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### Intervention: Reality TV, Whiteness, and Narratives of Addiction

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3 **INTERVENTION: REALITY TV,**  
5 **WHITENESS, AND NARRATIVES**  
7 **OF ADDICTION**  
9

11 Jessie Daniels

13  
15 **ABSTRACT**

17 Purpose – *Reality TV shows that feature embodied “transformations”*  
19 *are popular, including Intervention, a program that depicts therapeutic*  
21 *recovery from addiction to “health.” The purpose of this chapter is to*  
*address the ways whiteness constitutes narratives of addiction on*  
*Intervention.*

23 Methodology – *This analysis uses a mixed methodology. I conducted a*  
25 *systematic analysis of nine (9) seasons of one hundred and forty-seven*  
27 *(147) episodes featuring one hundred and fifty-seven individual “addicts”*  
*(157) and logged details, including race and gender. For the qualitative*  
*analysis, I watched each episode more than once (some, I watched several*  
*times) and took extensive notes on each episode.*

29 Findings – *The majority of characters (87%) are white, and the audience*  
31 *is invited to gaze through a white lens that tells a particular kind of story*  
33 *about addiction. The therapeutic model valorized by Intervention rests on*  
*neoliberal regimes of self-sufficient citizenship that compel us all toward*  
*“health” and becoming “productive” citizens. Such regimes presume*  
*whiteness. Failure to comply with an intervention becomes a “tragedy” of*

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1 *wasted whiteness. When talk of racism erupts, producers work to re-frame*  
 2 *it in ways that erase systemic racism.*

3 Social implications – *The whiteness embedded in Intervention serves to*  
 4 *justify and reinforce the punitive regimes of controlling African American*  
 5 *and Latina/o drug users through the criminal justice system while*  
 6 *controlling white drug users through self-disciplining therapeutic regimes*  
 7 *of rehab.*

8 Originality – *Systematic studies of media content consistently find a*  
 9 *connection between media representations of addiction and narratives*  
 10 *about race, yet whiteness has rarely been the critical focus of addiction.*

## 11 INTRODUCTION

AU :12

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 17 Visual media is a key mechanism for both reflecting and shaping the  
 18 medicalization of social problems and everyday life (King & Watson, 2005;  
 19 Seale, 2002, 2004). Historically, drug scares in the United States have been  
 20 racially inflected. Systematic studies of media content consistently find a  
 21 connection between media representations of addiction and narratives  
 22 about race. People who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups  
 23 are more often portrayed as “addicts” (Taylor, 2008). Research also finds  
 24 that blacks are portrayed as more menacing than whites in news stories  
 25 involving drug use (Peffley, Shields, & Williams, 1996; Reinerman & Levine,  
 26 2004). Even though someone could be an “addict” and not break any laws,  
 27 dominant media narratives about “addicts” and “lawbreakers” often regard  
 28 these two labels as synonymous and racialized. In this trajectory, “addicts”  
 29 become “lawbreakers,” and they are almost always coded as racial Others  
 (Dixon & Linz, 2000).

AU :1

30  
 31 Yet, only rarely and very recently has whiteness been the focus of critical  
 32 attention when it comes to representations of addiction in the media  
 33 (Linneman, 2010; Murakawa, 2011) or health (Daniels & Schulz, 2006).  
 34 Media studies scholars point to Richard Dyer’s (1988) essay “White” in the  
 35 film journal *Screen* as the catalyst for subsequent scholarly considerations of  
 36 the representational power of whiteness, a mercurial topic to analyze  
 37 precisely because it does not inhere in bodies but rather functions to  
 38 reinforce a system of domination (Nakayama, 2000). At issue is not only the  
 39 representation of whiteness, but what whiteness is used to do (Projansky &  
 Ono, 1999). The white racial frame (Feagin, 2006, 2010) is a key component

AU :2

1 of how whiteness gets operationalized in popular culture. In the current  
sociopolitical milieu and multimedia landscapes, whiteness is deployed to  
3 shape popular understandings of addiction through representations on  
reality TV.

