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**Changing Faces on Children's Cable Programming:
The Emergence of Racial and Ethnic Minorities as Lead Characters on
Nickelodeon and Disney Channel 1996-2005**

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by

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Thesis

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Dedication

In memory of my grandmother, Naomi Blassingille (1917-2002).

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Abstract

Changing Faces on Children's Cable Programming: The Emergence of Racial and Ethnic Minorities as Lead Characters on Nickelodeon and Disney Channel 1996-2005

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Although children's programming has been considered to be at the forefront of incorporating racial and ethnic diversity, the roles on television for racial and ethnic minorities have continued to be limited or based on stereotypes, and sheer presence in numbers for non-whites is still lacking in comparison to white characters. Television programming during the 1990s and early 2000s became a key period in history for racial and ethnic representation, as programming as a whole reflected a greater non-white presence than ever before, with children's programming as no exception. This thesis focuses on how race and ethnicity were depicted on the children's cable networks Nickelodeon and Disney Channel during this time period. My study focuses on three programs, *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* (Nickelodeon, 1996-1998), *Taina* (Nickelodeon, 2001-2002), and *The Proud Family* (Disney Channel, 2001-2005), all of which placed racial and ethnic minorities as lead characters, diverging from the standard in casting for children's television programs. In observing whether these programs portrayed race in an assimilationist, color/culture conscious, or post-racial manner, my study provides insight into the overarching narrative constructed about race and ethnicity for youth viewing two of television's most successful networks committed to programming for kids in this time period.

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Introduction

Since television's inception, racial and ethnic minorities have continued to fight for a space on the screen. Throughout the years, there has been landmark progression in roles for racial and ethnic minorities, but it has remained common for programs to downplay non-white culture-specific traits and storylines or play into stereotypes when the minority experience is reflected (Rivadeneyra 2006, 393). There have been few lead characters of color on children's programming and when they are present, these narratives have been mostly told with a white perspective in mind. Television networks Nickelodeon and Disney Channel rose to the forefront during the 1990s with an increase in racial and ethnic minority characters, choosing to provide children with programs that contained minorities as lead characters and telling stories from their points of view. Arguably, network executives had held off on programming that featured minority life, claiming that there was not a market for these programs (Seiter and Mayer 2004, 130), but as ratings reveal, audiences have been receptive to series with non-white leads.

In observing the period when Nickelodeon and Disney Channel began to include programming that starred non-white lead characters, the Annenberg Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania found in their 1999 State of Children's Television Report that 60% of programs incorporated some sort of ethnic diversity. Even though 40% of programming lacked any ethnic diversity, this is significant progress from decades past. During the late 1990s, there were more shows than ever airing on more venues than ever, with the largest increase in programming taking place on basic cable venues including

Disney Channel and Nickelodeon. With children spending an equal amount of time each year watching television as they spend in school, studies indicate that television programming can have an effect on children (Woodard 1999, 5). Researchers (Ryan 2010; Chandler 1997; Hobbs & RobbGrieco 2012) have transitioned from calling television viewers passive to active, which makes television not only entertainment for adolescents, but also a site to help configure kids' own norms and behaviors.

Due to decades of ongoing discrimination, misunderstanding, and stereotypes, it is important for children to see racial and ethnic minorities in a positive light. It is known that schools today are often as segregated as they were in 1968, so for many children in the United States, they do not interact with children of different races until they enter college or begin working (Orfield 2009, 3). With this in mind, television programming can be a way for child viewers to see that not only do all racial and ethnic groups co-exist but also have cultural differences that should be acknowledged and understood. For kids of racial and ethnic backgrounds that are less visible in programming, it is conceivable that they will take notice of this and may begin to contemplate their own place and role in society. To help prepare the next generation for a country that in 2050 is predicted to become majority minority, television programming should reflect the non-white shift in population. Through incorporating more of a true representation of the country's population, such inclusion will provide viewers with the opportunity to see that the United State is much more than just black and white and that racial and ethnic minority groups are multi-dimensional and multi-faceted.

There has yet to be a research project that specifically focuses on racial and ethnic diversity in children's cable programming during the period of the 1990s and 2000s. Both of the major works of scholarship on Nickelodeon, Heather Hendershot's edited book *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel For Kids* and Sarah Banet-Weiser's *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*, contain a chapter centered on race in programming, but both lack a comprehensive focus on this topic. Disney Channel programs during this period, which starred racial and ethnic minorities, have yet to be explored in depth in academia. Network executives have said in the past that racially mixed programs or programs with racial or ethnic minority leads can feel forced, obtain low ratings, or not translate globally, and are, therefore, less marketable (Seiter and Mayer 2004, 129-131). This has created a consensus in the industry that programming with racial and ethnic minorities are less likely to succeed (Seiter and Mayer 2004, 129-131). However, Nickelodeon and Disney Channel's programming, which at times starred racial and ethnic minorities in the 1990s and early 2000s, was successful in the ratings, debunking the myth that programs with minority character leads cannot be as successful as those with white lead characters.

Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical perspectives that I draw from in conducting this research are cultivation theory, uses and gratifications model, and schemata theory, all situated within more social scientific perspectives on television and representation. Cultivation theory conveys that exposure to television can construct one's worldview, which includes the norms, structure, and social behaviors that are reflected in society (Graves 1999, 712).

Television can be a social reality for its viewers, thus continuous restricted images of racial and ethnic minorities may lead viewers to develop stereotypes and prejudice, as well as to see these groups as powerless and unimportant. The uses and gratifications model finds that “children actively select television content that satisfies their needs” and assumes that racial and ethnic viewers would like to see characters of their same race (Graves 1999, 713). According to this model, children use television to learn about experiences outside of their environment but also may use television to further their knowledge about their own culture. Schemata theory expresses that children establish a schema, a way to organize and process the world, which can be applied to their viewing of television, tying demands and requirements of television show content to specific genres. These demands and requirements are based “on the assumption that people use the regularities of their experience actively to construct knowledge and expectations about people, places, objects, and events” (Fitch, Huston, and Wright 1993, 41). These cues relate to the perceived reality of programming by the viewer, which is dependent on the viewer’s own life experiences, making fictional programming at times appear socially realistic. These three theoretical perspectives help me argue for the importance and implications of children’s programming that depicts the lives of racial and ethnic minorities.

Literature on Children’s Television Programming and Race

Existing literature regarding children, television, and race spans a wide range of topics. The majority of academic work in this category has focused on prejudice reduction, stereotypes and representation, and consumption of programming. Broadcast

programming has continued to be the prime focus when looking at children, television and race. There have been two major works on Nickelodeon programming but there has yet to be extensive research on programming broadcast on Disney Channel.

Prejudice Reduction

When looking at the literature concerning prejudice reduction, there is a split in focus: One set of academics looks at reducing prejudice through television programming, while another set examines reducing prejudice through educational curriculum in school. Studies (Graves 1999; Lovelace et. al 1994) that look at prejudice reduction of race through television programming point to *Sesame Street* as the quintessential program, as it incorporates a race relations curriculum to purposively influence children's perceptions of ethnic and racial categories different than themselves. If studies do not research this specific program, they have focused on other broadcast programs, primarily those on PBS (Mares and Acosta 2010; Musher-Eizenman and Persson 2003). Prejudice reduction has been difficult to assess in these instances as the children being studied are of pre-school age and the effect of programming has been looked at over a short-term rather than long-term period. Not only increased awareness of race relations and general difference come as children grow older, but also, in several instances, the programs shown to children are not a part of their daily viewing routine and repeated viewing has been cited to increase positive effects in prejudice reduction. Studies (Aboud and Doyle 1996; Roberts, Bell, and Murphy 2008) that focus on prejudice reduction through discussions not specifically connected to television programming, but rather daily interaction with those around them,

appear to have been more effective in determining reduction in prejudicial thoughts and behavior.

Stereotypes and Representation

An area of literature that has remained relevant throughout the decades in regards to race and ethnicity on children's television programming is stereotypes and representation. Allport (1954) defines stereotypes as "primarily images within a category invoked by the individual to justify either love-prejudice or hate-prejudice" (Takanishi 1982, 117). Other aspects of stereotypes include overgeneralization or honing in on certain traits, which can lead to a justification for acceptance or rejection of a group. Stereotypes have the potential to grow in defiance of all evidence, may be unsupported by facts, can be sustained by selective perception and forgettings, and may change over time (Takanishi 1982, 117).

Most literature (Berry and Asamen 1993; Berry and Mitchell-Kernan 1982; Gray 2004; Fuller 1992; Entman and Rojecki 2001) from social science perspectives that examine stereotypes discuss family programming, adult programming or broadcast children's programming, such as *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *Good Times* (1974-1979), and *Fat Albert* (1972-1985), to name a few relevant series. African Americans have remained the most visible non-white group on television since the 1960s, thus the majority of literature has looked at the role of blacks on television. In regards to stereotypes, researchers are concerned with the silence, assimilation, or objectification of blacks. In programming, particularly in the past, blacks are either invisible and their culture is non-existent; reiterating historical tropes such as the Tom or the Mammy; or

their culture is amplified and dramatized, at times making their race the sole attribute of self, and they appear as the brutal black buck, the tragic mulatto, or the coon (Takanishi 1982, 124; Bogle 1973). This becomes complicated in programming, like *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977) or *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996), in which a majority black cast attempts to cater to a wide audience yet the comedy of the actors can appear at times to play into stereotypes. Graves (1993) and Stroman (1991) both acknowledge an increased diversity of portrayals of African Americans and the African American family on television starting in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s. Blacks were no longer only portrayed as incompetent, poor, and jobless; rather programs like *The Cosby Show* revealed a black middle class two-parent household.

For Latinos and Asians who have less of a presence on television programming than African Americans, there is an even smaller distinction between stereotyping, authenticity, and culture due to the lack of variety of portrayals. In the past, Latinos have typically been portrayed as law enforcers, lawbreakers, the Latin lover and the comic (Arias 1982; Ramasubramanian 2010). In Rivadeneyra's 2006 study on Latino adolescent perceptions of images on television, she expressed that Latino characters have been found to be the least articulate, dress less professionally, have the heaviest accent, and talk more about crime and violence than other ethnic groups. She finds that representation of Latina/os on TV has been increasing, but, generally, stereotypes prevail as the group continues to be cast in low-status occupations. Recent programs like *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010) and *The George Lopez Show* (2002-2007) have been successful at showing Latina/os in a multifarious manner, with both programs navigating between two cultural

worlds, an experience felt by many of today's second and third generation youth. Asians are often gendered in their portrayals, as the men are commonly seen as fighters or masters of technology, and the women depicted as dependent, weak, or helpless, with both men and women continually representing the model minority (Iiyama & Kitano 1982, 153-154). Deo et al. (2008) finds that the model minority stereotype is the most present stereotype of Asians in today's television landscape, with men being portrayed as undesirable in opposition to women being portrayed as available. He specifically finds that Asian Americans are continually excluded from sitcoms, which usually center on domestic life, revealing that they are still not considered to be a part of everyday American life. Counter-narratives have begun to appear on programs like *Grey's Anatomy* (2005 –) and *Lost* (2004-2010), but they are still few and far between.

Representation is tied to stereotypes, for the fewer ethnic and racial minorities that appear in programming, the less variety there is in how they are portrayed, as specific tropes become continuously performed and emerge as the norm. Hendershot (1999) finds that in children's animated programming in the 1950s and 1960s, references to blacks and other non-white characters have historically been excluded for fear of complaints of racism. This led to white-centric programming, which has permeated children's television throughout the decades under the guise of "protecting children to make cartoons a space free from controversial images" (Stabile 2003, 37). There has been a shift in placing more racial and ethnic minorities in animated programs, such as *Dora The Explorer* (2000 –) and *Hey Arnold* (1996-2004), among others, but these programs are on cable television. This supports the continued fear on the part of broadcast networks

of producing series that could be read as “too ethnic,” which contributes to their thinking that mass audiences could be alienated and result in a negative economic impact on the network.

Children’s Consumption of Television

Concerns of prejudice, stereotyping, and representation are raised in discussions of the consumption of programming by children. Consumption in this context is referred to as how and why children watch television and what they may be learning from it, as further explored below. Several studies (Berry and Asamen 1993; Berry and Mitchell-Kernan 1982) approach consumption by looking at the socialization of children through television. Socialization is defined as “the processes by which members of society acquire certain modes of thinking and behavior through social influences” (Berry and Kernan 1982, 2). This definition is further expanded by Aimee Dorr (1982), who finds that the certain modes of thinking presented by social influences reflect the social roles, attitudes, and values that are accepted and expected within specific segments of society.

The most common way of categorizing consumption among kids has been along the lines of race, gender, and class. Studies have focused on how racial and ethnic minorities learn self-concept but there has also been research on what children learn about other racial and ethnic groups from television programming. It is established that minority children, specifically blacks and Latina/os, watch more television than whites (Ward, Day and Thomas 2010; Rivadeneyra and Ward 2005; Hobbs and RobbGrieco 2012). Researchers have begun to argue that this trend may be due to segmented programming. Minority children not only want to watch mainstream programming but

also want to watch shows with characters that look like them. The majority of these shows are on racial and ethnic-centered television channels, such as BET, Univision, and Telemundo. In terms of gender, there has been a focus on the difference in black and white children's levels of consumption and preference categorized by gender (O'Connor, Brooks-Gunn and Graber 2000; Brown and Pardun 2004; Calvert et. al 2001; Children Now 1999). There have also been studies (Guidotti-Hernandez 2007, Rivadeneyra 2006; Rivadeneyra and Ward 2005; Ryan 2010; Moran 2011) looking specifically at Latina/o programming and its influence on Latina/o worldviews. Distinctions of class in children's television consumption have typically been examined through the lens of gender and race, determining if those on a lower socio-economic scale consume more programming (O'Connor, Brooks-Gunn, and Graber 2000; Lee and Vaught 2003), or analyzing specific programming that deals with class (Children Now 1999). Children Now (1999) has performed the most in-depth study of childrens' perception of class in television, asking African-American, Latino, White, and Asian children about what they see regarding professions and wealth related to race in programming.

Post-Network Television and Race and Ethnicity in TV Programming

One reason that African Americans, Latina/os, and Asians gained more representation on television is the creation and rise of cable television. During the 1990s, non-white faces began to disappear from broadcast networks, but gained a space on cable networks. This has been labeled as the post-network era, a time when several cable channels arose and new broadcast networks were formed. The act of narrowcasting was used by several networks to cater to certain niche markets in this period. (Fuller 2010,

290). According to Jennifer Fuller (2010), the discourse concerning cable was one of “risk,” arguing that the “risk” of having racial and ethnic minorities on programs brought about critical attention for the programs and cable networks, as well as boosts in subscriptions (286). As the Big Four networks claimed that they would not air certain kinds of black-led shows, “cable channels showed original movies and series with minority casts, and capitalized on controversies about race and broadcasting in order to promote themselves as edgy and innovative” (287). Nickelodeon is cited as one of the networks that had several programs starring African Americans at this time and was considered by one writer to be within a different programming universe “where whites are not only happy to watch black shows, they even pay for the privilege” (Fuller 2010, 286).

Origins and Branding of Nickelodeon and Disney

As noted above, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Heather Hendershot have written and edited the two most comprehensive accounts of the children’s cable station Nickelodeon. These works provide details on the writing and production of specific shows, and also the overarching idea and promotion of Nickelodeon as a brand. In addition, they address how this brand has grown and changed since its inception. Nickelodeon has continuously been ranked number one in daytime ratings (Hendershot 2004, 1), which makes it a competitor not only to other cable children’s networks but also to broadcast networks. As is evident by looking at Banet-Weiser and Hendershot’s research, Nickelodeon has a clear commitment to diversity. Not only is Nickelodeon a brand that most adults consider safe and trustworthy, the channel’s programming focuses on interpersonal relations rather

than violence, and does not “show a world in which only white boys have brains” (Hendershot 2004, 2). While for children the channel has provided goofy pranks and activities galore that contained slime, for parents, it offered an arena filled with gender equality, racial and ethnic diversity, and non-violence. The channel created an “us vs. them” mentality, showing the difference between adults and children and making the storylines from a child’s perspective (Hendershot, 2004, 89). In a rebranding effort that began in 1989 under new channel president Geraldine Laybourne, Nickelodeon added new shows in the genres of comedy, melodrama and horror while expressing multiculturalism in the shows through significant roles played by Asian Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans. According to Banet-Weiser, the channel specifically empowers children through its commitment to gender and ethnic representations, providing children with cultural capital.

Disney Channel began in 1983 but was not available on basic cable until 1997. Through its transition to basic cable, Disney Channel underwent a significant rebranding, making it a competitor for Nickelodeon. Disney Channel initially distinguished itself from Nickelodeon through its emphasis on music programming, airing music videos and live concerts of popular acts, like *NSYNC, Britney Spears, and Brandy, among others, which were aimed at the pre-teen and teen demographic. It also featured classic Disney films and television programs, extending its well-known brand and media to a young audience (Richmond 1997). Like Nickelodeon, Disney Channel created live-action and animated original series, but the tone and aesthetics of its programming heavily differed from Nickelodeon and other children’s cable stations like Cartoon Network, as Disney

Channel sought to be a “family channel,” as opposed to the networks listed above that chose to take a child’s eye view of life (Sterngold 1997).

Methodologies

My research focuses on case studies of the television programs *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*, *Taina*, and *The Proud Family*, which appeared on children’s cable networks, Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, during the mid 1990s to the early 2000s. All three of these shows were successful, some the most highly rated of their time, and all three included racial and ethnic minority characters as lead characters. Television programs *Taina* and *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*, which aired on Nickelodeon, were the first youth-oriented shows to star a girl of Latino and Asian American descent on a children’s cable network. In production from 2001 to 2002, *Taina* follows a teenage Puerto-Rican girl who attends an arts high school waiting to catch her big break. *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*, which aired from 1996 to 1998, centers on Asian American character Shelby Woo, a teenage girl who lives with her innkeeper grandfather and interns at a local police department, where she helps solve cases. Although both Nickelodeon and Disney Channel had programs (*Kenan and Kel*, 1996-2000; *The Famous Jett Jackson*, 1998-2001) that starred African Americans beginning in the mid 1990s, *The Proud Family*, airing from 2001 to 2005, served as Disney Channel’s first animated television series. The program concerns the trials and tribulations of a 14-year-old African American girl.

Previous scholarly work on children’s programming mostly examines broadcast educational programming for children below the ages of five. While this work is

important, educational programming has a specific agenda to reduce prejudice. Therefore, research needs to be expanded, looking also at programs that children watch purely for entertainment, as studies have shown that children can be active television watchers and use the medium to understand the world around them. My work will continue to look at stereotypes and representation in popular TV but rather than focusing solely on negative portrayals, I will take a more varied approach. In *Watching Race*, Herman Gray (2004) delineates three categories concerning discursive practices of blackness on television, which he finds to be assimilationist, pluralist, and multicultural. Building on and modifying his model, I have constructed my own three categories, assimilationist, color/culture conscious, and post-racial, arguing these best fit the narrative of non-white depictions of race and ethnicity on children's television programming in the 1990s and early 2000s. I chose not to use Gray's pluralist category because I did not see the trend of "separate but equal," i.e. blacks living in a black world, present in children's programming in this period. Although Gray's definition of a multicultural program is similar to mine of color/culture conscious, I felt that the term color/culture conscious was more appropriate for my study, because in series like *Taina* and *The Proud Family*, a consciousness about a specific race and/or culture is made present to the viewer, as well as enlightens characters of other cultures and colors within the program. By this, I mean that there is a constant exchange of dialogue of the principal racial vantage point throughout the shows where non-blacks are inclusive in the storyline. Race and culture are not downplayed, but interwoven throughout. This is in opposition to programs like *The Cosby Show* or *Frank's Place*, programs that Gray finds to be

multicultural. These have tended to focus on varying degrees of blackness within the black community, while incorporating little inclusiveness of non-blacks. I define an assimilationist rhetoric as one that is actively concerned with the pursuit of the American Dream, the attempt to reach a normative middle class status, and maintain American, but read “white,” values. A color/culture conscious approach gives attention to aspects of one’s race or ethnicity, such as language, cultural celebrations and/or holidays, or music, but also shows the character situated in assimilated American life. Lastly, a post-racial narrative would largely disregard difference in terms of race and ethnicity on both a personal and societal level. Multiple categories can be found within a program, but I argue that programs typically utilize one overarching category with respect to their representations of race and ethnicity.

The majority of previous studies focus on how a single minority group is portrayed, and the group that is most looked at is African Americans. As Latino and Asian populations are increasing in the United States, how these two groups are portrayed is important as well. My project examines programming that includes each of these racial groups. As shown in multiple studies, African Americans and Latina/os consume television at a higher rate than whites, with some attributing this to their viewing of both mainstream and racial and ethnic specific programming. I am interested in seeing how these characters were portrayed and the storylines that accompanied them to understand what potentially made the programs popular among minorities and whites alike. Although the focus of my work is on racial and ethnic diversity in programming, gender and class intersect with perceptions of racial and ethnic minorities and influence representations as

well. In the United States, Latina/os and African Americans overall have less wealth than whites and children have picked up on these cues (McKernan et. al 2013). Looking into how class, as well as gender and familial life is constructed on these programs, as further explained in the section below, will help me gain a more comprehensive picture of what factors tie into notions of race and ethnic identity.

