of color, 59% are raising children, and 75% live at or below the federal poverty line (Jenna Jerman, Rachel Jones, and Tsuyoshi Onda 2016; Rachel Jones and Jenna Jerman 2014). People at the intersection of these identities are more likely to face delays accessing abortion because of compounding barriers. Historians contextualize women of color's abortions as occurring within racist, sexist, and classist systems of oppression and sometimes as a moment of reproductive empowerment at a time of brutal dehumanization (Solinger 2007). These historical, legislative, and logistical components construct the reality through which people access abortion care, yet the extent to which these nuances are reflected in onscreen depictions of characters of color seeking abortions has not been examined.

Race and stereotypes onscreen

Before turning specifically to examine how racialized experiences translate in onscreen abortion stories, it is necessary to consider how people of color are portrayed on televi-sion. Characters of color can be understood by considering the discourse of stereotypes, defined by Stuart Hall as a "representational practice" which reduces populations to simplified, exaggerated characteristics as a way to create and maintain the "social and symbolic order" (1997).

Despite a documented increase in characters of color on television (Darnell Hunt, Ana-Christina Ramón and Michael Tran 2019), stereotypical representations of Black and Latinx characters persist (Dana Mastro and Bradley Greenberg 2000), and these stereotypes are often more pronounced in female characters (Beretta Smith-Shomade 2002). Scholars have created detailed lexicons of these stereotypes. Patricia Hill Collins, for example, established a catalogue of "controlling images" that reify Black women's subservience to white patriarchal societal norms (2008): the "welfare queen," who exploits government assistance at the expense of her many children; the "jezebel," whose boundless sexuality ensnares and traps Black men; and the "Black Lady," an asexual, middle class professional striving to be respectable to her white peers (Collins 2008). Other characters of color are subject to their own set of "controlling images" complicated by the distinctions between race and ethnicity. Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman explore the process of "tropicaliza-tion" in which Latinx characters are stripped of any ethnic specificity and are, instead, imbued with a generalized Latinx identity, creating an imagined universe in which all Latinx characters have a shared culture, history, and political reality (1997). Onscreen stereotypes of Latinas manifest in characters such as the "vamp," who is dangerously exotic and obsessively promiscuous, or the self-sacrificing "señorita," who is overtly religious and asexual (Dana Mastro and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz 2005). Doobo Shim notes the relative invisibility of Asian Americans in entertainment media, focusing his analysis specifically on depictions of Chinese and Japanese immigrant men as "unas-similable" and foolish foreigners, women as "subservient and sexual," and, more

recently, both men and women as the "model minority" eager to be "humble and quiet" in their assimilation into white American culture (1998). Recent scholarship documents the metamorphosis of these stereotypes, noting that some plotlines purposefully engage with them (Mary Beltrán 2016; Courtney Suggs 2020). Yet these programs often provide "complex and contradictory discourses" related to the societal forces (i.e., racism) that undergird the staying power of these stereotypes (Mary Beltrán 2002). Many of these patterns become apparent when looking at stories of characters who obtain abortions.

Race and abortion on television

Our previous research has demonstrated that characters who obtain abortions on television are not representative of real American women who have abortions: characters are, in aggregate, younger, whiter, and of higher socioeconomic status than their nonfictional counterparts (Sisson and Kimport 2016). Even as the number of plotlines including characters of color increases, they still remain underrepresented within every racial and ethnic group, and inaccuracies regarding how they access abortion remain. Our recent research finds, for example, that the majority of characters of color obtaining abortions do not experience barriers to abortion access and are portrayed as middle class (Stephanie Herold and Gretchen Sisson 2020). These portrayals stand in stark contrast to the reality of abortion access for U.S. abortion patients who face increased legal, logistical, and financial barriers and are often living at or below the Federal Poverty Line (Jones and Jerman 2014). These patterns may contribute to the public's lack of knowledge about abortions (Danielle Bessett, Caitlin Gerdts, Lisa Littman, Megan Kavanaugh and Alison Norris 2015) and may influence public policy and public opinion around abortion access, including restrictions on care. Because of this potential impact, it is important to understand television content related to abortion, and, in particular, what these plotlines communicate about the majority of people who have abortions: people of color.