5 In the past ten years, the U.S. broadcast media landscape has been  
transformed by the proliferation of nonfiction television, so-called “reality  
7 TV.” Driven by low production costs and drawing large audiences for  
advertisers, reality TV shows are increasingly popular, cover a range of  
9 topics, and appear on an expanding number of networks, as well as online.  
The focus of a subset of reality TV shows is “transformation” and  
11 “makeover,” (Hearn, 2008; Heller, 2008; Lewis, 2008; Ouellette & Hay,  
2008). While some shows focus on “transforming” home interiors (e.g.,  
13 *Changing Rooms*) or individual wardrobes (e.g., *What Not to Wear*), the  
“transformations” offered through many reality TV shows are situated in  
15 the bodies of their subjects (e.g., *The Biggest Loser*). These embodied,  
television transformations are staged as moving subjects from failure to  
17 success (Sender & Sullivan, 2008), from illness to health, even from death to  
life. Some of those who participate in the shows say things like “this TV  
19 show saved my life,” while others challenge the health effects of  
participating in transformations stage crafted for a viewing audience.<sup>1</sup> The  
21 supposed life-and-death stakes are especially salient within reality TV shows  
that feature the transformation from addiction to recovery and sobriety.  
23 Among the more popular shows engaged in this transformative reality TV is  
A&E’s Emmy-Award winning show *Intervention*, which features people  
25 “who struggle with addiction.”

The show *Intervention* has been a huge success when measured in terms of  
27 viewership, awards and in re-shaping cable networks’ schedules toward  
reality-based programming. Debuting on the A&E network in March 2005,  
29 *Intervention* is (at this writing) in its eleventh season, and it is consistently  
among the network’s highest-rated series. The initial episode of Season 11  
31 (in 2012) drew 1.8 million viewers, 1.2 million in adults in the sought-after  
18–49 demographic, and 1.1 million among 25-year olds to 54-year olds. In  
33 2009, *Intervention* won the Emmy<sup>®</sup> for Outstanding Reality Series. It has  
also won five “PRISM” awards, given by Substance Abuse and Mental  
35 Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Entertainment  
Industries Council to honor productions that are “not only powerfully  
37 entertaining, but realistically show substances abuse and addiction, as well  
as mental health issues.”

39 These awards speak to the way the show has been validated by both the  
entertainment and recovery industries for its portrayal of addiction. An

1 executive producer with *Intervention* has referred to the show as “a critical  
 3 turning point” that created a “big change in the network’s entire approach  
 5 to programming.”<sup>2</sup> And, indeed it has. A&E’s *Intervention* has been joined  
 7 by an entire programming schedule filled with other reality-based TV shows  
 9 (e.g., *Hoarders*, *Billy the Exterminator*, *Storage Wars*). And that change has  
 11 had a ripple effect on other networks that now feature their own addiction-  
 13 related programming, such as TLC’s *My Strange Addiction*, about anxiety  
 15 disorders, and VH1’s *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew*. The success of  
 17 *Intervention* signals the transformation of the media landscape into one in  
 19 which reality-based TV has become a mechanism in the increasing demand  
 for self-governance in the post-welfare state (Murray & Ouellette, 2008;  
 Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Embodied transformation through reality TV such  
 as *Intervention* has become a domain through which television contributes to  
 the neoliberal reinvention of government and the production of a self-  
 sufficient, “healthy” citizenry (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 477). I contend that  
 the imagined neoliberal citizen on *Intervention* is white, that the perspective  
 of the show is through a white racial frame, and that the narratives of  
 addiction and recovery depicted on the show are rooted in discursive  
 practices of whiteness.

In the chapter that follows, I review relevant literature on media  
 stereotypes of race and addiction, with a particular focus on whiteness,  
 then, I turn to the methodology and findings of the study. I find that whites  
 are disproportionately represented on *Intervention* and that this suggests  
 narratives of addiction and recovery are rooted in a white racial frame that  
 contains individual tragedy, therapeutic recovery from addiction to  
 “health,” and neoliberal self-sufficiency. I conclude by exploring some of  
 the social and political implications of this frame for understanding  
 whiteness and addiction.

29

## 31 MEDIA STEREOTYPES OF RACE AND ADDICTION

33 Stereotypes of race and addiction have been mapped on to particular racial  
 35 and ethnic groups along with specific substances at particular historical  
 37 moments (Chiricos, 1996). For example, Irish immigrants were so heavily  
 39 associated with alcohol and public drunkenness in the mid-19th century that  
 the police vans are still often referred to as “Paddy Wagons,” a lingering  
 racial epithet for the Irish (Ross, 2003). Asian Americans, particularly  
 Chinese immigrants in the early 1900s, were configured as “opium fiends,”  
 in popular press accounts at a time when they were also described as