I use content analysis and discourse analysis to conduct my research, building upon the work on Nickelodeon by Hendershot and Banet-Weiser, who both use content and discourse analysis to examine the television industry's role in children's television and the building of a successful cable brand. Textual analysis aids my understanding of how specific television programs with lead racial and ethnic minority characters were successful within the media structure of the day and what ideologies were present in these programs. I observed at least twelve episodes of each series to gain a sense of the plot and within these twelve episodes, choose one to analyze in depth. The episode that I chose to analyze in depth in each chapter is an episode that revealed the tensions of raising issues concerning race and ethnicity in that particular series. Through using textual analysis, I examined elements of televisual style and narrative, such as characters' accent, geographic location, family structure and values, language, and dress in these programs. I observed if discussions of race are present, if there are storylines related to identity, and if these narratives appear to be consistent with the program's plot, or if they appear to be stand-alone episodes. I assessed if the program appears to construct race through an assimilationist, color/culture conscious, or post-racial manner. This was done through discerning the style and narrative of the program and considering how those elements

contribute to a construction of racial and ethnic identity, or a lack thereof. Other components that were explored include the theme song and guest stars on the shows. This analysis can reveal how and to whom the program was intended to be marketed to and could potentially substantiate how well the series presented specific races and/or ethnic groups with seeming authenticity; in other words, whether the narrative and images presented in the show express the norms and the values specific to one's racial and ethnic culture i.e. food, language, and dress, among others. In Sarah Banet-Weiser's *Kids Rule!*, she finds that racial authenticity in Nickelodeon programming is the result of stressing the importance of family history and tracing the "roots" of ethnicities, as well as being presented as a general political and cultural style (145). Content analysis is congruent with my framework in assessing the representation of minority characters in Nickelodeon and Disney Channel programming during the mid-90s to mid-2000s, addressing how sheer numbers and types of roles for minority children differed from previous programming.

In my research on past and recent trade press, discourse analysis provides a more in-depth understanding of the industrial ideologies, or how one conceptualizes the world in which the program is set, of racial and ethnic character constructions of the programs I study, as well as of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel as brands. I analyze secondary materials such as interviews and internal and external reports on the shows and their production teams from books and the trade press. In addition, I look at the public discussion by the creators, producers, and writers of the shows, as well as examine their other works and assess if they show themselves to be concerned with portraying diversity

in other outlets. I also look into commentary by the lead actors and actresses, examining their expression of their thoughts concerning the shows. Ratings are also observed to understand Nickelodeon and Disney Channel's willingness to broadcast these programs and dispel the industrial myth that shows with minority lead characters will not attract a substantial audience. Lastly, I observe the relationship between live action versus animated programming and whether a specific format allows for different types of depictions of race.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter One, titled "Shelby Who?: Asian American Representation and the Post-Racial Narrative of Nickelodeon's Whodunit Series *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*," focuses on the Nickelodeon program, *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*, which aired from 1996 to 1998. This chapter looks at Nickelodeon in its post-golden age era and the premiere of Nickelodeon's first non-white female live-action lead character. It analyzes the assimilationist discourse by journalists and post-racial discourse by the creator, Alan Goodman, and lead actress, Irene Ng. While the program is largely presented through a post-racial framework, I look at two episodes in depth that show ruptures in this framework revealing assimilationist and color/culture conscious storylines. Lastly, I expand from this case study to look at the representation and narratives of Asian Americans in children's television series today.

Chapter Two, "I Know I Can't Wait to See My Name in Lights': Puerto Rican Representation and the Color/Culture Conscious Narrative of the Nickelodeon television series *Taina*," examines *Taina*, another Nickelodeon program, which aired from 2001 to

2002. In this chapter, I analyze Nickelodeon as a network and its shift to incorporate Latina/os as lead characters in its programming. I look at the journalistic discourse surrounding this shift, which variably reflected both an assimilationist and color/culture conscious vantage point. I also explore the marketing and branding of the program to the public; the show's audience heavily increased with the premiere of the series. I argue that this was due to the increased presence of the Latina/os on television and the series' relatable color/culture conscious narrative. The backgrounds of the series' creator, Maria-Perez Brown, and the lead actress, Christina Vidal, play an important role in the marketing and branding of the program and claims to its authenticity. This chapter further gives attention to an issue that programs with non-white leads face in terms of potentially alienating their audience when discussing the ideology of the program and whether it adheres to an assimilationist, color/culture conscious, or post-racial narrative. I analyze in depth an episode of the program that reveals the strong non-white emphasis of the program to the point of making white appear as Other. I then look at the presence of Latina/os in children's programming today on kid's cable networks.

Chapter Three, "I'm Penny Proud, I'm Cute and I'm Loud, and I Got It Goin' On": African American Representation and the Color/Culture Conscious Narrative of the Disney Channel Series *The Proud Family*, looks at the Disney Channel program *The Proud Family*, which ran from 2001 to 2005. In this chapter, I explore the atmosphere of Disney Channel during the early 2000s, when *The Proud Family* premiered, in order to understand the network's increased emphasis on racial and ethnic visibility. Specifically in this case, I look at a program with a color/culture conscious narrative. I also examine

the importance of the rise in the tween market, which became Disney's primary target niche market, and consider how *The Proud Family* fit within this structure. Like Maria-Perez Brown, Bruce W. Smith, the creator of *The Proud Family*, played an important role in the journalistic discourse surrounding the marketing, branding, and constructed authenticity of the program. Finally, I analyze an episode of the series in depth, exploring the color/culture conscious storyline through its focus on a tween interracial crush. Throughout the chapter, I place what happened with Disney Channel in relation to what was taking place at Nickelodeon during this time in terms of their approach to non-white leads and tween programming. I also question how live action may differ from animation in the representations and discourses surrounding children's programming and race and ethnicity in television. In conclusion, I discuss the legacy of African Americans on children's television, and in particular, on Disney Channel and in animation.

In my conclusion, I discuss the multiculturalism of the 1990s and how this allowed for an increase of racial and ethnic minority lead characters on television and the preferred narratives concerning race and ethnicity found on children's programming. I observe how this trend of color/culture consciousness narratives have disappeared in the post-9/11 age, as post-racial and assimilationist programming have become the two main vantage points demonstrated in children's television. I argue that the loss of a color/culture conscious perspective has also led to a loss in the sense of the "real" and that extraordinary storylines have accompanied this loss of cultural awareness. I lastly turn to areas in children's programming that should be further studied to understand what children are observing and learning about race and ethnicity in America.

Chapter One: Shelby Who? Asian American Representation and the Post-Racial Narrative of Nickelodeon's Whodunit Series *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*

Introduction

In prime time and daytime, broadcast and cable, and adult, as well as children's television programming, Asian American characters rarely appear on the screen. If they do appear, rarely are their characters the leads in the program. L.S. Kim (2004) traces the history of Asian Americans in television, beginning in the 1960s when Asian Americans were commonly depicted as foreigners or servants, to the millennium, as Asian Americans have received increased visibility in female roles and in children and cartoon programming. *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* (1996-1998) began during the 1990s, a time period that Kim cites as "Asian Americans as Either/Or", meaning that characters were either seen as "good" Asians or "liberated" Americans. I would argue that Shelby was depicted as both "good" and "liberated," rather than being seen as either/or. The Nickelodeon series was also a precursor to the millennial trend of placing more Asian Americans in children's programming.

This chapter will examine the representation of race and ethnicity in the Nickelodeon series *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*, as well as the journalistic discourse surrounding the program. I will address the network environment at Nickelodeon that the program entered in 1996 and consider how this environment allowed for an Asian American girl as the show's star. I will then turn to journalistic discourse focused on Irene Ng, who played Shelby Woo, and on Pat Morita, who played her grandfather, as well as discourse centered on the series itself during the series' premiere season. Then, I

will explore the premise behind the program and look further into the episodes of Seasons 1 and 2 to understand how Shelby's ethnic background was depicted in the series, and if the program's overarching narrative concerning race and ethnicity took an assimilationist, color/culture conscious, or post-race approach.

Nickelodeon: A Time When The Only Colors on the Screen were Green, Orange, and White

Before *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* aired on the cable kid's network Nickelodeon in 1996, the channel's lead characters were overwhelmingly white. In the book *Slimed!: An Oral History of Nickelodeon's Golden Age*, which recounts Nickelodeon's history pre-1995, Mathew Klickstein devotes a chapter asking why the network's programming was, in fact, so white. Network executives, producers, and writers attributed it to several things; the primary reason being that their main audience during this time was children with access to cable, who, in turn, were mostly upper-class white children (152). Creators of the program *The Adventures of Pete & Pete* (1993-1996), Will McRobb and Chris Viscardi, said their program was autobiographical and that their world was one that was majority white and set in the New Jersey suburbs (153-154). Scott Webb, Nickelodeon's first creative director, expressed the view that the network thought that by simply broadcasting creative and out-of-the-box programming for children the network was being diverse (152). Although the network had a degree of racial and ethnic diversity in their production crews, Nickelodeon ultimately found it difficult to find child actors of color to cast due to their choices of shooting locations (Orlando, Florida and New Jersey, among others) (164-165). At this time, Nickelodeon

did not find it necessary to put forth an extra effort in incorporating minority children in their programs. *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* was one of the first of Nickelodeon's programs to star a racial or ethnic minority and thus began the network's present-day notoriety and long history of casting non-white children in lead roles.

Looking for Shelby Woo

The decision to cast Asian American actress Irene Ng as Shelby Woo was not the network's original intention. The creator of the program, Alan Goodman, expressed that he simply wanted to do a mystery series and that he had no preconceptions about what the race or ethnicity of the lead actress should be (Asian Pages 1996, 10). However, the program was originally titled *The Mystery Files of Shelby Wink*, which Lorenza Munoz of the *Los Angeles Times* found to indicate that the program was originally written to star a white girl. Elizabeth Jensen of the *Los Angeles Times* attributes the discovery of Irene Ng to the network's decision to hold extra casting sessions in cities with large Asian populations, San Francisco and Vancouver, although Ng was found in New York City. Alan Goodman recounts that Ng was the best actress that executives auditioned and that she impressed them more than any other girl. This led them to rename the program *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* and to cast famed Asian American actor Pat Morita, known for his roles in *The Karate Kid* (1984, 1986, 1989, 1994) films and the television programs, *Happy Days* (1974-1984) and *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977), to play Shelby's grandfather (Munoz 2002, F1). Paula Kaplan, senior vice president of talent for Nickelodeon at the time, explains the network's colorblind approach to casting Ng and its acknowledgement of the world as an increasingly racially and ethnic diverse place:

“What we do differently here is that we are open-minded and try to be flexible as to who is right for the part...It’s more work, but people get excited about seeing great acting. And we want to make sure we are reflecting what is in a kid’s life. The world is a big melting pot now, and what we do is try to reflect their lives” (Munoz 2002, F1).

Kaplan acknowledges what many media executives will not, that performing outreach in casting non-white actors and potentially tweaking storylines to fit a non-white character may require more work on the network’s part. There was a general consensus among network executives that programs starring racial and ethnic minorities do not appeal to a wide audience and therefore, get considered “ethnic” programs, only to be placed on networks or nights of programming that cater to these non-white audiences. Executives have expressed that these programs are not economically viable, particularly in terms of syndication in other countries (Seiter & Mayer 2004,130). As seen above, Nickelodeon took a different approach when discussing Ng’s role as Shelby Woo, acknowledging that the world consists of different races and ethnicities and that placing non-whites at the forefront of programming can, in fact, be economically viable in and outside of the United States.

Surprisingly, the star of *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*, Irene Ng, came from this increasingly global melting pot of which Kaplan speaks. Ng, originally from Malaysia, moved to the United States at the age of 14 after her father secured a managerial job at a Chinese restaurant in Pennsylvania. Ng’s father had hoped that living in the United States would present greater opportunities for Ng and her siblings, which clearly became the case with Ng. After coming to the United States, Ng entered and won

local beauty pageants in Pennsylvania and was approached by a talent manager, which began her entry into acting. She made an appearance in the television program *All My Children* (1970-2011) and films *Heaven & Earth* (1993) and *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) before she was cast as Shelby Woo.

In looking at the promotional discourse surround Ng as she entered her Shelby Woo role, she was consistently portrayed as the embodiment of the American Dream. With reference to her immigrating to the United States for better opportunities, her enrollment at Harvard University at the time she was cast in her role as Shelby Woo solidified that Ng had achieved this opportunity. She already had earned two prized objects in American culture – an elite education and media stardom. As an example of such discourse, one can look to the second sentence of Scott Moore’s *Washington Post* article, “Success Is No Mystery To ‘Shelby Woo’ Star,” he lists off the accomplishments that Ng has achieved since moving to the United States: “...Ng (pronounced Ung) has learned English, graduated as valedictorian of her Allentown, Pa., high school class, appeared in a daytime soap and two films, and maintained an A average in pre-med and economics at Harvard.” Ng was viewed as a bright young woman who would bring energy and wit to the character of Shelby Woo. However, Ng was clearly being painted as a model minority, exemplary in her accomplishments as a 21-year-old Asian American girl. Through this assimilationist portrayal of Ng in the journalistic discourse, she was presented as appealing to white viewers for being “just like them,” yet she was also pitched to non-white viewers that may come from an immigrant family and are first or second-generation Americans.

The promotional discourse concerning the other Asian American star of the program, Pat Morita, constructed him as the wise, experienced actor to help Ng come into her own not only as an actress, but as an Asian American actress. In discussing Ng at the time, Morita finds that she has the qualities of Ralph Macchio from *Karate Kid* and Henry Winkler from *Happy Days* when they were inexperienced actors. Morita states in a *Washington Post* article, “She’s a still-blossoming talent. Once she learns that the camera is her best friend, she’s going to go very, very far. And I don’t care if she is better looking than I am.” Morita clearly sees the potential for Ng to become a mainstream American television and film star. Also, in the statement above, one can see that Morita finds Ng to be endearing and does see himself as a mentor for Ng.

Morita, now deceased, had a long history in film and television. He began as a stand-up comic and made his film debut as an Oriental villain in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1967). He became the first Japanese-American to obtain a lead role on a television series, *Mr. T and Tina* (1976), which only lasted five episodes. Although this program was short lived, he was beloved in his roles on television programs *Happy Days* and *Sanford and Son*, and movies *Karate Kid* and *Mulan* (1998). While some may find Morita to be a well-respected Asian American actor (*The Times* called him “cinema’s foremost Japanese-American actor”), others find Morita as complicit in the racist nature of Hollywood typecasting. A *New York Times* article was titled, “Goodbye to Pat Morita, Best Supporting Asian”.

Morita was born to migrant farm workers in California and sent to an internment camp in Arizona during World Word II at the age of 11 (*The Times* 2005, 80). Due to his

experience in an internment camp and, in turn, looking at the roles Morita played throughout his career, it is questionable as to whether Morita found it most important to have any sort of Asian visibility on screen or if he was more concerned with showing positive representations of Asian Americans. Ng acknowledged the door that Morita opened for her and other Asian American actors, stating, “The thing is, he must have had it so much harder (as an Asian performer) when he started. I’m sure the roles he got had to be typecasting.” This perspective heavily differs from the narrative of Lawrence Downes from the *New York Times* in his discussion of Morita’s career, stating, “Whenever a script called for a little Asian guy to drive a taxi, serve drinks or utter wise aphorisms in amusingly broken English, you could count on Mr. Morita to be there.” Although Downes acknowledges in the article that Morita was seen as a positive character in the industry and was part of a generation of Asian American actors that dealt with Hollywood’s singular interest in the stock Asian. Yet he still places some fault on Morita, stating that his career was “mostly a loose collection of servile supporting roles...Chinese, Japanese, Korean, whatever.” This view of Asian American actors in 2005 provides context for the legacy and industry environment that Ng entered in her role of Shelby Woo and the difficulty of the burden of representation that Asian American actors still face.

Girl Detective: The Premise Behind *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*

The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo was premised on creator Alan Goodman’s rediscovery of the Hardy Boys books. After finding that his 10-year-old nephew read the books, and making a trip to a bookstore and finding over 100 of the books still on the

shelves, the idea of a detective program for kids entered his head (Graham 1996, 3D). The program was considered to be Nickelodeon's first "whodunit" series, following a 16-year-old girl that interns at a police station after school, always finding a way to become involved in the station's investigations. The series takes place in Cocoa Beach, Florida, where Shelby lives with her grandfather Mike Woo (Pat Morita), a former criminologist who now runs a bed and breakfast. The program is age appropriate, staying away from serious crimes like murder, and concerns "smaller-scale problems such as missing coins, counterfeit tickets to a rock concert, an attack on a dolphin and the harming of a surfer in a competition" (Graham 1996, 3D). Ng uses the help of her two best friends, Noah Allen (Adam Busch) and Cindy Ornette (Preslaysa Edwards), to help solve the mysteries. The program incorporates a simulated computer screen that offers clues to each case, making the series interactive and allowing viewers to take part in solving the mysteries as well.

In the article "Missing in Action: 'Framing' Race on Prime Time Television," Deo et. al (2008) looks at the Asian/Pacific Islander American (APIA) presence in the 2004 and 2005 broadcast network seasons. They find that APIA characters rarely appeared in television sitcoms and are mostly cast in television dramas. In the 2004 season, no APIA regular characters appeared and in the 2005 season, only one APIA regular character was present. Deo et. al found this lack of presence in sitcoms, a genre that mostly revolves around families and domestic settings, to reflect "their exclusion from popular perceptions of what constitutes a quintessential 'American' family" (152). The sitcom format has been able to cross color lines in programs like *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) and *George Lopez Show* (2002-2007), but neither before nor after ABC's

single season of *All-American Girl* in 1995 has an APIA family been the central premise of a broadcast network series.

Although *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* was a cable children's program, its storyline is consistent with Deo et. al's findings. Rather than depict Shelby living with her parents, the nuclear family model is erased and she lives with her grandfather who runs an inn. The show situates her mother and father, who sent Shelby to the United States for better opportunities in education, to be far away in China. The background story of Shelby is similar to Ng's actual background, except that Ng's family was able to come with her to the United States. Deo et. al express the view that "omission from the sitcom genre also restricts characters from embodying a broader spectrum of class, occupational, and ethnic/cultural roles" (152). *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* can be considered a dramedy, a mixture of drama and comedy. Although the program does not depict the nuclear family, with her grandfather running a bed and breakfast and Shelby interning at a police station, the program is able to show many different walks of life that Deo et. al finds is less common in dramas, complicating Deo. et al's discussion of genre and APIA characters in television programming.

In discussing Shelby's race and its impact on the program, Ng presents a color/culture consciousness about her role as Shelby. She references the uses and gratifications that Asian kids may get from the program and the cultivation of a worldview that television can take part in concerning notions of Asians in society. In an article by the *Hartford Courant* titled, "Nick's Best Girls – Irene and Larisa – Two Actresses on Top of the World," Ng is asked her feelings on her position as the only

Asian American in a lead role on television. Ng states, “It means the world to me. I think it’s really important for Asian kids to see a representative of them in the American media, to see Asian faces not just as a silent, invisible minority. That’s the biggest source of fulfillment for me.” Ng clearly acknowledges the potential effect that her character can have on Asian American representations in media. However, she distinctly makes known that in the program, she is “just a typical teen-ager whose parents have sent her here to go to school. The show doesn’t harp on my Chinese-ness” (Prescott and Gay 1996, C5). In a different interview with *USA Today*, Ng says, “it’s rare to find a role where race doesn’t matter. It felt good that I could hold my own and compete with any actress.” Therefore, Ng situates the program as taking a more post-race approach rather than one of color/culture consciousness, but recognizes that kids certainly see her race when watching the program.

The discourse of *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* not only focuses on the importance of Ng’s race in the lead role of Shelby, but also the impact of her gender. In a retrospective tribute that the Museum of Television & Radio put on in 1999, commemorating 20 years of Nickelodeon, one of the areas of focus was strong girl characters throughout the network’s history. Ng took part as a panelist in a seminar at the retrospective titled “Girl Power! Creating Positive Role Models for Girls.” David Bushman, curator of the museum, expressed, “I think Nickelodeon has empowered kids in a lot of ways, but I think they’ve specifically empowered young girls, and that’s a really important thing that Nickelodeon deserves a lot of credit for. This whole idea that you could not make girl-centric shows because boys wouldn’t watch them, they

disproved that theory” (Heffley). This trend of independent and empowered girls on television was not solely a vision found on Nickelodeon. For example, Michele Willens of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote a piece in 1997 titled, “SheTeens Come of Age on Television; A crop of series starring very independent teen girls forging uncharted territory.” She cites Shelby Woo as one of these SheTeens, along with girls on programs like MTV’s *Daria* (1997-2001), ABC’s *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003), and UPN’s *Moesha* (1996-2001). Willens finds that there have been various series in the past with lead teen characters, “but what we have today is a growing number of shows that are centered around female teens, depicting them not as the objects of raging hormones but as their own confused, complicated, consequential selves.” Ng says that she likes Shelby “because I believe that girls should feel uninhibited about following their heart. She is very adventurous and never lets anything stand in her way” (Moore 1996, 6). Therefore, Shelby’s gender is noted to be just as central as her race to the character of Shelby Woo.

