Diagnosing Drama: *Grey’s Anatomy*, Blind Casting, and the Politics of Representation

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On February 5, 2006 nearly thirty-eight million viewers chose to forego post-Super Bowl celebrations in favor of tuning in to a much-hyped episode of ABC’s hit medical melodrama *Grey’s Anatomy*. The episode thus constitutes “the best scripted-series performance since the series finale of *Friends*” in 2004 and “the best performance of an ABC show since an episode of *Home Improvement* in 1994” (“Grey’s Scores Big”). *Grey’s Anatomy* and its multiracial ensemble stand in marked contrast to the all-white casts of both aforementioned shows, a fact that has not been lost on media observers. When civil rights groups issued their annual “diversity report cards” for 2006, ABC garnered the highest overall grade of the four major networks (an A-), thanks in part to shows like *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Lost*, and *Ugly Betty* (“Grey’s Leads Charge”). Its diverse cast and the production practices through which it was assembled have been the major focus of the media attention conferred upon *Grey’s*, second only to stories concerning the colossal audiences it routinely snags.¹

The show’s creator, Shonda Rhimes (currently the only African American woman “showrunner” in network television), gives the credit for her show’s diversity to her “race-blind” casting methods. In her *Time Magazine* profile of the writer and producer, Jeanne McDowell notes that “[Rhimes’] script for the pilot had no physical descriptions [of its characters] other than gender,” a statement repeated in almost all of the popular press coverage the show receives.² As Rhimes herself affirmed in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, “We really read every color actor for every single part. And . . . I was lucky because the
network was like, great, go for it” (“Oprah’s Cut”). More accurately, however, as Grey’s star Isaiah Washington pointed out on a 2006 episode of Nightline, Rhimes “stood up and took a risk. She said, ‘Look, you [talent agencies] continue just bringing me all blond-haired, blue-eyed people. I want to see all actors. You can’t tell me all the actors in L.A. are blond and blue-eyed.’” In other words, Rhimes had to actively point out and work against industrial assumptions that a racially unmarked character calls for a white actor. In discussing her casting practices, however, many journalists tend to similarly gloss over the actual struggles the producer encountered in her attempts to build a racially heterogeneous ensemble in favor of promoting a more harmonious, organic picture of the casting process.

Such obfuscation of the structural underpinnings of what bell hooks has called “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (235) typifies not only the ways that the media talk about Grey’s Anatomy and its racially diverse cast but also the raced and gendered meanings produced through the show’s narrative as well. Its characters and storylines consistently fail to attend to the ways in which discourses and institutions structurally and systematically maintain inequalities through the reproduction of powerful gender binaries and racial hierarchies. Grey’s Anatomy thus works to uphold dominant discourses concerning race and gender at the same time that (through its producers’ conscious if not entirely successful or unmediated efforts to avoid such reproductions) it seeks to and sometimes succeeds at challenging those discourses. A closer look at the discursive presentation of the show’s production practices in combination with close readings of its pilot episode and one particular representational trope (that of the “fairy tale” romance) reveals the extent to which the show and its producers both contest and concur with the very representational traditions they would prefer to consistently counter.

Standard Procedure: The Anatomy of Narrative Meaning

Simply stating that race is not (and that gender is) a factor in casting decisions does not necessarily preclude the possibility of reproducing dominant or otherwise problematic assumptions, values, and ideologies about race and gender. However, Grey’s Anatomy’s representational politics fall outside many of the categories and schemes through which
cultural critics have traditionally critiqued such representations. The show neither plays uncritically into normative constructions of race and gender nor consistently defies those norms. It is more accurately characterized by ambivalence about rather than outright challenge to the ways that race and gender are typically constructed in mainstream media representations. This ambivalence is, at least partially, produced by the approach that Rhimes takes to television production (including her casting practices) and institutional and generic conventions, as well as through its weekly evolving narrative.

As Patricia Hill Collins contends, while “W.E.B. DuBois predicted that the problem of the twentieth century would be the presence of the color line . . ., the problem of the twenty-first century seems to be the absence of a color line” (32). Although “[f]ormal legal discrimination has been outlawed,” she argues that today’s “new racism” has “not replaced prior forms of racial rule, but instead incorporates elements of past racial formations” (32–33). One of the “new” components of what Collins calls “the new racism” is its greater reliance on “the manipulation of ideas within mass media,” which “work to obscure the racism that does exist” by “present[ing] hegemonic ideologies that claim that racism is over” (54). In short, the new racism’s seemingly “color-blind” ideology (much like the idea of “race-blind” casting) makes it more difficult to see the ways in which older racial hierarchies and their associated meanings continue to be promoted and maintained through different mechanisms.

