THE MIXED RACE MOUSE

Discovering Mixed Race Identity in Disney Channel Programs from *High School Musical* to *K.C. Undercover*

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Turn on any action film or drive past a highway billboard, mixed race bodies frequent the media that Americans readily consume. Nevertheless, few scholars investigate the social impact of mixed race representation in such mediums as television. Ignoring multiracial presence in the media allows producers of television programs to shape and construct expectations that are projected onto the mixed race community. My paper contributes to mixed race scholarship by evaluating these projected expectations in order to encourage readers to seek out authentic representations of the mixed race experience. This paper answers two questions regarding mixed race representation. First, how has the entertainment industry constructed mixed race identity on television? Second, has that identity construction mitigated the demand for diversification and multiculturalism on screen, while simultaneously ignoring the unique discriminatory experiences lived by the mixed race community in the United States? Disney Channel serves as a case study for my research. To evaluate multiracial representation on Disney Channel, I performed a textual and visual analysis on four television programs featuring mixed race actors. I then categorized each mixed race actor as multiracial African American, multiracial Asian American, or multiracial Latino American and compared the identity construction of each character. My analysis indicates that Disney Channel uses mixed race actors and their respective characters to encourage an ideology of racial transcendence and colorblindness, which dangerously erases and ignores any history of racial prejudice and discrimination.

I. INTRODUCTION

A tanned and tall female struts her way through layers of draping, white curtains. She smiles and greets her audience before proudly announcing, "Hi, I'm a believably attractive eighteen to twenty-four-year-old female. You can relate to me because I'm racially ambiguous and I'm in this tampon commercial because market research shows that girls like you love girls like me."[1] U by Kotex, a line of feminine hygiene products, released this

1 Asherwoodweb, "Kotex So Obnoxious." YouTube Video, 31 seconds. February 7, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIzaM1VdVP0 .

advertisement in 2011, parodying the media's exploitation of mixed race people as means of increasing viewership and consumerism. The commercial highlights the market's demand for mixed race visibility on screen and exemplifies multiracial fetishism within mainstream American media industry. The practice of exploiting mixed race identity appears in a variety of media from children's network television to Hollywood blockbusters. Turn on any action film or drive past a highway billboard; mixed race bodies frequent the films, television programs, and advertisements that Americans readily consume. The emergence of mixed race people in the media heavily influences not only the self-constructed identity of the mixed race community but the public's perception of that community as well.

Mixed race identity, as defined by media and ethnic studies scholars, refers to the racial identification of people "who feel they are descended from and attached to two or more socially significant groups."[2] Because race is perceived as a social construct rather than a biological phenomenon, media and ethnic studies scholars evaluate mixed race identity as a social science.[3] I continue to address race as a social construct and build on current mixed race scholarship to illustrate the way in which the media serves as a tool for understanding racial hierarchies that plague today's culture. With the children's network Disney Channel as a case study, this thesis examines the mixed race community through a media lens to answer two pertinent questions. First, how has the entertainment industry constructed mixed race identity on television? Has that identity construction mitigated the demand for diversification and multiculturalism on screen, while simultaneously ignoring the unique discriminatory experiences lived by the mixed race community in the United States?

Current scholarship on race relations in the United States aids in answering these proposed research questions. Within the last few decades, an increase in academic research on mixed race identity illustrates an emerging acceptance and acknowledgement of mixed race communities. Despite the growth in scholarship, mixed race people are not a new phenomenon. Instead, the increase in relevant studies stems from a shift in America's acknowledgement of mixed race people.[4] For instance, the United States Census' sanctioning of the "check all that apply" box for stating one's race exemplifies the government's recognition of multiple ethnicities applying to any one individual.[5]

Claiming a multiracial identity appears new and exciting because it breaks down traditional race categories. Thus, claiming a multiracial identity has become socially acceptable and even desirable. With the emergence of this trend the media, as a business, has turned the multiracial identity into a commodity. Therefore, addressing the media's exploitation of racial ambiguity has become a salient area of study for understanding the reorganization of racial categories within American culture. Failing to critique and evaluate the characterization of multiracial people in film and television passively accepts the stereotypical representations of mixed race people that perpetuate racial hierarchies and continue to suppress marginalized communities. Disney Channel serves as a media case study in that it illustrates the power of the media to shape and perpetuate images of mixed race people, which influence the young audience to which the network caters.

Disney Channel fits into a long, historical trajectory of The Walt Disney Company's deliberate attempt to diversify its content. Today, Disney ABC Television Group (DATG), the sector of the Disney Company that directly governs Disney Channel, shows its diversity interests through its implementation of the *Creative Talent Development and Inclusion d*epartment. This division of the Disney Company serves as an "in-house resource for DATG current programming and development executives for information such as staffing suggestions for writers and directors as well as network diversity statistics for on-camera and production talent."[6] With the knowledge that Disney Channel seeks to include a wider variety of ethnic characters in its content, investigating the network's representation of race measures the network's success in its diversity efforts. Additionally, evaluating the narratives

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2 Rebecca C. King-O'Riain, Small, Stephen, and Mahtani, Minelle. eds., *Global Mixed Race,* (New York: New York University Press,2014), vii.

3 Laurie M. Mengel, "Triples—The Social Evolution of a Multiracial Panethnicity: An Asian American perspective,"in *Rethinking 'Mixed Race.'* (London, GBR: Pluto Press, 2001), 99.

4 LeiLani Nishime, *Undercover Asian: Multiracial Asian Americans in Visual Culture,* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 2.

5 Marcia Dawkins, "'Mixed Messages' Barack Obama and Post-Racial Politics," in *Spectator*, (2010), 10.

6 "Overview," *Creative Talent Development & Inclusion,* n.d., http://www.disneyabctalentdevelopment.com/overview.html

and characters that Disney Channel designates to its multiracial actors shows the extent to which popular media outlets value the voice of the mixed race community. Of course, various other films and television programs engage with mixed race identity. Therefore, to contextualize my evaluation of mixed race identity on Disney Channel, an examination of past academic literature on mixed race identity in the media, as well as an overview of the Disney Company's historical relationship to race, follows.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand Disney Channel's role in the construction of mixed race identity, I critically engage with existing scholarship in three key subject areas: general mixed race studies, mixed race representation on screen, and finally, Disney's representation of minorities from Walt Disney's "Oswald" shorts (1920s) to *The Princess and the Frog* (2009).

A. General Overview of Mixed Race Studies

i. Definition, History, and Why Now?

Mixed race studies trace the sociological evolution of individuals and communities of people who identify with multiple social groups.[7] Quoting scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Laurie Mengel argues that, regardless of its social construction, race is so fundamental to modern society that to distance oneself from race corrodes one's identity.[8] In "The Missing Bi-Racial Child in Hollywood," Naomi Angel argues that it is practically impossible to separate race from historical hierarchies of power that shaped not only American society but the way race relations evolved and continue to evolve in this country.[9] For example, laws prohibiting interracial marriage, collectively known as anti-miscegenation laws, originated in part from slave owners who worried that mixed race children would disrupt the economic system.[10] The first anti-miscegenation law was enacted in Virginia in 1664.[11] The Virginia law, and the anti-miscegenation laws that followed Virginia's lead, served as a means for protecting White individuals from the Black slave community they perceived as socially inferior.[12] Mixed race children exemplified a "great social evil" as they challenged the hierarchy of power that relied on dichotomous Black and White racial categories.[13] These anti-miscegenation laws, which persisted in the United States until 1967, illustrate the country's troubling history of marginalizing mixed race people.[14] Thus, the construction of mixed race identity today exemplifies America's progress from racial ideologies during the American slave trade.

With the collapse of anti-miscegenation laws, a new approach to understanding mixed race as its own racial category emerged in society and academic literature. Race and media scholar LeiLani Nishime explains that while mixed race identity is not a new phenomenon, the recent and ongoing attempts at recognizing mixed race as a legitimate identity category are in fact novel and necessary to critique.[15] In *Global Mixed Race,* the authors Rebecca C. King-O'Riain and Stephen Small similarly contest that while mixed race individuals have existed throughout time, the increased visibility of the mixed race community and the extent to which society recognizes and validates multiracial identity are rapidly changing.[16] She argues that the increase in interest in

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7 King-O'Riain, et. al, vii.

8 Mengel, 100.

9 Naomi Angel, "the Missing Bi-Racial Child In Hollywood," in *Canadian Review of American Studies,* (2007), 246.

10 Angel, 243.

11 Anti-Amalgamation Law Passed," *African American Registry: A Non-Profit Education Organization,* n.d., http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/anti-amalgamation-law-passed.

12 Angel, 244.

13 Angel, 243.

14 Stephen Small, "Colour, Culture and Class: Interrogating Interracial Marriage and People of Mixed Racial Descent in the USA," in *Rethinking 'Mixed Race,'* (London, GBR: Pluto Press, 2001), 119.

15 Nishime, 2.

16 King-O'Riain, et. al., ix.

the mixed race community is partly due to the increase in visibility of multiracial celebrities.[17] Her assertion reiterates the necessity to study mixed race media icons as means to understanding the emerging acceptance of mixed race identity. My study of multiracial Disney Channel stars contributes to King-O'Riain's argument by illustrating the impact of the media on the identity construction of mixed race individuals both on and off screen. To contextualize the identity construction of multiracial stars on Disney Channel, I first examine the main theories found in scholarship on the topic.

ii. Common Theories in Mixed Race Studies

The first common theory in mixed race studies insists that mixed race bodies represent a progressive step towards a post-race future in which a person's race is as insignificant as, for instance, a person's height. The majority of scholars criticize the post-race theory. Marcia Dawkins writes that the idealized post-race future dismisses the real and evident fact that race continues to impact the lives of minorities.[18] Dawkins bemoans the US government's attempt at convincing citizens of our nation's social progress through the implementation of the 2000 US Census "check all that apply" option, which allows for an individual to check more than one ethnicity on the census. This enactment supposedly signifies America's departure from strict racial boundaries. Dawkins argues that rather than transcending race in hopes of a raceless future, the new census option rids the government of its responsibility to create and maintain race inspired initiatives.[19]

Henry Yu's research supports Dawkins denunciation of the post-race theory. He argues that looking forward to a post-race future wrongly disassociates mixed race from its less appealing history, referencing the history between Asian sex workers and White men as evidence. The rise of anti-miscegenation laws successfully decreased marriages between Asian American labor workers and White women but did not stop White American soldiers from having sex with Asian female sex workers, thus producing mixed race offspring.[20] Yu argues that the interracial relations between American military men and Asian sex workers exemplifies colonial ideologies that positioned White men in power over minorities. Claiming that mixed race represents a progressive step towards a raceless future ignores this hierarchical power play. Instead of representing progress, mixed race bodies serve as a reminder of hierarchies that positioned White males at the apex of colonial power. Yu's article introduces a central concern to my research: the construction of mixed race identity as a reflection of historical race hierarchies.

Additionally, scholars acknowledge the perceived fragmentation of mixed race identity. According to Laurie Mengel, descriptors of multiracial people, such as "half-breed," "mulatto," and "mixblood," "perpetuate notions of blood division that can be quantified in fractional terms."[21] In a society fraught with racial tension, such labeling dangerously marks mixed race people as only a fraction of a whole person.[22] Fractionalizing the identity of a multiracial person can lead to their exclusion from monoracial communities.[23] This exclusion contributes to the exoticism of mixed race people, as they are perpetually pushed to the outskirts of racial categorization and marked as racial outsiders. She argues, then, that mixed race people occupy a "third space" in which multiracial people seek refuge from the White majority as well as the monoracial, colored minority.[24] In this third space, multiracial individuals are connected through their shared deviance from the normative White community as well as their shared feeling of racial fragmentation.[25] Mengel states, however, that new scholarship tries to understand mixed race people as doubly ethnic rather than fractionally ethnic.[26] This new ideology suggests that multiracial

17 King-O'Riain, et. al., ix.

18 Dawkins, 10.

19 Dawkins, 10.

20 Henry Yu, "Tiger Woods is Not the End of History: Or, Why Sex Across the Color Line Won't Save Us All," in *The American Historical Review,* (2003), 1414.

21 Mengel, 100.

22 Mengel, 101.

23 Mengel, 101.

24 Mengel, 100.

25 Mengel, 101.

26 Mengel, 102.

people are accepted into multiple monoracial communities. Mengel claims that this new approach fails to fully acknowledge the complexity of mixed race identity, as it assumes that mixed race individuals are welcomed into different racial communities with no issue.[27] The limitations of viewing people as doubly ethnic are analogous to the dangers of constructing mixed race people on television as welcomed members to monoracial communities. To further illustrate the complexity of mixed race identity, with particular attention to cinematic representations of mixed race people, I introduce the marketability of multiracial actors through an analysis performed by scholar Mary Beltran.