Race and Ethnicity in *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*

Although *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* premiered in 1996, the program reflected a post-race discourse that has become re-popularized since the 2008 election of African-American Barack Obama as President of the United States. During the early and mid-1990s, a similar rhetoric was in place, which then was referred to as colorblind, meaning that race no longer carried privilege in the selection of one’s participation in an activity or acquiring of certain services and that all racial groups will be treated on equal ground. *The Cosby Show* is cited as one of the key television programs that reified this notion that economic and other societal structural barriers no longer exist for racial

minorities, in this specific case, for African Americans (Gray 1995, pg. 81-83). Though executives at Nickelodeon and the series' creator were clear that the Shelby Woo part was written for any girl, with no specific race or ethnicity in mind, the network decided that Ng's visible ethnicity was as far as the program would go concerning race. As Ng was one of the first racial or ethnic minority leads on a Nickelodeon live-action, scripted, non-sketch comedy program, Ng as an Asian American visibly, with little attention to her character's ethnic heritage narratively, was already risk enough for the network. In this section, I will explore the post-racial narrative in the first and second seasons of *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*, while showing minor ruptures of color/culture consciousness and assimilationist rhetoric that appear briefly in the program.

In the series, Shelby has two best friends, Noah Allen, a white teenage boy, and Cindy Ornette, an African American teenage girl. In the first two seasons, neither of the best friends' families or home lives is pictured on the program, making the show's plot specifically focused on Shelby solving mysteries. On the website *Television Tropes and Idioms*, *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* is considered to be a program that contains a "Token Trio: Gender Flipped." According to the website, a token trio typically contains a white male, a black male, or other visible minority, and a white female, yet increasingly its third member has become a female of yet another minority group. In looking at the children's cable live action programs mentioned that contain a token trio, many of the programs are either gender or race flipped, such as *Lizzie McGuire* (2001-2004), *That's So Raven* (2003-2007), and *The Famous Jett Jackson* (1998-2001), all of which contain females or non-whites in the lead role, rather than a white male. The author finds the

Token Trio in the Nickelodeon program *Ned's Declassified School Survival Guide* (2004-2007) to not be considered token characters, as the roles are “genuinely fleshed out.” The author also points to the current Nickelodeon program *Supah Ninjas* (2011-) as race flipped, where the lead character is Asian with a black side kick and white female love interest.

The Token Trio can be a useful way of thinking about racial and ethnic representation in programming and questions of diversity and power, as well as how this representation can be translated into an assimilationist, color/culture conscious, or post-race narrative. For example, in an assimilationist narrative, the leader of the Token Trio may be a white male lead with one or two racial or ethnic minorities as his close friends, therefore, making it “token.” In contrast, if the lead character is of a different race or gender, thus “race-flipped” or “gender flipped,” and the narrative concerning race is one of color/culture consciousness, or even a post-racial narrative, then power is placed onto the non-white character, creating a rupture in the American power structure typically thought to be held by white males. In *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*, the two sidekick characters are simply sidekicks, with little, if any, reference to their home lives and families, and are depicted as typical American teenagers of the time. For example, Cindy is often seen sporting a Yin-Yang ring or “Flirt” t-shirt, popular trends during the mid-1990s. This depiction supports the notion of a post-race society, where “kids can be kids,” the nuclear family is of no concern, and race and ethnicity does not define the self.

Another trope for *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* is the black best friend, pointing to the character of Cindy, Shelby's best friend. The trope of the black best friend

has recently been given attention in academic research concerning Nickelodeon and Disney Channel programming. Jeffery P. Dennis cites in his 2009 article “Gazing at the black teen: con artists, cyborgs, and sycophants,” that Nickelodeon, Disney Channel, and Cartoon Network in 2007 included a trend of showing white preteen and teenage boys saving the world, receiving romantic interests, and succeeding in their schemes. This was in contrast to black boys that were more likely to be presented as con artists and tricksters than heroes, cyborgs or nerds than ‘hunks,’ and “more likely to be lackeys, sycophants and humorously inept sidekicks” (179). Interestingly, Dennis finds that this representation for black youth on children’s programming heavily differs from the stereotypes ascribed to black male adults in the mass media, but they also do not adhere to conventions of hegemonic childhood or adolescent masculinity, creating a potential new stereotype for black adolescents in programming (180).

Sarah E. Turner discusses the black best friend trope in her article, “Disney Does Race: Black BFFs in the New Racial Moment,” specifically looking at Disney Channel series *Shake It Up* (2010–) and *Good Luck Charlie* (2010–). She identifies this new racial moment as coming into fruition due to the election of Barack Obama, which “suggests the end of racism and instead signals the beginning of an idealised ‘we are all the same’ racial discourse referred to as colourblind racism” (125). As one can see in *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*, the notion of a Black Best Friend, or even a black or non-white sidekick as seen in the Token Trio trope, is nothing new in children’s television programming. *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* was one of the first children’s cable programs to display the Black Best Friend model, which goes to show that this colorblind

and post-race rhetoric was present in television before the election of Barack Obama, beginning with other political moments and contested policy measures, such as the overturning of the use of affirmative action in college admissions.

The format of *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* follows the rule of three, whereby there are three culprits in the mystery that Shelby is attempting to solve. In a 1999 Children Now study, 47% of children said that they associated the quality of breaking the law or the rules more with minority characters, as opposed to only 6% that said they associate this characteristic more with white characters. 59% of participants in the study said that they found that African Americans are most likely to play a criminal on television. When asked about the positions of secretary, boss, police officer, or doctor, over 50% attributed these roles to white characters on television. *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* may have knowingly tried to break the cycle of having minority actors playing the culprit, as in very few episodes is one of the three culprits a racial or ethnic minority. However, the lack of minority actors as culprits also may be attributed to the lack of minority actors in the Florida area discussed earlier in the paper.

Aside from Shelby, her grandfather, and her best friend Cindy, non-white actors were usually relegated to background or cameo appearances in the series. In one episode, in particular, titled “Tag, Not It” (Season 2, Episode 3), the victim in the case and one of the culprits is African American. This is an anomaly in the first two seasons of the series, as neither the victims nor the culprits are rarely non-white. In this episode, Cindy’s cousin Wayne is framed of a crime, which entailed someone tagging several local shops with graffiti. The act was caught on tape, showing the culprit tagging the side of a

building with Wayne's signature tag, wearing Wayne's baseball jersey and a hat with Wayne's initials on it. What is particularly interesting here is that the term "tagging" is an activity that became popularized amongst Latina/o and African American youth in New York during the 1970s. Therefore, tagging is a culturally loaded term associated with non-white youth. After the crime is shown at the beginning of the episode, the setting turns to Shelby, Cindy, and Adam on their way to view a mural that Wayne is working on for a project commissioned by the city. In this scene, it is mentioned that Wayne is a baseball player, and according to Cindy, the best pitcher on the team. They discuss the upcoming game, and Wayne explains that this game is of prime importance because college scouts will be in attendance, giving him the opportunity to gain a scholarship for college. This characterization of an African American baseball player, hoping for a college scholarship, displays both the post-racial rhetoric that there are no racial barriers to what one can achieve. However, it also falls into the common representation of racial and ethnic minorities as only being able to attend college due to their athletic abilities, rather than due to their intelligence.

Children pick up on these cues, as cited in the Children Now study above, in which children associated African American characters to more likely be criminals, maids, or janitors in programming, as opposed to professionals. Thirty-two percent of children in the study thought that the quality of intelligence is more associated with white characters, as opposed to 9% of children that found the quality to be more associated with non-white characters. What is promising in the study is that the majority of children (54%) associate being intelligent with both white and non-white characters; this suggests

that if children were to view this episode, they could potentially see Wayne as athletic, but also intelligent.

Next in the scene, Wayne's teammate, Paul, who is also an African American pitcher, bikes up to the mural site to greet the group. At this moment, Shelby's internship boss, Detective Hine, walks up to Wayne, pulling out a set of Polaroid pictures with Wayne's tag displayed in the pictures. Detective Hine asks Wayne if he tagged buildings downtown last night and proceeds to mention Wayne's trouble with the law last year, which involved graffiti. Wayne denies that he committed the crime and expresses to the group that the typical punishment for this crime is community service; if he is found guilty, he will be ineligible to play baseball, making it less likely for him to receive a scholarship to college. This episode is the only episode in the first two seasons that has an African American male victim, Wayne, and the writers found it necessary to incorporate him having a criminal record into the storyline. In looking at the storyline in a post-racial framework, race would have nothing to do with why Wayne is the potential culprit of this crime. However, the crime is embedded in a cultural signifier (graffiti), and with Wayne having a previous record, this delineates and makes visible Wayne's race. With a white creator of the program and few writers of color on the series writing staff, this may have resulted in less familiarity with issues of race in society, creating the potential for racial stereotyping and tropes of non-white characters.

In the episode, Shelby, Adam, and Cindy proceed in their typical fashion to identify three potential culprits: another street artist, Kendra Cross, who did not get the job to paint the city mural, Paul, the other African American pitcher on the team, who

receives little game play because of Wayne, and Bob, a karate instructor who is jealous of Wayne's relationship with his ex-girlfriend, who is currently helping Wayne paint the mural. As Shelby, Adam, and Cindy gather at Wayne's baseball practice to go over the clues that they have found, Adam asks why Wayne wears a different hat than the other players and if the WH stands for his name, Wayne Hendrick. Cindy proceeds to explain that it is his Winter Haven Tornadoes hat, which was one of the best teams in the Negro baseball league for whom Wayne and Cindy's grandfather played first baseman. Adam states, "I didn't know that; that's very cool." This is one of the few moments in the first two seasons of the series that provides color/culture consciousness. With Adam's simple response, this moment of rupture in the post-racial framework is not intended to be focused on, but rather the focus is put on the legacy of baseball in Wayne's family. As much as the series operates under a post-racial framework, the writers specifically chose to give attention to blackness in baseball and segregated leagues. Yet they did not want to address the structural racism that led segregated leagues to come about. This episode provides the most in-depth background on Cindy and her family; although Cindy is just one of Shelby's sidekicks, this episode clearly shows that she is proud to be black.

Detective Highline appears at the baseball practice, asking Wayne to come down to the station with him so that he can talk to Wayne and his parents concerning the vandalization. Even though viewers do not have an opportunity to see Cindy's family, nor Adam's, seeing Wayne's parents is further evidence of Cindy having a life outside of being Shelby's sidekick. Another important part of the scene is that Wayne is shown as having both a mother and father. At this point in time, the nuclear black family was the

center of the Nickelodeon show *Kenan and Kel* (1996-2000) and broadcast series, such as *Family Matters* (1989-1998) and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996), but images of the nuclear family for African Americans in the past had been few and far between, as programs like *Julia* (1968-1971) were heavily scrutinized by the African American community for its lack of a father figure in the program (Bodroghozy 1992, 160-163). Also, this period of the mid 1990s, in which *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* aired, was in the wake of the Reagan and Bush rhetoric of the black welfare queen, a woman that was typically depicted as unmarried, mother to several children, and no father figure present (Gray 1995, 17). Therefore, even though the episode depicts Wayne as an African American youth with a record, the episode does provide positive depictions of blackness shown through the presence of Wayne's family. The episode closes with Shelby figuring out the mystery, pointing to Paul, Wayne's teammate, as the culprit of the crime. The explanation for Paul's actions is simply that no one gets to see him pitch and all he wanted was to be a star. Paul's desire for fame pits him against Wayne's professional and intellectual ambitions of receiving a scholarship to college. The outcome provides further credibility to Wayne's character.

Each episode of *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* ends with Shelby at the police station, wrapping up the case. Shelby tells the viewers that the baseball team won the game and that Wayne was presented with the choice of two scholarships, both at schools with good art departments. In this statement, Shelby reveals that Wayne's tagging and working on murals is more than just a hobby and demonstrates that he has talent in the arenas of both athletics and art. The "Tag, Not It" episode is an example of the ruptures

in the post-racial framework that the series embodies. Such a narrative structure suggest that at times, the writers may have wanted to comment on racial barriers in society, particularly with having a non-white character as the lead of the program. However, the episode chooses to focus on the background narrative of a relative of Cindy rather than Shelby herself. By having the program focus on Wayne's blackness, the program can further its post-racial narrative of making Shelby's Asian heritage not appear as "Other;" other meaning something different than American, something strange rather than familiar (Deo et. al 2008, pg. 158).

Notably though, down playing Shelby's Asian heritage as Other does not always persist. One of the few moments to denote Shelby's Asian heritage and point to Shelby as Other is an episode titled "The Hot Seat." Up until this point in the series (Season 1, Episode 5), Shelby's immediate family background is a mystery. In this episode, Shelby and her grandfather are seen at the inn, discussing Shelby's current mystery, which involves counterfeit concert tickets. Mr. Woo says to Shelby, "You didn't check today's mail. There is something from China." Shelby questions, "Mom and Dad?" She then goes on to open the package, asking her grandfather if he had to send them her report card. Her grandfather then says, "You know, Shelby, the whole reason you are here is because they want you to have a good education...In fact, a little more time spent on school work and a little less time on solving mysteries, you could be an A student." This scene not only provides context to why Shelby is living with her grandfather, but it also incorporates a post-racial framework of Shelby as any other kid, distracted by her hobby and needing to do better in school. Nickelodeon was known in its history as a network that placed shows

from the vantage point of children, showing a world where adults are boring and kids are fun (Hendershot 2004, 3). In this interaction, it shows that Shelby's grandfather's discussion of Shelby's grades is less entertaining than Shelby solving mysteries; she is barely scolded for her lack of being an A student. Comments from parents throughout the years concerning their frustration with a lack of emphasis on family in the network's programs somewhat shifted Nickelodeon's ideology of a kid's world after *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* went off the air (Navarro, 1999).

What is also of particular interest in this program is how Shelby defies the model minority stereotype, typically displayed in representations of Asian Americans on television (Deo et. al 1998, 154). In the episode "Knockout Gas" (Season 2, Episode 7), Shelby's non-straight A persona once again receives attention in a scene walking with her sidekicks, Cindy and Adam, at school. Cindy asks Shelby for the details about Jeremy, an artist that Shelby has a crush on, but also whose father is the victim of the episode's crime. Shelby says that she thinks that they have a lot in common, at which point, Adam jumps in, asking Shelby, "Didn't you get a C minus in art?". Shelby then goes on to state "So maybe I need to study more." The subject quickly changes as the trio is interrupted by a fellow schoolmate associated with the mystery. Once again, grades are briefly mentioned, with the current case always taking precedence. However, even though Shelby may not represent the model minority stereotype, her status as an immigrant solidifies an assimilationist message and simultaneously one regarding Asian as Other.

The episode "The Alley Cat" (Season 2, Episode 2) breaks the traditional format of the program in two ways. First, Shelby's grandfather, as a former criminologist, aids

the Cocoa Beach police department in solving a case. Second, an assimilationist rhetoric is present throughout the episode, as well as narratives of Asian as Other, as I will exemplify further below. At the beginning of the episode, the crime is shown, in which a person in all-black clothing breaks into the inn that Shelby's grandfather runs and steals a special key. An alarm goes off, and Shelby and her grandfather race downstairs to check out the scene. Shelby is seen wearing bright yellow traditional Chinese print pajamas, marking her Chinese heritage and immigrant status. Mr. Woo and Shelby see that a window is half open and that her grandfather's secret box has been opened. Shelby finds a set of special tweezers on the ground, when her grandfather states that they must pack and immediately catch a plane to San Francisco, California, as this is his second chance to solve the "alley cat crime." They are then shown on a plane; Shelby exclaims that she can't believe that she is going to San Francisco to solve a case with the famous criminalist Mike Woo. This episode provides the most in-depth background on Shelby's grandfather, which the viewer does not get until Season 1, Episode 8. During the plane ride, her grandfather goes on to tell the story of the alley cat crime that happened four years ago; two pearls were stolen, and the culprit was never found.

What is of particular interest in this episode is that for both Shelby and her grandfather, the creator and writing staff chose to place them both coming from spaces associated with large Asian populations: Shelby from China and her grandfather from San Francisco. San Francisco, and California, in general, has been one of the most significant locales in American history for Asian immigrants. Since the 2010 census, San Francisco is considered to be a majority-minority city, with Asians making up 33.3

percent of the population and the Chinese population constituting the largest single ethnic minority group (Bay Area Census). The placement of Mr. Woo's home prior to Cocoa Beach, Florida as San Francisco contributes an immigrant and therefore, assimilationist, narrative, as Mr. Woo was a part of the San Francisco Police Department and now in Florida is a local business owner of an inn.

Shelby and her grandfather meet with Mr. Waterman, the jeweler whose pearls were stolen, at the famous Fisherman's Wharf, and Mr. Waterman begins to recount the case to them. He states that he has identified three culprits: Ruby Terry, a motorcyclist mechanic who lost a pearl in her helmet, Jordan Lucerne, Waterman's old jeweler partner who was found cheating their customers, and Dennis Waterman, a detective and the victim's brother who worked on the alley cat crime. As Shelby is seen as being too interested in the crime, her grandfather sends her off to do some sightseeing on her own while he investigates the crime. He names Nob Hill, Alcatraz, and the cable cars as interesting places to visit, but does not mention Chinatown, another noted place of interest in the city and a signifier of Shelby's heritage. As her grandfather's background is concentrated on in this program, Shelby remains situated as an all-American girl.

Shelby goes on to try and find clues on her own rather than sightseeing. Her grandfather catches her and decides that Shelby can accompany him in the rest of his investigation. In the next scene, Shelby and her grandfather interrogate Dennis Waterman at the San Francisco Police Department. During their time at the police department, Mr. Woo is made fun of by the officers, who allude to his obsession with and inability to solve the alley cat crime. In this scene, Mr. Woo is depicted as an outsider and inferior to

the officers still at the department. All of the officers appear to be towering over him while Mr. Woo remains passive, relegated to the “Undesirable APIA Man” stereotype, whereby Asian men are typically seen in television as weak and non-aggressive (Deo et. al 2008, 154). Back at their hotel room, Mr. Woo is seen in a troubled state, thinking about the case. Shelby asks her grandfather if he wants to share with her what he is thinking about, and he says not particularly. Shelby asks, “You know what I’m thinking about?” and then states, “When I first arrived from China and how you helped me deal with missing mom and dad. I couldn’t talk about it and you helped. Maybe I can help you too.” Her grandfather dismisses Shelby’s offer, and they proceed to go to sleep. This is another one of the few moments where Shelby points to her non-native status as a Chinese immigrant to America. While the two are asleep, the alley cat breaks into their hotel room, stealing her grandfather’s special box with several of the clues to the case. They do not catch him in the act, but find the box to be missing in the morning and discover a woman’s stocking that the alley cat left behind.

In the next scene, the assimilationist narrative is presented once again, as Shelby and her grandfather dress up as all-American bikers, clearly differing from their typical clothing, daily occupations, and environment, in order to investigate Ruby, the motorcyclist mechanic. Mr. Woo is clearly out of his element as he tells Ruby, “Nice Pig,” then Shelby corrects him saying, “It’s hog, grandpa.” After a visit to Mr. Waterman’s home, Shelby figures out that the pearls have been hidden all along inside a stuffed bear of Mr. Waterman’s daughter, Tamara. Shelby creates flyers for a garage sale that Mr. Waterman is hosting with the bear’s image on it, hoping to lure the culprit to the

garage sale to obtain the hidden pearls. The culprit is revealed as Mr. Waterman's detective brother who hid the pearls as the eyes of the bear, as well as Mr. Lucerne, the jeweler, who was a partner in the crime with the detective brother. Here, both Mr. Woo and Shelby save the day and also are exemplified as continuing to keep the city, and even country, safe. Their commitment to fighting crime is synonymous with their commitment to the safety of the United States in relation to their immigrant status. "The Alley Cat" episode provides a break in the post-racial tone of the series, showing Mr. Woo and Shelby's commitment to fighting crime in the popular Asian immigrant city of San Francisco. Although Shelby always solves the crimes in the series and is singled out for her exceptionalism as a kid and a girl, the role of her grandfather in this episode and the geographical setting adheres to the assimilationist rhetoric of Asian Americans trying to be a "good" American. At the end of the program, the image and narrative returns back to the post-race, "I'm just a kid" rhetoric, as Shelby is seen at her desk giving a tour to a group of children of various racial backgrounds. One of the kids asks if Shelby was made a real detective after this case. Shelby then turns to the camera stating, "Me? No way. Who would let a kid do that?".

Conclusion

Due to a union-led production workers' strike in 1997, the location for the shooting of the fourth season of the series was moved from Florida to Vancouver. The program was fictionally moved to Boston and Shelby's two sidekicks were replaced. Now the costars were a white boy and a white girl, Vince Rosania (Noah Klar) and Angie

Burns (Eleanor Noble). A location change, as well as replacement of two key actors in the program, may have contributed to the fourth season being the program's last.