*Grey’s Anatomy* is certainly guilty of this sort of obfuscation. Indeed, although every character is portrayed as having worked exceptionally hard for what s/he has earned, racial privilege and its converse are rarely noted at Seattle Grace, the fictional hospital that serves as the show’s main set. Rather, in keeping with the “color-blind” ethos espoused by its creator, racial differences are often elided or transferred onto other kinds of similarities such as gender, location of origin, and individual merit or personality traits. These sorts of displacements and transfers do more than simply obscure actual, structural barriers to racial equality. They work simultaneously to erase the specificity and the multiple, intersecting power relations that produce people of color’s varied experiences of marginalization and to reproduce racist and sexist assumptions embedded in many, less “socially aware” popular cultural forms.

At the same time, however, by constructing connections—whether based in friendship, shared experience, professional obligation, or
romantic love—between a wide array of differently raced characters, *Grey's Anatomy* works, in some ways, to make certain stereotypes uninhabitable and to allow certain problematic representational traditions and controlling images to, as Amanda D. Lotz terms it, “mean differently” (19). However, the ways in which these connections are articulated often serve not to undermine but to prop up narrative conventions that reaffirm white supremacy by placing the actions and stories of people of color in service to the needs of their white counterparts. This is not a simple function of institutional racism seeping into the sphere of cultural production—whether through some sort of collective osmosis or the prejudice (or professed lack thereof, in Rhimes’s case) of one or two stubborn individuals. Rather, precisely because race is presumed to carry little or no meaning in the post-Civil Rights, “color-blind” world of *Grey's Anatomy*, the less overt or formal ways in which racism works through, for example, generic conventions and institutional assumptions remain obscured from view.

First Impressions (Can be Misleading): Coalitions Across Difference

Although the constructed similarities across racial lines work, at times, to challenge (as well as reproduce) controlling images and stereotypes of variously raced and gendered groups, they most often serve to obscure the structural underpinnings of racial oppression and the experiential specificities those structured inequalities produce. The show’s pilot episode, “A Hard Day’s Night,” provides a glaring example of just this sort of erasure. In its first few minutes, interns Meredith Grey (the show’s “tent pole” character, played by Ellen Pompeo), Christina Yang (Sandra Oh), and George O’Malley (T. R. Knight) learn that their resident (the more experienced surgeon under whom they will work) will be Dr. Bailey (Chandra Wilson), who has earned the nickname “the Nazi.” When another doctor points them toward her, they (as well as the viewing audience) are surprised to discover that “the Nazi” is neither “a guy” nor “a Nazi” (as George and Meredith respectively expected), but a short, somewhat heavyset African American woman.

As George, Meredith, and Christina hesitantly approach Dr. Bailey, fellow intern Isobel “Izzie” Stevens (Katherine Heigl)—who, it is frequently noted, grew up in a trailer park and worked as an underwear
model to put herself through medical school—posits that perhaps Bailey’s “Nazi” persona derives from “professional jealousy. Maybe she’s brilliant and they call her a Nazi because they’re jealous. Maybe she’s nice.” Christina rolls her eyes and quips that Izzie is most likely the model she and Meredith had heard was part of the program. In this way, the show sets up a connection between Izzie and Bailey predicated on their experiences with “professional jealousy” and name-calling.

This connection, however, renders invisible the significant differences that would, were this not a fictional hospital, exist between these women’s particular experiences. Granted, both Bailey and Izzie may have had to work especially hard to earn the respect of their co-workers, but the stereotyped notions of herself against which Izzie—as an exceptionally attractive white woman—might have to fight would surely differ markedly from those that Bailey—as a short, stocky black woman—would be likely to encounter. In addition, Izzie frames both their experiences in individualistic as opposed to systemic terms, erasing the structural foundations of the differences between the ways that she and Bailey are respectively positioned and reducing them to the effects of individual personality traits.