Thus far, the question of what it means to tell a story about abortion and race in popular culture has gone largely unexplored. We build on Stephanie Gomez and Megan McFarlane's (2017) concept of "refraction," in which the "both/and tension that ultimately depoliticizes race and gender while seeking to conceal that depoliticization" (p.365), a framework that enables us to examine how television can both portray racialized characters while also ignoring or denying the existence of race or systemic racism. This framework suggests that mediated representations often critique "post-feminism" and "post-racism," yet they simultaneously "depoliticize the material realities of racial minorities and women" (Gomez and McFarlane 2017). To understand how these complexities manifest in abortion portrayals, we qualitatively analyze a decade of characters of color's onscreen abortions and focusing on Black women, Latinas, Asian women, and biracial women, and find that these plotlines often simultaneously center race on an individual level and deemphasize race on a structural level. This results in alternatingly progressive and regressive narratives that "refract" characters' abortion stories through ongoing negotiation with familiar tropes around race.

Methods

Sample

We draw our sample from a database of abortion plotlines on American television, curated from December 2013 to the present using systemic online searches. We use the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), an industry- and crowd-sourced online catalog of film and television titles, searching for titles that are either tagged "abortion" as a keyword or included "abortion" as a plot descriptor. Additionally, we conduct Google searches with the strings "abortion on television" and "abortion episode" weekly in order to capture recently aired titles. The database is restricted to scripted, English-language shows that are available to viewers in the U.S. (Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport 2014). We include all types of television content (e.g, broadcast, cable, online streaming) and all genres (e.g., comedy, drama) in order to capture as many depictions of abortion as are available to American audiences.

For this analysis, we limit our sample to plotlines that aired from January 2008 through December 2019. To be included in our sample, a plotline has to include a character obtaining an abortion or disclosing a past abortion.

Data coding

The first author viewed all plotlines included in our database that aired during the sample period to determine if they meet our inclusion criteria and code for variables related to race (of both the character and the actor portraying that character), age, relationship status, income, and barriers to abortion access. If an abortion plotline lasted for more than one episode, we viewed multiple episodes until the story arc was completed. The second author coded 10% of the sample; we achieved an inter-rater reliability over 95%. When there were questions as to whether a plotline fit our inclusion criteria or regarding a specific coding question, all authors discussed it until we reached consensus.

Defining racially-specific plotlines

There are a number of ways in which television content creators can avoid exploring race meaningfully. Perhaps the most frequent is by telling stories predominantly or exclusively about white characters, without engaging in an interrogation of whiteness as a racial identity (Eduardo Bonilla-Silva 2012). However, there are also television programs which include a diverse cast of characters and/or actors and still avoid exploring race meaningfully; this premise of our analysis is informed by scholarly conceptions of both "crossover" programs and "colorblind" television. "Crossover" refers to the process by which Black personalities, issues, and phenomena are deracialized to appeal to white audiences (Herman Gray 1994) and transcend and distance themselves from race (Maryann Erigha 2015). "Colorblindness," a term which sociologists define as "the claim that race no longer 'matters' in American society" (Ashley Doane 2014), "neutralizes" race on television by displacing characters of color outside of their communities, and stripping them of any social, emotional, or cultural markers that might refer to their racial identity (Vincent Brook 2009; Kristen Warner 2015).

In contrast to crossover and colorblind television content, which sublimate racial detail and identities, we seek to identify "racially-specific" plotlines that accentuate or explicitly discuss race. We define a plotline as race-specific if it meets two criteria: 1) it emphasizes race by having characters speak, act, or dress in accordance with racial and/or cultural signifiers, or having racially-marked cultural symbols or icons present, 2) the plotline literally or metaphorically locates the character in a racialized community or context. For example, a 2015 episode of *Scandal* features Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington), a Black character, obtaining an abortion. In this storyline, there are no references to Olivia's race, how a biracial pregnancy might or might not influence her career or the career of her sex partner, the President of the United States, nor are any references made to abortion politics or barriers to abortion access faced by Black women or U.S. women in general. Therefore, we coded this episode as "non-racially specific." By contrast, in a 2017 episode of *Underground*, Clara (DeWanda Wise), a Black character who is enslaved in 19th century Georgia, is coerced into taking herbs that induce an abortion by her sex partner, who does not want to bring a child into the world to become enslaved. This plotline is imbued with racial specificity, rooted in the brutality of slavery as a key driver in abortion decision-making. There were no disagreements among the authors about our identification of coding of racially-specific plotlines, which gave us confidence in our coding criteria.[1]

Because our cultural narratives, including those on television, often employ dichotomous racial categories (e.g., Black, Latino, white) instead of more complex identity categories that differentiate between race and ethnicity, we refer to these simplified racial categories as well.