While there were moments in *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* that presented an assimilationist or color/culture conscious message, those moments were few and far between and the dominant ideology of the program was that of a post-racial society in which Shelby was a kid that could help solve crimes, have friends of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and not have to acknowledge societal inequities tied to race in America or China. Although the series was a children's program, making it less common for serious or controversial subjects to be presented in the storylines, other series like *Sesame Street* (1969-) and *Nick News* (1992-) have been successful in discussing issues of prejudice, showing that *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* had at least the potential to discuss race and ethnicity in some capacity.

Irene Ng's character as Shelby Woo was important in opening the door for non-white leads on Nickelodeon, as well as on other children's programming networks. *Hey Arnold* (1996-2004), an animated program centered on Arnold, a football head middle school aged boy, had a lead Asian character, Phoebe Heyderhal. In 2007, Nickelodeon premiered the animated program *Ni Hao, Kai-Lan* (2007-2011), a show focused on a Chinese-American girl, Kai-Lan, and her adventures as a kid. The format was similar to *Dora The Explorer* (2000 –), as the viewers are intended to be active participants and Mandarin Chinese is taught throughout the episodes. In 2011, Asian American actress Ashley Argota played a lead role in the series *True Jackson, VP* (2008-2011). Meanwhile, the series *Supah Ninjas* (2011-2013), which recently ended on Nickelodeon,

stars a Japanese-American boy, Ryan Potter, and the network recently premiered the series *Sanjay and Craig* (2013-), a program starring a 12-year-old Southeast Asian American male actor. Disney Channel's most notable Asian American actress is Brenda Song, who starred in the programs, *The Suite Life of Zach & Cody* (2005-2008) and *The Suite Life on Deck* (2008-2011). The Disney sister station, Disney XD, just ended the series *Pair of Kings* (2010-2013), which had Asian American Actress Kelsey Chow as a lead character. In addition to these programs, there have been several children's animated programs on broadcast and cable television that star Asians. However, in looking at the titles above, there is not a program listed where a live-action series centers on the life of an Asian American girl, showing how truly rare Ng's opportunity to star in a program was, and still is, and how groundbreaking her character of Shelby Woo is in the discussion of Asian American characters and race and ethnicity in children's television programming.

Chapter Two: “I Know I Can’t Wait to See My Name in Lights”: Puerto Rican Representation and the Color/Culture Conscious Narrative of the Nickelodeon television series *Taina*

Introduction

Latina/os have primarily been absent from children’s, as well as adult, television programming. *Sesame Street* (1969-) on Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) is cited as one of the television series that has continuously held a diverse cast, and it can be argued that television series on this network have provided the most visibility for Latina/o characters in children’s programming. Historically, a social science approach concerning the socialization of Latina/o children has been the most prominent type of research in observing representation of Latina/os on television (Arias 1982, Rivadeneyra 2006, Rivadeneyra & Ward 2005). More recently, a cultural studies approach in academic literature has emerged concerning Latina/o visibility on television, largely centering on more recent programs like *Dora the Explorer* (2000-), *Dragon Tales* (1999-2005), and *Maya and Miguel* (2004-2007), with only one of these series appearing on a cable network and all three of these series are animated and educational (Guidotti-Hernandez 2007, Ryan 2010, Serrato 2009, Masi de Casanova 2007). Another recent area of literature concerning Latina/o representation on children’s programming has focused on the tween market and multiracial and multiethnic actors (Valdivia 2008, 2011). Yet the discussion of Latina/os in non-educational children’s programming during the early 2000s is largely absent in academia, making *Taina* an important case study in understanding the type of programming and representations that contribute to the rise in visibility for Latina/os in television. Although the series was on a children’s cable

network, it was a part of a response from Latina/o activist groups that called for a boycott of the “Big Four” broadcast networks, what they termed a “brownout,” in 1999 due to the lack of visibility of the race in broadcast programming.

In this chapter, I examine Nickelodeon as a network and its move to incorporate Latina/os as lead characters in its programming. I specifically will be examining racial and ethnic representation in the television series *Taina* (2001-2002), and the journalistic and industrial discourse that surrounded it. I observe the backgrounds of the series’ creator, Maria Perez-Brown, and the lead actress of the program, Christina Vidal, in order to understand how the series came into being and how the personal backgrounds of these women influenced the character of *Taina*. I also analyze the journalistic discourse surrounding the program’s release, as well as discussions of race, ethnicity, and gender in the marketing and branding of the program to the public. Since the series aired for only two seasons, I chose to use the journalistic publications that were available rather than two or three specific sources in order to gain a varied yet holistic picture of the discourse surrounding the series run. I will then perform a textual analysis of one episode from the program’s two seasons to understand the racial and ethnic representations within the program itself and address its color/culture conscious narrative. Lastly, I will look at what *Taina* contributed to television and the state of Latina/os on children’s television programming today.

The End of an Era?: *Nickelodeon still slime green, but just a “very beautiful slime” green*

From the period of 1998 when *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* went off the air to 2001 when *Taina* premiered, Nickelodeon as a network experienced a change in its network president, as well as the downsizing and eventual closure of Nickelodeon Studios Florida. These two events led to a shift in the branding and marketing of the network. The network had notoriously been known for its game shows, like *Wild & Crazy Kids* (1990-1992) and *Legends of the Hidden Temple* (1993-1998), but with the move in filming and production to Hollywood and New York City, game shows became less prominent and scripted and animated programming began to take precedence on the network.

As noted in the last chapter, Mathew Klickstein’s book, *Slimed!: An Oral History of Nickelodeon’s Golden Age* (2013) recounts the history of Nickelodeon pre-1995. In his final chapter, Nickelodeon executives, writers, producers, and actors discuss “the end of an era” (as Klickstein labels it), concerning how the network has changed since its alleged “Golden Age” (1986-1995, according to Klickstein, 1986-2000, though some interviewed argue it ended around the year 2000). Alan Goodman, creator of *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*, attributes the change to the success of animated programming like *Dora the Explorer* and *SpongeBob Squarepants* (1999-), which provided the network with an opportunity to obtain exceptional wealth in licensed products (230). The success of the programs from the Golden Age, like *Rugrats* (1991-2004) and *Clarissa Explains It All* (1991-1994), put Nickelodeon on the map, providing them with a larger budget and

the ability to shoot in media centers like Hollywood and New York City and create higher quality animated series like those mentioned above. However, according to some, the introduction of increased licensing and merchandising led to less play and creativity in the development of storylines and series and turned the network into more of a “real” corporation, more interested in making money rather than innovative programming (230). Adam Weissman, a director on programs like *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* and *All That*, finds the change in programming to reflect changes in technology: “In 1993, there were no iPhones, no Internet. What distracted them and what got them in trouble and what kept them entertained was different than today” (230).

The change in network president from Geraldine Laybourne (1984-1996) to Herb Scannell (1996-2006) is marked as a significant part of the change in tone and branding of the network. Scannell, now the president of BBC Worldwide America, was Vice President of Nickelodeon when Laybourne left in 1996 to become president of Disney-ABC Cable Networks. Scott Webb, Nickelodeon’s first creative director, found the underlying change as follows: “One of the axioms Gerry gave us – and this was the key to the kingdom: ‘If it’s good for kids, it’ll be good for business.’ Now, it’s ‘If it’s good for business, then we’ll make it good for kids” (233). Tommy Lynch, the creator of *The Secret World of Alex Mack* (1994-1998), finds that the rise in Disney Channel and Cartoon Network spurred the notion that the kids’ cable business is big business, increasing the competition for Nickelodeon to remain the top cable network for children (236).

Scannell was seen as taking the company more corporate, with additions like Nick Movies, Nick Online, and the rise of Nick International, eventually making Nickelodeon the fifth-largest studio system in Hollywood (233, 236). During this change in management, several producers and writers at the network left to work for Disney, Cartoon Network, and Comedy Central, among others, and a significant amount of the actors and actresses left their acting careers behind. Albie Hecht, who participated in varying roles in network development, finds Scannell's ambition to be genuine stating, "It was all Herb's ambition to take this brand and express it in so many different ways, to 'be present' – as he put it – in kids' lives and be able to touch them wherever they wanted to touch Nickelodeon" (236). However, others found that Nickelodeon, a network that was once the anti-Disney, had now become indistinguishable between the 'Big Three' (Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, and Cartoon Network). The programming on the network was considered not as quirky and not as celebratory of being a kid. Will McRobb, one of the co-creators of *The Adventures of Pete & Pete* (1993-1996), states, "There aren't too many shows that glorify what it's like to hang out in your backyard with your friends trying to figure out what to do for the day" (236). It was during this shift in network branding that *Taina* premiered, reflecting the conflicted nature of a network still trying to present programming from a kid's perspective, but beginning to focus on the rising tween market, extraordinary storylines, and multigenerational casts.

Placing Latina/o Youth on the National Televisual Stage in the New Millennium

Before the airing of *Taina*, the network already had programs that starred racial and ethnic minorities, such as *All That* (1994-2005), *Kenan & Kel* (1996-2000), *Hey*

Arnold (1996-2004), and *Cousin Skeeter* (1998-2000), among others. But Latina/os were largely absent from the network, with the animated program *Rocket Power* (1999-2004), beginning in 1999, one of the only programs to star a Latina/o character. *Taina* joined a slew of programming (*Dora the Explorer*, 2000-present, and *The Brothers Garcia*, 2000-2004) during the early 2000s on Nickelodeon that starred Latina/os and featured storylines from a culturally specific point of view.

Jennifer Pendleton in an *Advertising Age* article finds that even though the major broadcast networks were still lacking in their representation of Latina/os in their 2000 fall season, cable networks, specifically Nickelodeon, had become a place where assimilated Latina/os were seen as commonplace. She cites *Taina* as one of these programs, stating that the young Latina star, Christina Vidal, would appear at a Mexican Independence Festival near East Los Angeles to sing before a crowd of 100,000 to promote the program to the Latina/o community. Print and radio campaigns in Spanish and English were seen for all three new Latina/o based programs on Nickelodeon at popular kid establishments like Chuck E. Cheese (Forkan 2001, 40) and Nickelodeon also chose to advertise online on websites like Yupi.com, a Spanish-language portal. Girl Scouts of the USA advertised *Taina* on television and print public service ads hoping to attract more members from the Hispanic community (*Times-Picayune* 2003). Pendleton attributes Nickelodeon's strategy to the rising demographics of the Latina/o youth population and the rise of Latinas/os in the larger popular culture, making the choice to include this racial group in their programming as economically viable for the network. Also, Latina/os at this time (2000) made up 15 percent of the channel's viewership and Nickelodeon was

cited as the number one kids' cable network among the group. However, as was the case with the discourse in Chapter One concerning Irene Ng as the unlikely yet no-brainer actress choice for the part of Shelby Woo, Nickelodeon's commitment to *all* children and telling kids' stories from a "rainbow perspective" is invoked to provide a sense of public interest, rather than purely commercial benefits for the network. But it is clear that the network chose to capitalize on their already strong relationship with Latina/o viewers. The network's president, Herb Scannell, also is cited as one of the potential supporters of increased Latina/o visibility on Nickelodeon, as Scannell himself comes from a bilingual background and is part Puerto Rican (Forkan 2001, 40).

In the journalistic discourse surrounding the rise of Latina/os in children's programming at this time, several state that children do not have any preconceived notions of what it means to be a kid or what it means to be a specific race, making any resistance to watching characters of color non-existent (Barney 2002, F9). Nickelodeon, specifically, is cited as a network that has a long standing reputation of representing diversity, not only in relation to ethnicity and race, but also gender, with strong female lead roles, and now the disabled, as seen in the series *Pelswick* (2000-2002).

In 2002, Kevin Kay, executive vice president of production for Nickelodeon, made the claim that the network continued to design their series as what is good for kids. However, as argued in the section above, several other Nickelodeon executives expressed views that the "what is good for kids" mantra had largely disappeared by this time at the network. Cyma Zarghami, vice president and general manager for the network at the time, said that the process for Nickelodeon in including, as Catherine Newton stated, "a

colorblind TV wonderland populated by characters of diverse colors and cultures,” has been much more organic than simply basing their programming off statistics. This colorblind, post-race discourse continued as Patti Miller from *Children Now* expressed that race is not the major issue in these programs and that the series concerned “kids of different backgrounds learning from, and interacting with, one another” (Barney 2002, F9). However, Miller then goes on to say that television can greatly affect cultural attitudes and can have a major impact on a child’s self confidence and self-esteem, thereby making a case for the impact that television can have in the cultivation of a child’s worldview, which was also stated by Ng in Chapter One concerning her role as Shelby Woo.

As one can see, network executives and journalistic discourse in general were much more open to discussing racial and ethnic diversity as *Taina* came onto the televisual scene. Nickelodeon now had several successful series with non-white leads, which was not the case when *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* aired. However, the commentary from the network executives and tone expressed by the journalists took a colorblind, post-racial approach. This differed from the commentary made by Jeff Valdez, creator of *The Brothers Garcia*, and Maria Perez-Brown, creator of *Taina*.

In the opening lines of an article titled, “Leading the way when it comes to diversity, children’s shows far outdistance prime-time programs,” Valdez recalls one of the few moments that had the power to interrupt his outdoor playtime as a kid living in a Denver housing project: the rare sighting of a Latino character on TV. Valdez states, “I swear whenever it happened, my mom would yell out to us, and we’d come running into

the house, because it was such a shock... Then we'd just sit there staring at the screen and going, 'Oh Wow!' It was such a validation of yourself" (Barney 2002, F9). Valdez then goes on to say that he finds that a greater Latina/o presence in programs like his own (*The Brothers Garcia*) is essential to the health of the country. His statements take a much more personal and political tone than those expressed by the executives and journalists above, showing the personal investment that he has in the success of his program, but also that Latina/o presence is important not only for all kids, but, in particular, Latina/o kids.

In a 2000 article, journalist Eric Deggans states that race could potentially be television's next great creative frontier, with cable network series exploring racial inequities in society in a way that previously was done for gender and class in programs like *Maude* (1972-1978) and *All in the Family* (1971-1979). He cites the rise of Latina/o-based programs on Nickelodeon, but also looks to cable networks like Showtime and HBO that have filled the void for non-white casts that existed on broadcast networks. In the article, Perez-Brown asks, "Why not have a workplace comedy...(where) the black character is more complex and explains why he gets angry when white co-workers (mistake him) for another black worker?... When it comes to really telling the truth about how we are living, that's where network TV always comes up short" (Deggans 2000, 1D). One could argue that Perez-Brown's wish was fulfilled in the network comedy *The Office* (2005-2013), which frequently had storylines concerning prejudice in the workplace, providing Deggans' premonition with some validity. Deggans also points to Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki's work, which finds that broadcast networks

develop programs with the belief that white audiences will not accept them if they have more than one or two non-white characters. Cable networks like Nickelodeon, Showtime, and HBO all defied this notion in their programming during this time, and broadcast networks slowly began to break this cycle with series like *Lost* (2004-2010) and *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–). However, the creators of these cable series still struggled with showing Latina/o stereotypes, arguing that some aspects of stereotypes are real life, such as gangs in *Resurrection Boulevard* (2000-2002), or specific to the culture, like extra-hot salsa in *The Brothers Garcia*. One of the resounding themes from the new Latina/o series' creators is the desire to show their viewers that they are just as American as “everyone else.” Although none of the creators or journalists denotes who “everyone else” is, “everyone else” clearly means the white audience. The creators' discourse shows a desire for color/culture consciousness in their programming, but also an acknowledgement of the industrial need for an assimilationist rhetoric in their series in order to engage a non-minority audience. Deggans ends his assessment of this newfound space for Latina/os in television by stating that it is too early to tell whether this increase in diverse portrayals will be a mainstay and that it ultimately comes down to how much the networks will profit off of this new market.

The Women Behind *Taina*: The Stories of Maria Perez-Brown and Christina Vidal

As seen in the section above, even though network executives claimed to favor racial and ethnic diversity in their programming, the network engaged in a more post-racial, colorblind marketing of the program, rather than one of color/culture consciousness. In the premiere of and ultimate success of *Taina* as a color/culture

conscious series, a strong vision from the series' creator and sense of authenticity in the performance by the lead actress was needed in order to achieve this type of a program amidst the industrial and journalistic push to downplay Puerto Rican culture in the series.

The inspiration for *Taina* as a series was a reflection of Maria Perez-Brown's own upbringing; Perez-Brown states that rather than attempting to write a program with a white main character, she chose to write what was familiar, a Latina lead character. Perez-Brown explains in an interview with the *Orlando Sentinel* that *Taina* is essentially her in her teenage years: "That 15-year-old girl is really me, what I was, trying to define my life in my own terms and having this very strict Latino family telling me, 'No in the Latino culture, this is how we do it'" (Wellons 2000, K7). Perez-Brown says that she explicitly chose the genre of comedy to capture the Latino world and that *Taina* experienced the kind of childhood that she would have liked to have, as she herself struggled in navigating between two cultures, being born in Puerto Rico and moving to the United States at the age of six. Aside from her own ties to the character of *Taina*, Perez-Brown was seen as already an expert in diverse and successful programming for children, as she created and was the executive producer for the Nickelodeon program *Gullah Gullah Island* (1994-1998), which centered on an African American family in South Carolina. The series was nominated for an Emmy and won several other awards, leading Perez-Brown to attain a six-show development deal with Nickelodeon, *Taina* being the first show of the deal.

Perez-Brown's success in the industry as a Latina may be attributed to her ability to navigate worlds very different from that of her own upbringing, as she attended Yale

University at the undergraduate level and New York University for law school. She then became a tax attorney for six years and eventually moved into entertainment law, opening her own practice. She is currently President at the Perez-Brown Media Group, “a New York based consulting firm that specializes in providing companies with insights and tailored content strategies to engage the Latino community” (LinkedIn). One of Perez-Brown’s motivations for moving into producing television programs was the lack of Latina/o faces on programming when she was growing up. She notes that while her parents watched novellas on Spanish-language networks, she watched what the other children she knew watched, which included *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974) and *The Partridge Family* (1970-1974). The journalistic discourse mostly portrays Perez-Brown as an industry insider, but in one article titled, “On TV Soon, Look for Latinos; Nickelodeon Discovers a Large New World to Portray,” an assimilationist lens is taken and Perez-Brown is depicted as pulling herself up by her own bootstraps. The article’s author, Navarro, cites that Perez-Brown grew up poor in Puerto Rico before moving to Brooklyn. She was raised in a single-parent household with four siblings, and then moved to a house in Hartford shared by aunts and cousins, all before she attended college. Taina’s navigation of two cultures in the series is clearly a reflection of Perez-Brown’s own personal story, which is continuously recited in journalistic discourse to establish the authenticity of Taina’s character as a Latina.

Like Irene Ng, Christina Vidal was not who was originally envisioned for the part of Taina. The original pilot episode had a different actress, Diane Lozada, in the lead role, but Perez-Brown states that, “After we saw that show, we felt the character needed

to have more of a New York City edge, needed to be more authentic. The moment we met Christina Vidal, not only did she look like Taina looked in my head, she was the best actress that we saw” (Clodfelter 2001). Differing from Ng and the post-racial narrative of Shelby Woo, Vidal’s personal story invoked in the journalistic discourse is vital in providing further meaning and validity to Taina’s character and the color/culture consciousness of the series. In an interview with the *Sun-Sentinel*, Vidal expresses the view that she felt that the part was perfect for her and that she herself had attended a performing arts school in New York City commuting from Queens, had dreams of becoming a star, and dealt with maintaining her relationships with friends and family during the process. Like Taina, Vidal’s parents were born in Puerto Rico, so unlike previous sitcoms about Latina/os like *Chico and the Man* (1974-1978) where the actor was from a different Latino group than the lead character, Vidal, like Taina, is Puerto Rican. However, in the interview, Vidal stressed that she was raised in a very assimilated context, but that family celebrations and cultural foods she eats are what distinguish her as Puerto Rican. She argued that Taina lives in an assimilated, Americanized world as well and that even though there should be importance placed on the lead role being a Latina, the focus of the series itself is not her ethnicity, which is just “an added bonus.” Like Ng, Vidal stresses that in the program ethnicity “is not thrown in everyone’s face” (Munoz 2002, F1), and like Perez-Brown, Vidal comments that, “it gives everyone a chance to see Latin people in a different light—that ‘they are just like everybody else.’” Once again, in order to market the series to the public, the story can only contain so much of a color/culture conscious message for fear of alienating a white audience.

When asked in the *Sun-Sentinel* interview what television programs she watches, Vidal's response (either knowingly or unknowingly) validates the importance of her role as Taina, as she replies *Friends* (1994-2004) and *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), majority white cast television programs. Just like Perez-Brown, Vidal watches what "the other kids watch," and this programming involved a majority white cast. The void in television at this time is further made apparent as Vidal cites Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston, two non-white entertainers, as her inspirations with regard to singing. Music has long been an avenue for greater racial and ethnic visibility than other popular culture forums, while television has remained a medium that still significantly lacks racial and ethnic representation. However, efforts to market to the tween audience in the 1990s led to the casting of more non-white actors as leads, as seen in Vidal's role as Taina, beginning to fill a void in children's programming.