As Elizabeth Spelman points out, “While it is true that images and institutions that are described as sexist affect both Black and white women, they are affected in different ways” (27). Moreover, she argues that “sexism and racism must be seen as interlocking, not as piled upon each other” (27). Similarly, Evelynn Hammonds asserts that “what has to be thought through” in terms of racism and sexism are “the ways in which these vectors of power require and deploy each other for the purposes of their own articulation” (141). In other words, while some opportunity for connection certainly exists between women like Bailey and Izzie, this connection will necessarily be superficial and (white) solipsistic if the differences and power relations through which, for example, black and white women’s gender and racial identities are constituted and represented are not taken seriously. In suggesting that the discriminations to which Izzie and Bailey have been respectively subjected are directly comparable, the narrative collapses such distinctions and, more importantly, obscures the power relations and structural forces through which these two drastically different experiences (or, more specifically, representations of experiences) are produced and interpreted.

Moreover, this incident reveals the ways that racialized and gendered assumptions come into play in what is presumably a “color blind”
casting process. As Tracy Owens Patton notes, “ethnic minority women” rarely see their “beauty . . . reified as something positive” in mainstream media outlets (241). *Grey’s Anatomy* continues this tradition by casting a white woman in the role of the particularly attractive former model. Furthermore, Bailey near-perfectly exemplifies what Collins terms the “modern mammy” (140). Such characters are not only, she states, “tough, independent, smart, and asexual” but also maintain the appropriate “level of ambition and aggressiveness needed for achievement in middle-class occupations” (140). Although, as she told Oprah, Rhimes initially imagined Bailey as “this sort of tiny blond woman with all these curls,” when “Chandra Wilson auditioned . . . we thought, that’s exactly who Bailey is” (“Oprah’s Cut”). Thus, although Rhimes purportedly attempted to avoid reproducing such controlling images as the desexualized modern mammy, the racist assumptions on which those images depend carried over into the casting process despite her best intentions.

“A Hard Day’s Night” also marks the beginning of a long-running and increasingly deep connection between Meredith and Christina. By the beginning of the second season, each woman considers the other, as *Grey’s Anatomy’s* writers put it, her “person” (a term the women coined when Christina designated Meredith as her official emergency contact person and continue to use in lieu of “best friend”). However, during much of the first episode, they are barely speaking. In the pilot, Christina first learns that Meredith has slept with attending neurosurgeon Dr. Derek Shepherd (Patrick Dempsey). He subsequently overlooks Christina for one of his surgeries while Meredith is given the opportunity to scrub in. At the height of her anger, Christina justifiably snarls that she doesn’t “get picked for surgeries because I slept with my boss, and I didn’t get into med school because I have a famous mother,” telling Meredith that she has done “a cutthroat thing” and should “just deal with it” rather than “com[ing] to me to for absolution.”

While Meredith’s being the daughter of, as Izzie puts it, “one of the first big chick surgeons” and having slept with her boss are both salient issues here, Christina, much like Izzie, chooses to focus on these individual attributes and actions rather than the systemic racial and class-based privileges on which they are contingent. Moreover, the narrative supports this individualist ethos by affirming Meredith’s medical skills in order to debunk Christina’s assertion that Meredith has not earned
the right to scrub in. And although Meredith and Cristina make amends before the episode’s end, they base their reconciliation not on a straightforward conversation about the structural forces that lay behind their “misunderstanding” but on a mutual agreement that they would prefer not to, in Christina’s words, “do that thing where, you know, I say something and then you say something and somebody cries.” Later on, however, Meredith and Christina’s relationship provides fertile ground for contestations and reinscriptions of conventional modes of representing race, gender, and sexuality. These processes are most clearly revealed through an analysis of their sexual relationships with their bosses and the fairy tale trope on which these representations are predicated.

Fights, Fairytales, and Firings: Generic Conventions and Color-Blind Coalitions

The media delighted in reporting a string of conflicts that surfaced among the Grey’s Anatomy’s cast, all of which revolved around Isaiah Washington’s alleged use of a homophobic slur to refer to then-closeted co-star T. R. Knight on October 9, 2006. The delight primarily stems from, as LA Times writer Scott Collins puts it, the “metaphoric death” that the incident represents. He claims that:

Washington’s use of a crude slur in reference to a fellow actor signifies the death of Grey’s as a symbol of “new Hollywood” as a utopian, forward-thinking place, where colorblind casting can thrive, where a black woman can create and run a successful TV drama while her large, racially diverse cast gets along as famously as the six principals of Friends.

(Collins, “Kiss and Make Up?”)