Results

We identified 143 scripted plotlines that aired from January 2008 through December 2019 in which a character obtains or discloses an abortion. The vast majority of plotlines (83%) did not meet our inclusion criteria for being racially-specific, including sixteen plotlines about a character of color obtaining or disclosing an abortion (Table 1).

Whiteness and abortion on television

No plotlines depicting a white character obtaining an abortion met our inclusion criteria for a racially-specific plotline. White characters experience their abortions in ways that do not make their race salient to the experience. This pattern makes the overrepresentation of white characters obtaining abortion important, not only because it is an inaccurate reflection the racial demographics of U.S. abortion patients, but because it assumes that whiteness does not have an impact on a character's pregnancy decision-making or ability to access abortion. These plotlines do not examine how a white character's abortion decision-making may be complicated or made easier by race, either by virtue of white supremacy (e.g., a white character with a biracial pregnancy), white privilege (e.g., an increased likelihood of socioeconomic privilege), social support (e.g., an absence of feeling like their decision will reflect all women of their race), or the need to maintain a social status that closely links acceptable motherhood with heteronormative, marital, middle-class ideas of stability. Instead, these plotlines reinforce the misconception that white characters have no racial identity (Bonilla-Silva 2012).

Table 1. Sample of racially-specific abortion episodes, 2008–2019 (n = 25).

Show Title	Episode Title	Year	Race
South Park	Eek, A Penis	2008	Latina
Boston Legal	Roe	2008	Asian
Archer	Skorpio	2010	Latina
The Game	The Right to Choose Episode; Skeletons	2012	Black
Law and Order: SVU	Presumed Guilty	2013	Latina
Orange is the New Black	Fucksgiving	2013	Latina
East Los High	Build a Future Worthy of You	2013	Latina
Being Mary Jane	People in Glass Houses Shouldn't Throw Fish; If The Shoe Fits	2015	Black
Mercy Street	The Belle Alliance	2016	Black
Jane the Virgin	Chapter 46	2016	Latina
Underground	Things Unsaid	2017	Black
Star	The Winner Takes it All; May the Best Manager Win; Rise from the Ashes	2017	Black
Liar	The White Rabbit	2017	Black
LetterKenny	Sled Shack	2017	First Nations
Empire	Sweet Sorrow	2018	Black
Dear White People	Coco	2018	Black
Claws	Cracker Casserole	2018	Black/Asian
Insecure	Ghost-like	2018	Black
The Bold Type	The Deep End	2019	Black/White
She's Gotta Have It	#WhenYourChickensComeHometoRoost	2019	Black
Made in Heaven	All That Glitters	2019	Asian
Orange is the New Black	God Bless America	2019	Latina
Empire	You Broke Love	2019	Black
New Amsterdam	Righteous Right Hand	2019	Black
Bull	Doctor Killer	2019	Black

The overrepresentation of white characters also averts narrative examinations of the racialized politics of abortion in the U.S. Black characters on both *Being Mary Jane* (2015) and *Dear White People* (2018), for example, discuss their pregnancy decision-making as it reflects on their racial group in a way that white characters do not. On *Claws* (2018), a biracial character entering the abortion clinic is harassed using racially-charged rhetoric by anti-abortion protestors. On *New Amsterdam* (2019), an aunt of a young Black woman with Down syndrome explains her distrust of advocates on all sides of the abortion debate, saying, "Let's be clear, this Black family … ain't being co-opted for anyone's crusade." These counter examples show what stories about white characters make invisible: additional challenges of abortion access for women of color, and the privilege of not incorporating them.

Characters of color in colorblind worlds

As mentioned above, sixteen plotlines that included a character of color obtaining an abortion still did not meet our inclusion criteria for race-specific depictions. In some of these plotlines, the woman of color character is a minor character, and her abortion experience is not the focus of the plot. On *The Good Wife* (2011), for example, Alicia Florrick (Julianna Margulies) learns that her son's ex-girlfriend, Nisa (Rachel Hilson), obtained an abortion while they were dating. That Nisa is Black is never mentioned or referenced; rather, the significance of the abortion is the upheaval its discovery may cause for Alicia's political campaign. Similarly, on *Pretty Little Liars* (2016), opposition research reveals that a Black candidate for political office had an abortion, a secret that

threatens her credibility as an anti-abortion candidate. These plotlines focus on how abortion may call into question the moral fiber of a particular character; that these are characters of color who may have experienced racialized barriers to abortion remains unexplored.