The Premise Behind and Marketing of *Taina*

As briefly discussed above in recounting the parallels between Perez-Brown and Vidal's personal stories and those of Taina, the series concerns the life of a 14-year-old Latina navigating her new performing arts school and her dreams of becoming a mainstream star in tandem with her traditional Puerto Rican home life. The program's interior scenes were shot at Nickelodeon's Orlando Studios and the exterior scenes and establishing shots, such as the subway and Times Square, were filmed on location in New York City. Vidal's talents consist of singing, dancing, and acting. In each episode, Taina has a dream sequence, shot in music video style, where her dreams become "reality" and her hopes of stardom are actualized. These fantasies are typically used to help her come

to a realization concerning the dilemma that she is facing in the episode. Even though Taina has a few close run ins with true stardom in the program, her stardom was intended by the creator to never truly become actualized, as the premise of the program was most concerned with the pursuit of “the dream” and creating a Latina role model for young girls. As a comedy, the tone of the program remains light, with plot lines ranging from the revelation of Taina’s not-so-senior 13-year-old boyfriend to the failing of a Spanish test, which leads her grandfather to turn their home into a mini-Puerto Rico. The program frequently had African American and Latina/o guest stars, including Shakira, Joe, and Nick Cannon, among others.

Tween Marketing

Part of Nickelodeon’s rebranding under new network president Herb Scannell included the pursuit of a wider audience for the network. *Taina* was one of Nickelodeon’s first programs to target the tween demographic, defined as 9 to 14-year olds. Tween programming is considered to involve storylines usually centering on junior high or high school-aged kids and the issues involved with no longer being a little kid, but not yet a teenager. The programming was considered to be more age appropriate than the teen series of the time, such as *Dawson’s Creek*, and was even aimed at those younger than the tween demographic. The importance of family is also something that has been labeled specific to the tween audience, as most are navigating how much time should be spent with friends and how much time should be spent with family, as seen in *Taina*.

Aside from seeing the tween market as a programming niche that needed to be filled, some argue that the decision for many networks to begin to pay attention to this

demographic was an economic one. Gail Pennington (2001) cites that tweens have more money to spend than ever before, with an average disposable income of \$763 a year. Angharad Valdivia (2008) presented a similar assessment in her book chapter “Mixed Race on the Disney Channel,” but adds that the tween focus is on age, gender, and race. Valdivia states that, “Disney estimates that the aggregate disposable income of this group of girls is between \$40 and \$60 billion” (275). Jim Rutenberg argues that Nickelodeon inherently had a problem in its programming, which was strictly concerned with being a kid; every child reaches a point where he or she no longer wants to be a child anymore, and this is where tween programming can succeed. The network specifically created a block of programming on Saturday night, labeled SNICK, and a block of programming on Sunday night, labeled TEENick, to target an older and tween audience. *Taina* appeared on both programming blocks; in its second season, ratings among the 2 to 11-years-old demographic (Nickelodeon’s prime demographic) were up by 28 percent and ratings for the tween demographic were up by 51 percent.

Although the show provided a space for tween viewing, the network’s lack of investment in tweens before the early 2000s allowed Disney Channel to gain a head start in catering to the tween demographic, with programs like *The Famous Jett Jackson*, which began in 1998. Pennington cites Disney Channel as the top network in 2001 for tweens due to the success of the series *Lizzie McGuire*. She finds diversity to be of special importance to producers of tween programming, providing the examples of the multiethnic and multiracial casts of *Lizzie McGuire* (2001-2004), *Taina*, and *The Proud Family* (2001-2005), the last of which will be discussed in depth in my last chapter.

Executives at both Nickelodeon and Disney Channel expressed the importance of reflecting the diverse landscape on television that children experience in their daily lives. However, Valdivia finds that tween star success stories have largely been young, white, and female, such as Mary Kate and Ashley Olson, and points out that the success of mixed race tween programming on Disney Channel has been contingent on a panethnic or post-racial narrative. This panethnic narrative is one of ambiguity and hybridity of ethnicity in order to appeal to as many ethnic audiences as possible without alienating the white audience (272-273). Although Valdivia's argument is more centered on tween programming that concerns multiethnic characters, *The Proud Family* and *Taina* were two successful tween programs that were color/culture conscious and resisted a post-racial and panethnic narrative, showing that the target demographic was expanding to include non-white girls and that there was some belief by the networks that non-white centered programs could be financially profitable

The Characters of Taina: Entry of the Multigenerational Family and Exit of the Token Trio

Taina marked a time in Nickelodeon's history when portraying family life was of prime importance. Nickelodeon's shift to become a more family oriented network rather than just a kid's network was in line with the premise of a series based on a Latina teen, coming from a culture where family is paramount. *Taina*'s parents, Eduardo Morales (Josh Cruze) and Gloria Morales (Lisa Velez), grandfather, Gregorio Sanchez (Manolo Villaverde), brother, Santito (Orlando Iglesias), and aunt, Titi Rosa (Selenis Leyva) are all regularly seen on episodes of *Taina*, with several of the plot lines concerning the

family members. Although Vidal was virtually unknown to most in the acting world (her major acting parts prior to *Taina* consisted of a film with Michael J. Fox titled *Life with Mikey*, 1993, and a Disney Channel movie titled *Brink!*, 1998), Lisa Velez and Gregorio Sanchez were well-known Latino entertainers. Lisa Velez went by the stage name Lisa Lisa and was a famed 1980s pop star, and Manolo Villaverde was on the PBS bilingual sitcom *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* (1977-1980), which centered on the life of a Cuban-American family. The presence of these established Latina/o actors provides further authenticity to *Taina* as a program that intended a color/culture conscious approach.

As discussed in the previous chapter, including a group of three friends for the protagonist, or a Token Trio, is a common trope in children's television. *Taina* continues this trend but creates several ruptures in the common makeup of the Token Trio. This trio is most often comprised of a white male, a black male or other discernable minority, and a white female, yet increasingly the white female has been substituted for a non-white female. *Taina*'s two best friends are a black female, comedian Renee Jones (Khaliah Menee Adams), and a black male, "Spike Lee wannabe" Lamar Johnson (Chris Knowings). Not only is the white male not the lead, but also all of the members of the Trio are minorities, potentially making this structure incapable of being labeled a "Token Trio." The program does continue the Black Best Friend trope discussed in Chapter One, but since the series is racially diverse and contains a color/culture conscious narrative, it is difficult to label Renee the "token Black BFF" as seen in other children's programs that reflect a more post-race or assimilationist narrative. It also can be argued that "music prodigy" Daniel McDaniel (David Oliver Cohen), a white male, is a part of the

immediate friend group, making the circle of friends a foursome rather than a trio.

Martiza Hogg (LaTangela Newsome) is the last of the main characters at Taina's high school, but instead of being one of Taina's close friends, she is regarded as a pain in Taina's side and a "diva scene-stealer" (Wellons 2001). Martiza's racial and ethnic background is mixed, as she is born to an African American mother and a Puerto Rican father. Perez-Brown stated that she mirrored the character after a girl that stole her boyfriend when she was 14 (Navarro).

Taina achieved in its casting what most children's and adult programs on both cable and broadcast did not, a realistic portrayal of a racially and ethnically diverse cast in New York City. *Taina* was one of the three shows at the time (the other two being *Brothers Garcia* and *Resurrection Boulevard*) that employed "more Latino actors than all the Latino actors ever employed as regulars on a series in the history of television" (Copp 2000). Unlike *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*, Taina's family and friend relationships are a central part of the plot line and to Taina and the other non-white characters are more than just a face in the background.

The Tug of War Between Authenticity and Marketability

In most of the journalistic and industrial discourse surrounding racial and ethnic casts and the authenticity of these characters, the lack of non-white writers is a common reason given as to why characters of color are not often present in television and lack depth and/or authenticity. If one has not lived the experience, had personal involvement, or validated the experience in some way, the ability to depict realism is compromised.

Perez-Brown states that she made it her mission to hire Latina/o writers for *Taina*, even if

they did not have a lot of television experience. She argues that one of the major reasons why non-white writers are not more present in writing rooms is the lack of training programs. Nickelodeon launched a training program, in which three writers were paid \$30,000 to watch a specific show being produced for a year and at the end of the year, the trainee was given the opportunity to write one episode of the Nickelodeon show (Martin 2001). Programs like the one above were founded as a potential entryway for minority writers into the television industry. *Taina* is continuously cited in journalistic discourse as having cultural authenticity, which has mostly been said to be a product of Vidal and Perez-Brown, but the several non-white writers and cast members appear to play an underlying role in the holistic color/culture consciousness of the series.

The journalistic discourse that surrounded the premise of *Taina* ranged from the series being considered within the trend of the imagined, unrealistic, perfect yet quirky life of a high school student, seen in shows like *Saved By The Bell* (1989-1993) and *Clarissa Explains It All* (1991-1994) (Ferris 2001, B4), to being the first show since ABC's *My So-Called Life* (1994-1995) to have "the ability to talk to teens in an entertaining, responsible, and meaningful way" (Zurawik 2001, 1E). David Zurawik, in a Baltimore *Sun* article, raves about the series' pilot episode, claiming that respect for education, diversity, hard work and excellence are all present in the first episode. In line with Nickelodeon's marketing strategy at the time, Zurawik touts the family friendly and age appropriate nature of *Taina*. He asserts that unlike the reality series *Pop Stars* (2001-2002), on the WB at the time, which tells its teen audience that stardom is reached

through sex appeal and corporate star-making machines in Hollywood, *Taina* provides the narrative that success is achieved through hard work and education.

The general consensus of both those in the industry and journalists was that the program was on its way to becoming a huge hit, with one newspaper article stating that only a month after the program's premiere, 13 more episodes of the series had been ordered by Nickelodeon beyond the 13 already finished (Weiss 2001). As seen above, writers like Zurawik found the show's success to be tied to its focus on the life of a strong, independent, intelligent teen girl. But several writers questioned the potential threshold for success of the program because of its majority minority cast and the centrality of race and ethnicity in its storylines. Perez-Brown and Vidal were continuously asked by journalists why *Taina* was an important program and whether or not it would translate to a mainstream (i.e. white) audience. The series is validated for a mainstream audience in the commentary by Perez-Brown and Vidal through their discussion of its use of color/culture consciousness while defying stereotypes. This discourse presents the conflicted nature of having a program with a majority minority cast that is always relegated to an "ethnic television show," a program that network executives feel is too culturally out of touch with white viewers, rather than "simply a television show," a series that adheres to assimilated, mainstream American culture and values.

Race and Ethnicity as "Hip": Challenging Race as Commodity on Nickelodeon

Although *Taina* faced the challenge of validating itself as a marketable program due to *Taina*'s Puerto Rican identity, the series had no trouble marketing itself as hip,

urban, and cool. All three of these words are used in newspaper articles about the series. Gloria Goodale argued that 2001 marked the period when Nickelodeon chose to reinvent itself through cultural diversity, pointing to the three programs that starred Latina/os that began during the 2000-2001 television season. I would argue that Nickelodeon began this transition before this period, starting with the program *All That* in 1994, which starred a multi-racial cast and featured a musical guest, typically hip-hop and R&B artists, on each episode. Media critics abroad expressed similar sentiments to Goodale. In an *Irish Times* article about *Taina*, Harry Browne observes a wider trend in popular culture in leading children to view Latina/o and black characters as somehow cooler. In a *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* article by Catherine Newton, she found that Nickelodeon's risk taking and cutting-edge content, presenting shows that star racial and ethnic minorities was due to the network's "deep conviction that shows need to be 'authentic.'" Further in the article, Cyma Zarghami, vice president and general manager of the network, states that the network is putting color and culture together in a way that was both more exciting and genuine, rather than strictly funding a project because it starred a person of color. However, this narrative by Zarghami of color and culture as exciting was continued as Nickelodeon chose to promote *Taina* as hip as well, which was reflected on their website Nick.com advising viewers to "Get ready for a truly hip trip through the music videos of Tai's mind" (Peck 2001).

Navarro pointed to the "hip, contemporary urban world" that *Taina* lived in as consisting of eclectic music, citing it as salsa, R&B, and hip-hop. All three of these music types are major music genres provided categories in the Grammy Awards, making salsa,

R&B, and hip-hop hardly eclectic. This continues the narrative seen in Chapter One concerning race as Other, a term typically concerning Orientalism, meaning something separate from being white or American, something strange rather than familiar (Deo et. al 2008, pg. 158). Music genres like pop, country, and rock would undoubtedly not be considered eclectic because all three genres are thought to be dominated by white artists, as opposed to salsa, R&B, and hip-hop, which are as popular genres as those above. However, since non-white artists dominate these fields, this type of music becomes Othered and is considered eclectic.

Sarah Banet-Weiser discusses in *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* the relationship between kids and commercial media citizenship. She discusses Nickelodeon as an influential and powerful site for constructing this particular type of media citizenship. Banet-Weiser argues that Nickelodeon's audience is "imagined as empowered citizens, situated within the culture of 'cool,' part of a landscape rife with symbols of kids' apparent oppression" (82). This is embodied in Nickelodeon's "us versus them" mentality discussed earlier, which was instituted by former network president Geraldine Laybourne. Banet-Weiser finds that Nickelodeon chose to capitalize on the anxiety and fear generated by the urban landscape and code the urban as "real and authentic," or at the very least "cool," as seen in programs like *Hey Arnold!* (100). She finds that for Nickelodeon, a racial ambivalence and racial style has created a postracial television economy, an environment where "race itself no longer matters in the same way it once did but is rather an interesting means to feature the authentic, cool, or urban..." (144). Banet-Weiser's main contention with this type of programming is that acquiring

cultural capital through diversity is placed at the forefront. This prioritization of style takes precedence over acknowledging the social and political problems connected with race. Although I agree that this is an important concern when discussing racial representations in television, I would argue that systemic problems associated with race should be dealt with in a different manner for children's programming than adult programming.

In her analysis of Nickelodeon and its "commitment" to diversity, Banet-Weiser weaves a history of children, adult, broadcast, and cable programming, each of which has a very specific history and should be treated as such. Research has found that children at a young age have preconceptions about race concerning stereotypes and racial difference, but that they are less racially prejudiced than adults (Graves 1999, Lovelace et. al 1994, Mares and Acosta 2010). Therefore, I question whether focusing on societal inequities in children's programming would foster less prejudice and fewer misconceptions or if it would highlight racial and ethnic cultural difference, providing fodder for whites and non-whites to share less of a common culture.

Banet-Weiser dismisses the notion that children and adults view race and ethnicity in different ways and with varying amounts of knowledge and history concerning the topic. She argues that the channel's commitment to diversity has increased its financial profitability due to a rise in narrowcasting. However, broadcast networks have largely strayed from a long-term commitment to niche racial audiences in adult programming, showing that kids are more likely to accept programs with racial and ethnic minorities than adults due to their detachment from the larger societal discourse

concerning racial difference. I am not arguing for naiveté, but instead that there is a way to embrace racial and ethnic culture while also creating a common culture in order to reduce prejudice and misconceptions for the day when kids are no longer kids. Though I agree that whiteness still remains the norm in television programming and should be challenged, I disagree with Banet-Weiser's call for a more political agenda in children's television programs, particularly in programs like *Sesame Street* that are aimed for a pre-school audience and encourage the reduction of prejudicial thoughts in children in a non-political manner.

Banet-Weiser's book was published in 2007, five years after *Taina* went off the air, providing no excuse for her lack of inclusion of the series in her assessment of consumption of race on Nickelodeon. Her book chapter heavily references the other two Latina/o themed programs at the time (*Dora the Explorer* and *The Brothers Garcia*). I argue that including *Taina* would very much complicate her theory of racial ambivalence and race as a commodity on Nickelodeon. Although *Taina* was considered to be hip, urban, and cool as seen in the journalistic discourse above, the "dreams of being a star" persona of Taina and her attendance of a performing arts high school in New York City were very much in line with Vidal's real life experiences and the authentic notions of a Puerto-Rican American family life experienced by Vidal and Perez-Brown. *Taina* was ethnically specific and the program was truly authentic given its biographical nature. Banet-Weiser asserts an extension of Herman Gray's three discursive presentations of blackness in television to include a postracial or urbanization style that is now often present in the current television landscape. She does not define specifically when this era

begins but in the programs that she references (like *All That*), it appears to begin in the mid-1990s. As seen in Chapter One, I also contend that a postracial era in television is present earlier than 2008, the year that is marked as its beginning by other academics, such as Sarah Turner (2012), due to the election of African American Barack Obama to the United States Presidency. However, a color/culture consciousness is not completely absent from programming during this time, as seen by *Taina*.

One could argue that race as commodity, branding non-whites as “hip” in order to sell products, was present on *Taina* with the appearance of several non-white guest stars in the Latin, hip-hop, and R&B music worlds like Shakira, 3LW, and C-Note, among others. Also, *Taina*’s music video visions play into race as commodity, a strategy typically used on music television station MTV. However, if *Taina* were a 14-year-old girl from Queens in reality, she most likely would be listening to the artists mentioned above and would have dreams of becoming a mainstream Latina star. Banet Weiser’s assessment of race as commodity discounts the lack of representation of Latina/os on television programming and that Nickelodeon programming can truly empower young girls of color, as opposed to simply existing as a strategy and brand identity for the network (Ryan 2010). Banet Weiser does not provide an example of a program on Nickelodeon that contains a non-white character that does not represent race as a commodity, so the question comes to mind, when one is dealing with children’s television and television programming in general, is it possible for anything to not be a commodity when networks thrive on making a profit? Ultimately, I find her argument to still place whiteness at the forefront of the discussion of race on television, particularly in

her decision to not look beyond the impact of these characters on the mainstream i.e. white audience.

Race and Ethnicity in *Taina*

Race and ethnicity and more so, a color/culture consciousness was central to the premise of *Taina*. In using the backdrop of a performing arts high school, Latina/o stars, like Selena and Jennifer Lopez, among others, are frequently mentioned and are presented as role models for Taina, rather than other popular white stars at the time, like Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera. A Latin culture and sensibility is presented throughout the series, as Taina calls her mom and dad Mami and Papi, her aunt Titi Rosa, and grandfather, Abuelo. The local hangout for the students is Papito's, which is owned by a Latino man named Papito, and the coffee shop is famous for the latte-like drink called a "Papachino." Taina's family and the other Latina/o characters mix in Spanish words or phrases with dialogue in English and subtitles are not used, making the use of Spanish normalized rather than foreign.

Several episodes center around the family and Latin culture, such as "Quinceanero," in which Taina is torn between having a traditional Quinceañera, a coming of age party for Latinas usually held at the age of 15, or to have a more modern, hip take on the celebration. At the end of the episode, Taina decides to wear a more modern dress rather than the hand-me-down frilly pink dress worn by her mother and aunt, but she still chooses to wear the tiara that has been passed down from woman to woman in her family. In another episode titled "Abuelo Knows Best," Taina intends to help her grandfather with a cooking contest, for which they are making the Puerto Rican

dessert pastelon, but she ends up missing the contest because she has a run-in with her idol Shakira at Papito's. Although this episode is a great example of Latin culture and the importance of family as normative, it is also an example of Nickelodeon's programming beginning to rely on extraordinary storylines, with Taina being late due to a run-in with a major Latina star rather than simply being a typical teen hanging out with her friends and losing track of time.

Like *Shelby Woo*, *Taina* is part of a trend in kids' programming in this time period starring strong, independent girls. Although Taina is seen as having crushes or becoming involved with the popular crowd, at the end of each episode, she always reestablishes her independence and also her support system of her family and friends. In terms of class, Taina is meant to be read as coming from a middle-class background, as she lives in a nice home, wears fashionable clothes, and has a cordless phone in her room. However, storylines and comments arise to make the viewer aware that money does not grow on trees for the family. In the episode "Mega Funds," Taina desperately begs her parents for money to attend a class trip to an amusement park. Instead of her parents immediately saying yes, her father replies with, "We will see what we can do." The next day, Taina wins a cash prize at a contest at school and can pay for the trip herself, but she chooses to buy a pair of expensive shoes instead. When her parents receive word of this, they sing, "I'm so lucky... Because we don't have to pay for your Mega Fun trip." Although the ultimate lesson of saving one's allowance and/or part of growing up is paying for things yourself is a typical one shown in a teen television show, Taina's parents make it clear that the family is not well off. This is a different result than the response that would be

given to the teen characters on shows like *The O.C.* (2003-2007) or *90210* (2008-2013). As one can see, gender and class constructions are present in the program as well, but race and ethnicity through a color/culture conscious narrative is the focal point of this study and is most central to the series' construction.