1 “spreading disease” in San Francisco (Shah, 2001). The portrayal of the  
2 “drunk Indian” in Hollywood films configures Native Americans as  
3 uniquely vulnerable to alcohol throughout the 1950s and 1970s, a period  
4 in which Native Americans were driven even further into government-  
5 created poverty and launched a powerful resistance movement (Aleiss,  
6 2005). Propaganda campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s warned against the  
7 encroaching “Marijuana Menace,” and these efforts were joined with anti-  
8 Mexican sentiments (Meier, 1994).<sup>3</sup> The U.S. government, through the  
9 Federal Bureau of Narcotics (now the Office of National Drug Control  
10 Policy) contributed to the hysteria, racism, and xenophobia by asserting that  
11 marijuana use led to violent crimes, most often by racial and ethnic minority  
12 group members (Meier, 1994). The association between Latinos and  
13 marijuana is so endemic in U.S. popular culture that it makes possible a  
14 self-directed spoof of that narrative in the film *Up In Smoke* (1978) in which  
15 Cheech Marin makes fun of the weed-addled Latino (List, 1992). Yet, these  
16 racialized – and racist – associations between a particular racial or ethnic  
17 group ignore the fact that the majority of drug use in the United States is by  
18 whites. These media stereotypes of race and addiction only work when set  
19 against a presumed norm of whiteness.

Whiteness, like other racial categories, is socially constructed and actively  
21 maintained. Thought of in this way, whiteness is not an immutable category  
22 but is *accomplished* through the active efforts of human beings who create  
23 and maintain social boundaries by, for example, defining who is white and is  
24 not white (Allen, 1994; Daniels, 1997; Roediger, 2007; Wray, 2006). A key  
25 feature of whiteness is the unmarked quality of “white” as a racial category  
26 (Fine et al., 1997; Frankenberg, 1993). This seeming invisibility of whiteness  
27 is itself a mechanism of privilege because it allows those within the category  
28 “white” to think of themselves as simply human, individual and without  
29 race, while others are racialized (Feagin & Vera, 1994; Dyer, 1998). A  
30 number of scholars from DuBois onward (Twine & Gallagher, 2008) have  
31 observed that “black folks have, from slavery on, shared with one  
32 another ... knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white  
33 people” (Hooks, 1992, p. 338). The aim of most studies of whiteness, like  
34 this one, is therefore to problematize the ways in which whiteness has  
35 remained unremarked and “normal.”

One of the pitfalls in many studies of whiteness is that they can be merely  
37 descriptive rather than analytic. Such overly simplified accounts of the  
38 behavior, tastes, and proclivities presume that whiteness inheres within a  
39 discrete set of people (Bonnett, 1996; Fiske, 1994). This is perhaps most  
obvious in the popular website and book by Christian Lander, *Stuff White*

1 *People Like* (Lander, 2008). However, whiteness is not just about white  
2 bodies and skin color (Nakayama, 2000; Shome, 1999). Whiteness is about  
3 the discursive practices that, because of colonialism and neocolonialism,  
4 privilege and sustain the global dominance of white imperial subjects and  
5 Eurocentric worldviews (Shome, 1999, p. 108). My own understanding of  
6 whiteness echoes these approaches and incorporates more recent work that  
7 extends these further to include a critique of elite whites who actively  
8 participate in shaping public policy and mainstream media through a white  
9 racial frame in which whiteness is the assumed norm (Feagin, 2006, 2010).  
10 Cross (2001) has demonstrated how assumptions about whiteness and  
11 science circulate very widely through broadcast media in television shows  
12 about the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP). Specifically, Cross  
13 argues that the implicit whiteness in these shows constructs the HGDP as  
14 objective, universal science when, in fact, it is located in specific, discursive  
15 practices (Cross, 2001, pp. 416–417). In the following chapter, I build on  
16 analyses like that of Cross to address the ways in which whiteness helps to  
17 constitute particular representations of addiction on *Intervention* and the  
18 extent to which collective thinking about addiction may indeed be shaped  
19 by these notions.

21

## METHODOLOGY

23

24 My analysis of *Intervention* utilizes a mixed methodology, incorporating  
25 elements of quantitative content analysis and more qualitative discourse  
26 analysis. As a methodological framework, I incorporate Griswold's (1987)  
27 conceptualization of the cultural diamond in which she posits that the  
28 sociological analysis of any cultural product should include four elements:  
29 (1) text, (2) production, (3) social context, and (4) audience reception. This  
30 chapter is part of a larger work, and I have chosen to leave the examination  
31 of audience reception to future iterations of this research. Here, I focus  
32 primarily on the text of the shows, their production, and the social context  
33 in which they are viewed.