On other plotlines, a more central, recurring women of color character is depicted pursuing an abortion, yet the plotline does not engage with race. On *Grey's Anatomy* (2005, 2011), Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh), a Korean-American surgeon, twice faces unplanned pregnancies and decides to have an abortion. In neither pregnancy is Cristina's race made relevant to her abortion decision (nor, in the first case, is the race of her Black boyfriend, the father of the pregnancy, made salient). Instead, Cristina's abortion is framed as an affirmation of her careerism. While some critics suggest that the character of Cristina may contribute to "model minority" stereotypes of Asian women (Julia Hallam 2009), Oh commented that the character is smart and ambitious because of her profession, not because of her race (Matthew Fogel 2005). It is possible for both Oh's narrative and this critique to be true, yet it is significant that Oh purposefully distances the character from her racial identity. This suggests a raceless universality to Cristina's goals, instead of exploring how her identity might play into her decision-making both for her career and her pregnancy.[2]

A counter argument could be made that characters of color are *always* functioning in racialized ways, and their mere inclusion makes the fictional universe they inhabit less colorblind. If their actions do not include racialized signifiers, that itself is a commentary on racial tropes, a de-emphasis that is a prime example of refraction. That is, Cristina Yang "bring[s] color into the frame without conflict," (Catherine Squires 2014), offering a representation of a character of color while ignoring the inherent, systemic inequalities that manifest in the healthcare system based on race. There is no doubt that, when a plotline features a character of color obtaining an abortion—even if racial tropes and signifiers are not made overt—it may be understood as racialized by many viewers. Many characters of color also embody race in different plotlines, without race becoming a relevant part of their abortion story (e.g., Olivia Pope on *Scandal* in 2015). This is an inherent aspect in analyzing fictional characters instead of real people; they lack the internal processes and lived experiences beyond what is scripted.[3] Characters can occupy colorblind worlds to a far greater degree than audiences can.

Characters of color in racially-specific worlds

Seventeen percent of our sample (25 plotlines) met our inclusion criteria for having racially-specific content. Below, we detail the elements of those plotlines, segmented by race.

Black characters obtaining abortions

Twenty-two plotlines depicted Black characters obtaining abortions; thirteen of these plotlines met our criteria for being racially-specific. Many of these plotlines appeared on television programs with predominantly Black casts, including *The Game* (2012), *Being Mary Jane* (2015), *STAR (2017)*, *Empire (2018)*, *Dear White People (2018)*, and *She's Gotta Have It (2019)*. These programs foreground race by focusing on signifiers of Blackness,

including depictions of Black family life, intraracial and interracial relationships, and interpersonal encounters with racist institutions. When characters on these programs have abortions, they are often portrayed as wrestling with (and sometimes reinforcing) stereotypes of Black women; in calling attention to these tropes, these plotlines suggest that the barriers characters face to abortion access are only individual, cloaking political and racialized barriers to abortion.

Some plotlines deploy racial specificity by engaging with stereotypes of Black women as characters consider or remember past abortions. On both *Being Mary Jane* (2015) and *Dear White People* (2018), Mary Jane (Gabrielle Union) and Coco, respectively, discuss their abortions as mechanisms to distance or differentiate themselves from a combination of the "jezebel" and "welfare queen" stereotypes (Collins 2008), both of which embody perceptions of reproductive irresponsibility. In discussing her abortion, Mary Jane discloses to her father: "I did the reasonable, responsible thing, because I couldn't look at my dad and have him see a burden, a pathetic burden." She defines herself as a person who made the "responsible" decision to forgo early motherhood in pursuit of respectability, using loaded language to describe not just her imagined perception of herself under different circumstances, but her judgement of other Black women who choose to parent in what she considers less than ideal circumstances. On *Dear White People*, Coco confesses to her roommate Kelsey, "Part of me thinks maybe I should [continue the pregnancy] … Then I'd be a 20-year-old college drop out. What kind of life could I give a child?" Coco articulates her understanding of a "type" of person who becomes a mother at a young age, one lacking in skills and resources. Both Mary Jane and Coco emphasize clear middle-class values inherent in delayed parenthood, college degrees, and pursuit of respectability, goals that are, in their views, best achieved by ending their pregnancies and distancing themselves from pejorative stereotypes embodied by other Black women.