The episode "Sabotage" (Season 2, Episode 2) is an episode that solidifies non-whites as normative, and whites, or more specifically the idealized Heartland notion of white, as non-normative. In Victoria Johnson's (2008) *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and The Struggle for U.S. Identity*, she argues that, "Midwesternness was the frame through which television was introduced, through which its uses were imagined, and through which its ideal audience was represented" (2). Taina, and specifically this episode, defies Midwestern as normative and situates the "Mary Tyler Moore America's Sweetheart" sensibility of the character Lizzie as Other. A guest star, pop singer Brooke Allison, is present as the character Lizzie in this episode and soon becomes Taina's nemesis, as Lizzie receives the finale spot in the school talent show. Taina teams up with her previous rival Maritza to try to achieve the finale spot from Lizzie. Throughout the episode, Lizzie woos teachers and classmates with her girl-next-door charm, an attitude that is rarely seen being used by Taina or her friends throughout the series, placing Lizzie as truly Other and a place disconnected from Queens but is recognizable as All-American, i.e., the Heartland. The minor story arc in the episode also focuses on a white character, as Renee develops a crush on Daniel, showing the potential for an interracial relationship. However, throughout the episode, it is unclear whether Renee's crush on

Daniel is out of the ordinary because he is in the girls' immediate friend group or if it is because he is white.

The episode begins with Taina singing at her locker when Renee joins her in song, but she clearly is not meant to be a singer, as her singing is off key and her voice cracks. A common trait associated with African Americans, and particularly women, is the ability to sing, so for Renee to lack the talent to sing is defying a common stereotype in popular culture concerning female blackness. At this point, Taina exclaims "Renee!" Renee replies, "I'm sorry girl. I just got caught up in the groove. We be jammin' huh?" and then the girls proceed to do their secret handshake. In this short piece of dialogue, which is typical of the series, slang is used to evoke both youth and a color/culture consciousness. Renee then goes on to tell Taina that her love for that song is tied to her impending love affair with her future husband, i.e. Dan. Dan walks up to the lockers as Renee proceeds to flirt with him, asking him if he has worked out and calling him 'Papiculo.' Taina remains in a state of confusion, grimacing and asking, "Dan? DAN?" multiple times before the theme song and credits roll.

Taina is next seen singing in Papito's, practicing for the school talent show. Maritza and Lamar walk into the coffee shop, and Lamar introduces a white, blond-haired girl named Lizzie to Taina. After meeting Taina, Lizzie replies with a southern drawl, "Taina, that's an interesting name. Nice to meet you." Lamar goes on to say that Lizzie acted out a scene he wrote for film class and that she was great. Lizzie replies, "And now he's promised to make me his leading lady when his script gets turned into a movie. He's sweet as shoofly pie." In contrast to Renee's dialogue earlier, Lizzie clearly

is not from New York City, as she is unfamiliar with Latin names like Taina Morales and refers to Lamar as being sweet as shoofly pie.” When Lizzie introduces herself to Maritza, Maritza sprays something on Lizzie’s hand stating, “You need to disinfect after touching moi.” Though this is typical of Maritza’s diva personality, it also places Lizzie and her whiteness as Other and potentially unclean. However, in a later scene when Lizzie considers receiving help from Lamar for her audition, Maritza hands the antibacterial spray to Lizzie, saying that if she decides to take help from Lamar, she may need the spray. This redeems Maritza’s potential prejudice against Lizzie and shows that Maritza is essentially prejudiced against everyone but herself. Lizzie, Maritza, and Taina then go on to talk about the talent show:

Lizzie: Well, uh, are y’all auditioning for the talent show?

Taina: Oh, I am. Agents are going to be in the audience scouting for new talent.

Maritza: And I’m going to get the headlining spot at the end of the show.

Everyone whose performed in that spot has gone on to become a star.

Lizzie: Golly, you must be really good. What are you doing for the audition?

Maritza: A song called Nunya

Lizzie: Nunya? (still with a smile on her face)

Maritza: That’s right. Nunya business. (and proceeds to role her eyes)

Taina, in her do-gooder fashion, says to Maritza, “Could you be any more rude?”.

Taina then proceeds to show Lizzie the song that she plans to sing at the audition. In the dialogue above, an insider and outsider narrative is present again and slang is used to place Lizzie as a white, Midwestern outsider. The use of phrases like “golly” and “y’all”

depict once again that her origin is not in New York City, placing her background in a mysterious Heartland as the girl next door.

Later on, the scene shows Maritza, Taina, and other classmates at the audition for the talent show. Lizzie comes running in, saying that she had an emergency phone call and her dog Sprinkles has been rushed to the hospital. She begs to audition before Taina (calling her “puddin’”) so that she can head to the hospital afterwards. Lizzie’s performance awes all, except Taina who is frantic because Lizzie stole the song that she had planned to sing for the audition. Lizzie ends up receiving the finale spot of the show and now both Maritza and Taina have a vendetta against her. This is a common teen storyline, but also can be read as two non-white “urban” girls ganging up on the white “girl next door.” After calling Lizzie “a scheming, snake, fake, sick dog, song stealer,” Taina decides to join the crew for the talent show to get revenge on Lizzie when she least expects it.

In the next scene, the multigenerational aspect of the series appears, as Taina’s grandfather finds Taina up late in the kitchen making a sandwich. He tells Taina to get over the Lizzie issue and gives her advice, saying that she will be able to get revenge without doing a thing because bad people always get what is coming to them. His statement constructs Taina as good and Lizzie as bad. In order to keep the conversation and vendetta light-hearted, her grandfather says that he has seen this happen in novelas a thousand times. His ultimate advice to Taina was to have a plan b. He then steals her sandwich and exits the scene.

As the episode nears a close, it's the night of the talent show. Taina tells Maritza that she has decided she is going to let fate run its course with Lizzie. This is an example of the independence that Taina reaches at the end of most episodes, as she typically faces dilemmas concerning something that may be out of character of the strong Latin family values that she was raised with. Lamar walks into their conversation and proceeds to ask the girls why they have such a problem with Lizzie. He then comes to Lizzie's defense, saying that he plans to stop Maritza and Taina's scheme if possible and that the girls "cannot handle that poor, sweet girl's success." The girls continue to try and tell Lamar that Lizzie is just using him. Lamar begins to believe the girls and decides to engage in a scheme with them to figure out if Lizzie is using him or not. Maritza and Taina find out that Lizzie knew about the scheme all along as she states, "Of course. I'm a country girl and I know a fox trap when I see one." Lizzie then goes on to say how easy it was to manipulate Lamar into writing his script for her to play the lead role. Taina is back into her role as a schemer, as she taped Lizzie bad-talking Lamar. But now Taina appears good for helping Lamar, and Lizzie appears as bad for deceiving him. Right before Lizzie is set to go onstage, she sprays her hair with what she thinks to be hairspray, but it was the spray glue that Taina used in a failed scheme earlier in the episode. Just as Abuelo had advised Taina, Taina was able to get her ultimate revenge by letting fate take its course.

This episode reveals the color/culture consciousness of *Taina* through slang being used in the dialogue, as well as the normalizing of non-whiteness and construction of white as Other. In the 11 episodes that I watched from the two seasons (26 episodes total)

of *Taina*, this was the only episode that presented another white teen aside from Daniel as a main character in a storyline. Brooke Allison, who played Lizzie, is also the only white guest star on both seasons of *Taina*, marking the rarity of white guest stars appearing on the program. In this sense, in using Banet-Weiser's argument about an urban, cool, non-white sensibility that became a part of the Nickelodeon brand, one could argue that the lack of white guest stars and the centrality of non-white lead characters was an example of Banet-Weiser's argument. However, this urban sensibility went much further into culture, as well as ethnic and racial specificity than the programs that Banet-Weiser discusses, like *Kenan and Kel*, *Rocket Power*, and *Rugrats*. White stars at this time were considered hip by Nickelodeon as well; guest stars on *All That* went from almost being purely R&B and hip-hop performers to including several white pop stars. Ultimately, the world of *Taina* was one meant for entertainment, while its autobiographical nature provided a Latin specific authenticity and a reimagining of race at the center of the televisual landscape.

Conclusion

Although *Taina* garnered Nickelodeon their highest ratings in three years, the program was cancelled after a second season. Cancellation was thought to be due to its lack of appeal to a majority female audience, along with a lack of funds to continue the project. Racial and ethnic diversity became an integral part of the Nickelodeon brand starting in the mid 1990s, but the cultural specificity and a majority non-white cast was a rarity for the network, making *Taina* a particularly interesting case study. *Taina* also marked a time when Latina/os were becoming more visible on cable television, with the

show being one of Nickelodeon's three programs that presented a Latina/o point of view. The high ratings of the program disprove the theory that series with racial and ethnic minority leads cannot attain a substantial viewership. However, it appears that other reasons, such as financial and network support, impact the longevity of series with non-white lead casts.

In looking at the state of Latina/o characters on children's television after *Taina*, there are still few Latina/o actors in lead roles in live action programming. Yet, elementary educational programming has become a space for Latina/o visibility. *Dora the Explorer* is the most popular of the Latina/o starred programs, but *El Tigre: The Adventures of Manny Rivera* (2007-2008), *Go, Diego, Go* (2005-2011), *Maya and Miguel*, *Dragon Tales*, *Sofia the First* (2013-), and *Handy Manny* (2006-2013), all animated Latina/o starred programs, have been successful as well. As the animated programs usually contain Spanish words and elements from Latin culture (although the characters themselves may present a pan-Latino identity), the most visible live action Latina/o leads like Selena Gomez in *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007-2012) have been racially ambiguous or multi-ethnic lead characters. Television shows *Victorious* (2010-2013) and *Austin & Ally* (2011-) have Latina lead characters played by Victoria Justice and Raini Rodriguez, but both programs provide little, if any, attention to the characters' race. It appears that a color/culture consciousness concerning Latina/os has been relegated to animated preschool-aged programs, and it has remained difficult for elementary and tween live action programs to achieve the culturally specific vantage point seen in *Taina*. However, looking at the several Latina/o lead characters in

children's television stated above, Nickelodeon's effort in 2000 to air three Latina/o specific series paved the way for Latina/o visibility on television in the millennium.

Chapter Three: "I'm Penny Proud, I'm Cute and I'm Loud, and I Got It Goin' On": African American Representation and the Color/Culture Conscious Narrative of the Disney Channel Series *The Proud Family*

Introduction

African Americans have remained the foremost non-white presence on American television programming for both kids and adults. As seen in Chapters One and Two, Asian American representation has continued to be sparse, and Latina/os have made substantial gains in children's television programming, but both groups still lack a presence on adult targeted programming. Beginning in the 1950s' with *Beulah* (1950-1952), blacks have held lead roles in successful television series throughout the decades, making African Americans part of significant popular culture moments that have been etched into the nation's memory. However, African Americans, and racial minorities in general, have remained largely absent from animated programming, particularly when it comes to majority-minority casts.

According to Carol Stabile (2003), in fear of complaints of racism during the 1950s and 60s, references to blacks and other non-white characters were scaled back and a white-only genre of programming was formed – children's cartoons. Stabile argues that this was done under the rubric of protecting children in working to make cartoons a space free from controversial images (37). Heather Hendershot finds in her book *Saturday Morning Censors: Television Regulation Before the V-Chip* (1998) that non-white characters are not completely absent from cartoons, as ethnic diversity has proven to be profitable for product-based cartoons. However, these non-white characters are typically “drained of otherness by narratives that rarely explicitly acknowledge cultural or ethnic

differences” (101). Although non-white characters provide the opportunity of a wider consumer audience, production companies still fear non-white leads, finding them a potential risk of low ratings or presenting an “ethnic” show rather than a “normal” show (102). Hendershot argues that cartoon animalization, series using animated and speaking animals as characters rather than humans, has been the common strategy to mask ethnic stereotyping. One could also consider television series like *Doug* (1991-1994), which present characters with skin tones of blue and green, as attempts to mask ethnic stereotyping. In the case of *Doug*, the central characters continue the hegemonic order and are white.

Fat Albert and The Cosby Kids (1972-1985), *The Jackson Five* (1971-1972), and *Harlem Globetrotters* (1970-1972) are some of the most notable animated television programs centered around majority black casts. However, all three of these programs aired in the 1970s, a time when black-themed programming was on the rise (like *Good Times*), and all of these programs focus on male leads. Black females have remained even less commonplace in animation, but in the 1990s with the premiere of the character of Susie Carmichael in the Nickelodeon series *Rugrats*, African American girls in children’s animated programming gained a greater presence. In 2001, Disney Channel premiered *The Proud Family*, the network’s first original animated series to star a majority African American cast and arguably the first television animated series centered on an African American female. The series centers on a 14-year-old African American teenager and her daily trials and tribulations with her family and friends. Due to academia’s continuous focus on educational children’s programming, series like *The Proud Family* have been

overlooked, even though this program can be considered a milestone for non-whites in television. I argue that *The Proud Family* is an important case study because of the lack of African American females in animation in conjunction with its color/culture conscious perspective. With Disney's prejudicial past, it is also an important program to study in looking at Disney's historical trajectory concerning race and ethnicity.

In this chapter, I first explore the atmosphere of Disney Channel at the time that *The Proud Family* premiered to help gain perspective on why this program aired on Disney Channel in 2001. I then examine the journalistic discourse concerning the series itself and the series' creator, Bruce W. Smith. I subsequently perform an in-depth analysis of *The Proud Family*, specifically focusing on its color/culture conscious vantage point. Throughout the chapter, I situate what was happening with Disney Channel in relation to what is taking place at Nickelodeon during this time. I will also consider how live action may differ from animation in the discussion of children's programming and race and ethnicity in television. In my conclusion, I discuss the legacy of African Americans on children's television, and in particular, on Disney Channel and in animation.

Disney Channel Enters the Millennium: Tweens, Acquisitions, and the Expansion of the Children's Dream Machine

Unlike Nickelodeon, which made its debut in 1979, what is presently known as Disney Channel launched in 1983 as The Disney Channel. Nickelodeon became the prime cable network for children beginning in the early 1990s with the success of programs like *Rugrats* and *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991-1996), while at this time The

Disney Channel focused on airing Disney films and reruns of non-original programming (Blue 15). When *The Proud Family* premiered, Disney Channel was in the midst of a rebranding effort that the network began in 1997. Disney Channel premiered its first original series in 1996 titled *Flash Forward* (1996 – 1999), a series focused on two best friends since birth and their journey through the 8th grade. The series was clearly targeted towards an elementary and middle school-aged audience, which, in turn, became the primary audience of Disney Channel in the years to follow. Not only was a new logo introduced at this time, but also, the channel began to transition from a premium service to a basic cable service (Dempsey). With increased programming targeted towards kids, primarily ages 2-14, along with the entry of popular music concert specials and music videos onto the channel's non-advertisement based network, the channel clearly began to market itself to the pre-teen and teenage demographic that were currently tuning into MTV, WB, Nickelodeon, and Cartoon Network.

These efforts proved to be a success by 2001, when *The Proud Family* premiered, making Disney's venture of an animated series centered on an African American teenage girl anything but risky. By 2002, when the series was in its second season, Disney Channel chose to cancel its "Vault Disney" programming block. This block of programming featured classic Disney films and television programs, which is what the channel was built on and what some felt was the "true" Disney brand (Guelph Mercury 2002, D15). This decision was made due to the network's expanding younger audience, as the network gained wider distribution as a basic cable network. By 2002, the channel had grown to 80 million households, up from 14 million households six years earlier

(Guelph Mercury 2002, D15). The airing of classic content proved successful when the channel was a premium channel that required a subscriber fee, making the audience largely baby boomers. However, this audience was not enough to sustain Disney Channel, particularly with Nickelodeon as its competition and its need to obtain a profit when paired with struggling broadcast network ABC (Guelph Mercury, 2002, D15). Cancelling the Vault Disney block allowed Disney to present 24-hour programming for children like their competitor Nickelodeon and to present more current and relevant programming to their burgeoning youth (ages 2-14) audience.

Another change in programming that Disney Channel made during the early 2000s was in its music programming. In 2001, the network chose to stop airing music videos and concert specials and instead began asking musical stars to make cameos on their prized original series like *Lizzie McGuire* and *Even Stevens* (2001-2003) (Gundersen 2001, 1D). The channel is credited with launching the careers of popular acts like *NSYNC, LeAnn Rimes, and Aaron Carter. Rich Ross, Disney Channel's general manager, argues that the network has been a machine for the recording labels, with Disney not attaining as much of a profit as they would like; hence the decision for a more channel-centric means of presenting music through the network's original movies and television series (Gundersen 2001, 1D). The network also wanted to distance itself from resembling networks like MTV in showing concert specials, music videos, and increasingly risqué videos that Disney Channel found to not be appropriate for its prime-time 9-14-year-old viewers. The network would now have more control financially and in the guests' musical content.

Disney's Acquisitions of ABC and Fox Family and Extending the Disney Brand

Walt Disney Co., the owner of Disney Channel, made a major acquisition in July 2001, buying Fox Family Worldwide for \$3 billion and assuming the company's \$2.3 billion in debt in order to further their brand, and their reach to the tween and teen audience ("Changing Channels" 2001). Fox Family, which would be renamed ABC Family under the acquisition, reached about 81 million cable subscribers in the United States at this time. Disney was in competition with other companies, believed to be Viacom (which owns Nickelodeon) and AOL Time Warner. Clearly, this was a significant opportunity for already established children's television brands to have another space and increased viewership, along with the extending and growing their brand. Disney also acquired ownership of Fox Kids Europe and Fox Kids in Latin America, with a combined viewership of 34 million ("Changing Channels" 2001). Saban, a production company largely focused on children's programming (*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* [1987 –] and *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* [1993-1995]), was also a part of the deal, with Disney receiving their programming library of more than 6,500 episodes of shows. This was Disney's first acquisition since it bought ABC in 1996. But with Fox Family considered one of the "five or six strong, ubiquitous cable channels in the United States," Disney would now be able to further grow in the arena of children's cable television ("Changing Channels" 2001).

Continued pressure was placed on Disney Channel to make a profit due to its partnership with broadcast network ABC; in 2002, Disney Channel aired *The Proud Family*, among other tween programs on their network, on ABC's "Disney's One

Saturday Morning” block. Not only did they expect the series to attract a significant audience, but they also hoped that it would extend Disney Channel’s brand beyond its loyal cable viewers. ABC was the first broadcast network to market to the tween audience for Saturday morning programs. This demographic increasingly became popular at this time, and NBC, Fox, and CBS all made plans to revamp their Saturday-morning programming blocks to reach older kids as well (Umstead 2002, 56).

The Conquering of the Tween Audience

One of the major shifts from when *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* aired to the premiere of *Taina* and *The Proud Family* was the creation of the tween audience. During the 1990s, as discussed in previous chapters, the main purpose of female lead children’s programs was to reflect the lives of independent, strong teenage girls, while proving to be successful among both male and female audiences. Tween purchasing power was not mentioned in the discussions of *Clarissa Explains It All*, *Moesha*, or *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, as marketing to youth was relegated to toys and merchandise based on children’s cartoons or music on MTV. As discussed in Chapter Two, in the early 2000s, a new demographic group emerged titled tweens. These were individuals seen as no longer kids but not yet teenagers. This group was found to have significant buying power (an estimated \$38 billion) and those that were most tuned into Disney Channel’s programming were tween girls (Larson 2003). Megan Larson argues that Disney Channel created a programming schedule that became a must-see for girls ages 9-14, and from 2002 to 2003, this demographic’s viewership of Disney Channel grew by 26%, with 78% of that growth being girls. *Lizzie McGuire* was Disney’s first successful series marketed

specifically towards tweens. Other networks followed suit in this programming with series like Nickelodeon's *Taina*. *The Proud Family* was regarded as a tween program, and Disney Channel was considered in journalistic discourse to be the top network among the tween audience (Dempsey 2001, 24). As mentioned in Chapter Two, the family was viewed as an important part of tween programming, which *The Proud Family* underscores in the name alone.

Julia Boorstin argues that Disney Channel, which she labels a "once an ugly stepchild," "essentially recreated the old Hollywood star system with its 'tween actors and actresses,'" making little-known kids into big names and marketing them through TV shows, movies, records, and/or merchandise. Hilary Duff, the lead actress in the Disney Channel series *Lizzie McGuire*, was the first in this trend. Duff was named the "Tween Queen" by *Vanity Fair* in 2003. At this time, she already had a substantial brand with Disney Press, with published books based on the series and the soundtrack for the series, which featured Duff singing, had gone platinum. Boorstin finds the reasoning for Disney's tween focus with their budding stars is due to the successes of Mouseketeers Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake, and Christina Aguilera, who received their start on the Disney Channel show *Mickey Mouse Club* (1955-1959, 1977, 1989-1996) and whose profits Disney did not see a penny of, as stated earlier.