Washington’s actions garnered attention from civil rights groups like GLAAD and the NAACP, spawned arguments among Internet bloggers and fan communities, and arguably resulted in Isaiah Washington’s departure in the show’s third season finale.

The event and ensuing media spectacle crystallize a host of representational, discursive, and political issues that can be brought most clearly into focus when viewed in conjunction with particular narrative and generic threads running throughout the show’s three seasons and concerning four of its major characters—Meredith, her
on-again-off-again love interest, Derek Shepherd, Christina, and Christina's now-former partner, Preston Burke (Isaiah Washington), head of the hospital's cardiothoracic unit. Grey's Anatomy's organizes its depiction of Meredith and Derek's relationship (consisting of two Euro-Americans), unlike that of Burke and Christina's (comprised of an African- and Korean-American male and female, respectively), around a set of assumptions or narrative trope—the fairy tale—that belies the progressive intent of “race-blind” casting. The show's use of this fairy tale trope reveals the ways that generic conventions work, in spite of Grey's purportedly “race-blind” casting methods, as institutional structures that inhibit the show from putting forth a more radical challenge to hegemonic televisual assumptions about and representational constructions of particularly raced and gendered subjectivities.

At the beginning of the aptly-titled episode “Save Me,” Meredith, in her customary voiceover, addresses the issue of “fairytales—the [childhood] fantasy of what your life would be,” lamenting that “eventually you grow up and the fairy tale disappears.” Shonda Rhimes has, in fact, claimed that “Grey's Anatomy is about fairy tales” (Buchman). As Marcia Lieberman notes, fairy tales generally “serve to acculturate” some (predominantly white, upper- or middle-class, heterosexual) women to certain “traditional social roles” (383). It is thus not surprising that a television show “about fairy tales” would promote the primacy of white, patriarchal, heterosexual desire through its white leading couple and maintain white women’s (and men’s) historical racial privilege in relation to women (and men) of color (Hurtado 844–46). More surprising, however, is the way that the voiceover’s concluding insight—that “it’s like one day you realize that the fairy tale is slightly different than your dream”—gets incorporated into the show’s narrative more generally and works against at the same time that it conforms to racist, patriarchal ideas about white as well as nonwhite womanhood (and, less prominently, manhood).

The interactions between and among Meredith, Derek, Christina, and Burke in its third season’s finale best exemplify the nontraditionality of the fairy tale that Grey's Anatomy tells. Fully accounting for the political implications of the finale’s plot, however, entails revisiting the same season’s three-part “television event,” which aired in February 2006 and is comprised of the episodes “Walk on Water,” “Drowning on Dry Land,” and “Some Kind of Miracle.” In this narrative arc, Meredith falls into the water as she and her colleagues are assisting with a devastating ferryboat
crash. Although Derek initially rescues Meredith from drowning, he is ultimately unable to save her life (she is, at this point, medically dead); the task is left to the other members of Seattle Grace’s surgical staff. Grey’s thus presents audiences with a slightly warped version of the traditional fairy tale, in which a “white knight” heroically rescues a “damsel in distress.” In Grey’s Anatomy’s fairy tale, Meredith is more accurately revived through her connection with Christina.

At first, Christina flees from Seattle Grace, too afraid to witness her best friend’s death (an echo of her earlier response to Burke’s hand injury in “The Deterioration of the Fight or Flight Response,” part of the series’ two-part second season finale). Eventually, however, she returns to stand diligently at her friend’s bedside, commanding the other doctors to “try again” until Meredith finally returns from the dead. For her part, Meredith—who has been consorting with several memorable former patients in her “afterlife”—first cries out for Derek but quickly turns to verbalizing her desire to reunite with Christina. The possibility of never seeing her “person” again is clearly presented as more devastating to Meredith than the possibility of never again seeing Derek, whose continuing affections are frequently acknowledged as less stable and assured than those Meredith receives from Christina. For example, in the episode “From a Whisper to a Scream,” Meredith explains her decision to keep from Derek a secret with which Christina entrusted her by stating that “she was there when you weren’t.”