B. Mixed Race Representation on Screen

i. Entertainment Industry Market Concerns

The vast amount of scholarship pertaining to mixed race representation on screen exemplifies the influence of multiracial public figures on the cultural construction of racial identity. The entertainment industry not only transforms mixed race people into influential public figures but shapes the public image of mixed race people through scripted narratives and interviews found in trade publications and Hollywood news sources. For example, the employment of mixed race actors Selena Gomez, Zendaya, and Vanessa Hudgens on Disney Channel's popular television programs turned these three women into celebrities and public representations of multiracial identity. A recent shift in acceptance of mixed race bodies on screen, as demonstrated by the three aforementioned Disney actors, illustrates the perceived marketability of such racially-marked stars. Mary Beltran, a leading scholar in mixed race studies, argues that multiracial actors are increasingly viewed by industry leaders as box-office gold because they embody the diversity found in today's audience.[28] Similarly, Jeffrey Brown argues that mixed race actors are lucrative for the entertainment industry because they grant the industry a superficial avenue for ethnically diversifying content without evading all racial stereotypes.[29]

Mixed race stars appear most marketable to the young audience. Beltran cites a study from the 1990s that found viewers between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four were more likely than their older counterparts to consume television that featured actors of a race different from their own.[30] Assuming that not all young audience members are of the same mixed race the study shows that young audiences are more likely than older audiences to watch television featuring mixed race actors. Well into the 21st century, producers continue to capitalize off of the young audience's desire for multiracial representation.[31] In fact, mixed race actor Vin Diesel, famous for his starring role in *The Fast and the Furious* franchise, stated that he publicly shares his mixed race identity to better relate to his young fans.[32] Scholar Gregory Carter further argues that films like *The Fast and the Furious* exploit the mixed race identity of the films' stars for economic gain. Media scholars continue to find that despite the perceived marketability of mixed race actors, producers perpetuate the post-race ideology through an explicit presentation of race only to show its irrelevancy. The post-race ideology influences the construction of racial identity on television by allowing mixed race characters to unrealistically transcend racial politics.

ii. The Post-Race, Colorblind Future of Television

Joseph's *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial* shows the entertainment industry's promotion of post-race ideology in *America's Next Top Model.* The reality competition show features supermodel and producer Tyra Banks. In each season of the television series, Banks leads a group

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27 Mengel, 102.

28 Mary Beltran, "The New Hollywood Racelessness: Only The Fast, Furious, (And Multiracial) Will Survive," in *Cinema Journal* (2005), 54.

29 Jeffrey A. Brown, *Beyond Bombshells,* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 82.

30 Beltran, "The New Hollywood," 56.

31 Beltran, "The New Hollywood," 56.

32 Sika Alaine Dagbovie, "Star-Light, Star-Bright, Star Damn Near White: Mixed-Race Superstars," in *Journal of Popular Culture,* (2007), 226.

of top model hopefuls through thematic photoshoots. At the end of each episode, she compares and ranks the images from the photoshoot and eliminates one model. Banks, an African American model herself, frequently weaves race into the series narrative. Joseph examines one particular episode that illustrates post-race ideology. In this episode, the models compete in a race-swap themed photoshoot.[33] Each model goes through extensive hair and makeup to emulate a race other than her own.[34] According to Joseph, simplifying race to mere stage makeup strips race of it political, historical, and colonial roots.[35] Race becomes irrelevant as the models move from race to race with a simple change in makeup. The racially ambiguous and presumably mixed race children modeling alongside the program's competitors exemplify the most troubling element of the photo shoot's relationship to race politics. The physical features of the child models do not directly equate to the ethnicity that the competitor tries to portray.[36] Instead, the show uses the child's racial ambiguity to suggest that looking "simply close enough" to a particular race suffices in the representation of that race.[37] The "simply close enough" notion minimizes the importance of race in a post-race fashion.[38] Joseph concludes that this episode of *America's Next Top Model* illustrates the industrial practice of presenting race only to challenge the importance of racial identification through the use of costume and makeup.[39] Regardless of producers' claims that mixed race bodies signal a raceless future, racial stereotypes continue to manifest in contemporary television. These stereotypes contribute to the harmful construction of ethnic identities on television and perpetuate inauthentic images of marginalized communities. Three specific media stereotypes, discussed next, further exemplify the troubling practice of misrepresenting the lived experience of mixed race people.

iii. Mixed Race Representation Broken Down by Stereotype

a. The Tragic Mulatta

One of the three racial stereotypes, the tragic mulatta, frequents media representations of multiracial African Americans, despite producers and scholars claim of a raceless future.[40] The tragic mulatta describes a character, usually female, whose racial impurity predicates her misfortune.[41] The greatest shortcoming of the tragic mulatta is her secret yearning for Whiteness.[42] Sika Dagbovie explains that during the era of slavery, two oppositional ideologies characterized White people's relations with multiracial African Americans. First, mixed race African Americans were perceived as superior to African Americans of pure racial descent in regard to intellect.[43] This ideology encouraged White supremacy as the White ethnic background of the multiracial African American person justified that person's intelligence.[44] At the same time, people viewed multiracial African Americans as mentally unbalanced.[45] This idea hinted to the "one drop rule," which insisted that just one drop of Black blood places an individual in an inferior social category. In the case of the mixed race African American, one drop of Black blood infected his or her mental health.

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33 Ralina L. Joseph, *Transcending Blackness: from the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial,* (Durham: Duke University, 2013), 126.

34 Joseph, 128.

35 Joseph, 129.

36 Joseph, 145.

37 Joseph, 145.

38 Joseph, 145.

39 Joseph, 53.

40 I acknowledge the derogatory nature of the term "mulatto." Unfortunately, scholars continue to use this term in academic literature. To remain consistent, I use the term "mulatto" or "mulatta" only when referring to the "tragic mulatta" stereotype as it is the only term used for the particular character trope to which it refers. This in no way endorses the use of the term in colloquial speech.

41 Joseph, 40.

42 Joseph, 56.

43 Dagbovie, 218.

44 Dagbovie, 218.

45 Dagbovie, 218.

The media industry complicates the "one drop rule," as exemplified through Joseph's examination of multiracial African American actor Jennifer Beals' portrayal of Bette Porter on the television series *The L Word*, a fictional series about lesbian women. Joseph acknowledges the success of the series in addressing the intersectionality of Porter's sexuality, class, and gender. But, she argues, the series ultimately fails to address Porter's mixed identity by confining her to the tragic mulatta stereotype through scenes of utter loneliness.[46] The early episodes of the series attempted to tackle the issue of race, but as the series progressed, racial discussion decreased to the point that Joseph insists Porter passed as a White character.[47] The series' ability to forgo conversations on race through passing Beals as White suggests that mixed race African American women can rise above their Blackness.[48] The producers' identity construction of Beals' Bette Porter illustrates just one example of racial irrelevancy that plagues mixed race African American women on screen. As multiracial African Americans are constructed as the tragic mulatta in film and television, mixed Asian Americans are subjected to an equally paralyzing stereotype: the new model minority myth.

b. The New Model Minority

The new model minority myth stems from the original model minority myth that suggests Asians are superior examples of triumphing over racial boundaries to achieve full assimilation into American culture.[49] Mixed race Asian Americans modernize the old model minority myth by representing the success of Asian Americans in marrying outside of their race. The new myth suggests that marrying into White society signifies overcoming racial segregation.[50] The new and old model minority *myths,* however, are just that—myths. Marrying outside of the Asian community does not guarantee access or assimilation into American culture. Yu warns that labeling mixed race individuals as the new model minority dangerously erases the history of White imperialism and colonization that politicized interracial marriage in the Asian community.[51]

Nishime identifies two ways in which Hollywood constructed Asian and White interracial relations. First, at the end of World War II, film, literature, and theater distributed images of the Asian male as predatory of the poor White female.[52] This image perpetuated fear of an Asian invasion into the United States and the belief that Asians were inferior to the White race.[53] The second recurring image, which also developed at the end of World War II, is that of the White-knight. A White, heterosexual male patriarch functioned as the White-knight in film and television when he saved a poor, defenseless Asian woman from her backward race.[54] Again, this image encouraged the superiority of White American culture and reiterated the position of the United States as the patriarch of all world powers.[55]

With an increase in multiracial Asian presence on-screen, Nishime argues that the ethnic background of characters portrayed by mixed race actors goes unacknowledged in film and television narratives.[56] Jeffrey Brown reiterates Nishime's claim in his chapter, "Ethnicity and the New Heroine," which examines the frequent casting of women of color as action heroines. As evidence, he refers to the character Nikita, portrayed by multiracial Asian American actress Maggie Q, in the CW television series of the same name. While Maggie Q's racial mix is publicized in real life, her character's racial heritage is never explicitly discussed in the show's narrative.[57] Brown contends, however, that Nikita invokes stereotypes associated with Asian television characters. Nikita's sexy and

46 Joseph, 39.
47 Joseph, 46.
48 Joseph, 66.
49 Yu, 1413.
50 Yu, 1413.
51 Yu, 1413.
52 Nishme, 9.
53 Nishime, 9.
54 Nishime, 9.
55 Nishime, 9.
56 Nishime, 63.
57 Brown, 101.

cunning characterization perpetuates the dragon lady stereotype which traditionally marks Asian women in film and television as seductive and mischievous. Nikita's martial arts skills contribute to the "Asian warrior" television stereotype while simultaneously presenting the contemporary, White crime-fighting hero image.[58] The identity construction of Nikita illustrates how a mixed race performer's dual ethnicity allows for a dual characterization that grants access to traditional Asian tropes, while maintaining a safe degree of Whiteness. The practice of sexualizing multiracial Asians remains consistent in the representation of multiracial Latinos, as discussed next.

c. Mixed Race Latino: Mestizaje

Literature on mestizajes, or mixed race Latinos, presents a slight divergence from the literature surrounding individuals of mixed African American or mixed Asian American descent. The Latino race, unlike the Asian and African race, is rooted in a mixed ethnic background comprised of Spanish and sometimes African blood.[59] According to Leo Jimenez in Beltran, Latinos throughout history have been celebrated during periods of mixed race fetishism.[60] Regardless of celebration, actors of "partial Latino descent" frequently hid their mixed race identity up until the 1990s.[61] Since the 1990s, Latino stars who have made a claim to their mixed heritage frequently enjoy more acting opportunities than were previously available.[62] Yet, the available roles continue to confine people of Latino descent to the spitfire stereotype. Much like the dragon lady and tragic mulatta stereotype, the spitfire stereotype, according to Brown, confines women of Latino descent to hypersexualized, fiery, and seductive characters.[63]

Beltran presents Jessica Alba's character in Fox's *Dark Angels* to exemplify the spitfire stereotype. Beltran argues that Alba, a fair-skinned, multiracial Mexican actor has achieved,, to quote Diane Negra, an "off-white" image.[64] In other words, Alba's public persona is just ethnic enough to play into the spitfire stereotype but not too ethnic as to lose out on additional, non-Latina specific acting opportunities.[65] In *Dark Angels,* Alba's character, while imagined as multiracial, also functions as raceless.[66] Although the character circumvents direct racialization, the overt focus on her sexualized body confines her to the spitfire stereotype.[67] The tragic mulatta, new model minority myth, and the spitfire stereotype set the foundation for examining the way in which Disney Channel's mixed race characters embody or reject these problematic racial stereotypes and in doing so give voice to or silence their marginalized racial communities.

iv. Mixed Race Representation through a Genre Lens

While the aforementioned scholarship addressed mixed race representation through film and television actors, additional scholarship approaches mixed race through the genres of action, science fiction, and horror. Studying mixed race exclusively through characters misses out on details such as landscape and theme, which also contribute to the identity construction of mixed race people. Therefore, studying mixed race representation through genre addresses the big picture. The following sections examine literature pertaining to action, science fiction, and horror film to illustrate the genre specific stereotypes that plague the mixed race community.

a. Action Film

58 Brown, 97.

59 Mary C. Beltran. "Mixed Race in Latinowood: Latino Stardom and Ethnic Ambiguity in the Era of *Dark Angels*," in *Mixed Race Hollywood,* ed. Mary Beltran and Camila Fojas (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 251.