In contrast, other Black characters embrace alternate stereotypes of Black women in creating a narrative around their abortions. On *The Game* (2012), Melanie (Tia Mowry) struggles to conceal the circumstances of her past abortion from her husband, talking to and then chiding herself, saying, "Always trying to be the 'Strong Black Woman,' Black women don't talk to themselves." This passing reference to the pejorative "Strong Black Woman" trope foreshadows Melanie's reasons for keeping her abortion a secret; she later justifies her concealment as protective of her marriage. Melanie coaches herself into the role of the "Strong Black Woman," an archetype Collins describes as someone who is inherently resilient and self-sacrificing, concealing any need for interpersonal or institutional support (2008). Similarly on *STAR* (2017), Alex (Ryan Destiny) keeps her abortion a secret from her boyfriend, revealing to her boss that she does not want to add "pressure or stress" to his life.[4] Like Melanie, Alex evokes the Strong Black Woman stereotype, shouldering the burden of the abortion to shield her partner from any emotional repercussions. These depictions racialize abortion plotlines by having characters act in opposition to (Coco and Mary Jane) or in concordance with (Melanie and Alex) stereotypes of Black women.

These stereotypes are rooted in systemic racism and sexism, yet these plotlines frame them as tropes to be responded to by characters individually. Coco's and Mary Jane's reproductive decisions are discussed as separate from the institutional forces that shape them and are framed as personal responsibilities with individual consequences instead of decisions made within a societal infrastructure that stratifies Black women's reproductive

decisions. Both characters take purposive action in defiance of the jezebel and welfare queen stereotypes by having abortions, yet they do not engage with the larger structures that create an environment in which Black women might feel obligated to choose between pursuing an education or career and becoming a parent. Likewise, Melanie and Alex willingly embrace the Strong Black Woman stereotype, enduring any hardship associated with their pregnancies and abortions alone in service of protecting their partners. The burden of being the Strong Black Woman places the responsibility of overcoming adversity on the individual, implying that if she taps into an inherent reserve of resilience and conceals any perceived weakness, she can overcome complex systems like racism or poverty herself. Rather than exposing the Strong Black Woman trope as harmful, these plotlines imply that Melanie and Alex's actions are solely responsible for the resulting relationship distress. While their actions clearly play a role, they cannot be untangled from the social pressure to adhere to the Strong Black Woman stereotype. Taken together, these plotlines provide superficial explorations of "controlling images" of Black women and fail to take into account the larger systems of racism and sexism at play.

Several plotlines delve into the broader politics of abortion in ways that do not meaningfully engage with racial politics. When sharing her pregnancy decision with her friend Jamal, *Empire*'s (2018) Becky (Gabourey Sidibe) proclaims, "I have decided to terminate, it's my body, my choice." On *She's Gotta Have It* (2019), Clorinda (Margot Bingham) discloses her abortion during an argument with her partner, Mars (Anthony Ramos), who is visibly angry that she concealed this from him. She exclaims, "As an ardent feminist, I thought that any and everything I do with my body is my choice" and when he asks who she's expecting judgment from, she sardonically responds, "the entire U.S. government." When considering her pregnancy options, *Dear White People*'s Coco and Kelsey remark that "at least we're not in Texas, or Utah, or South Dakota," naming states where it is difficult to access abortion. These passing references offer a nod to the politization of abortion access. This is refraction at work: these depictions acknowledge the politics of abortion yet obfuscate any systemic inequalities Black women face when accessing abortion. Decoupling abortion politics from racial politics is especially notable because of the racial specificity of these plotlines. On *Empire*, when Jamal tries to comfort Becky, she immediately code switches to African American Vernacular English, saying, "Boss Becky ain't never scared." Before disclosing her abortion, *She's Gotta Have It*'s Clordina and Mars argue about if it is moral for her, as a Black woman, to undermine Black Lives Matter activism as part of her job. On *Dear White People*, a discussion about abortion is immediately followed by Kelsey caressing Coco's hair and asking if it's a new weave. These plotlines engage with explicit racial markers, yet the details of how these characters' Blackness affects their abortion experience is not clearly articulated.

Latina characters obtaining abortions

Seven of the eleven plotlines depicting Latinas met our inclusion criteria for being a racially-specific plotline. On these plotlines, Latinidad (or "Latino-ness") is most frequently invoked by tying each character's abortion experience to Catholicism, using religiosity as a Latinx identifier and/or cause of conflict over the abortion. By calling attention to religion, these depictions downplay the structural barriers Latinxs face in pursuing abortion care.