In this way, Grey’s Anatomy privileges the connection between these two, differently raced women over Meredith’s connection with Derek, a white man. However, the narrative not only constructs Meredith’s relationship with Derek as less fundamental than her relationship with Christina but also presents Christina’s connection to Meredith as more enduring than her connection to Burke. Indeed, Christina fled from and took much longer to return to Burke’s bedside following his nearly career-ending hand injury than she does to Meredith’s after her near-death experience. Grey’s Anatomy thus erases and collapses the distinctions between the ways in which women of color relate to men of color and the ways in which white women and men relate to one another, establishing a “color-blind” sisterhood between Meredith and Christina that ignores the significant differences in the power relations that produce their differential relationships to white and nonwhite men (Hurtado 842–44).
As Aida Hurtado contends, whereas white women are “groomed from birth to be the . . . partners (however unequal) of white men because of the economic and social benefits attached to these roles,” such “avenues of advancement . . . are not even a theoretical possibility for women of Color” (842). The fairy tale conventions around which the show is organized necessitate that Meredith reap the benefits she can accrue through her association with Derek—benefits which Christina has, in Hurtado’s words, a “[lower] probability of obtaining” (844). Thus, in emphasizing the importance of women’s coalitions across racial differences as if there were no differences either in their relationships with men—whether white or otherwise—or with each other within the framework of the fairy tale romance, the narrative also masks and avoids contending with the power relations and politics involved in the admittedly distorted fairy tale that has been enacted through Meredith’s rescue and which is distinctly unavailable to Christina.

Moreover, Christina’s relationship with Burke is rarely presented as embodying the fairy tale ideals around which Meredith and Derek’s relationship is structured. Although their coupling endures the twists and turns of nearly three full seasons relatively seamlessly, not until the third season’s explosive last episode are Christina and Burke presented with (and subsequently denied) the opportunity to fulfill the fairy tale promise first put forward in “Save Me.” In the episode “Wishin’ and Hopin’,” Christina finally agrees to marry Burke, who proposed to her in the preceding week’s episode, “Great Expectations.” Their engagement serves as little more than comedic fodder in the episodes leading up to “Didn’t We Almost Have it All,” the season finale, in which Christina and Burke are set to walk down the aisle.

The episode opens, after a brief voiceover performed by Chief Richard Webber (James Pickens, Jr.), with Meredith, Izzie, and resident orthopedic surgeon Callie Torres (Sara Ramirez) helping Christina prepare for the impending ceremony. As the other doctors leave to answer a hospital page, Meredith stops to insist that Christina, ever hesitant about commitment, promise her that “no matter what, you’re walking down that aisle today,” adding, importantly, that “I need you to go down that aisle.” She explains that “you marrying Burke [is] a sign . . . that people like you and me can do this . . . You marrying Burke restores my faith in me”—or, more accurately, her faith in her relationship with Derek. Although Christina is joking when she quips,
“Oh, so my wedding is about you,” her statement more or less rings true. In much the way that Christina’s devotion served as a prop for Meredith’s successful return from the dead, her attainment of the fairy tale ideal would prove to Meredith that “people like you and me can do this” and act as a “sign” (for both Meredith and at-home viewers) that she and Derek can maintain their currently rocky relationship into the series’ next season.

Meredith further reiterates the symbolic significance of the wedding in convincing a panicked Christina to go through with the ceremony, demanding that “we need you to get your happy ending.” However, although Christina announces that “I’m ready” after Meredith makes her speech, Burke suddenly realizes that he is not. As he explains to Christina, “If I loved you—not the woman that I’m trying to make you be or the woman I hope you’ll become—but you . . . , I wouldn’t be up there waiting for you. I would be letting you go.” Christina is thus denied her fairytale ending. But the tragedy lies not so much (though it does partially) in the fact that Christina’s relationship has failed; rather, the significance of this incident lies in the foreshadowing function it serves in relation to Meredith and Derek’s continuing partnership.

When Meredith stands up in front of her friends’ wedding guests and announces that “it’s over; it’s so over,” she references not only Christina’s fairy tale but, more importantly, her own. In the scenes leading up to the dissolution of Christina and Burke’s engagement, Derek had, in fact, asked Meredith to “put me out of my misery” if “you’re not in this.” When viewed in conjunction with this narrative development and Meredith’s earlier comments concerning her stake in Christina’s successful completion of the marriage ritual, her declaration that “it’s over” takes on a deeper meaning for the viewing audience at home than it does for the wedding’s audience in the narrative. Moreover, the question of whether or not Meredith and Derek will remain together constitutes the cliffhanger that writers, producers, and network executives hope will compel viewers to tune into the next season’s premiere. Although Christina and Burke’s break-up and Burke’s sudden departure are big surprises for fans, these events seal the couple’s fate—there are no burning questions with regard to what will happen with these two characters next season—and work to foreshadow the outcome of and build anticipation around the real mystery: whether or not Meredith can “have it all.” The narrative thus upholds white
privilege by placing Christina and Burke’s relationship in narrative subordination to the needs of Meredith and Derek’s.