34 I conducted a systematic analysis of *Intervention*, including nine (9)  
35 seasons of one hundred and forty-seven (147) episodes featuring one  
36 hundred and fifty-seven individual main characters or “addicts” (157). For  
37 the quantitative content analysis, I logged details of each episode I watched  
38 including: a unique identifier for each episode, the name of the main  
39 character, the region, the original air date, substances to which the main  
40 character is identified as being addicted (both primary and secondary), their

1 race, gender, and (when available) their occupation, age, and sexual  
orientation.

3 For the qualitative analysis, I watched each episode more than once and  
took extensive notes on each episode, focusing on what particular characters  
5 (including “addicts,” interventionists, and family members) said and did.  
I kept track of the text cards (white text on a black background) used  
7 extensively in each show. Further, I noted how the main characters  
responded to the intervention and what the reported “final” outcomes were  
9 for each character. For example, each episode ends with an epilogue about  
where the character is now, (e.g., “Vinnie left treatment after 29 days and  
11 his mother flew him home first class.”), and I recorded each of these.  
Finally, I noted when there was a relevant subtext to an episode, (e.g., as  
13 when an episode in season two included this: “The producer tried repeatedly  
to keep Sylvia from driving,” an event that appeared in several mainstream  
15 press accounts about the ethics of the show). The results from both the  
quantitative and qualitative analyses appear in the sections that follow.

17

19

## FINDINGS

21

The characters featured on *Intervention* are evenly split in terms of gender **AU :5**  
23 (female = 72, male = 71), though compared to rates of drug use by gender  
(11.6% of men and 5.9% of women report substance abuse or dependence  
25 in national surveys), women are over-represented on the show. The data on  
the race of main characters featured on *Intervention* reveals a distinct racial  
27 pattern. Non-Hispanic whites make up 63.7% and Latinas/os make up  
16.3% of the general U.S. population,<sup>4</sup> yet Latinas/os only appear as  
29 characters in 6% of episodes of *Intervention*. African Americans make up  
12.6% of the U.S. population, while only 4% of those appearing on  
31 *Intervention* are black. Asian and Pacific Islanders make up 5% of the U.S.  
population and appear on *Intervention* as main characters 1% of the time.  
33 Approximately 3% of the U.S. population identifies as “having two or more  
races,” yet biracial or multiracial people only appeared in 1% of the  
35 episodes in Seasons 1–9. Native Americans make up approximately 1% of  
the U.S. population and appeared in 1% of the episodes. According to  
37 national survey data in the United States, illicit substance use across racial  
groups is roughly the same.<sup>5</sup> Thus, whites, who appear in 87% of episodes,  
39 are overrepresented, and African Americans, Latinas/os and Asian/Pacific  
Islanders are underrepresented on *Intervention* (Chart 1).



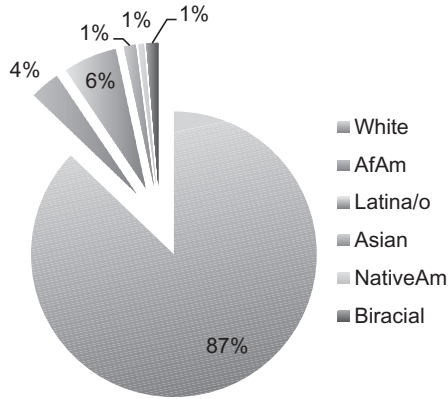


Chart 1. Race/Ethnicity of Main Characters Appearing on *Intervention*, Seasons 1–9. AU :11

## “IN MY HEART, I KNOW IT WAS A SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTION”: THE INTERVENTIONISTS

People who are featured on *Intervention* are described by their families and the professional interventionists as having “hit rock bottom” (Tiger, 2012). But, “rock bottom” is a slippery place on which to stand and shifts constantly. As the interventionists are fond of saying, “rock bottom is different for every person.” The staged intervention occurs in the last quarter hour of each episode. Although each intervention is a “surprise,” there is very little that’s surprising about it for anyone who has viewed more than one episode. The setting for each intervention is a hotel meeting room; these are strikingly similar in their beige blandness, even though they are drawn from disparate regions of the United States. The script for each intervention is set the day before in a meeting between the families and the interventionists. Each family member composes a partially pre-scripted letter that starts with “I love you, and I remember when . . .,” which is then completed with a story from a happier time. The family goes on, “Your addiction has affected my life negatively in the following ways . . .,” then there is a recounting of horrific betrayal, sometimes violence, and most often bitter disappointment. Each family member, instructed by the VanVonderen or Finnigan, the show’s interventionists, reads the same script, as the camera alternates between close-ups of family members, the “addict,” many of whom are often tearful, and the interventionists who, for the most part, remain calmly unemotional throughout.