Another reason why Disney Channel turned to creating all of its merchandising within the Disney brand was due to its status as a commercial-free network, making it difficult for the company to obtain substantial advertising dollars from non-Disney products. However, its acquisitions of ABC and Fox Family and their extension of the

tween audience to those networks was also said to aid in their receipt of high advertisement dollars. (Dempsey 2001, 24). The network also accepted 15-second sponsorships sold at premium rates to increase revenue (Larson 2003). Although in 2001 tween program *Lizzie McGuire* was Disney Channel's highest rated series, in journalistic discourse, the channel was still seen as the "ugly stepchild" by some, as John Dempsey states that the series ratings are "not yet at the smash-hit level of *Rugrats* or *Powerpuff Girls* (1998-2005) found on rival networks Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network. However, Disney Channel had created niche programming for a specific demographic that proved successful, as the network led in prime time ratings with tweens in comparison to the two networks mentioned above. By 2003, Disney Channel had several successful female led tween shows (*Kim Possible*, *That's So Raven*, *The Proud Family*, *Lizzie McGuire*, among others) and had overtaken Nickelodeon in becoming the favorite network among kids 6-11 in primetime, growing by 53 percent since July 2002, as well as the favorite overall for kids 6-11 and tweens, which grew by 81 percent and 67 percent from the previous year (Larson 2003).

Unlike during the 1990s when girl-led programs needed to resonate with boys and girls alike, the female-driven tween programs of the 2000s were able to stand on their own with a majority female viewership. In Gail Pennington's discussion of the rise of tween programming, she asserts that female-led programs like Disney Channel's *Lizzie McGuire* and Fox Family's *Braceface* (2001-2004) spoke to issues that were important to tweens, such as junior-high traumas or a chaotic school life. These storylines are pitted in opposition to series targeted towards tween boys like Fox's *Transformers: Robots in*

Disguise (2000-2001), WB's *Yu-Gi-Oh* (2001-2006), and Nickelodeon's *Spongebob Squarepants* (1999 –), which were either violent, remakes of older series, or purely for fun, dealing less with the day-to-day lives of transitioning from a kid to a teenager. Disney Channel discovered a substantial and strong market for this type of narrative, making a case for the network's rapid popularity among the tween audience.

Rich Ross, Disney Channel's president of entertainment, and Anne Sweeney, president of Disney Channel Worldwide and ABC Cable Networks Groups, are largely credited at this time for the success of Disney Channel, and, in particular, their role in increasing Disney Channel's tween audience. Rich Ross came to Disney in 1996 with the goal in mind of attracting preschoolers to Disney Channel and keeping them entertained through junior high, an idea that was similar to the reality of Nickelodeon at the time. Ross, a self-proclaimed fanatic about the tween age group, states that the network's goal was to be number one with kids ages 2-14; in 2003, the network had already achieved the number one status with ages 6-14 (Larson 2003, Pennington 2001, G6). Ross hoped that by growing the network's numbers among boys and from the viewership of preschool programming block Playhouse Disney that the network would close the current gap of being number one among 2-6 year olds (Larson 2003). Ross adopted similar language to Nickelodeon executives in previous chapters, as he states that the network "attempts to lure them [tweens] by 'telling an honest story and speaking to what's important to them'" (Pennington 2001, G6). He claims that the network did this through the inclusion of family, diversity, and by simply telling age-appropriate, good stories (Pennington 2001, G6).

Anne Sweeney joined Disney in 1996 like Ross and found that Disney's current programming, which consisted largely of dated programming, was too uncool and out of touch to appeal to youth at that time (Boorstin 2003). As discussed as a trend in tween series in Chapter Two, Sweeney is credited with creating more "hip" programming, which became a trend in tween series. Boorstin finds this hip programming to include *Lizzie McGuire*, *That's So Raven*, and *Even Stevens*, among other series, further discrediting Banet-Weiser's argument about "race as hip," for not all of these programs star non-white actors and not all of these programs take place in an urban center. What was not discussed in the journalistic discourse concerning *Taina* was the potential expiration date of tween stars and series, wherein the actors potentially begin to look older than their middle school or high school character. Also, the characters can only remain in high school for so long, and in order to maintain relevance with their target audience 2-14, Disney Channel strayed away from programs that included characters in college. Sweeney was anything but coy about the notion of an expiration date, as she and Ross disclosed that no more than 65 episodes of any series were made and that the network shoots the episodes quickly before key actors can outgrow their roles. Disney is then able to air them at a leisurely pace with the ability to rerun successful programs for years while garnering new generations of tween viewers. The network is also able to limit the amount the stars are paid since all the series are shot quickly with production potentially ending before it becomes a hit (Boorstin 2003). Sweeney also acknowledges the pushback from tween stars when they themselves feel like they have outgrown their roles, citing Hilary Duff, who by 2003 was planning several other ventures without

Disney Channel's involvement and from which Disney Channel would not receive revenue. However, Sweeney and Disney Channel had already found two other female stars, 14-year-old Alison Michalka of *Phil of the Future* (2004-2006) and Raven of *That's So Raven*, to keep alive the tween girl fan fare that the network would be losing with the exit of Duff.

I now turn to the journalistic discourse surrounding *The Proud Family*, focusing on the discourse surrounding race and ethnicity and the tween sensibility in the program. I also explore the narrative concerning the creator of the show, Bruce W. Smith.

The Marketing and Branding of Disney Channel's First Animated Original Series

By 2001, when *The Proud Family* premiered, Nickelodeon already held a track record of several series that starred non-whites and were successful. Disney Channel had only two original series before *The Proud Family* that starred racial and ethnic minorities, these being *Lizzie McGuire* and *The Famous Jett Jackson*. Therefore, the entry of *The Proud Family* may not have seemed unusual to most since children's television programming has historically held, to some extent, racial and ethnic diversity. However, a majority minority cast was something unheard of on Disney Channel and a sight rarely seen in animation. The focus of the program on an African-American teen girl and her family was highly publicized by Disney Channel and in journalistic discourse, similar to what was seen in the discourse on Nickelodeon's *Taina*, which aired the same year as *The Proud Family*.

The overall message in journalistic discourse surrounding *The Proud Family* was that the show was original and full of smart humor, ideal for those at the tween age, but a

program that the family could enjoy as well, as the show looks at a 14-year-old girl's relationships with friends and family. Key words that are used for Penny Proud, the lead female character, fit into the SheTeen characterization discussed in Chapter One. Penny is described as independent (Berkowitz 2001), strong-willed (LaRue 2002), and as having a never-ending passion ("Meet the Prouds" 2001). Numerous journalists describe the programming as including familiar topics that families and teens face, such as cheerleader tryouts, spin-the-bottle rumors, and too-small allowances, but the emphasis on culture, with episode themes focused on Black History Month, Kwanzaa, and Blaxploitation films and the clever animation and humor, is what sets the program apart. The tone and focus of the discourse by journalists concerning *The Proud Family* reflects a much more color/culture conscious emphasis than the discourse surrounding *Taina*. The discourse on *Taina* continued the history of visionary yet apologetic rhetoric concerning race and ethnic conscious programming. Rarely does this type of discourse appear in the commentary on *The Proud Family*. This may be due to *The Proud Family* being an animated program rather than live action so that the program is seen as more fictional than live action programming, making the color/culture consciousness of the series less of a threat to the reality of race relations.

In a 2003 *New York Times* piece titled "At the Disney Channel, It's a Diverse World After All," Marc Weingarten looks at Disney's transition from a not-so-dated racist past, citing the company's missteps with the 1946 film *Song of the South* and recent 1992 film *Aladdin*, to its inclusion of black characters on three Disney Channel programs, *That's So Raven*, *The Famous Jett Jackson*, and *The Proud Family*. Anne Sweeney

asserts that these missteps were before her time, and that during its rebranding, the network finally began to think “big about the world.” Once again, racial and ethnic diversity is seen as marketable globally, contradicting the reasoning of some network executives that claim that racial and ethnic diversity is not marketable in other countries. Weingarten places *The Proud Family* and its accompanying black-led Disney Channel programs as significantly differing from broadcast channel UPN’s black-led sitcoms like *The Parkers* (1999-2004) and *Half and Half* (2002-2006) stating, “For the most part, the Disney shows featuring minority characters don’t fit into easy stereotypes... Disney black characters are not averse to laugh-track zingers, but they carry themselves with considerably more dignity.” He claims that the UPN programs listed above frequently feature “antagonists trading sassy insults.”

What Weingarten seems to not be privy to is that even though he is praising original programming starring African Americans, he is complicit in the racist thinking that he condemns by using terms like “sassy” and “dignity,” contested language throughout history that attempts to distinguish what is acceptable (dignity) or not acceptable (sassy) by the mainstream public concerning African Americans. I do, however, agree with Weingarten’s overall point, which is that substantive programming with minority leads was a rarity on Disney Channel and was finally coming into fruition during this time. Aside from the race/racial identity of the series’ lead characters, Weingarten also states that the smart, snarky dialogue found in *The Proud Family* more closely resembles programming on Nickelodeon, showing that Nickelodeon was regarded

at the time as not only the network leading in minority led shows, but also in more intelligent and savvy writing.

As seen in Chapter Two, the relevance and accuracy of cultural elements within minority-led children's programming is typically credited to the influence of the creator of the show. In the discourse surrounding *The Proud Family*, Bruce W. Smith, the creator and lead animator of the series, is portrayed as the mastermind of the program. A personal narrative was used in the discourse seen in Chapter One with regard to Alan Goodman, the creator of *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*, as his desire to make the program was based on the mystery novels that his nephew read, while the promotional narratives repeated regarding series creators Maria Perez-Brown and Bruce Smith and their visions for their programs were autobiographical in nature.

Smith attributes the influence for *The Proud Family* series to his middle-class upbringing in Los Angeles within an African American family. The family and the show received their name when Smith showed his animation-studio partner Tom Wilhite early drawings of the characters, and Wilhite remarked, "This is a really proud-looking family" (LaRue 2002). Smith states that he wanted to create "a middle-class family that was not so much Cosby-esque as Cosby-esque with a really interesting slant" (Solomon 2000, F24). Smith used both past and present imagery of an African American family to shape his characters, as he found that the mother and father on the program, Trudy and Oscar Proud, are exaggerated versions of himself and his wife, who have four children, and the grandmother character Suga Mama is based on Smith's mother. In looking at the discussions of the show in the popular press, journalists clearly felt that the program had

an interesting slant and was unique, as the program was rarely referenced alongside *The Cosby Show*. However, this may have been due to the fact that the program was animated rather than live action and targeted to kids rather than adults, for Smith and many of the journalists instead place *The Proud Family* in conversation with African American-led animated children's series like *Harlem Globetrotters* and *Fat Albert*.

Smith felt that African Americans and Latina/os were missing from several television genres and his vision was to re-create what was already within the animation genre but also to provide a series that he and other minorities could relate to. Smith stated that *The Proud Family* “speaks a language that hasn't been heard on television” (Solomon 2000, F24). When asked what he wanted the program to ultimately convey, Smith states, “I want to give audiences something to laugh at, but at the same time to give them something to take away and be proud of in terms of what our culture represents, what we've done, where we've been, where we could go” (Byrne 2003). Like Jeff Valdez speaking about *The Brothers Garcia* in Chapter Two, Smith discusses the show as vital to the expansion of representation of non-whites on American television.

Smith's interest in animation began at a very young age, with programs like *The Flintstones* (1960-1966) and *Fat Albert* as some of his animation influences. When Smith realized that the majority of cartoons did not reflect his own experience, he began to sketch cartoons based on his own life as a kid and on black live action programs at the time like *Sanford and Son*. Like Perez-Brown, Smith was college-educated, attending the California Institute of the Arts. One can continue to see a distinction between white creator Goodman and minority creators Perez-Brown and Smith, as Goodman's

educational background was not mentioned in any of the journalistic discourse.

Achieving the American Dream and creative success is an underlying theme in the discourse that surrounds Perez-Brown and Smith. Smith, like Perez-Brown, had a successful track record before creating his first tween program. Smith provided animation for film hits like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), *A Goofy Movie* (1995), and *Tarzan* (1999), among others. He is most widely recognized for his first directed feature, *Bebe's Kids* (1992), the first animated feature to include an entirely African-American main cast, and for his role as animation director of the 1996 film *Space Jam*.

In 2000, Smith formed Jambalaya Studios with Hyperion Studio president and chief executive, Tom Wilhite. As Smith continued to see the void of non-white characters and stories in animation, the purpose of his studio was to bring more ethnically diverse projects to the forefront. Like Perez-Brown, Smith was interested in not only his own culture's stories and perspectives, but also those of other non-whites. This is clearly reflected in the ethnic makeup and diversity seen on *The Proud Family*, which is Jambalaya Studio's first project. Though television was the studio's initial emphasis, it intended to work on internet-related and direct-to-video projects as well. When discussing the intentions of Jambalaya Studios, Smith continues to assert that their projects will have crossover appeal, but with a cultural point of view (Solomon 2000, F24). As animation has a considerable racist past, Smith says that his characters may have some stereotypical elements to them. Nonetheless, that humor and soul is infused into these characters, many of which were based on relationships throughout his life, creating an authenticity to them. Specifically concerning *The Proud Family*, he states that

he wants to show that there is more to African American culture than the backdrop of the ghetto, with kids playing basketball or listening to hip hop, which I would argue he achieves (Duffy 2001). However, like Perez-Brown, Smith is shown as conflicted in showing a portrayal of the black community that represents its rich culture, but is not purely stereotypical. I will now turn to looking at racial and ethnic representation in the show specifically.

Race and Ethnicity in *The Proud Family*

I would argue that *The Proud Family* is the first Disney Channel original series with a color/culture conscious vantage point. The premise of the program is about the daily adventures in a teenage girl's life with a focus on common themes as stated earlier. However, the importance of family and the color/culture consciousness of lead character Penny Proud and her friend group differ from that seen in the majority of children's programming at the time. Like *Taina*, the characters are majority minority and Penny's immediate friend group is majority minority as well. The actors voicing the characters are majority non-white, which is not always typical of animated non-white characters. What is particularly interesting in the case of *The Proud Family* is that the voices for the family members and immediate friend group are all notable actors and actresses, particularly in black-themed programs and movies, making the children's animated program even more unique and understood as a holistically high quality television series.

Penny Proud is played by Kyla Pratt. Pratt is known for her role on *One on One* (2001-2006), but she was also a guest on several black-themed and children's television programs, such as Disney Channel's *So Weird* (1999-2001), *Moesha*, and ABC's *Smart*

Guy (1997-1999). As discussed earlier, the character of Penny is considered to be independent, strong-willed, and as having a never-ending passion. Oscar and Trudy Proud, Penny's parents in the program, are played by Tommy Davidson, a main character on *In Living Color* (1990-1994), and Paula Jai Parker, a recurring character on *The Wayans Bros.* (1995-1999). Penny's parents are seen as overprotective, but down-to-earth veterinarian Trudy clearly holds together the household in comparison to fumbling and blustering entrepreneur Oscar (Berkowitz 2001, Duffy 2001). Penny's grandmother, Suga Mama, is voiced by JoMarie Payton, most well known for her role as the mother on *Family Matters* (1989-1998). Even though Suga Mama can barely see, she sports a white fro, resembling her white dog named Puff, and is considered to be the "wild and crazy thorn in her adult son's side" (Duffy 2001). Penny also has two younger twin siblings, Bebe and Cece (Tara Strong), that "look nothing alike but are united in their desire to torment Puff the poodle" (Berkowitz 2001).

Penny's best friend, Dijonay Jones, is voiced by Karen Malina White, who played recurring characters on *The Cosby Show*, *A Different World*, and *Malcolm & Eddie* (1996-2000). Dijonay, Penny's best friend, was considered by multiple sources to be "sassy" ("Meet the Prouds" 2001, B3, LaRue 2002). The others in Penny's friend group include geeky Zoey (Soleil Moon Frye) who is the only main white character on the show, rival LaCienega Boulevardez (Alisa Reyes), and tech-savvy Sticky (Orlando Brown), who appeared on *Punky Brewster* (1984-1988) as the lead role, a recurring member on *All That*, and as a lead character on *That's So Raven*. Although not present in the majority of episodes, LaCienega's parents, Felix and Sunset Boulevardez, are played

by Latino comedian Carlos Mencia and Latina actress Maria Canals-Barrera, who played the mother in Disney Channel hit *The Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007-2012).

The Proud Family continued to show similarities to *Taina* in maintaining the black best friend tradition in children's television programming. But the series also broke the token trio model by having a friend group of four, which at times can be considered five with the inclusion of Penny's nemesis, LaCienega. The series was initially slated to air on Nickelodeon, which appears to some reviewers to be a better fit for the type of humor and animation of the series. Specific reasons were not given as to why Nickelodeon ended up passing on the program, but with *Taina* premiering on Nickelodeon around the same time, the two shows may have appeared too similar, reflecting that even though networks were becoming more comfortable with non-white lead series, two color/culture conscious programs on the same network, even though focused on two different races, may have made for one too many "ethnic" programs.

The series' themes of typical teenage issues viewed through a race, gender, and class conscious lens appeared consistently throughout the program. The first episode of *The Proud Family* titled "Bring It On" centers on a new rich family, the Boulevardez family, moving across the street from the Prouds. The Proud family is of middle-class economic status. Penny is the best dressed out of her friends, wearing a buttoned-up collared white shirt with a pink sweater and magenta skirt, as opposed to her friends that wear jeans and t-shirts. Although Dijonay dresses similar to Penny, but her midriff is always showing, making her clothes appear too small and not as put together as Penny. Penny's parents dress well also, as Trudy sports khaki pants and a blazer and Oscar

always wears suit pants, a button down shirt, suspenders, and a tie, making one understand why they appear to be “proud family.”

Their neighborhood has a suburban feel, but with Oscar’s entrepreneurial spirit, he not only attempts to “keep up with the Jones” but also tries to do it while saving a penny. When Oscar sees the moving truck pull up to the curb across the street in the first episode, he runs to the window with binoculars. Trudy insists he stop, as she does not want them to come across as nosey neighbors. Oscar then states, “Trudy, people who move in the middle of the day want you to be nosy so that they can show off all of their stuff.” He then goes to put on a suit and say that they will not be having company with a television bigger than theirs, running off to the store to buy a new television. When Oscar finally meets the neighbors, he is delighted that Felix knows his company Proud Snacks, only to become discouraged when Felix says he uses the snacks as landfill for his construction company. Even though the Boulevardez family is considered better off than the Prouds, both minority men are depicted as self-made men, dispelling media stereotypes of lazy minorities. Throughout the episodes and the series, Oscar is never able to keep up with the luxuries of the Boulevardez family, but he and Felix become good friends. Other episodes include a focus on class and money issues, such as the episode “Strike” when Penny and friends go on strike for an increase in their allowance and “Don’t Leave Home Without It” when Penny is given a credit card and chooses to spend unwisely. Penny and her friends are also continuously picked on and asked for money by three bullies named The Gross Sisters. Although these issues appear to be common in teen and family television programming throughout the decades, during this

time, there was a rise in teen shows, live action and reality, which show teenagers living with substantial wealth and no concern about money. This is why it is important that programs like *Taina* and *The Proud Family* continue to stress that class differences are present and, indeed, a reality. Gender issues are dealt with throughout the program through a focus on dating, cheerleading, and female friendships. In particular, the episode “She’s Got Game” concerns Penny’s fight to be a player on the men’s football team.

Race and black culture consistently influenced the program, seen in the inclusion of slang and even the credit sequence with Oscar eating chicken and waffles, a soul food dish widely known in black culture. The program was noted for its bright colors, but it also should be acknowledged for its realistic portrayal of the variety of skin tones in both the black and Latino community. No Proud family member or member of Penny’s friend group share the same skin color. In animation, it is even easier to make all characters look alike, as opposed to live action, so Smith clearly wanted to reflect reality and the existence of all different types of skin tones. Penny, however, is still light-skinned, which may be considered problematic by some. Especially in the first season, topics concerning race and culture were present such as interracial dating, hip-hop, Kwanzaa, and Black History Month. A basketball mogul named Magic Kelly, intended to be a spin on Magic Johnson, is present in several episodes. Episodes also focus on cultural themes like slam poetry and Ramadan. Even though as time went on *The Proud Family* themes became less progressive in terms of race, gender, and class, I would argue that the series achieved a varied portrayal of the black community for a mixed audience found in very few children’s programs throughout the decades.

Like *Taina*, *The Proud Family* included several non-white guest stars on the program, adding to its color/culture consciousness. The guest stars ranged from musical guests, like Mos Def, Ray J, and Ashanti, to seasoned actors such as Vanessa Williams, Samuel L. Jackson, and Cicely Tyson, among several others. The introductory theme song, “Here Comes Penny Proud,” is performed by Destiny’s Child and Solange Knowles (Beyonce of Destiny’s Child’s sister). This reflects the continued support of the non-white community behind the program.

The episode titled “Romeo Must Wed” (Season 1, Episode 21) reflects the multicultural and multiethnic vision that Smith had for animated television. The title of the episode is a play on words referencing the movie *Romeo Must Die*, which has a similar plot to William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, but in the movie, the families feud over race rather than family name. The two feuding races in the movie are Black and Asian. Smith fuses the age-old *Romeo and Juliet* play with the modern *Romeo Must Die* film in the plot of *The Proud Family* episode with a millennial tween sensibility.