60 Beltran, "Mixed Race," 252.

61 Beltran, "Mixed Race," 251.

62 Beltran, "Mixed Race," 251

63 Brown, 105.

64 Beltran, "Mixed Race," 260.

65 Brown, 113.

66 Beltran, "Mixed Race," 255.

67 Beltran, "Mixed Race," 259.

Mixed race characters in action film narratives are figured as "superhuman."[68] Placed against a colorblind background, the superhuman character is more intelligent, courageous, and athletic than the surrounding characters.[69] Action films centered on female heroines, such as *Kill Bill* and *Charlie's Angels,* value the featured mixed race actor based on her ability to convey toughness and to appear exotic.[70] Brown argues that casting mixed race females as action heroines allows the industry to employ racial stereotypes while circumventing issues like miscegenation.[71] Multiracial heroines also appear stronger and smarter than their male love interests, granting the heroines greater agency in their romantic relationships than other non-mixed female characters.[72]

b. Science Fiction

On the other hand, according to mixed race scholar Anne Kustritz, science fiction film and television tackle the issue of mixed race through discussion on the ethics of reproduction.[73] Kustriz draws examples from the television series *Battlestar Galactica.* She argues that the series' narrative addresses the morality of enhancing humans through genetic selectivity.[74] Genetic selectivity originates in eugenics, which is the process of manipulating genes to "build a better race."[75] Kustrtiz argues that *Battlestar Galactica's* encouragement of interracial coupling represents the desire to construct a superior race built on hybridity.[76] *Battlestar Galactica's* Hera, portrayed by Korean American actress Grace Park, is one of the most important characters in the show's narrative as she is a human-cylon hybrid.[77] Her species hybridity is analogous to the racial hybridity that defines the multiracial community, and her construction as a nonthreatening being promotes the image of a safe future in which genetic selectivity assuages racial tension.[78] In lessening the threat of racial tension, genetic selectivity transcends race and, in doing so, promotes a post-race ideology.

c. Horror

In contrast to science fiction films, horror films construct mixed race identity through monstrous figures. Scholar Justin Ponder compares the construction of zombies in horror films to the identity construction of the mixed race community, specifically the biracial African American-White community. Ponder references the horror film *Dawn of the Dead* as evidence.In regard to the zombie film genre, Ponder quotes scholar Jamie Russell, who argues that multiracial people live in a space between Black and White just as zombies survive in the liminal space between life and death.[79] In *Dawn of the Dead,* a zombie baby is depicted as repulsive and monstrous not only because it is partially-dead and partially-alive, but also because it is the product of interracial coupling.[80] Ponder contends that zombies horrify because death infringes on the purity of life.[81] Likewise, multiracial African

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68 Gregory Carter, "From Blaxploitation to Mixploitation: Male Leads and Changing Mixed Race Identities," in *Mixed Race Hollywood,* ed. Mary Beltran and Camila Fojas (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 207.

69 Carter, 207.

70 Brown, 80.

71 Brown, 80.

72 Brown, 115.

73 Anne Kustritz, "Breeding Unity: Battlestar Galactica's Biracial Reproductive Futurity," in *Camera Obscura* (2012), 5.

74 Kustritz, 2.

75 Kustritz, 2.

76 Kustritz, 9.

77 Kustritz, 9.

78 Kustritz, 13.

79 Justin Ponder, "Dawn of the Different: The Mulatto Zombie In Zack Snyder's Dawn of the Dead," in *Journal of Popular Culture* (2012), 553.

80 Ponder, 554.

81 Ponder, 555.

Americans horrify because Black blood infringes on White racial purity.[82] Ponder also challenges the post-race utopic image associated with mixed race through a historical analysis. He states that historically multiracial African Americans were viewed as "divine justice against an unjust society" sent to destroy the United States' racial hierarchies.[83] This apocalyptic imagery mirrors that of the zombie apocalypse that frequents horror film narratives. The scholarly approach of viewing zombie films through a colorblind lens, Ponder argues, undermines the audience's ability to see racial inequality characterized through the monstrous, horrific zombie.[84]

An examination of mixed race through a genre lens illustrates the way in which film and television represent mixed race people as outsiders through super-human tropes or grotesque monsters. While the Disney Company steers clear of zombies and monsters, racial inequality continues to manifest itself through other hybrid figures. Scholar Kheli Willetts examines Disney's representation of racial inequality on-screen through an analysis of Disney's early representation of Blackness as follows.

C. An Overview of Disney's Minority Representation

i. Disney and the Problematic Use of Blackness

The Disney Company exemplifies a long historical trajectory of race politics that continues today. Although the company frequently depicted its minority characters through demeaning stereotypes during the company's early years, it never shied away from including minorities in its narratives. Walt Disney, the founder of the Disney Company, rendered diversity through caricatured cartoon animals and "animated minstrelsy."[85] In "Cannibals and Coons: Blackness in the Early Days of Walt Disney," Khelli Willetts explores one of Disney's earliest animations, the "Oswald" shorts. She states that Disney's early diversity attempts fell short of providing an authentic image of Blackness, instead perpetuating stereotypical images of Black men. For example, in the "Oswald" short *Bright Lights,* Oswald encounters a bellhop animalized as an orangutan. Willetts notes that the bellhop is the only orangutan in Oswald's world of anthropomorphic cats, bears, and rabbits.[86] She contends that concurrent to the premiere of *Bright Lights,* it was a common trade for Black men to work as bellhops.[87] Willetts argues that, although the bellhop appears for a quick moment in the short, his figuring as the only orangutan is important because it exemplifies an early rendering of Blackness as out of place and exotic.[88]

Apart from the "Oswald" shorts, Disney found international success through its lead character: the animated Mickey Mouse. The international appeal of Mickey Mouse allowed the Disney Company to spread images of Blackness around the world with little to no challenge from competing narratives.[89] While the "Oswald" shorts illustrated Disney's exoticism of Blackness, later images of Mickey Mouse in blackface proliferated grotesque and humiliating images of Blackness, as exemplified in 1932's *The Grocery Boy*.[90] In this short, Mickey chases his dog Pluto around the house to distract him from stealing food from the kitchen.[91] As he chases Pluto, he transforms into Napoleon Bonaparte through costume and jumps onto Pluto's back, as if Pluto is his horse.[92] As Mickey rides on Pluto's back, the two characters crash into a stove and the soot from the stove covers the Napoleon costume in black. The soot transforms Mickey into a man in blackface, complete with a bowler hat and overcoat.[93] The use

82 Ponder, 556.

83 Ponder, 560.

84 Ponder, 565.

85 Kheli Willets, "Cannibals and Coons: Blackness in the Early Days of Walt Disney," in *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality And Disability,"* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2013), 9.

86 Willets, 14.

87 Willets, 14.

88 Willetts, 14.

89 Willets, 14.

90 Willets, 15.

91 Willets, 15.

92 Willets, 15.

93 Willets, 15.

of blackface in *The Grocery Boy* perpetuates the practice of White people masquerading as African Americans for comedic effect. In later years, feature films such as *Dumbo,* which premiered in 1941, and *The Jungle Book,* which premiered in 1967, similarly presented images of African Americans that suggested the inferiority of the Black race. In *Dumbo,* Willetts explains that the anthropomorphic imaging of Black people as crows portrays the ideology that Black men are "urban irritants" and "producers of raucous noises."[94] In *The Jungle Book,* Willetts contends that the jiving orangutans, like the orangutan featured in *Bright Lights,* are meant to embody Black people.[95] As the king orangutan sings the lyrics "I wanna be like you," the film sustains the notion of African Americans as self-hating people who desire nothing more than to become white men.[96]

Disney's 2009 film, *The Princess and the Frog,* marked the company's most progressive step in reimagining Blackness through its first African American princess, Tiana. In "Blackness, Bayous, and Gumbo: Encoding and Decoding Race in a Colorblind World," scholar Sarah Turner argues that while Tiana is figured as an African American princess through her skin color and vernacular, her race has little impact on the progress of the narrative.[97] According to Turner, Disney producers hoped that while the audience acknowledges Tiana's Blackness, they choose to embrace her hardworking character and desire for the American dream.[98] The dual presentation of Tiana as Black, but also universally relatable, allows for her character to reach a wider audience.[99] In a similar vein, Tiana's love interest, Prince Naveen, functions in a middle ground of race. He is racially ambiguous, neither Black nor White, allowing for an appeal to both minority and White audiences, just like Tiana.[100] In comparing Disney's earliest depictions of Blackness to its most recent, the Disney Company shows progress in attempting to produce more authentic images of Blackness. However, Disney appears to approach race cautiously with its first African American princess. In doing so, Disney avoids direct articulation of African American culture and heritage, which inadvertently silences the stories and lived experiences of the African American community. Shortly after the first images of Blackness featured in Disney productions, the company introduced Latino representation into its narratives.

ii. Latino Americans and the Two-Sided Debate

During the 1940s, Disney was commissioned to produce a narrative on Latin America to counter the racial stereotypes of Latinos that frequented popular culture at the time. The company first produced the film *Saludos Amigos,* and then, in the 1970s, *The Three Caballeros,* to appease its commissioners.[101] For the project, the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs financed Disney and his artists to travel to Latin America to learn and become accustomed to the Latin culture.[102] Karen Goldman contends that despite Disney's efforts, the two films contributed to damaging stereotypes of Latinos, which only emphasized the unequal relationship between the United States and Latin America.[103] Even after reaching out to Latin American countries, Disney continued to imagine Latin America as exotic and idealized.[104] Goldman stated that the few authentic images of Latin America in the two films remained devoid of political and historical discussion that would have enriched the audience's

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94 Willets, 15.

95 Willets, 18.

96 Willets, 20.

97 Sara Turner, "Blackness, Bayous and Gumbo: Encoding and Decoding Race in a Colorblind World, in *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essay On Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality And Disability,* (2013), 84.

98 Turner, 84.

99 Turner, 84.

100 Turner, 93.

101 Karen Goldman, "*Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros:* The Representation of Latin America in Disney's 'Good Neighbor' Films," in *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality, And Disability,"* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2013), 25.

102 Goldman, 29.

103 Goldman, 25.

104 Goldman, 29.

understanding of Latino culture.[105] In the case of *Saludos Amigos,* Goldman argues that Disney constructed an "us versus them" dichotomy. By positioning Goofy—a familiar member of Mickey Mouse's gang—in Texas, Disney asks the audience to identify with the familiar, the "us." When Goofy travels to Latin America for a short period of time before returning to Texas, Disney attempts to persuade the audience to see Latin America as "them," the unfamiliar outsider.[106] Additionally, in *The Three Caballeros,* Latina performer Aurora Miranda dances for the audience.[107] Goldman argues that her hypersexual performance is fraught with gender and racial stereotypes that confine Latina women to sexual and exotic characterizations reminiscent of the spitfire stereotype.[108]

Natchee Blue Barnd continues the conversation on Latino representation through a case study on the animated film *Oliver and Company.* The film is an anthropomorphized reenactment of Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist,* employing various breeds of dogs to perform the role of each character.[109] Barnd calls attention to the Chihuahua character, Tito, who diversifies the film by representing Latinos. However, his depiction falls into stereotypes of Latino culture. Speech patterns exemplify one of these stereotypes. Tito speaks quickly with a noticeable "urban chicano accent."[110] Barnd further argues that Tito is oversexualized, unrestrained, and lacking paternal guidance and sophistication.[111] Tito preys on female dogs, dances to Latin music, "anticipates dangerous 'gang wars,' rides on police cruisers" and participates in criminal activity.[112] Barnd acknowledges that other dogs in the film pilfer food to survive, but Tito is the only dog to participate in a significant number of other illegal activities.[113] Thus, the company's construction of Latino identity is overwhelmed by negative images of Latinos that prevent the full assimilation of Latinos into American culture, instead reiterating the "us vs. them" dichotomy.

One academic scholar, however, stands out in his celebratory examination of Disney's diversity, especially in regard to Disney's portrayal of Latinos. Writing first about *Oliver and Company,* Douglas Brode denounces those who complain that Disney anthropomorphized Tito, the sole Latino, as a Chihuahua. He justifies the depiction by arguing that because other races were also figured as different breeds of dogs, Disney evades any bigotry.[114] Brode's analysis fails to persuade because he simply asserts that the representation of other races validates Tito's depiction. He fails to deconstruct how Tito's behavior positions him as inferior to the dogs coded as white. Brode also applauds Latino representation in *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros.* He justifies the authenticity of Latino representation by stating that Latino countries and journalists positively received the film.[115] However, he fails to acknowledge the United States as a patriarchal world power and how that position of privilege might dissuade Latin American countries from an outright denouncement of the Disney film. In regard to *The Three Caballeros,* Brode celebrates Aurora Miranda's dance scene. He argues that Disney represented Latino culture through Miranda without over sexualizing her but also without desexing her either.[116] Brode fails to unravel the politicized weight of featuring Latin American dance. While Brode's analysis is a clear outlier from the majority of academic scholarship, he is a significant contributor to the discussion of Disney's diversity, as he analyzes Disney's work in the way the company hopes its audience might consume the program. Alternative perspectives like Brode's illustrate the multiple encoded readings contained within a single Disney text. Brode's argument shows that various scholars can envision an authentic image of Latino culture differently. Varying understandings of authenticity contribute to the difficulty in achieving a text that is exemplary of a perfect rendering of racial

105 Goldman, 29.

106 Goldman, 32.

107 Goldman, 33.

108 Goldman, 33.

109 Natchee Blue Barnd, "White Man's Best Friend: Race and Privilege in *Oliver and Company,"* in *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality And Disability,* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2013), 67.

110 Barnd, 75,

111 Barnd, 75.

112 Barnd, 75.

113 Barnd, 76,

114 Douglas Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment,* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 3.