Several plotlines ground the Latinx abortion experience in a Catholic-based condemnation of nonmarital sex. On the cartoon comedies *South Park* (2008) and *Archer* (2010), Catholicism is the crux of the joke: on the former, a Latina character initially declines an abortion because she's Catholic, until a white character convinces her to obtain one because "that's how white girls get ahead." On *Archer*, the title character's Latina maid repeatedly presents him with pregnancy tests, and Archer (Ron Howard) offhandedly remarks, "It's the Pope's fault she won't let me wear a condom." On *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (2013), a Catholic church hides the criminal activity of their clergy, one of whom molested a young Latina congregant and coerced her into having an abortion. In a more sympathetic depiction, *Jane the Virgin*'s (2016) Xiomara (Andrea Navedo) has an abortion, but her devout Catholic mother Alba (Ivonne Coll) comments that Xiomara could go to hell as a result. Unlike in the cartoons, Alba's Catholicism is not a joke but instead a source of conflict; Xiomara's partner and adult daughter both support her through the abortion, and her mother's judgment is the episode's central source of tension. Ultimately, they reconcile despite Alba's religious beliefs.

These plotlines yoke Latinidad to religion to mine each character's abortion for humor or conflict. By highlighting presumed tensions between faith and abortion-seeking, plotlines seem intended to appear as progressive critiques of religious ideologies.[5] Taken in the context of tropicalization (Aparicio and Silverman 1997), these depictions critique religion while offering little analysis related to race or ethnic identity. With the exception of *Jane the Virgin*, whose characters are specifically Venezuelan, no plotlines provide ethnic origins for their characters, relying on the illusion of a common Latinx identity. These plotlines also miss opportunities to depict barriers related to immigration status, language, or socioeconomic disparity. These plotlines may appear progressive by subtly or overtly critiquing religious opposition to abortion, yet their reliance on religion as the main obstacle to abortion access for Latinas functions to erase structural barriers to abortion access.

A more recent *Orange is the New Black* (2019) plotline follows an undocumented immigrant, Santos Chaj (Melinna Bobadilla), as she attempts to self-induce an abortion with parsley tea while incarcerated. The parsley tea is not effective, and because Santos speaks an indigenous language, she cannot communicate with other inmates about ending her pregnancy. Upon discovering that she wants an abortion, an immigration enforcement officer refuses to transport her to a clinic. Ultimately, a correctional officer smuggles Santos an abortion pill. Santos faces many systemic barriers: incarceration, undocumented status, language limitations, and entrenched stigma. Her immigration status and indigenous language are central components of this plotline, which depicts her as the victim of a racist, xenophobic detention system. Notably, this depiction is the only one in our sample to highlight interlocking systemic institutions that create barriers to obtaining an abortion.

Asian characters obtaining abortions

Six plotlines in our sample include an Asian character who obtains an abortion, and only three met our inclusion criteria for race-specific plotlines: *Boston Legal* (2008), *Claws* (2018, discussed in the biracial category below), and *Made in Heaven* (2019).

On *Boston Legal* (2008), Kim (Charlet Chung) is a 15-year-old Chinese immigrant seeking a judicial bypass to obtain an abortion. Her lawyers, the show's protagonists

Shirley Schmidt (Candace Bergen) and Alan Shore (James Spader), are initially hesitant to take the case, as Shirley shares that her past abortions "haunt" her. Later, Shirley and Alan interrogate Kim together, saying "[Your] culture has a preference for male offspring … you're aborting this baby because it's a girl." In the courtroom, Shirley interrupts the judge's ruling, declaring that even though Kim is her client, "I'm not going to let the abortion license be exploited for the holocaust of women. If that gets me disbarred … so be it." Despite this outburst, the judge grants Kim the judicial bypass, and in the closing scene, Alan reflects on how his past experiences with abortion "weigh" on him. This plotline relies on white characters' xenophobic assumptions about Chinese culture, assumptions that lead them to attempt to damage the case of their own client. This construction of Asian American characters as synonymous with their countries of origin is a colonialist trope meant to create a binary opposition between Asian cultures and (white) American cultures, casting Asian characters as the "unassimilable other" (Shim 1998). Kim's pursuit of an abortion is an opportunity for the white characters to disclose their experiences with abortion and leverage these experiences (and their perception of Chinese culture) to invoke white American racial superiority disguised as morality. Kim's abortion plotline is what Shim calls "ethnic background scenery" (1998), an opportunity for white lead character development at the expense of Asian extras.