In making explicit its reliance on the generic conventions of the fairy tale in “Save Me,” the show reveals (however unintentionally) the unevenness of the applicability of the theme around which it is structured as well as the unevenness of Grey’s Anatomy’s racial politics more generally. If, as Rhimes claims, her show is, in some sense, “about fairytales,” then it is also not and can never be “about” Christina (and Burke) in the same way that it is about Meredith (and Derek). In other words, because the show is structured around an ideal—the fairy tale romance—that is, as Hurtado points out (842), specifically unavailable to Christina, Grey’s cannot help but reproduce the white privilege that, through its purportedly unconventional casting methods, it actively seeks to confront and defy. The dissolution of Christina and Burke’s relationship, as well as its function within the larger narrative and in terms of Washington’s departure from the show, makes this point abundantly clear.

Further, media pundits have reveled in the opportunity to pit marginalized groups (in this case, “gays” and “blacks”) against one another and, specifically, to delegitimate Rhimes’ presumably sincerely if not always successful antiracist production methods. Associated Press reporter Lynn Elber, for example, entitled a portion of her article on Washington’s firing “Racism or Homophobia?,” implying not only that the two must be mutually exclusive but that, in choosing to fire Washington, the show’s production team and the network’s executives were necessarily making a choice between employing one of the two. 6 In short, Rhimes may not see color, but the rest of the media (indeed, the rest of the world) apparently does. Although Washington’s firing and the narrative processes by which it was explained to viewers do not result directly from Rhime’s approach to casting, they render visible the contradictions inherent in attempting to combat racism without attending to and seriously grappling with the often hidden structural processes by which it is maintained.

At the same time, however, the connections that characters like Meredith and Christina share (which have been nurtured and maintained over nearly fifty hours of television broadcast at the close of Season 3) cannot be so easily discounted. While the show’s lack of attendance to power relations should not be trivialized, neither should the important connections that exist between Grey’s Anatomy’s major
characters and the potential sites of contestation they create. Meredith and Christina’s relationship is, for example, mutually and reciprocally beneficial and rewarding. After all, it is Meredith who helps Christina remove her wedding dress and comforts her after she discovers that Burke has removed his most prized belongings from their apartment. Scenes in which the women defend one another against attacks from co-workers, support each other through difficult times, and rely first on each other for emotional support appear frequently during the show’s three seasons and act as rich sources of intense emotional connection and viewing pleasure.

These connections, relationships, and meanings may at times be problematic, but they certainly represent a valid, if not entirely successful, attempt on the part of the show’s creator, producers, and writers to promote ideals of community, care, egalitarianism, and interconnection across, racial boundaries and gender categories. Although it is important for scholars to deconstruct and critique the ways in which these ideals are constructed, maintained, or undermined—particularly in light of Rhimes’ “enlightened” production practices—such criticisms overshadow the myriad possibilities and alternative meanings that *Grey’s Anatomy* could potentially and sometimes manages to produce and encourage.

**Conclusion**

The popular press’s framings of Washington’s departure from the show and the events that led up to it, while obviously problematic, point to the fact that, as Patricia Hill Collins states, “ideas about [race,] sexuality and gender that were very much a part of prior forms of racial rule remain . . . important today” even though the “processes used to maintain [these] outcome[s] are . . . different” (33). Although “race-blind” casting may sound like a progressive way to enrich the representational possibilities of a narrative form like television, it functions more accurately as a discursive band-aid for a political bullet hole. Rather than challenging the assumptions and values cultural forms have historically placed upon raced and gendered subjectivities and the material inequities that persist not only in the United States but throughout the world, “race-blind” casting ignores the intersectional specificities among groups of men and women and the systemic
power relations through which these differential experiences are produced and maintained.