115 Brode, 93.

116 Broe, 94.

identity, if such a rendering is even possible. My measure of authenticity in this paper is the employment of an actor or actress whose racial identity matches that of the character. This casting procedure allows an actor to perform a narrative concerning his or her racial community from a place of truth, having grown up within that community. While troubling depictions of African Americans and Latinos frequent Disney film, the absence of Asian American representation is equally problematic.

iii. Disney and the Asian Cat

Few representations of Asian Americans exist within Disney's film history. Kimiko Akita and Rick Kenney analyze two of the few representations of Asians. Interestingly, both representations take the form of cats. In *Lady and the Tramp,* most of the main characters are anthropomorphized as dogs. However, the two villainous Siamese cats named Si and Am represent Asians during the height of American xenophobia.[117] Together, the cats' names spell "Siam," referencing the former title of the Asian country, Thailand. In one telling scene, the cats invade another character's home. The invasion serves as a metaphor for America's greatest fear in the 1950s: Asians invading the United States via illegal immigration.[118] In a similar vein, the animated cat Shun Gon from Disney's *The Aristocats* is figured as Asian. He plays the drums with chopsticks and sings about egg foo yung and fortune cookies.[119] Sheng-mei Ma, as quoted in research performed by Akita and Kenney, notes that both egg foo yung and fortune cookies are Western attempts at emulating Chinese food.[120] Therefore, Disney presents two problematic images of Asians. Through Si and Am, Disney depicts Asians as villainous. Through Shun Gon, Asian culture is depicted as dominated and controlled by American society. The two films continue in the tradition of employing inauthentic renderings of minorities in Disney film. A few years after the premiere of *Lady and the Tramp* and *The Aristocats,* the Disney Company expanded to the silver screen, bringing along its problematic representations of race.

D. Mixed Race and Multicultural Disney Channel

The children's television sector of the Disney Company, known as Disney Channel, premiered in 1983. The channel exemplifies the Disney Company's most recent construction of racial identity.[121] It was not until the digital technological revolution of the 1990s, however, that Disney Channel contributed to the expansion of the Disney Company. In 1995, the company purchased the network channel ABC and increased its international reach with the introduction of Disney Channel UK.[122] In this year, the Disney Company established itself as the second largest media corporation in the world.[123] With its immense international expansion, Disney Channel programming needed to transcend cultural barriers to appeal to a global audience. Anne Potter argues that in 2006, Disney Channel achieved international success and overcame cultural barriers with the premiere of *High School Musical,* starring mixed race actors Vanessa Hudgens and Corbin Bleu. *High School Musical* was watched by over 295 million people around the world and is one of the earliest examples of Disney Channel's employment of mixed race actors.[124]

Although Disney Channel continues in a long historical trajectory of problematic representations of minorities, few academic sources address mixed race identification in *High School Musical* or other Disney Channel programs. Angharad Valdivia pens the only academic analysis of Disney Channel's mixed race efforts. However, her article "Mixed Race on the Disney Channel: From *Johnny Tsunami* through Lizzie McGuire

117 Kimiko Akita and Rick Kenney, "A 'Vexing Implication': Siamese Cats an Orientalist Mischeif-Making," in *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender And Disability,* (North Carolina: McFaraland & Company, Inc., 2013), 55.

118 Akita and Kenney, 55.

119 Akita and Kenney, 61.

120 Akita and Kenney, 61.

121 "Disney History," *D23: For the Fan in All of Us,* n.d., https://d23.com/disney-history/.

122 Anne Potter, "It's a Small World After All: New Media Constellations and Disney's rising star--the global success of High School Musical," in *International Journal of Cultural Studies,* (2012), 120.

123 Potter, 121.

124 Potter, 122.

and Ending with *The Cheetah Girls*" was published just after the premiere and global success of *High School Musical.* In the article she argues, in the early nineties, the channel struggled financially within the larger Disney Company.[125] To overcome its shortcomings, Disney Channel expanded its audience to include the nine to fourteen-year-olds, also known as the tween audience.[126] The tween audience Disney desired was composed of affluent young White females hailing from financially stable families.[127] This particular demographic, Valdivia contends, had the money to spend on clothes and appearance, which Disney exploited for its synergistic marketing plan.[128] Having capitalized on the tween demographic, Disney Channel expanded its ethnic appeal as part of the Disney Company's efforts at global expansion. The cable channel exemplified its diversity efforts through the employment of mixed race and multicultural actors in *Johnny Tsunami* (1999) and *The Cheetah Girls* (2003). *Johnny Tsunami's* lead character of the same name is a boy of mixed race descent who attempts to overcome race and class obstacles through peaceful means.[129] Valdivia argues that the intergenerational conflict that exists throughout the narrative represents the obstacles faced by those who identify as mixed race.[130] In the musical made-for-TV movie *The Cheetah Girls*, the cheetah, Valdivia contends, represents mixed race.[131] The film stars a mixed race African American, a mixed race Latina, an African American, and white character who come together to form a girl band named "The Cheetah Girls." According to Valdivia, the narrative, especially evident in the closing song performed by the girls, celebrates girl power as well as difference.[132]

As aforementioned, Valdivia does not thoroughly address *High School Musical* because she published just after the explosion of mixed race representation on Disney Channel. Disney Channel's *High School Musical* and *Wizards of Waverly Place*, both premiering after *The Cheetah Girls*, catapulted the careers of some of the entertainment industry's biggest mixed race stars, namely Vanessa Hudgens and Selena Gomez. Disney Channel capitalizes on the rising demand for mixed race performers, as evidenced by the company's continued employment of mixed race actors Zendaya Coleman, Booboo Stewart, and Cameron Boyce. My thesis picks up where Valdivia left off, analyzing Disney Channel's mixed race representation after *The Cheetah Girls*.

III. METHODS

To address mixed race identity on Disney Channel since Valdivia's research, I performed a qualitative analysis of four Disney Channel programs that premiered within the past ten years. The programs included *High School Musical* (2006), *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007), *Descendants* (2015), and *K.C. Undercover* (2015). I engaged in both a textual and visual analysis to understand the construction of mixed race identity on the television programs of interest. Rather than performing interviews or surveys of viewers, I analyzed Disney Channel texts. A textual analysis caters more to the presentation of mixed race people on-screen, as produced by entertainment industry executives, than the varied interpretations of the representations by the viewers. While interviews and surveys provide insight to audience reception, my research questions are concerned with how the production industry constructs mixed race identity, rather than how the audience interprets that identity construction.

In the initial steps of my research, I identified Disney programs that premiered within the past ten years and featured mixed race actors as lead characters or significant supporting characters. Explicit reference to race rarely factors into Disney television narratives, so the mixed race identity of the actor featured in a Disney Channel program, rather than the racial identity of the character, led to the selection of a program. To determine the identity of the supposed mixed race actor, I referenced interviews and images of the actor's family. Four

125 Angharad N. Valdivia, "Mixed Race on the Disney Channel: From *Johnnie Tsunami* through *Lizzie McGuire* and Ending with *The Cheetah Girls,"* in *Mixed Race Hollywood,* ed. Mary Beltran and Camila Fojas, (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 273.

126 Valdivia, 274.

127 Valdivia, 274.

128 Valdivia, 276.

129 Valdivia, 281.

130 Valdivia, 281.

131 Valdivia, 278.

132 Valdivia, 278.

programs featuring mixed race actors stood out because of the popularity of the multiracial stars featured in the programs, as measured by their online presence and visibility. These programs included *High School Musical* (2006), starring multiracial actors Vanessa Hudgens and Corbin Bleu; *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007), starring multiracial actress Selena Gomez; *K.C. Undercover* (2015), starring multiracial actress Zendaya Coleman; and *Descendants* (2015), starring multiracial actors Booboo Stewart and Cameron Boyce.

After identifying the television programs of interest, I analyzed mixed race identity through characterization, rather than genre, because Disney Channel produces situational comedies almost exclusively. Thus, my research mirrors the research of scholars Mary Beltran and Jeffrey Brown, who both analyzed the characterization of mixed race actors, such as Jessica Alba, Rosario Dawson, and Maggie Q, rather than genre. Each program was first analyzed through a textual analysis. Verbal exchanges, soliloquies, and songs performed by or concerned with mixed race actors illustrated the social acceptance of multiracial people.

During the textual analysis portion of my research, I listened for explicit statements about racial identification. This included conversations between the mixed race actor and other characters, as well as conversations about the mixed race actor. In most cases, the characters' explicit claims on particular racial identities manifested in conversations between characters. However, in the case of *High School Musical* and *Descendants*, I also analyzed song lyrics, as Disney Channel formatted both these programs as musicals. In both the musical and nonmusical programs, I noted any conversation in which a character described or suggested the ethnic background of the mixed race actor's character. I also looked for conversations that gave insight to the family history of the character, which might illustrate the lived experience of mixed race individuals and their families. For example, *Descendants* centers on generational conflict between Disney villains and their offspring. Conversations between the mixed race actors' characters were suggestive of their intended racial identifications. Other clues, such as names and locations, were telling of mixed race identity construction.

As another element of my textual analysis, I recorded moments in which mixed race characters felt alienated or different. In *High School Musical* and *Descendants*, the mixed race actors all played a character that was the "new kid in school." This reoccurring theme prompted verbal expressions of isolation, loneliness, and rejection from their monoracial peers. Such feelings confine the characters to the tragic mulatta stereotype, the new model minority myth, or the spitfire stereotype. Scripted lines expressing the mixed race characters' feelings of alienation or rejection perpetuate the exoticism of mixed race individuals. These expressions of loneliness contributed to stereotypes specific to multiracial identity. Signs of isolation or the desire for Whiteness in the characters suggested the employment of the tragic mulatta trope. Signs of exemplary citizenship and intelligence hinted at the new model minority stereotype. Hyper-sexualization and a fiery attitude exemplified the spitfire stereotype. Anxiety over social mixing also suggested fear over racial mixing.

Explicit statements about family background, cultural practices, or heritage also helped construct racial identity. Specific examples of shared cultural experiences between family members were telling of the race in which Disney Channel classified the mixed race actor. For example, the family in *Wizards of Waverly Place* discussed cultural events, such as a Quinceañera, which explicitly categorized the family as Latino.[133] Family history also contributed to the expression of the lived experience of mixed race people. In one episode of *Wizards of Waverly Place*, the narrative explored the family's history, revealing racial tensions that illustrated anxieties specific to the mixed race experience.[134]

To a lesser extent, each program was also analyzed through visual analysis. In other words, landscape, colors, costume design, makeup, special effects, and any other information expressed via symbols and images, rather than verbal exchanges, were analyzed to further assess representations of mixed race identity. For example, the African style paintings visible on the set design on *K.C. Undercover* contributed to the construction of K.C.'s ethnic identity.[135] Both textual and visual clues exemplified the race politics that govern industry production and manifest in the construction of mixed race identity. Overall, the racial identity construction of mixed race characters on Disney Channel programs provided multiple interpretations of multiracial identity, while simultaneously perpetuating a raceless, colorblind ideology that revealed the mixed race anxieties discussed next.

133 Gigi McCreery and Perry Rein, "Quinceanera," directed by Andrew Tsao (2008; Los Angeles: Disney Channel), television.

134 Todd Greenwald, "Retest," directed by Victor Gonzalez (2009; Los Angeles: Disney Channel), television.

135 Rob Lotterstein, "Photo Bombed," directed by Jon Rosenbaum (2015; Los Angeles: Disney Channel), television.

IV. ANALYSIS

To address racial anxieties and identity construction in the media, I provide a brief summary of the four Disney Channel programs of interest. First, I address *High School Musical*, a musical made-for-TV movie which premiered on Disney Channel in 2006. The program drastically bolstered the popularity of the cable network, establishing the channel as one of the top-ranked networks for children's television.[136] The program premiered to an audience of 7.7 million people in the U.S., making it the highest-rated Disney Channel telecast at the time.[137] In the year 2006 alone, over 100 million people worldwide viewed the program.[138] Additionally, two original songs from the program ranked on Billboard's Hot 100 chart.[139] Set in Albuquerque's fictional East High School, *High School Musical* follows the lives of two students, Troy Bolton and Gabriella Montez. Troy, the traditional White protagonist and popular high school jock, falls for Gabriella, the nerdy new girl from San Diego. The two meet at a New Year's Eve party and instantly connect but lose contact after the initial meeting. They meet again when Gabriella's family relocates to New Mexico. Although the two exist on opposite ends of the high school social spectrum, Troy as a jock and Gabriella as a chemistry nerd, the two shake up the status quo of East High School when they audition for the school musical. The program's primarily White cast features two mixed race actors of interest, including Corbin Bleu, who portrays Chad Danforth, and Vanessa Hudgens, who portrays Gabriella Montez.

In 2007, Disney Channel premiered *Wizards of Waverly Place*. This program lasted for four seasons and produced multiple made-for-TV movies. The program proved profitable for Disney Channel, scoring an Emmy win and catapulting the career of multiracial Latina actress Selena Gomez. The television series follows the Russo family, a Mexican-Italian American family with magic powers living in New York City. Throughout the series, the father, Jerry Russo, prepares his three kids Justin, Alex, and Max for the Wizarding Competition that determines which sibling gets to keep his or her magic powers into adulthood. The characterization of protagonist Alex, as played by Selena Gomez, reveals an interesting depiction of mixed race identity.