In the opening scene, Penny is seen with her friend group and other classmates on a theater stage, preparing for auditions for *Romeo and Juliet*. Although The Gross Sisters are pictured in the scene in a blue hue, their facial features resemble the African American characters the most. It is suspected that this blue hue is a visual effect to imply that they have ashy skin, a common term used in black culture. This makes all those in the scene non-white, aside from Zoey, the white geek in Penny’s circle, and the play director, who appears as racially ambiguous. This scene alone, and the characters within it, is a sharp turn from what is typically seen on networks at the time, aside from BET,

UPN/WB, and, occasionally, Nickelodeon. After classmate Kwok and Penny get the lead roles for Romeo and Juliet, the scene shifts to Penny's house, where Trudy is welcoming in her sister Diana, voiced by famed actress Sheryl Lee Ralph. Not only does this episode deal with interracial relationships and teen crushes, but with the visit of Trudy's well-off sister Diana, class is also brought into the plot. Diana enters the household wearing a long coat with a fur trim around her neck and hands, depicting a luxurious lifestyle. She instantly begins talking about life on Broadway, as she is an established actress. Oscar complains about carrying all of her bags, for which Diana hands him a coin. Oscar looks down at the money disappointed, alluding to his continuous spirit of always trying to make a profit. Diana then pulls several gifts for the family out of a suitcase:

Diana: I have gifts for everyone! Toys from Paris for Bebe and Cece. Diamond studs from Amsterdam for Trudy and Suga Mama.

Trudy: Wooo these are beautiful.

Suga Mama: Yeaah, thank ya darling. I've never had any fake diamonds look this good. (A frown enters Diana's face)

Suga Mama proceeds to draw on a window with the diamonds and a screeching noise is heard.

Suga Mama: Wooo these here are real! Wonder if the pawn shop is open.

One can see the family humor consistently present throughout the show. But most importantly, the Proud family is continued to be pictured as not wealthy; members of the family other than Oscar are shown as trying to save a penny when possible.

In the following scene, Penny is shown rehearsing with her fellow classmates. Sassy Dijonay is seen making a snarky comment to Zoey: “This ain’t *Gone With the Wind* Zoey, you beta’ change that tone in your voice.” The director is quick to jump at Dijonay saying, “And this isn’t *Showtime at the Apollo* either, Dijonay. This is Shakespeare. You must embrace the language.” In this scene, race and language are not-so-subtly intertwined, as white Zoey is paired with the movie *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and black Dijonay is paired with Harlem-based television program *Showtime At the Apollo* (1987 –). It is unlikely that middle-class tween viewers on Disney Channel would get either of these references, showing that the program was meant for a family and older audience as well. What is also interesting about this scene is the play director emphasizing the language of Shakespeare as opposed to the type of language that Dijonay speaks, potentially pitting white, “proper” language and black urban slang against one another.

Diana comes bursting into the theater and is praised by the director as one of his star students. Oscar rushes in behind her, trying to toot his own horn to the director about his company Proud Snacks. He is in competition with Diana, who introduces him as her driver rather than a business owner or even her brother-in-law. Diana is asked to direct the next scene, which she chooses to be the scene where Romeo and Juliet decide to get married. Oscar balks at hearing this and the program returns to the light tween and family humor. One of the major differences seen in animation as opposed to live action programming is the continuously playful and unrealistic humor that the show is able to have. In this episode thus far Oscar has already slammed into what appears to be a steel

door and then in the upcoming scene is attacked with needles and pinned onto the family home's front door, normally actions that would cause serious injuries but Oscar appears unscathed. This is the playful violence such as seen in age-old programs like *Looney Toons* (1930-1969) that appeal to both a young and male audience. Typical teen issues continue in the next scene as Penny walks into the family home and praises the dress her aunt bought her for her Juliet role while her mother works on a homemade dress for Penny in the living room. Class comes into play again as Penny's dress is delivered by Diana's personal costume designer, Pierre, who sports a French accent, thin mustache, and beret. The cheap quality of the dress Trudy is making for Penny in opposition to the dress given by Diana is exemplified by Pierre snatching a piece of it off to hand to Penny as a handkerchief while she cries with joy about her new dress and about playing the part of Juliet.

Penny is next seen rehearsing with Kwok, quoting lines from the play while sitting at the kitchen table. Like Penny, Kwok is depicted as a typical American teenager, sporting a hoodie vest and t-shirt. Penny and Kwok pause after a few lines and Kwok states, "Uh, yo this is the part where we're supposed to kiss Penny." Penny says, "I know, do you think we should rehearse it?" Kwok replies, "Well, I mean if we're going to be convincing as Romeo and Juliet, then I think we should." A huge smile comes over Penny's face and she exclaims, "I think you're right!" This is the first indication in the episode that Penny has a crush on Kwok. Oscar catches Penny and Kwok mid-kiss and yells for Trudy to come address the situation immediately. Oscar appears to be upset simply because his daughter is kissing a boy, not because Kwok is Asian and a different

race than Penny. Trudy simply explains that they are practicing for the play and Kwok chimes in as well saying that it was just a “play kiss.” Kwok’s parents show up after the incident to pick up Kwok. When Oscar opens the door, Kwok’s parents appear, but before saying hello, they both bow, showing that they are more traditional in keeping specific customs tied to their Asian heritage. As they introduce themselves, they maintain an accent, exemplifying that English is not their first language.

Kwok’s father: We would prefer that after this play your daughter and our son not continue to see each other socially.

Oscar: (with a pleased look on his face) Now that’s what I’m talking about. (his facial expression turns to confusion) Wait a minute?! What do you mean you don’t want my daughter to see your son?

Kwok’s father: We just don’t want to encourage this friendship.

Trudy: I don’t understand where this is coming from Mr. Wong. You have a very nice son and we have a very nice daughter. I just don’t see anything wrong with their friendship.

Kwok’s mother: We have our reasons.

Oscar: Ooho. I’ve seen this movie before. They think Penny isn’t good enough for their son! I see it very clearly.

Kwok’s father: Hey! Watch who you’re calling racist.

Oscar: I call ‘em like I see ‘em

Kwok’s mother: Well I assure you racism is not our reason.

Trudy: Then what is the reason Mrs. Wong?

Kwok: I'm engaged to be married.

In this dialogue, The Wongs and The Prouds bicker about their children's friendship and budding romantic interest. The Wongs assert that they are not racist, but instead just traditionalists since it is implied that Kwok is part of an arranged marriage, since he is only 14 like Penny. Penny then proceeds to grill Kwok about his arranged marriage at the local hamburger joint where he works. Although Kwok's parents are traditional, Kwok appears to be ingrained in modern American culture due to his continuous use of slang and his working at a fast food restaurant. Kwok finally provides some ethnic specificity, saying that having an arranged marriage is a tradition where his parents are from in China, and that his wife-to-be will be in town tonight. He tries to put the moves on Penny telling her that his wife-to-be will be gone tomorrow and asks Penny out for ice cream. But she simply replies to him, "I don't date married men." Penny's reaction clearly reflects that it is a tween and family program in the main character's choice to take the moral high ground. However, Penny clearly has feelings for Kwok and travels to Kwok's home (in a gated community) that night with Dijonay to get a look at his wife-to-be. Penny is hurt by seeing Kwok with her and after being caught by Kwok, runs away.

The next scene cuts to the night of the play; Penny refuses to play Juliet because of her broken heart. However, Penny musters up the courage to be in the play and rushes to the school auditorium. In the middle of a scene, Kwok strays from his lines and tells Penny that the marriage is off and that the two could not stand one another. Penny hops into Kwok's arms, about which Penny and Kwok's parents are first angry, but after they

see how happy the two of them are, they smile and clap for the finale of the play. The program's hip, youth, and color/culture conscious sensibility appears in a special musical hip/hop rendition of a part of Romeo and Juliet at the end of the episode, demonstrating that a classic play can be translated into modern hip youth culture. This episode is a prime example of the series' smart writing and humor concerning not only tween issues, but race, gender, and class matters. Smith weaves black culture and a black sensibility within a storyline that attempts to normalize black culture within American culture, as clearly seen through the language used in the series with words like "yo" and references to historical black monuments like the Apollo Theatre. This episode was not one of the more themed episodes surrounding race, gender, or class but it exemplifies the consistency throughout the series of bringing these issues to light.

Conclusion

The Proud Family enjoyed three successful seasons of 54 episodes with the last two episodes comprising a made-for-TV-movie titled *The Proud Family Movie* (2005). Knowing that 65 episodes was the maximum amount of episodes at the time that Disney Channel planned to shoot these tween programs, this may have been why *The Proud Family* ended after three seasons. However, it is an animated program as opposed to live action so the network did not have to worry about the actors outgrowing their teen roles. With the all-star cast of the program, it is unlikely that Disney Channel would be able to maintain the salary for the cast and that the cast members may have wanted to move on to other projects where they received more visible recognition.

Since *The Proud Family*, Smith and Jambalaya Studios have only released one other television series, *Da Boom Crew*, which premiered on Kid's WB in 2004. It received the network's worst ever 11:30 am premiere show audience for the male and female tween audience, as well as boys ages 6-11. The show was cancelled after four out of 13 episodes were made. Smith's career continued to flourish afterwards in film, in his work on Disney's *Princess and the Frog* (2009), a movie starring the company's first black Disney princess. It appears that like Maria Perez-Brown, Smith's vision of color/culture conscious television programming may still have been too forward thinking for children's cable television since neither of these creators have aired another program on a children's cable television network.

Racial and ethnic diversity, however, has remained a presence on Disney Channel, seen in programs like *Cory in the House* (2007-2008), *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007-2012), *Sonny With A Chance* (2009-2011), and *Shake It Up* (2010-2013), among others. Nonetheless, a post-racial approach is the main vantage point of these programs, with discussions of race and ethnicity rarely making an appearance. Also, there has not been another animated series on Disney Channel starring a non-white lead. The majority of the network's animated programming now centers on the lives of animals, a trend also found in recent programming on Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, repeating patterns of past animated series that sought to avoid racial and ethnic specificity. Disney Channel and other children's cable networks clearly have also chosen not to air majority black cast animated programs since *The Proud Family*, which distinguishes and draws attention to the monumental nature of the series. As stated earlier, the presence of African

Americans lead characters in animation is rare, particularly in terms of programs centered on females. Therefore, *The Proud Family* was a progressive program, even for the time it aired, not only because of its color/culture conscious approach, but because of its presence as Disney Channel's first original animated series, which starred an African American family and a majority non-white cast.

Conclusion

The acceptance of multiculturalism in the public sphere in the early-to-mid 1990s brought about a substantial increase in the representation of racial and ethnic diversity in adult and children's television programming. Programming that fell within Herman Gray's pluralist category, such as *Family Matters*, still remained present in several adult series with majority black casts during this time period, but this specific discursive practice of racial representation was not as pervasive in children's television. As I found in my research, narratives concerning race in children's television largely presented an assimilationist, color/culture conscious, or post-racial viewpoint. In a 1999 Annenberg Public Policy Center's State of Children's Television report, 40 percent of children's television programs on cable and broadcast networks combined did not contain any racial or ethnic diversity (Woodard 1999, 17). The Annenberg report also found that 51 percent of children's programming on broadcast networks at that time were considered to showcase a lot of diversity. However, in looking at the Children Now prime time broadcast network reports from 2000 to 2003 for adult programming, the range of white characters of total prime time programming fell from 80 percent to 73 percent white, showing that even though broadcast programming was making an effort to increase racial and ethnic diversity, children's programming had already achieved this in many programs.

Although racial and ethnic diversity has been more of a constant in children's television series, the ideologies concerning race and ethnicity have mostly been assimilationist since television's inception. *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* represented

the beginning of non-white leads on children's cable television, largely presenting a post-race vantage point, with ruptures of assimilationist and color/culture consciousness storylines. *Taina* and *The Proud Family* premiered in the early 2000s, at a time when non-white leads were commonplace on children's television, providing a space for a color/culture conscious point of view. Both series also contained an underlying ideology of assimilation, as the families were considered to be middle class and living the American Dream. Yet the two series were notably color/culture conscious through a majority minority cast and everyday references to African American and Latina/o cultural practices.

In observing the climate of children's cable networks through my three case studies, which spanned the years of 1996 through 2005, one is able to understand the importance of cable television in comparison to broadcast networks when it comes to diversity and children's programming. Disney Channel and Nickelodeon furthered diversity in programming presented to youth relating to identity politics. Interestingly, though, is that none of the three programs that I analyzed lasted past four seasons. This outcome may largely be attributed to the majority of cable children's programming having shorter runs due to the aging of their actors (longer running programs at this time included animated series such as *Rugrats* and *Hey Arnold*). While there was a varied presence of assimilationist, color/culture conscious, and post-racial series from 1996 to 2005 on Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, I believe that today post-race is the leading approach concerning race and ethnicity in children's television programming. I believe one reason why this has become the primary vantage point of children's television

narratives concerning race is due to the post-9/11 age that the United States, and the world, is living in, as discussed below.

As noted in the conclusions of the preceding chapters, Asians, Latina/os, and African Americans have continued to hold lead roles in children's television series. Despite that consistency, there has yet to be another live-action program centered on an Asian female since the role held on *Shelby Woo*, while Latina/os now have been relegated to leads on animated elementary age programming. *Taina* and *The Proud Family* premiered in 2001, *Taina* months before 9/11 and *The Proud Family* just days after. Although children may have been accepting of a color/conscious point of view, which is indicated through the high ratings of both programs, networks may have become wary of this approach. This may have been due to an increased fear of difference that was present around the world, with American television series wanting to present the world with unanimity. I would argue that these programs were two of the last live action, non-educational series on Nickelodeon and Disney Channel with a color/culture conscious approach. Animated programs like *Dora the Explorer* and *Ni Hao Kai-Lan* have provided a new take on color/culture conscious programming, presenting a more educational structure of culture to children and focusing on learning a language. None of the creators of the three programs that I studied have created another successful children's television show. Bruce Smith is the only one who attempted to premiere another program (*Da Boom Crew*), and it failed miserably.

Adult programming on broadcast and basic cable mirrored children's programming as well in its decline of color/culture conscious scripted programs in the

2000s, with a now overwhelming presence of post-race and assimilationist narratives. However, since children's programming has historically been more diverse than adult programming, I would anticipate an increased variety in narratives concerning race in its programming, making the exit of color/culture conscious series particularly an important subject of study.

In Children Now's 1998 (published in 1999) comprehensive study of children's perceptions of race and class in the media, researchers conclude that children find it important to see people of their own race, as well as other races, on television. Children advocated for television series that featured more teenagers, were more "real," and showed people of all races interacting with one another (3). Series like *Taina* and *The Proud Family* contained all three of the elements that children advocated to see in their programming. I would argue that the element that has been lost in the post-9/11 age is storylines being "real." Disney Channel has excelled at extraordinary storylines in their tween programs, whether it's a nanny living in a multi-million dollar penthouse (*Jessie*, 2011 –) or a dog that writes a blog (*Dog with a Blog*, 2012 –). Nickelodeon has followed suit, as their current lineup of television series center around kids that live in a haunted house (*The Haunted Hathaways*, 2013 –), a family with superpowers (*The Thundermans*, 2013 –), and a teenage witch (*Every Witch Way*, 2014 –). This trend began post-9/11 with programs like Disney Channel's *That's So Raven*, a series concerning a teenage girl that can see the future, and Nickelodeon's *True Jackson VP*, which focuses on a girl that becomes the vice president at a fashion company. Both of these programs star African American girls, but the storylines are less "real" than programs in the 1990s and early

2000s on Nickelodeon and Disney Channel. Almost always, there is whimsy and fantasy in children's programming, which is seen in all three of the series that this project discusses in depth. However, the post-9/11, post-race programs are filled with much more fantasy than those before them, dealing less and less with race, class, and gender politics, as well as the everyday experiences of today's youth.

Observed in the journalistic discourse throughout the last three chapters is the importance of television writers and producers autobiographies in relation to the storyline or lead character of a series concerning race and ethnicity. Even though *Shelby Woo's* plots revolved around harmless mysteries, Irene Ng's personal connection to the background of Shelby Woo, a teenage Asian immigrant to the United States, was thought to play into the success of her role. Autobiography played into the discourse around *Taina* and *The Proud Family* as well, showing the connection of both Christina Vidal and Maria Perez-Brown to the character of Taina and Bruce Smith's family to the Proud family. With extraordinary storylines now the common plot for children and tween programming, it is understandable why a post-racial approach is the leading ideology when the narratives are not based in reality. The creators and the writers have a significant voice in the direction of a series, and without creators and writers of color, then the likelihood of a color/culture conscious approach is less probable. I am not advocating that the only approach to showing race in children's television is color/culture consciousness, but assimilationist and post-race programming, with an increase in animated series based on animals, is the current environment of children's television, with color/culture consciousness barely seen. I am proposing that children's television

reflect the diversity of shows and approaches relating to race and ethnicity seen in the 1990s and early 2000s; programming that was “real,” relatable to tweens and teens, and depicting children from different backgrounds interacting with one another.

Over a decade has passed since Children Now’s study on children’s perceptions of race and class in the media. Studies (Children Now 2007) today are more focused on children’s use of media rather than the impact of the content that they are consuming. Children Now is one of the most reputable sources in its studies of adult and children’s programming concerning race. Their last comprehensive report about race and adult television programming was in 2003, however, and the group’s last report of children’s television and race was in 2001. Clearly, there was a shift in several sectors from discussing race on television, but why? Did the industry and the public feel that they had reached their vision of what diverse programming would look like? Did a post-911 world lead to more political correctness in programming and a de-emphasis on race and ethnicity?

With the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States in 2008, America, and the world, realized that the United States is anything but post-race; race became an increasingly discussed topic in the media and not always in a positive manner. However, with the success of shows like *Dora the Explorer*, seeing a plethora of children’s backpacks and merchandise with a brown rather than white face on them may appear as progress enough. Parents (Meade 2013) and critics (Elber 2012; Johnson 2012; Refinery 29 2013) have been vocal about race in children’s television programming, but the voice that remains missing is that of the kids. This project is not only important to me

because of my advocacy for racial and ethnic diversity in television programming, but because I actively watched all three of these programs growing up. *Taina* had a significant effect on me, cultivating my never-ending dream to move to New York City and seeing my own name in lights. In discussing my project with several people throughout the past few months and looking at commentary on social media sites surrounding the three television series, many likely felt that these programs were the epitome of what it means to see “me” on TV, not only through the visible representation, but also through the narratives. The question that I believe must be continued from Children Now’s 1999 study is how children themselves define what it means to see “me” on TV. In recent years, that question remains largely unanswered by studies of the newest generation of youth. But if the questions begin and the answers follow, the diversity of children’s programming of the 1990s and early 2000s may appear again.

Limitations and Possibilities for Related Future Research

I continue to advocate for further research to be conducted on children’s cable programming. Most of the recent work concerning race and ethnicity on children’s television concerns *Dora the Explorer*, which is a significant program in regard to race and ethnicity, but only one of many. The overwhelming focus on *Dora the Explorer* continues the trend in the academic community of analyzing educational rather than non-educational programming, and I believe both areas of programming deserve ample attention. I also believe that more extensive research should be done on narratives concerning race and ethnicity on broadcast network children’s programs in relation to children’s cable networks. This has been observed in studies such as Kristin Moran’s

(2007) work on the growth of Latino-themed and Spanish-language programs for children, which discusses programs like *The Misadventures of Maya and Miguel* and *Dora the Explorer*. A lack of in-depth comparisons as to how narratives concerning race on broadcast compare to those on cable is still a void in research.

One reason why *Dora the Explorer* is discussed heavily is due to the important presence of a popular, long running program starring a Latina. I would like this work to be continued but expanded to discuss the rise of Latina/os on children's television in relation to the potential increase or decrease in the presence of other races and ethnicities and the narratives surrounding these groups in children's programming. In my own study, I explore how Nickelodeon aired three color/culture conscious Latina/o programs in the early 2000s. However, I would have liked to analyze further narratives in series on Nickelodeon and Disney Channel during this period that also starred Latina/os, such as *Rocket Power* and *Lizzie McGuire*, and observe if narratives concerning other races in the program differ depending on the racial background of the lead characters. Such a study could also be done with programs that starred African American characters like *Cousin Skeeter* (1998-2001) and *Romeo!* (2003-2006) on Nickelodeon in comparison to *The Famous Jett Jackson* (1998-2001) and *The Proud Family*, which aired around the same time.

Other limitations of my study and areas for further research include a more in depth analysis of the differences concerning race and ethnicity found in animation versus live action series. For example, in Mathew Klickstein's book *Slimed!*, the question of why Jim Henson chose to use colors like blue and green for skin tones of characters

meant to be seen as human was discussed. Since I was limited to the amount of programs I could discuss, I was unable to delve into this subject, but I find children's perceptions concerning race when viewing non-traditional colors for skin tones versus traditional skin tones is another important area of study. Another limitation present in my study concerned which episodes I was able watch due to time constraints and the availability of the programs. Web presence in children's lives is a popular topic in discussing youth today and their connection to media. All three series I analyzed had an online presence on the Nickelodeon and Disney Channel websites while they were on air. This content was no longer available on the websites, so I was unable to address the narratives that the networks presented online concerning these programs. Other areas for future research include exploring further the intersectionalities between race, class, and ethnicity in children's television. There were also several reality and variety programs on Nickelodeon and Disney Channel during the time period I study, which I find to be an ample topic for research.

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