Erica Chito Childs is a sociologist specializing in the study of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender, and their representations in media and popular culture. Her work centers on the intersection of these identities, either engaging areas of convergence within a single subject or group, or interrogating the relationships and interactions among them. Throughout her work, Childs has demonstrated a strong interest in the African American experience, and as a result, much of her research focuses on the relationships between black and white people. However, Childs also recognizes the limitations of such work, and clearly articulates the need to expand research in racial mixing beyond the narrow confines of black-white relations.

In her second and most recent book, *Fade to Black and White: Interracial Images in Popular Culture*, Childs strives to address this need by considering several different racial combinations. Similar to the work in her first book *Navigating Interracial Borders: Black-White Couples and Their Social Worlds*, Childs interrogates contemporary perceptions of mixed race couples; however, in this most recent work she also enriches her discussion by incorporating additional minority groups such as Asians and Latinos. While these inclusions are significant because they represent a serious effort to expand definitions of interracial relationships, Childs ultimately fails to sustain this broader construct, and in doing so, continues to minimize the complexities of racial minorities.

Building on her previous work, Childs employs textual analysis in *Fade to Black and White* to focus specifically on how sex and marriage between interracial couples has been constructed in media since 1990. To accomplish this, Childs dedicates each chapter to addressing a specific media form or phenomenon, including primetime television (Chapter 2), popular American films (Chapters 3 and 4), news coverage of high-profile events (Chapter 5), and popular music, sports, and youth culture (Chapter 6). Childs posits that despite news media’s and academia’s celebration of “the increased number of interracial couples in television and film as a signal of increased acceptance…these representations do more to solidify ideas of interracial relationships as deviant, detrimental, outside the norm, or only possible with an exceptional person of color.”

Childs’s most significant contribution in *Fade to Black and White* is her identification of three
conceptual frames through which mixed-race unions continue to be presented: “constructing interracial relationships as problems,” “privileging, protecting, and empowering whites,” and “the simultaneous perpetuation and denial of racism.”

Tracing these frames across multiple media platforms, Childs calls attention to the numerous ways in which contemporary discourse continues to delegitimize interracial couples. For example, Childs describes several different scenarios used to frame mixed-race unions as impossible, which include situating them in the past, using them for comic relief, or presenting them as “only possible with an exceptional person of color.” Similarly, Childs also notes many media examples where interracial couples are used to bolster the image of the white character, often by using the relationship to underscore his or her caring and progressive nature, or by situating him or her in the role of a helper or savior. In addition, Childs also notes a number of situations where interracial couples are used to both perpetuate and deny racism, which often involve the displacement of racist attitudes onto minority characters, or an emphasis on alternative factors like culture or class that continue to imply racial differences.

Although these frames successfully call attention to the persistent racial biases in contemporary media, they are also problematic. While Childs clearly demonstrates that attitudes toward racial minorities and their intermarriage with whites remain deeply flawed, her discussion fails to adequately consider the implications of this increased representation. Specifically, how has this move toward a more inclusive racial landscape altered these relationships? What do changes in media representation say about contemporary attitudes? To what extent should these differences be considered or ignored? Given the long history of overt racism and exclusion of minority groups and racial mixing in American media, recent changes in contemporary media cannot be overlooked. While it is important to recognize similarities between past and present trends in representation, such similarities should not be confused with a lack of change. Instead, these shifts must be considered in connection with Childs’s work, unpacking her conceptual frames to reach a more nuanced understanding of contemporary trends in media.

Other types of omissions also serve to undermine the productivity of these frames, which ultimately detract from the strength of Childs’s argument. Despite a brief recognition during the introduction that not all interracial images fall neatly into one of these three conceptual frames, throughout the book they are frequently articulated as both exclusive and absolute. Instead of engaging inconsistencies and addressing images through multiple frames, Childs ignores overlaps and dismisses exceptions by disqualified them based on outside criteria. For example, although Childs acknowledges the interracial couples in *Heroes* (NBC) and *Lost* (ABC) that operate largely outside these frames, she quickly dismisses them citing their location in “alternate worlds.” In addition, Childs also omits discussion of Edward Bonilla-Silva’s theories of color-blind racism, despite their strong ties to the conceptual frames in her study. As a result, her lack of open engagement with his work ultimately detracts from the potential weight of her argument.

Furthermore, although Childs foregrounds the historical sexualization of Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos alongside African Americans in the opening chapter of her book, the central focus remains on black-white interracial relationships. For example, although Latinos are considered in early discussions of interracial relationships, the emphasis on black-white relations is evident not only in the book’s title, but also in the extensive consideration these relationships receive as the primary subjects of chapters three and four. Similarly, although gay and lesbian couples are also explicitly addressed in her opening discussion, they too remain highly peripheral to the study as a whole, confined almost exclusively to footnotes throughout the majority of her work. Thus, while this project raises important questions regarding the construction of interracial images, it also falls victim to many of the same conceptual issues it strives to overcome.

Despite these concerns, *Fade to Black and White* still offers many valuable insights that should not be ignored. Most importantly, although flawed, the three conceptual frames Childs identifies in contemporary media encourage a more careful consideration of current trends in racial representation. In addition, Childs also
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raises several important questions regarding the meaning of “interracial couple,” and actively works to broaden current definitions beyond the heterosexual black-white relationships typically examined in academic study. In doing so, Childs expands an area in both media and cultural studies that is currently underexplored. Although, as noted above, her discussion would have been more effective had she conceptualized these frames as fluid categories and engaged historical context throughout her work, these limitations encourage future projects to build on this text. As a result, Childs’s analysis of contemporary American media in Fade to Black and White is useful to future studies, as her work reveals important opportunities to examine the construction of interracial relationships in more inclusive ways, and to consider differences in dominant and minority group discourses addressing interracial images.

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End Notes

1 For example, Childs has published several articles and book chapters foregrounding these relationships, including “Listening to the Interracial Canary: Contemporary Views on Interracial Relationships Among Blacks and Whites,” “Black and White: Family Opposition to Becoming Multiracial,” “Black-White Interracial Marriage and Families: Theory and Methods,” and “Between Black and White: Creating a Multiracial Community.” In addition, these relationships were also the subject of her first book entitled Navigating Interracial Boarders: Black-White Couples and Their Social Worlds (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).
3 Ibid.
4 Childs, Fade to Black and White, 45.
5 Ibid.
6 Although Edward Bonilla-Silva’s theories on color-blind racism are engaged throughout his book entitled Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), his discussion on pages 25-52 is particularly relevant to this point.
7 This is particularly true of Native Americans who, despite visible presence in interracial relationships such as the extramarital affair between John Redcorn and Nancy Gribble on King of the Hill, remain entirely absent from this study after the initial discussion of the group’s historical sexualization.
8 The most notable exception to this rule is Childs’s recognition of the committed interracial relationship between two gay men on HBO’s Six Feet Under on pages 40-41.