Three years after the series finale of *Wizards of Waverly Place*, *K.C. Undercover* premiered in early 2015 and currently airs its second season on Disney Channel. The series stars Disney Channel veteran and multiracial African American actress Zendaya Coleman. Coleman, who plays undercover teen spy K.C. Cooper, works alongside her siblings and parents as part of a larger spy network. The series follows K.C. as she struggles to live a normal life while simultaneously catching criminals in various action packed scenes. Because she is coded as purely African American, I explore the complexity apparent in Coleman's portrayal of a monoracial character.

Lastly, I examine *Descendants*, a Disney Channel Original Movie which premiered in August 2015. Also a made-for-TV program, *Descendants* profited off the same music and dance scenes as its predecessor *High School Musical*. *Descendants* follows the offspring of four of Disney's greatest villains: Maleficent, the Evil Queen, Cruella de Vil, and Jafar. According to the introductory narration, twenty years ago, the Beast, from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast,* united all the magical kingdoms to form the "United States of Auradon." All the villains and the sidekicks, on the other hand, were banished to the Isle of the Lost with "no magic, no wi-fi, and no way out."[140] Now, twenty years later, Belle and the Beast's son, Prince Chad, is accepting his place as King of Auradon. His first act as King is to allow four of the most vengeful villains' children to take up residency in Auradon, get an education, and redeem themselves and their families. After a short period of time in Auradon, despite their awful upbringing, the four selected children discover the benefit of living a life of morality and shed their evil tendencies. The program features three mixed race actors: Cameron Boyce, Booboo Stewart, and Sarah Jeffery, all of whom represent different racial stereotypes and a colorblind ideology. Boyce and Jeffery represent multiracial African Americans and, in doing so, continue the Disney Channel tradition of stereotyped portrayals of mixed

136 Potter, 122.

137 Elizabeth Wagmeister, "'High School Musical' By the Numbers," *Variety,* 2016, http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/high-school-musical-10-year-anniversary-1201684209/.

138 Wagmeister.

139 Wagmeister.

140 Josann McGibbon and Sara Parriott, *Descendants,* directed by Kenny Ortega (2015; Los Angeles: Disney ABC Television Group), Television.

race African Americans, similar to Bleu's portrayal of Chad Danforth in *High School Musical.*

A. Mixed Race African American Characters

Of all multiracial minority groups, Disney Channel represents multiracial African Americans most often but casts them in racially false or stereotypical roles. For example, the casting of characters Chad Danforth, from *High School Musical,* and K.C. Cooper, from *K.C. Undercover,* illustrates the practice of designating multiracial African Americans to monoracial roles. This casting decision still allows for the exploitation of various mixed race stereotypes. Additionally, the characters Carlos and Audrey from *Descendants* exemplify the newer Disney Channel practice of casting mixed race actors as mixed race characters — a practice that is still riddled with images that confine multiracial African Americans to the tragic mulatta stereotype. To exemplify Disney Channel's diversity efforts, I first analyze the oldest program of interest, *High School Musical.*

i. *High School Musical:* Chad Danforth

Figure 1: Chad (left) expresses his distress over Zeke's (center) baking confession during the musical sequence "Stick to the Status Quo."

In 2006, Disney Channel premiered *High School Musical*, featuring multiracial African American actor Corbin Bleu as Chad Danforth. Although Bleu is of mixed race descent, his character falls into stereotypes pertaining to a monoracial African American identity. Upon first
introduction to Chad, the camera follows him as he dribbles a basketball around a cheerleader.[141] Later in that same scene when he meets up with his best friend Troy, he immediately states his desire to win the basketball championship this upcoming season.[142] Chad's identity is basketball. Aside from a flippant reference to Chad's mother's love of the musical *Phantom of the Opera*, the narrative does not delve deeper into Chad's family history or any other interests or extracurricular pursuits. According to Richard Lapchick, a scholar of the relation between race, crime, and sports, Americans "think black" when they think about sports.[143] Chad's obsession with basketball

141 Peter Barsocchini, *High School Musical,* directed by Kenny Ortega (2006; Los Angeles, Disney ABC Television Group), Television.

142 Barsocchini.

143 Richard Lapchick, "Crime and Athletes: New Racial Stereotypes," in *Society,* (2000), 14.

confines him to this Black stereotype that associates athleticism to race. Thus, by providing no resources for constructing Chad's identity other than athleticism, Disney Channel constructs Chad as monoracially Black and ignores any further explicit exploration of a mixed race heritage.

Fellow athlete Zeke Baylor, however, complicates Chad's racial identity, as his character highlights racial anxieties that underlie Chad's character construction. Chris Warren, a monoracial African American actor, portrays Zeke. Unlike that of Chad, Zeke's identity extends past his athleticism. Disney Channel explores Zeke's complex identity in the musical sequence "Stick to the Status Quo." This scene is set in the high school cafeteria with distinct social cliques positioned throughout. In one corner the jocks and cheerleaders sit around a lunch table. Zeke stands behind the table and opens the musical sequence by revealing a secret to friends: "You can bet there's nothin' but net when I am in the zone and on a roll. But I've got a confession my own secret obsession and it's making me lose control. . . . I bake."[144] Zeke's announcement sets off a progression of multiple confessions. In another corner, the history nerds sit with their noses pressed to their textbooks when one of the nerds jumps up and admits that she has interests outside of history, namely hip hop dance.[145] Likewise, within the skater group, one skater announces that, aside from skating, he enjoys playing the cello.[146] At each admission, the confessor is quickly reprimanded by his or her friends who insist that the confessor renounce his or her deviant interests and "stick to the status quo".[147] Despite the scolding, Zeke embraces his love for baking and begins to talk with other social groups outside of the basketball jocks.[148]

Chad is perhaps the most disgusted character in the "Stick to the Status Quo" scene. He is infuriated by Zeke's confession that he enjoys activities outside of basketball (see fig. 1). He complains, "Even the drama geeks and the brainiacs suddenly think that they can talk to us. Look, the skater dudes are mingling. Suddenly people think that they can do other stuff. Stuff that's not their stuff."[149] Similar to basketball and skating, race is another unspoken social group.[150] Therefore, Chad's anxiety in regard to the intermixing of social groups represents his anxiety toward accepting his true multiracial identity. This is especially evident when contrasted with Zeke's willingness to converse with the skaters, drama geeks, and brainiacs.

Chad's obsession with basketball makes sense when viewed as a manifestation of racial anxiety. Unlike Zeke's inclusion in the African American community, Chad's inclusion in that same community depends on his participation and acceptance into a stereotypical African American activity: basketball. Consequently, Zeke is permitted to engage in activities outside of basketball without anxiety because his membership into the African American community is uncontested. Chad, on the other hand, like other people of mixed race descent, must wrestle with a fragmented identity that complicates and restricts his full acceptance into a monoracial community.[151]

ii. *Descendants:* Carlos

Almost ten years after Chad's characterization, *Descendants* premiered on Disney Channel. In this program, Carlos, portrayed by biracial, African American-white actor Cameron Boyce, is depicted as an almost undeniably mixed race character. Although this is a step forward from identifying a mixed race actor as monoracial, Disney Channel still depicts Carlos through stereotypes associated with mixed race identity. Carlos, the son of Disney villain Cruella de Vil, grew up on the Isle of the Lost. In the first instance that the audience meets Carlos, he sings, "They think I'm callous/ a low-life hood/ I feel so useless/ misunderstood."[152] Carlos lives a life of isolation and loneliness because people misunderstand his mischievous behavior, which he developed from his mother. But, as

144 Barsocchini.
145 Barsocchini.
146 Barsocchini.
147 Barsocchini.
148 Barsocchini.
149 Barsocchini.
150 Justin R. J. King, "Change or No Change:Native American Representations of Race in Disney," in *FIlm Matters,* (2015), vii.
151 Mengel, 103.
152 McGibbon and Parriott.

Figure 2: Carlos (right) is dressed in black, red, and white, a mix of colors that represents his multiracial identity. Jay (left) represents Asian American identity.

he reveals in the song's chorus, he knows no life other than one of mischief and vengeance.[153] His sense of loneliness reflects that of the tragic mulatta described in Joseph's *Transcending Blackness*, in which Joseph argues that film and television narratives mark the tragic mulatta with a perpetual sense of loneliness.[154] Although the tragic mulatta stereotype typically refers to mixed African American women on screen, mixed African American men in the media have experienced a similar sense of isolation due to their mixed race identity, as exemplified by the tragic public image of professional, multiracial athlete Tiger Woods.[155]

Scholar Hiram Perez argues that the media enjoys exploiting the mixed race identity of such athletes as Tiger Woods, who is of Asian and African American descent, to simultaneously perpetuate the stereotype of African American men as "superior athletes" and the Asian American model minority stereotype.[156] Carlos' identity, however, distances itself from further exploitation of any such stereotype as he possesses no athletic ability. Unlike Chad, Carlos is used for comedic relief when he consistently fails at sports.[157] Carlos' lack of athleticism distances him from the African American stereotype of superb athleticism. His identity illustrates a slight progression on Disney Channel's part.

Carlos' costume also contributes to the construction of his mixed race identity. In the opening scene, a musical number titled "Rotten to the Core," Carlos climbs out of a window dressed in a black and white leather jacket with red sleeves and black and white leather pants (see fig. 2). Upon a surface level analysis, the color scheme reflects that of his mother's infamous black and white costume modeled after Dalmatian dog fur in the Disney film *101 Dalmations*.[158] However, the distinct black and white pattern also reflects and highlights Carlos' mixed race identity. Black and white symbolize Carlos' African American and Anglo-Saxon blood, while the color red, in combination with his Spanish name, indicates a Spanish, or even Afro-Latino, heritage. The three colors displayed on Carlos' costume allow the character to identify with multiple racial groups. Carlos' costume illustrates one instance in which Disney Channel circumvents the raceless ideology, instead suggesting mixed

153 McGibbon and Parriott.

154 Joseph, 64.

155 Hiram Perez, "How to Rehabilitate a Mulatto," in *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture,* ed. Shilpa Dave, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

156 Perez, 406.

157 McGibbon and Parriott.

158 Bill Peet, *101 Dalmatians,* directed by Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, and Wolfgang Reitherman (1961; Los Angeles: Walt Disney Productions) Film.

race people can have ties to multiple races. This suggestion aligns with Carter's analysis in which he argues that "mixed race people actually have doubly as much race, and possibly multiple connections to traditional racial groups."[159] Boyce's casting as a multiracial Afro-Latino, despite his biracial African American identity, reverses the common practice of associating Afro-Latino actors with Blackness. Instead, his casting exemplifies the perceived malleability of racial performance in Hollywood. Boyce's casting illustrates Beltran's argument that mixed race actors frequently experience a racialized identity projected onto them that is not the ethnic identity or origin with which he or she actually identifies.[160]

Further, the construction of Carlos' identity contrasts Boyce's public identity. Sika Dagbovie argues that "through advertising, interviews, and publicity, biracial celebrities encode a distinct connection to Blackness despite their projected (and sometimes preferred) self-identification."[161] As exemplified by press interviews, even after the premiere of *Descendants*, the press distinctly ties Boyce to an African American heritage, as the media highlights his family's connection to "The Clinton 12."[162] Carlos' mixed race identity gives hope that Disney Channel and other media outlets can honor the unique experience of mixed race people, despite the press' insistence on confining actors to monoracial identities.

Disney Channel still has a long way to go in authentically and respectfully representing mixed race people. For example, in *Descendants*' final musical sequence, Carlos sings, "They told me I should back down/ judgin' me because of my background/ thinking of changin' my path now."[163] The lyrics indicate Carlos' choice to overcome his "low-life hood" reputation by changing his life path. However, the lyrics also suggest the possibility of racial transcendence. The line "judgin' me because of my background" fails to define "background." If interpreted as "ethnic background," the program suggests that by changing one's life path, in Carlos' case ridding himself of his mother's villainous tendencies, a person can overcome racial obstacles that confine him or her to a stereotyped reputation; in other words, one can transcend race. Encouraging racial transcendence simply by removing oneself from one's parents ignores the hierarchy of racial powers that still exists in American society and serves as an obstacle in the lives of racially marginalized people. Unfortunately, *Descendant*'s representation of Audrey, another mixed African American character, does not appear as encouraging as the depiction of Carlos.

iii. *Descendants:* Audrey

Audrey, Sleeping Beauty's daughter who is portrayed by mixed race actress Sarah Jeffery, is another example of multiracial African American identity.[164] Through Audrey's characterization, Disney Channel employs the tragic mulatta stereotype and, in doing so, fails to authentically present the unique experience of a mixed race African American girl as anything other than dreadful. Audrey is a member of Auradon's most popular clique because she is dating Auradon's Prince Ben.[165] She falls into the traditional characterizations that define the high school popular girl: she is the head of the cheerleading squad and hails from a prestigious family. She is the daughter of Sleeping Beauty and a princess. Analogous to the tragic mulatta who is defined by her secret desire for Whiteness, Audrey displays her secret jealousy for Mal and her desire for Whiteness through her aggressive pursuit of a White boyfriend, Ben. Notably, Audrey is the only lead character in Auradon who has questionable morals and is of mixed race descent. The only other mixed race characters live on the Isle of the Lost, which suggests that multiracial people possess some degree of moral depravity inherent to their blood.