She may be willing to challenge some racist institutional norms, but Rhimes does not question the underlying assumptions of the generic conventions (primarily, the fairy tale) that she employs. Thus, in much the way that what Collins calls the "new racism" maintains older racial formations through updated but less visible mechanisms, "race-blind" casting, at least in this instance, generally works to obscure the continued operation of many of the same assumptions, values, and norms that the practice is intended to counter. However, Rhimes' production methods cannot be considered a total failure. While her show does rely on some of the problematic representational strategies that frequently function to marginalize, objectify, and malign subordinated groups in popular culture, it also, at times, subverts those strategies in order to debunk or contradict their associated meanings.

Such simultaneous continuations and contestations highlight the importance of recognizing and critically contending with not only the racial meanings that are produced through shows like Grey's Anatomy but also the practices by which they are created and the terms within which those practices are discussed as well. Cultural critics, particularly those who work within anti-racist feminisms, should remain extracritical of popular cultural forms. Indeed, popular culture, more often than not, reproduces and upholds the very assumptions, discourses, and institutions that feminist and/or antiracist activism and theorizing have historically worked against and continue to oppose. However, television shows like Grey's Anatomy can provide viewers ample opportunities to derive pleasure from and imagine empowerment through its narratives. Such forms certainly carry on problematic representational traditions, but they can also act as attempts to undermine and reimagine those normative constructions, creating space to envision new modes of representation and social formation. Looking critically at and engaging fully with popular texts and the discourses surrounding their production mechanisms can help critics to better identify the ways in which those spaces might be more usefully and frequently forged.

Notes

1. For examples of the ways in which the media have discussed the show, its creator's casting practices, and its large audiences see Hal Boedeker's "ABC's Grey's Anatomy Cuts Through the
Competition,” Lisa de Moraes’ “A Special Delivery on Grey’s Anatomy: It’s a Pilot,” and Bill Keveny’s “Shades of Grey’s Anatomy.”


3. Aside from the previously mentioned connections, the show creates and maintains similar ties that bind Meredith to fellow intern Alex Karev (Justin Chambers), George to Burke, Derek to Chief Richard Webber, and Izzie to George. Similar, though less enduring, ties are also frequently established between doctors and patients. In “The Self Destruct Button,” Alex bonds with an African American man over their shared Iowan origins and “extreme” masculinities. In “Break on Through,” Izzie feels entitled to suggest that a pregnant African-American teen give her baby up for adoption—like Izzie did with hers—without first consulting the girl’s mother because the two women live in the same trailer park in which Izzie grew up. In “No Man’s Land” Meredith develops a special connection with an unconscious rape victim because they are wearing the same shoes.

4. Fellow intern Alex Karev (Justin Chambers) later nicknames Izzie “Dr. Model.”

5. When Meredith asks Dr. Shepherd whether or not their prior sexual relationship factored into his decision to pick her for the surgery, he reminds her that “you’re [the patient’s] doctor, and on your first day—with very little training—you helped save her life. You earned the right to follow her case through to the finish.” Later, Meredith shows up fellow intern Alex Karev (Justin Chambers) in front of Chief Webber (James Pickens, Jr.), further asserting her surgical talent. In this way, Meredith’s differential privilege is negated and instead attributed to her individual merit.

6. For more examples of similar press coverage, see for example, Kevin Naff’s “Calling a Faggot a Faggot” on the Web site Southern Voice, “Shame on You, Shonda” on the internet blog Girls Gone Gossip, Noelle Hancock’s “Grey’s Anatomy Smackdown, Round Two: Heigl vs. Washington,” Carmen Van Kerckhove’s “Should Isaiah Washington be Fired” on Racialicious, an internet blog devoted to exploring “the intersection of race and pop culture,” and Black Voices blogger Marcus Vanderberg’s “Isaiah Washington Fired from Grey’s Anatomy,” all of which are cited below.

7. For example, in “Don’t Stand So Close to Me,” Meredith demands, against Christina’s will, that the other interns forgive Christina for her helping Burke hide his hand injury. When Christina asks Meredith why she cannot just mind her own business, Meredith replies that “[y]ou’re my sister, my family, you’re all I’ve got.” Christina subsequently gives in and allows Meredith to hug her (something she rarely does for anyone but Burke or Meredith). By juxtaposing this scene with one in which Christina finally reconnects with Burke after weeks of estrangement and another in which Meredith hugs her mother out of an Alzheimer’s-induced rant, the show suggests that their connection (that is, Christina and Meredith’s) provides both women with the emotional sustenance they need to deal with other difficult events in their daily lives.

Works Cited


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