On the more recent *Made in Heaven* (2019), set in India, the plotline follows the lead up to the wedding of Aliya (Aditi Joshi), a journalist, and Angad (Pavail Gulati), heir to a substantial fortune. Angad's parents discover that Aliya had a past abortion, and they encourage Angad to call off the wedding because his bride is "impure." Angad lies about the pregnancy, saying, "it was my baby, I asked her to get it aborted." When he reveals the lie to Aliya, she yells "fuck you and fuck your family." To demonstrate his commitment to Aliya, Angad later resigns from all aspects of his family life, including disinheriting his fortune. Aliya accepts his apology, encourages Angad to reconcile with his family, and they marry. This portrayal highlights cultural expectations of Indian women, namely the focus on "purity" or virginity before marriage, explicitly depicting this as an out of touch expectation by older generations. Yet the character who confronts this expectation is Angad; that the plotline focuses on the abortion's repercussions for the male character undermines the critique of cultural sexism. The abortion revelation provides Angad with an opportunity for personal growth and reflection, leaving Aliya's perspective unexplored and any connections to larger systems of power unaddressed.

Biracial characters obtaining abortions

Only three plotlines in our sample portray biracial characters obtaining abortions: *The Fosters* (2014), *Claws* (2018), and *The Bold Type* (2019), although only the last two met our inclusion criteria for being racially-specific. Biracial and multiracial characters in popular culture have the potential to "reify existing power structures and move us towards emancipation at the same time," (LeiLani Nishime 2004, 45) and this complexity is reflected in these depictions.

On *Claws* (2018), Virginia (Karrueche Tran) is a biracial (Vietnamese and Black) nail artist. Her nicknames of "China Doll," "Saigon," and "Mochachina" highlight her Blackness and Asian-ness, a mixed-race combination that media scholar Myrna Washington refers to as "Blasian." Washington (2017) details how Blasian woman first came to widespread cultural representation through Black hip-hop culture in depictions that portray them as sexual

and exotic (p. 42). This differs from the controlling image of Black woman as "the jezebel" by focusing on the display of sexuality, rather than the deployment of it—a difference reflected in Virginia's history as an "exotic dancer."

When Virginia becomes pregnant, her boyfriend's sister chides her, highlighting her biracial identity, yelling "I can't believe your mixed ass wasn't on the pill!" She is confronted with racialized anti-abortion rhetoric when entering the abortion clinic, as white anti-abortion protesters harass her with chants of "Unborn lives matter!" In the clinic, she wonders if their child might be the next Barack Obama or Martin Luther King, Jr, a reference the showrunner noted was a nod to real anti-abortion billboards placed in Black communities that read "Every 21 minutes our next future leader is aborted" (Barrois, J., personal communication with Renee Bracey Sherman, November 7 2018; Joyce Jones 2011).[6] Virginia asks her friend Anne (Judy Reyes) what their coworkers think of her, and Anne reassures her of their support. This statement is followed by a montage of the salon's employees sharing experiences with rape, abortion, and adoption. While those who know Virginia comment on her "mixed"-ness, the anti-abortion cultural narratives that are most salient are rooted in anti-Blackness (instead of, for example, conversations about purity or gender selection that appear in portrayals of other Asian characters obtaining abortions).

Similarly, on *The Bold Type* (2019), it is Kat's (Aisha Dee) identity as a Black woman that becomes most salient. Kat's past abortion surfaces as she considers running for elected office, and she discloses this history to Tia (Alexis Floyd), a Black woman and her potential campaign manager. In turn, Tia shares her own abortion story. Kat chooses to share more details of her abortion experience with Tia than with her white best friends, creating a moment of connection between the two Black characters.

It is difficult to discern a pattern from these two biracial women. They resist the existential conflict and exoticization previously documented in relation to biracial characters (Ralina Joseph 2013). Although the plotlines focused on both Kat and Virginia's Blackness as a source of support, both characters are humanized to a greater degree than we saw with other non-biracial Black characters, who more consistently conformed to stereotypical controlling images of Black women. Both Kat and Virginia are met with shared experiences from the women of color with whom they chose to discuss their abortion; none of the Black characters encounter a similar response (instead, they are met with confrontation or encouragement to continue their pregnancies). These responses serve to affirm the characters' ability to make a pregnancy decision in a way that contextualizes their decisions within those made by other characters of color. Whether this difference is a pattern related to their biraciality, however, is a tenuous conclusion to draw given our small sample.

Conclusion

Despite documented increases in characters of color who obtain abortions, the majority of characters who obtain abortions on television continue to be disproportionately white (Herold and Sisson 2020), and these white characters' racial identities play no meaningful role in these abortion narratives. When television plotlines feature a character of color obtaining an abortion, racialized elements of the character's experience are often absent or tied to tropes that reaffirm controlling images of women of color. The race-specific

representations in our sample may appear progressive by making race visible, yet their relative lack of discourse related to structural barriers and systemic racism reinforces the flawed notion that abortion is primarily an interpersonal issue, instead of one rooted in complex systems of race, class, gender, immigration status, etc. This is especially concerning given the impact that media can have on public understandings of reproductive health experiences (Jennifer Hall 2013), the public's relative lack of knowledge about abortion safety and access (Bessett et al. 2015), and the increase in abortion restrictions over the last decade (David Cohen and Carole Joffe 2020).