159 Carter, 205.

160 Beltran, "Mixed Race," 263.

161 Dagbovie, 217.

162 In Clinton, Tennessee twelve Black students were integrated into an all-white high school for the first time. They are collectively named "The Clinton 12." Cameron Boyce's paternal grandmother is one of the surviving twelve. "Cameron Boyce Honors the Clinton 12\ Black History Month| Disney XD," 2016, YouTube.

163 McGibbon and Parriott.

164 Jeffery's ethnic identity is undisclosed to the public; however, I choose to read her as mixed African American because the grandmother character is portrayed by Judith Maxie, an African American actress (see fig. 3). It is important to note, however, that Jeffery now plays the child of Jennifer Lopez, a Puerto Rican actress on the television series *Shades of Blue,* inferring that Jeffery is of Latin American descent.

165 McGibbon and Parriott.

Figure 3: Audrey (left), a representative of the tragic mulatta stereotype, and her grandmother (center) express their dislike for Mal (right), who represents Whiteness.

The audience first meets Audrey when she welcomes the Isle of the Lost children to Auradon, alongside her boyfriend, Prince Ben. When Evie introduces herself as royalty to Prince Ben in hopes of wooing him, Audrey quickly reminds Evie that her royal status on the Isle of the Lost is meaningless in Auradon.[166] She then corrects Ben when he introduces her simply as Audrey, reminding him that she, unlike Evie, is a legitimate princess.[167] From this introduction, the scene simultaneously establishes Audrey as royalty and illustrates her underlying fear of people forgetting her status. The need to vocalize her identity, especially to ethnically White Mal and Latina Evie, shows her fear that people of monoracial descent will not accept or recognize her social position. Audrey's hostile reaction to Evie's advances on her boyfriend also exemplify her fear of losing her claim to popularity and her membership in a popular social group. Audrey's social status anxiety reflects that of Chad in *High School Musical*, whose hidden mixed race identity served as the source of his desperate desire to maintain a social status quo.

Audrey's anxieties and desire for Whiteness, which confine her to the tragic mulatta stereotype, are most evident in her romantic relationships, as well as her relationship with Mal.[168] As explained above, Audrey desperately seeks to maintain her relationship with Prince Ben.[169] Prince Ben's public breakup with Audrey, with the intent of making Mal his girlfriend instead, only exacerbates Audrey's desire for Whiteness.[170] In this instance, Audrey not only desires to possess Whiteness as embodied by Prince Ben, but she also desires to metaphorically become Mal. The program exemplifies Audrey's desire for Whiteness through her sudden increase in vengeful behavior that, up until this point, was typical of Mal. For example, Audrey mocks Mal in front of her friends, calling her just a "villain infatuation," which both insults Mal and illegitimates her and Prince Ben's relationship.[171] As Audrey insults Mal, the narrative invokes sympathy for Mal and anger towards Audrey. Therefore, Audrey is punished for her desire for whiteness as her jealousy and vengeance transform her into the narrative's antagonist. Through Audrey's character, Disney Channel continues in the tradition of confining mixed race African American women to the tragic mulatta stereotype. In contrast, a more recent Disney Channel program, *K.C. Undercover,*

166 McGibbon and Parriott.

167 McGibbon and Parriott.

168 Joseph, 56.

169 McGibbon and Parriott.

170 McGibbon and Parriott.

171 McGibbon and Parriott.

which features multiracial African American actress Zendaya Coleman, negates this characterization.

iv. *K.C. Undercover*: K.C. Cooper

Disney Channel's most recent and ongoing television series *K.C. Undercover* presents a complex illustration of multiracial African American femininity through the title character K.C. Cooper, performed by biracial actress Zendaya Coleman. K.C.'s identification is complex; Disney Channel represents K.C. through mixed race stereotypes in some instances and through a monoracial representation in others. Overall, Disney Channel uses the character to support a colorblind, raceless ideology. The series centers on the Cooper family, all of whom are undercover spies. Each episode fluctuates between K.C.'s two identities. First, she functions as a normal teenager at a public high school, dealing with friendships and class assignments. Then, usually during the second half of the episode, K.C. takes on her other identity. This second identity, that of the action heroine, shows K.C. in undercover attire, punching and kicking various criminals in action scenes. The mixed race actor as an action heroine is a familiar trope associated with mixed race actors, according to Brown.[172] He explains that whenever a woman of color is in the lead role of an action film, she is portrayed by a mixed race actor.[173] Employing mixed race actors as heroines allows producers to "utilize ethnic stereotypes about women and to sidestep other racial issues, such as discrimination or miscegenation."[174] K.C.'s identity as an undercover spy continues the pattern of the mixed race actor as action heroine stereotype, allowing Disney Channel to present race without explicitly addressing it in the narrative. In perpetuating the action heroine stereotype the network ignores the unique experience of a marginalized community.

In relation to the action heroine trope, another significant narrative arch in representing K.C.'s mixed race identity is her professional and romantic relationship with fellow undercover teen spy, Brett Willis. Ambiguously Asian American actor Ross Butler portrays Brett. In the first episode in which Disney Channel introduces Brett, he and K.C. are assigned to a spy mission together. Although Brett had won the honor of a prestigious junior spy award, K.C. finds herself babysitting Brett as they prepare for their mission. She scolds him for shooting wasabi peas into his mouth instead of focusing on the task at hand.[175] When the two are finally faced with the criminals in question, it is K.C. who takes the lead.[176] At first, K.C. appears to fit the mixed race action heroine stereotype in this episode. Similar to representations of Zoe Saldana and Maggie Q, mixed race actors whom Brown references as "stronger, smarter, and more resourceful, than their male love interests," K.C.'s spy skills are superior to Brett's.[177] However, the episode quickly represses K.C.'s skills when she is overpowered by the criminals. Consequently, Brett must save her in the end.[178] On the one hand, K.C. and Brett's relationship circumvents her image as a stereotypical mixed race heroine, but on the other, K.C. is confined to the gendered stereotype of needing a male savior.

K.C. and Brett's romantic coupling also comments on the historical trajectory of Asian Americans and African Americans pitted against one another throughout American history.[179] Because neither actor identifies as fully African American or fully Asian American, the pairing can appear safer to the intended audience. However, when K.C. discovers that Brett serves as a double agent plotting against her family, the relationship becomes, as K.C. describes it, "messed up."[180] The complexity of their relationship is a metaphor for the problems interracial and mixed race couples face. Despite K.C. and Brett's attempt to look past their spy obligations, Brett must flee to Canada to avoid arrest, and the spy agency strips K.C.'s family of their spy jobs due to their association with

172 Brown, 80.

173 Brown, 80.

174 Brown, 80.

175 Cat Davis and Eddie Quintana, "Double Crossed Part One," directed by Joel Zwick (2015; Los Angeles: Disney Channel), television.

176 Davis and Quintana.

177 Brown, 115.

178 McGibbon and Parriott.

179 Nishme, 12.

180 Rob Lotterstein, "K.C. and Brett: The Final Chapter-Part 1," directed by David Kendall (2016; Los Angeles: Disney

Brett as a double agent.[181] Brett's sudden departure and the Cooper family's loss of their spy status work together to punish the interracial relationship.

At the very least, K.C.'s characterization negates the tragic mulatta stereotype. While stereotypical narratives punish the tragic mulatta for her desire for Whiteness, *K.C. Undercover* flips that.[182] Instead it is K.C.'s White best friend Marisa who not only appears lonely but also desires Blackness. K.C.'s family is an integral part of the narrative, so K.C. never undergoes significant periods of loneliness or distance from them. Marisa, on the other hand, is somewhat estranged from her family. In the episode "Double Crossed Part 2," Marisa shows up to breakfast at the Cooper's house uninvited, simply because she desires closer union with the Cooper family and less time with her own.[183] K.C. sympathizes with Marisa's desire to join the Cooper family. In the episode "Photo Bombed," K.C. finally relents and lets Marisa in on the family secret, revealing that they are all undercover spies.[184] Unlike the tragic mulatta, who is governed by her desire for whiteness, K.C. maintains full agency in her friendship with Marisa. It is Marisa instead who is plagued by her desire to fit in as a member of the Cooper family, regardless of the fact that her race and exclusion from the spy society prevent her from ever gaining full acceptance into the family.

Depicting K.C. within the action hero stereotype is about as far as Disney Channel goes in identifying the character as mixed race. The majority of the narrative identifies K.C. as African American. For instance, the set designers covered the Cooper family household in African art. In K.C.'s room, a prominent poster from the *Dreamgirls* movie hangs above her bed (see fig. 2).[185] Similarly, in the family room, a painting of an African American singer clutching a 1950s style microphone hangs next to the staircase, and in the kitchen, a painting of three African American women embracing hangs in full display.[186] The producers' choice to design the set with images directly associated with the African American community tie the Cooper family to African American roots. In doing so, Disney Channel safely presents race literally in the background of the narrative without explicitly identifying K.C.'s ethnicity. However, the homogenous images of African American people disguise Zendaya's mixed race identity and instead insist on a monoracial African American one.

Further, instead of embracing interracial marriage and a mixed race family, Disney Channel chooses to cast African American actors to portray K.C.'s parents and siblings.[187] K.C.'s mother, played by Tammy Townsend, displays a lighter skin tone, which might hint to her mixed race background. However, in the episode "Off the Grid," K.C.'s maternal grandparents' African American identities weaken any suggestion of mixed race descent.[188]

Beyond its monoracial constraint, "Off the Grid" also exemplifies Disney Channel's attempt at portraying a raceless society, an ideology that frequents narratives that employ mixed race actors in film and television.[189] K.C. complains when her grandparents want to tag along on her spy mission, stating, "What was their last mission? Colonizing the dang Americas?"[190] K.C.'s comment positions her grandparents in the role of colonizers, which disregards the historical truth of colonizers as White Europeans who conquered and enslaved Africans and other people of color. The comment asks the audience to ignore political and racial hierarchies that marginalized the African American community that K.C. is forced to identify with throughout the narrative. In doing so, Disney

Channel), television.

181 Rob Lotterstein, "K.C. and Brett: The Final Chapter-Part 2," directed by Jon Rosenbaum, (2016; Los Angeles: Disney Channel), television.

182 Joseph, 56.

183 Lotterstein, "Double Crossed Part 2."

184 Lotterstein, "Photo Bombed."

185 *Dreamgirls* is both a stage musical and 2006 Hollywood film which starred an all-black cast composed of powerhouse African American celebrities, such as Beyonce Knowles, Jennifer Hudson, Eddie Murphy, Annika Noni Rose, and Jamie Foxx (Condon 2006).
Rob Lotterstein, "The Final Chapter-Part 1," directed by David Kendall (2016; Los Angeles: Disney Channel), television.

186 Teri Schaffer and Raynelle Swilling, "Daddy's Little Princess," directed by Jon Rosenbaum (2015; Los Angeles: Disney Channel), television.

187 Lotterstein, "Photo Bombed,"

188 Darin Henry, "Off the Grid," directed by Jon Rosenbaum, (2015; Los Angeles: Disney Channel), television.

189 Dawkins, 10.

190 Henry, "Off the Grid."

Figure 4: *Dreamgirls* poster featured in K.C.'s bedroom.

Channel ignores not only the experience of mixed race people but also all marginalized people of color.

To complete her mission in "Off the Grid," K.C. goes undercover as Gretta Norwood, an ethnically White cowgirl. K.C. shows up to her nemesis Regina Honey's party dressed as Norwood in an all-white cowgirl outfit.[191] Although Regina Honey has previously met Norwood, K.C.'s costume dupes her.[192] K.C.'s ability to pass as a monoracial White woman simplifies race to a mere costume. This colorblind ideology reflects that of the race-trading episode of *America's Next Top Model* discussed in Joseph's *Transcending Blackness.* Joseph explains that trading race through makeup or costume presents race "as devoid of history, politics, and power."[193] As a further example, when the whole Cooper family must go undercover, they take on the family name "Takayuchi Chung."[194] The undercover name is Asian in origin and insinuates that the African American Cooper family can pass as Asian American, again reiterating the irrelevance of race. K.C.'s ability to transform into another race through costume falsely presents the notion that American society has entered into the post-race future.

B. Mixed Latina American Characters

Unlike the representation of multiracial African Americans in *K.C. Undercover*, in which race functions as a costume and is never directly addressed in the episodes I studied, Disney Channel explicitly and repeatedly discusses race through its multiracial Latina character Alex Russo on *Wizards of Waverly Place*. Alex's characterization illustrates social anxieties and highlights cultural discrepancies that plague interracial families. *Wizards of Waverly Place* represents one of the only depictions of mixed race Latinas on the cable network and reflects the changing social status of mixed race people as a result of an increase in mixed race births in the 1990s.

i. *Wizards of Waverly Place*: Alex Russo

As a result of the 1990s' boom in mixed race births, actors of partial Latino descent began to publicly claim their multiracial identity.[195]The millennial star of Disney Channel's *Wizards of Waverly Place*, Selena Gomez represents

191 Henry, "Off the Grid."
192 Henry, "Off the Grid."
193 Joseph, 128.
194 Zwick, "Double Crossed Part one."
195 Beltran, "Mixed Race," 251.

Figure 5: Alex (right) represents multiracial Latinas and fits into the tomboy trope that characterizes mixed race females on Disney Channel. In this image, Alex tries to show Harper (left) that her sneakers match the pink dress in hopes of retaining her tomboy style during the Quinceañera celebration.

one of the earliest generations of child stars portraying multiracial Latinos on television. The series, which premiered on Disney Channel in 2007, makes visible a multiracial family as it follows the Russos, a Mexican-Italian family with magical powers. While the series addresses both Mexican and Italian culture in the context of the Russo family, the series frames Alex as never "Mexican enough" or "Italian enough."

The ethnic shaming exemplified in the series is common amongst people of mixed race descent. For example, fellow multiracial Mexican actor Jessica Alba faced public shaming when Latin-specific media chastised her for not embracing her Mexican identity enough.[196] Disney Channel continues in the practice of ethnically shaming multiracial Latinas, as exemplified through Alex Russo's characterization. For example, in the episode "Quinceañera," Alex's best friend Harper, portrayed by white actress Jennifer Stone, educates Alex on the cultural significance of a Quinceañera. The conversation between Harper, Alex's mother, and Alex goes as follows:

> Alex: Oh, Harper what are you doing?
> Theresa: Planning your Quinceañera.
> Alex: Oh my gosh, am I sick? What's a Quincemono?
> Theresa: It's a party celebrating a girl's coming of age, that's why your grandmother is coming to town. You get to wear a pink beautiful dress.
> Harper: And it's a Latin American tradition that comes from the words Quince, meaning 15, and año meaning year, and era, which just makes it sound Spanish Alex: I'm sorry, everything after pink dress was just 'yuck, yuck, yuck.'[197]

In this scenario, it is the monoracial individuals, Alex's mother of Mexican descent and Harper of European descent, who are familiar with Latino specific cultural practices. Alex's clear lack of concern for learning more

196 Beltran, "Mixed Race," 258.

197 McCreery and Rein,"Quinceañera."

about this celebratory aspect of her culture is evident in her flippant remark, "I'm sorry, everything after pink dress was just 'yuck, yuck, yuck.' " The conversation continues when Alex's father, Jerry, enters the scene:

> Alex: Look, I love being Mexican and half-whatever he is.
> Jerry: Italian. Italian. I tell you that every time you order pineapple on your pizza.
> Alex: The point is, look at this stuff. It's all too girly and lame.[198]

The significance of this exchange lies in four major points. For one, Alex perpetuates the fragmentation of mixed race people by referring to her racial identity in fractional terms. Such language encourages the ideology that mixed race people are less than a whole human.[199] Alex's comment exemplifies the way in which Disney Channel constructs mixed race identity through problematic language that disavows the full humanity of the mixed race community. Second, the later part of Alex's comment, "and half-whatever he is," suggests that Alex does not know and does not care to know her ethnic background. She brushes it off and in doing so encourages the irrelevance of ethnic specificity. Third, Jerry's interjection, "Italian. Italian. I tell you that every time you order pineapple on your pizza," is a form of shaming Alex for rejecting her Italian culture by customizing the pizza to her liking. In the end, Alex's final comment, "the point is, look at this stuff. It's all too girly and lame," rejects and belittles ethnic specific events in a manner that reiterates the irrelevance of a racial identity. This episode addresses mixed race identity only to point out its irrelevancy and its unimportance to Alex's characterization. Thus, Alex fails to express the anxiety that accompanies the navigation of multiple cultures and cultural practices.

Italian culture further complicates Disney Channel's negotiation of biracial identity, as it frequently represents the magic world while Mexican culture represents the mortal world, causing conflict between the two. For example, in each wizard family, only one sibling can keep his or her powers into adulthood. To marry Alex's mortal mother, Theresa, Alex's wizard father Jerry had to give up his magic powers to his brother. When Jerry's sister, Meg, meets Theresa, she is so outraged that Theresa is the reason her brother gave up his magical powers that she throws Theresa's empanadas off the terrace.[200] Although Meg throws the empanadas off the terrace as a direct sign of her disapproval of Theresa's mortal upbringing, the empanadas also represent Theresa's Mexican culture. Thus, throwing them off the terrace is a symbol for rejection of both her mortal status and her Mexican heritage. Jerry's family and Theresa remain at odds with one another for the remainder of the series. Therefore, Theresa and Jerry's relationship is punished for mixing races, as well as mixing magic with mortals.

In a similar manner, Theresa's extended family is oblivious to her children's magical powers. When Theresa's brother, Ernesto, comes to visit, the children must hide their powers from him.[201] However, when a magic chicken runs loose in the living room, the family is forced to come to terms with the impossibility of hiding such an integral part of its identity.[202] In comparing the episode featuring Theresa's family to the episode featuring Jerry's family, both scenarios force the Russo siblings to deny a part of their identities to gain acceptance. In Jerry's family's case, the siblings must ignore their mortal descent, and with Theresa's, they must hide their magic descent. The magic world versus the mortal world serves as a metaphor for Mexican cultural identity versus Italian cultural identity. Even racial misunderstandings within families can occur and create identity obstacles.[203] Bettez explains that mixed race "women also had experiences as outsiders, even within family contexts."[204] Alex, likewise, never fits perfectly into the mold projected onto her by either her Italian wizarding family or her mortal Mexican family. Not identifying fully with either leaves Alex with a sense of anxiety, exemplified by the feeling of rejection she suffers when her Aunt Meg refuses to reconcile with the family.[205]

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198 McCreery and Rein, "Quinceañera."

199 Mengel, 100.

200 Greenwald, "Retest."

201 Todd Greenwald, "Uncle Ernesto," Directed by Bob Koherr (2010; Los Angeles: Disney Channel), television.

202 Greenwald, "Uncle Ernesto."

203 Silvia Cristina Bettez, "Mixed-Race Women And Epistemologies of Belonging," in *Frontiers: A Journal Of Women Studies,* (2010), 73.

204 Bettez, 80.

205 Gonzalez, "Retest."

In comparing the multiracial identity of Alex to K.C. from *K.C. Undercover*, one attribute remains constant from one series to the other: both girls are identified as tomboys (see fig. 5). For example, just as Alex detests the color pink and anything too girly,[206] K.C. struggles to escape her traditional tomboy persona for an undercover mission at a cotillion.[207] Just as both characters blur the lines of monoracial identification, they blur the dichotomy of gendered expectations. Their creation of a third space that is neither feminine nor masculine mirrors that of the third space created by mixed race individuals. The third space for the mixed race community is a safe space for mixed people to connect based on a panethnic connection that differs from a connection to any monoracial community from which they descend.[208]

C. Mixed Asian American Characters

Disney Channel, however, restricts multiracial Asian Americans from forming a panethnic community, as the network projects a racial identity onto mixed race Asian Americans that differs from their actual ethnic identities. Thus, the most complicated image of mixed race identity exists within Disney Channel's employment of multiracial Asian American actors in consistently monoracial roles. Disney Channel's casting practices are not unusual however, as networks frequently mark mixed race actors with a racial identity that differs from their actual ethnicities or ethnic identities.[209] The characterizations of Jay from *Descendants* and Gabriella Montez from *High School Musical* illustrate the practice of casting multiracial Asian Americans in ethnic roles that differ from their racial identities and illustrate the extent to which this casting practice ignores the authentic stories of marginalized communities and promotes a raceless future ideology.

i. *Descendants:* Jay

Figure 6: Jay (left) and Jafar (right) represent monoracial Middle Eastern descent.

In 1992, Walt Disney Feature Animation released the animated motion picture *Aladdin* set in the Middle East.

206 McCreery and Rein, "Quinceañera."

207 DisneyChannelPromo, "K.C. Undercover- 'Debutante Baller'- Episode Clip." YouTube Video Clip, Two minutes and one second. August 4, 2105. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJT_emof_VY.

208 Mengel, 100.

209 Beltran, "Mixed Race," 260.

The film told the story of an Arabian Princess and her unlikely, vagabond prince.[210] Maz Jobrani, an Iranian-American actor, reprises the role of the film's antagonist, Jafar, in Disney Channel's *Descendants*.[211] Multiracial Asian American actor Booboo Stewart portrays the role of Jay, Jafar's son. Maintaining the ethnic identity of Jafar and extending that identity to Jay problematizes Stewart's casting. His casting suggests that a multiracial Asian American can pass as a Middle Eastern character, perpetuating a colorblind ideology that marks race as irrelevant (see fig. 6). Through narrative clues that code Jay as Middle Eastern, the narrative intends to mislead the audience into believing Stewart's Middle Eastern identity. The ability to "bypass the rules of representation and claim an identity by virtue of a 'misleading' appearance" exemplifies racial passing.[212] Elam warns against taking the practice of racial passing for granted. She contends that "a presumptive consensus about the so-called ambiguous body is to erase the historical and political why's and how's some bodies at some times come to be coded in a particular way."[213] To blindly assume that multiracial Asian Americans can be coded as Middle Eastern without addressing the political and social position of American society that allows for this coding fails to address the dangers of a colorblind ideology.

The August 2015 premiere of *Descendants* coincided with over a decade of heightened fear of Middle Eastern people and culture as a result of the September 11th terrorist attack. Passing practices illustrated in the casting of *Descendants* deny the Middle Eastern community the right to tell their politicized history of prejudice and discrimination. In post-9/11 fashion, the casting decision perpetuates the notion of White supremacy, which grants White American culture greater control of the Middle Eastern story than the actual Middle Eastern community possesses, further marginalizing that community.

Racial passing also suggests the inherent racelessness of mixed race people.[214] By casting Stewart in a racialized role that differs from his actual racial identity, Disney Channel treats mixed race people as a "blank slate," which allows for the projection of any racial identity onto them.[215] Viewing multiracial actors as blank slates erases the history of prejudice and discrimination faced by the mixed race community. While Disney Channel treats Stewart as a blank slate, the *Descendants* narrative simultaneously confines him to stereotypes that plague multiracial characters and actors in Hollywood.

For instance, embodying the superhuman stereotype associated with mixed race characters, Jay exemplifies superior strength and hyper-aggression on the sports field. During his first physical education class at Auradon, the coaches select him to play as a starter on the school's sports team.[216] His natural ability and speed win him the MVP award the first time on the field.[217] Similar to *The Fast and the Furious* and *The Scorpion King, Descendants* exemplifies a "mixploitation" television program. As defined by Carter, mixploitation media exploits the mixed race identity of multiracial actors, framing mixed race people as superior to their monoracial peers in intelligence, bravery, charisma, and strength.[218] Jay's identification as a strong, athletic, and charismatic character like that of multiracial actors Vin Diesel and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson in *The Fast and the Furious* and *The Scorpion King* respectively, reflects that of the superhuman male stereotype that defines multiracial actors in Hollywood. Furthermore, mixploitation films are set in "contemporary milieus [that] are utopic to a fault."[219] Auardon itself is a utopic village comprised of only the moral elites and royalty. Films like *Descendants* that exemplify mixploitation

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210 Ron Clements, Ted Elliot, John Musker, and Terry Rossio, *Aladdin,* directed by Ron Clements and John Musker (1992; Los Angeles: Disney Feature Animation), film.

211 Robin Wright, "Fighting Islamophobia with Comedy," in *The Atlantic* (2016).

212 Phillip Brian Harper, "Passing for What? Racial Masquerade and the Demands of Upward Mobility," in *Callaloo* (1998), 389.

213 Michele Elam, "Passing In the Post-Race Era: Danzy Senna, Philip Roth, And Colson Whitehead," in *African American Review* (2007), 751.

214 Carter, 205.

215 Joseph, 249.

216 McGibbon and Parriott.

217 McGibbon and Parriott.

218 Carter, 207.

219 Carter, 207.

fail to illustrate "the realities of our multicultural society."[220] As a multiracial actor portraying a superhuman character, Stewart provides a visual and narrative distraction that allows for ignorance towards the reality of the lived experience of multiracial people. Even in *Descendants*, Jay's success on the field distracts from his apparent lack of friends in Auradon and his perpetual emotional and physical distance from his own father. Mixploitation silences the history of discrimination and prejudice that plague the mixed race community.

ii. *High School Musical:* Vanessa Hudgens

Figure 7: Gabriela Montez falls into the model minority stereotype.