Many scholars critique television's consistent inability to address, examine, and portray systemic issues, instead focusing on "the choices of certain individuals … [and endorsing] dominant ideologies of social identity—gender, sexuality, class, and race" (Elana Levine 2007). This obfuscation of structural inequality is especially concerning when accompanied by racialized stereotypes, which may encourage viewers (particularly white viewers) to adopt more prejudicial attitudes towards race-related policies (Srividya Ramasubramanian 2010; David Stamps 2020). This pattern of excluding depictions of both structural and racialized obstacles to abortion may be especially influential given the confluence of factors that make abortion a unique issue in American life, namely that it remains politically controversial despite being privately accessed by a large minority of Americans.

Because portrayals of characters of color obtaining abortions are still relatively infrequent, they may contribute to the inaccurate perception that abortion is not a common pregnancy outcome for people of color. The exceptional nature of these plotlines, though, may also result in more media scrutiny and analysis, lending them increased cultural currency than plotlines in which a white character has an abortion. These plotlines have been especially meaningful for people of color who have had abortions, as rare opportunities to see variations of their abortion experiences reflected and reaffirmed onscreen (Bracey Sherman 2015; Romero, Qu'emi Gutierrez, and Diaz 2016; Terrell 2018). Yet, despite these anecdotal testimonies to the impact of these stories, and previous research illustrating the influence of depictions on sexual health behavior and attitudes (Tasha Falconer 2019), little research on these effects incorporates abortion. More scholarship is needed to understand the impact of these depictions.

The progress inherent in visibility is limited if these portrayals primarily reinforce racialized stereotypes while ignoring structural barriers to abortion access. To more robustly explore the intersection of race and abortion decision-making, access, and support, content creators might consider the positional power of their characters—including white characters—within a broader system of reproductive stratification. While some television shows have depicted legal and logistical barriers to abortion access (Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport 2017), the proportion of portrayals incorporating such barriers is decreasing (Herold and Sisson 2020) and the role of race is exacerbating these barriers has been largely undepicted.

While entertainment television cannot be everything to every viewer, it is clear that content creators are endeavoring to explore abortion stories with more diverse and nuanced perspectives. Part of this effort ought to be expanding the depictions of characters of color obtaining abortions beyond stereotypical controlling images, making overt the racialization of abortion politics in the U.S., and devoting particular attention to how race in abortion stories is made in/visible.

Notes

1. There is a limit inherent on our inclusion criteria, which exclude stories about characters of color who do not function, at least to *some* extent in traditionally racialized ways or communities. Our exclusion of these plotlines from this analysis is *not* to assert that these television stories do not inform the broader pop cultural narrative about race and abortion, but instead to focus our scope, for this analysis, on those programs that do so most explicitly and overtly.
2. Scholars have widely critiqued *Grey's Anatomy* showrunner Shonda Rhimes (who is also the showrunner for *Private Practice* and *Scandal*, all of which have featured abortion stories) for crafting a "colorblind, post-racial" sensibility on her programs (Ralina Joseph 2016; Warner 2015). Rhimes is one of the only showrunners to consistently incorporate an abortion-decision making plotline in many of her shows, yet she avoids discussions about race or racism in these contexts, obfuscating institutional barriers to abortion that are compounded by race.
3. Oh's resistance to giving a racial context for Cristina's decisions makes clear the extent to which the actors playing characters of color do not necessarily bring their own experiences as people of color to those they are portraying, even when there is racial/ethnic alignment in the identities of the actor and character.
4. Many of the Black women characters understand their histories of abortion and disclosure in relation to how it will impact the men in their lives: for Mary Jane, it's her father; for Melanie, her husband; for Alex, her boyfriend. All consider that the pregnancy itself, nonmarital parenthood, or the history of abortion, will be a source of stress for these men. They choose to either delay or decline disclosing their abortions to protect these men from stress, burden, and embarrassment.
5. These plotlines imply an imagined dichotomy between religiosity and abortion seeking. In fact, more than half of U.S. abortion patients identify as Christians, a quarter of whom are Catholics (Jones, Jerman, and Onda 2016).
6. Of course, this rhetorical deployment of Barack Obama centers his own Blackness, as opposed to his biraciality.

Acknowledgments

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