Akin to Stewart's portrayal of a Middle Eastern character, multiracial Asian American actor Vanessa Hudgens portrays Gabriella Montez, a Latina coded character. Three elements of the narrative code Hudgens' character as Latina. For one, the character's name is derived from Spanish origin. It is not difficult to identify media stars of Latina descent with the same name, such as Argentinian professional tennis player Gabriela Sabatini[221] or Dominican actor Maria Montez.[222] Second, Gabriella's mother is portrayed by Latina actor Socorro Herrera.[223] While a father figure remains absent from the narrative, Gabriella's Latina mother reinforces her Latina heritage. Additionally, a newspaper article written about Gabriella calls her the "San Diego Wiz Kid."[224] San Diego lies just north of the Mexican border and so Gabriella's close proximity to a Latin country further suggests her Latina heritage.

While the aforementioned narrative clues frame Gabriella as Latina, other aspects of the narrative confine her to stereotypes that limit Asian Americans in film and television to one specific identity. For instance, Gabriella's character perpetuates the original model minority stereotype discussed previously. The stereotype is a manifestation of the ideology that Asians as a panethnic demographic have succeeded in assimilating to American culture through their strong work ethic, despite obstacles imposed by their race.[225] The stereotype often imagines Asian Americans as hyper-intelligent. Thus, networks frequently typecast Asian American actors as doctors, exemplified by Sandra Oh and Ming-Na Wen's characters in the shows *Grey's Anatomy* and *ER*, respectively.[226] While not a doctor, Gabriella proves her superior intelligence both in the classroom, where she

220 Carter, 207.

221 "Gabriela Sabatini," *Players|WTA Tennis English,* n.d., http://www.wtatennis.com/players/player/7179/title/gabriela-sabatini.

222 Jesus Trivino, "Exclusive: Celines Torbio on 'Maria Montez' and Dominicans in Hollywood," in *Latina* (2015), http://www.latina.com/entertainment/movies/exclusive-celines-toribio.

223 Barsocchini.

224 Barsocchini.

225 Yuko Kawaii, "Stereotyping Asian Americans: the Dialectic of the Model Minority and the Yellow Peril," in *Howard Journal of Communications* (2005), 113.

226 Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media* (Malden: Polity Press, 2009), 19.

corrects the teacher's work, and as a top competitor at the scholastic decathlon (see fig. 7).[227] It is her intelligence that confines her to the Asian American stereotype that she most urgently tries to escape. She complains to her mother upon arriving at her first day at the new school, "I don't wanna be the school's freaky genius girl again."[228] Her desperate need to claim a new identity illustrates the desire for the multiracial Asian American girl to escape from an inauthentic, monoracial identification.

Disney Channel continues to construct Gabriella through Asian American stereotypes, as exemplified by her relationship with Troy. When Gabriella steps up to the microphone for her theater audition, she suddenly experiences intense stage fright and stands motionless before her waiting audience.[229] Troy comes to the rescue, running onto the stage and harmonizing with her for the audition, embodying the white-knight stereotype.[230] Narratives that employ the white-knight stereotype exclude the Asian male from heteronormative coupling with the Asian woman. This exclusion allows the American White male to establish America as the top of the racial hierarchy.[231] The white-knight saves the Asian female from the perceived disaster of her own racial status. Troy serves as the white-knight when he saves Gabriella from her own tragic downfall on stage.

Although the narrative appears to construct a conflicting monoracial identity for Gabriella, the overarching narrative of the program actually symbolizes the social anxiety experienced by the mixed race community. Gabriella is the new girl at school, and her arrival ignites the sudden downfall of previously implemented social groups and hierarchies. Because the program takes place on a high school campus, social groups are represented quite literally through campus cliques, such as the history geeks, the skaters, the jocks, etc. Gabriella's superior intelligence grants her membership to the chemistry club and thus, the chemistry social group.[232] However, when she chooses to audition for the school musical and intrudes upon the White-coded theater nerds, she knocks the social status quo off balance and ignites the slow reorganization of social categories. Gabriella's characterization encourages the raceless future model that suggests multiracial Asian Americans "predict the eventual reorganization of racial categories."[233] Her audition for the school musical inspires jocks like Zeke to embrace deviant interests, such as baking. After the "Stick to the Status Quo" scene, Zeke and Gabriella's movement from social group to social group exemplifies the irrelevance of such social groups in the first place, as they do not govern the actual identity of its members.

Gabriella most evidently expresses the anxiety of mixed race people through her embrace of the "duality of hybridity" model. Mengel explains, "in this model, people of two or more racial groupings are said to be able to embrace, and be embraced by both (or more) of his or her racial communities."[234] In the narrative climax of *High School Musical*, Gabriella proves her ability to do what no other person on campus has done before: achieve acceptance to multiple social groups when she manages to attend both the scholastic decathlon with the chemistry club and theater auditions on the same day. Her ability to "be embraced" by both the chemistry club and theater club, against all odds, symbolizes the possibility of acceptance into multiple racial categories. However, this optimistic view of mixed race identity falsely assumes that a multiracial person is embraced by any monoracial group, let alone all. An ethnic "third space" exists for the very reason that the chance acceptance into a monoracial social group does not suffice as a place of comfort for people of multiracial descent.[235] Montez's representation continues to exemplify the functionality of the media as a tool for perpetuating idealistic images of racial identity. As the visibility of mixed race people in the media increases, the media's responsibility to present an authentic image of mixed race people grows as well.

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227 Barsocchini.

228 Barsocchini.

229 Barsocchini.

230 Barsocchini.

231 Nishime, 10.

232 Barsocchini.

233 Nishime, 10.

234 Mengel, 100.

235 Mengel, 100.

V. CONCLUSION

With respect to the growing visibility and acceptance of mixed race identity, the way executives use the media as a tool for perpetuating images and shaping ideas concerning race provides unique insight into the progression of American racial politics and social order. Disney Channel, as the leading producer of children's television content, exemplifies one cable network's approach to race. The Walt Disney Company, Disney Channel's parent business, represents a long historical trajectory of problematic race politics. Although the company included images of African Americans as early as the 1920s, its depiction of this minority group perpetuated stereotypical representations, as exemplified by early Mickey Mouse cartoons and later feature length films. Decades after the original Mickey Mouse cartoons, Disney Channel emerged on television, just before the boom in mixed race visibility. However, representations of multiracial people in Disney Channel's programming remained minimal through the early 2000s. My research examines mixed race identity on Disney Channel within the last decade to show the way in which Disney Channel executives have used mixed race identity to promote a paradoxical ideology of racial diversity and colorblindness.

Disney Channel frequently employed multiracial African American actors in roles that suggest a monoracial, African American identity, as exemplified by Chad Danforth and K.C. Cooper. The characterizations of Danford and Cooper illustrate Disney Channel's attempt at assuaging the demand for diversity while silencing the anxieties and triumphs of growing up multiracial. In the case of Carlos and Audrey in Disney Channel's *Descendants,* the network succeeded in representing multiracial African Americans as multiracial but continues to use harmful stereotypes, such as the tragic mulatta. Over the past ten years, Disney Channel's casting practices have reflected American society's narrow understanding of the multiracial African American experience that continues to alienate the African American community.

On the other hand, Disney Channel's representation of multiracial Latinas proves more promising. Although the channel only showcased mixed race Latino Americans in one prominent television program, *Wizards of Waverly Place*, the series succeeded in presenting an authentic image of this mixed race family's struggle to overcome inevitable racial obstacles, unique to an interracial couple and their children. Through the use of magic-versus-mortal symbolism, the series addresses racial conflict within mixed race families through nuanced arguments and identity crises that arise within the Russo family. Multiracial Latino identification circumvents the spitfire stereotype that frequents the representation of multiracial Latinas. Significantly, multiracial Latino Americans receive a more authentic and nuanced treatment of mixed race identity than the other two races discussed. This suggests that because Latinos were perceived as mixed race, even before the boom in mixed race identity acceptance, the mixing of a Latino with a non-Latino is less threatening than the interracial coupling of a monoracial Asian American or African American with a different race. The narrative and casting decisions displayed in *Wizards of Waverly Place* suggest that Disney Channel executives are familiar and comfortable with Latino culture and interracial Latino relationships. Thus, executives present a more authentic image of the multiracial Latino experience.

Other Disney Channel programs, especially those portraying multiracial Asian Americans, skirted the direct expression of race in order to continue Disney Channel's practice of presenting conservative, neutral content that appeals to a wide variety of tweens of different ethnic heritages. These programs, instead, used mixed race bodies to show the irrelevance of race to society. For example, Disney Channel executives portray multiracial Asian Americans Vanessa Hudgens and Booboo Stewart from *High School Musical* and *Descendants*, respectively, as races other than the ones with which they identify. As a result, Disney Channel executives casted the two actors in falsely racialized roles that illustrate racial irrelevance. In doing so, the channel views multiracial actors as racially malleable, capable of switching race through costume and narrative. This colorblind casting practice erases the history and prejudice associated with the multiracial experience and denies the marginalized communities, portrayed by Jay and Gabriella, the right to tell their own story. The identity construction of these two characters reveals the disassociation of multiracial Asian Americans from any Asian heritage. This disassociation encourages racial transcendence and colorblindness.

Overall, Disney Channel's treatment of mixed race identity represents an idealized, raceless "utopia," as every Disney Channel program investigated ends with a complete resolution of any issues or anxieties presented

throughout the narrative. The channel's characters function in a false utopia of racial acceptance. While overcoming obstacles is a characteristic of children's television, such resolutions are harmful to the telling of a mixed race person's experience. The acceptance of mixed race identity during the 1990s is still relatively new. Therefore, Alex's ability to navigate both her Mexican and Italian heritage, Gabriella's successes in finding acceptance to the chemistry club and the theater club, and Carlos' ability to rid himself of his mother's evil habits represent a false reality of the mixed race story. American society is still struggling with racial hierarchies and imbalances in power. To show mixed race characters easily overcoming obstacles that symbolize race issues optimistically imagines a society in which mixed race people are fully accepted into any racial group, monoracial or mixed race. Such an optimistic representation is far from the truth.

In analyzing Disney Channel's raceless utopia, one limitation that I discovered in my research, as well as in Disney Channel's handling of mixed race people, is the tendency to see multiracial people as biracial. Rather than looking at mixed race people as descending from only two races, such as African American and white, future research must overcome biracial biases and address the identity of multiracial people who identify with more than two ethnicities in order to expand and diversify our understanding of the mixed race experience. I commend Disney Channel for its representation of Alex Russo as explicitly biracial, but to further progress, it must present families with more than two racial origins to increase and diversify its multiracial representation.

Another limitation I discovered in my research is that ambiguously raced actors do not always publicly claim any particular race. Educated guesses and presumptions are heavily relied on to determine whether an actor is actually mixed race. As was the case with Sarah Jeffery from *Descendants,* racial depiction is not always consistent for mixed race people from program to program. Future research can compare the costs and benefits of mixed race actors either publicly sharing their ethnic backgrounds or choosing to withhold them from the public. Engaging with actors and producers through interviews and trade publications to determine how their own racial identities come into question during casting procedures can provide further insight to understanding the construction of mixed race identity in the media.

In conclusion, mixed race representation on television exemplifies the ways in which media reflects contemporary racial ideologies and also influences particular ways of regarding race. The increase in mixed race representation on Disney Channel, one manifestation of the media as a business, shows that racial ambiguity is desirable and marketable in today's economy. Thus, people of mixed race descent find themselves exploited in various constructed characterizations that fail to illustrate a true, authentic mixed race experience. The media also serves as a cultural tool for constructing race. Studying the media as a tool that does not function in a vacuum but is instead shaped by societal norms and practices allows for the understanding of the ideologies that govern our culture. Bringing attention to the media's frequent biases and misjudgments in representing race can encourage readers to seek out the full, authentic expression of marginalized communities so as to pursue an American culture in which race is acknowledged and respected without perpetuating racial hierarchies that prevent social and political progress. Delving deeper into the procedures and practices that govern media makers and the production industry further illustrates the institutionalized racial hierarchies that create and perpetuate underlying images of how mixed race people should look and act. But if we are to ever see a truly authentic and respectful image of mixed race people in the media, we, as culture influencers and media consumers, must address the ways in which we personally acknowledge and value the mixed raced communities and multiracial people who live right next door.

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Contributor's Note by Paloma Larson:
The Author graduated from the University of California, Berkeley in spring of 2016 with a degree in Media Studies. She spent the fall of her senior year studying abroad at the University of Edinburgh. The premise of her honors thesis, "The Mixed Race Mouse: Discovering Mixed Race identity in Disney Channel Programs from High School Musical to K.C. Undercover," was inspired in part by her experiences abroad as a national and ethnic outsider. Her thesis exemplifies her passion for investigating mainstream entertainment and reflects her experience growing up multiracial. Apart from her academic interests, the author pursued dance as a hobby throughout college and was involved in the Catholic center at Cal.