1 The basic premise of the intervention is that people are given a stark choice:  
2 go to rehab or lose all connection to the people sitting in the room. If they are  
3 resistant to going to treatment, then the “intervention brings the (rock)  
4 bottom to the alcoholic or addict.”<sup>6</sup> This is achieved through an ultimatum  
5 given by those in the intervention room: go to rehab or lose all material  
6 possessions; it is within the power of those in the room to control. For many,  
7 this means losing their housing, car, mobile phone, and ongoing financial  
8 support. Taken together, the threat of the loss of social connection combined  
9 with the loss of material resources are powerful mechanisms of social control.  
10 When used as leverage to get people to go into treatment, it is often difficult  
11 to resist, even when one does not think that treatment is necessary.

12 However, some do manage to resist the powerful social control of an  
13 intervention. When this happens, interventions rely on additional mechanisms  
14 of social control, including law enforcement. Several times during  
15 Seasons 1–9, Jeff VanVonderen called upon law enforcement to assist him  
16 with an intervention. For instance, in Season 3, Dillon a white, 20-year-old  
17 meth user from Oklahoma, was suspicious of the “documentary crew”  
18 filming him and told his family that he would refuse to go to treatment  
19 should they stage an intervention. With this information, VanVonderen and  
20 Dillon’s mother go to the local sheriff’s office. There we see VanVonderen  
21 talking to the sheriff, saying:

22 We are asking you to be part of our therapeutic effort because, you know, obviously, it’s  
23 better to be therapeutic than punitive. We’ll get more done in the long run. If he still says  
24 no, even after we’re all finished ... then, he’s all yours.  
25

26 Sheepishly but without hesitation, the sheriff says simply, “Ok,” and then  
27 appears throughout the episode as an assistant to VanVonderen and the  
28 intervention effort. This extreme form of coercion is relatively rare when  
29 considering all nine seasons of *Intervention*. It is precisely this overall lack of  
30 punitive law enforcement involvement and the predominant therapeutic  
31 model that speaks to the whiteness of addiction on *Intervention*.

32 Many reality TV shows that are engaged in projects of individual  
33 transformation typically employ “experts,” including physicians, psycholo-  
34 gists, home organizers, and physical trainers to help facilitate the  
35 transformation of the subject. Like other reality-based shows *Intervention*  
36 puts the impetus to succeed in recovery on the individual “addict,” yet it  
37 recognizes that “most need help to stop.” In this program, help comes in the  
38 form of experts in the Johnson intervention technique, known as “interven-  
39 tionists.” As Nikolas Rose points out, in the context of neoliberalism,  
“individuals will want to be healthy, experts will instruct them on how to be

1 so, and entrepreneurs will exploit and enhance this market for health. Health  
 2 will be ensured through a combination of the market, expertise, and a  
 3 regulated autonomy” (1998, p. 162). Here, it is the work of several  
 4 professional “interventionists” who are the featured experts on this show:  
 5 Jeff VanVonderen, Candy Finnigan, and Ken Seely (all white). Seely has  
 6 recently left the show, and several other interventionists (one Latino, one  
 7 African American) have joined, but it is VanVonderen and Finnigan who  
 8 most frequently appear in Seasons 1–9 as the interventionists and who serve  
 9 as recurring characters and shapers of the narratives of addiction.

10 VanVonderen’s and Finnigan’s work on the show is to orchestrate  
 11 interventions that result in the main character going to treatment at the end  
 12 of the episode. When this fails, VanVonderen and Finnigan shore up the  
 13 rhetoric of the “successful” intervention anyway. For example, Marquel,  
 14 who is Cuban American, featured in Season 7 for her alcohol and exercise  
 15 “addictions,” literally runs away when she suspects that Finnigan is  
 16 conducting an intervention with help from Marquel’s father, stepmother,  
 17 and sisters. The text cards near the end of the episode read: “3 Months  
 18 Later/Marquel has not gone to treatment./She has not spoken to her family  
 19 since the intervention.” Undaunted by this, Finnigan says to the family and  
 20 the larger audience, “I feel in my heart it was a successful intervention.” It is  
 21 not immediately clear how this counts as a “successful” intervention, except  
 22 that Finnigan is pleased that they were able to remove Marquel’s two small  
 23 children from her home.

24 Whether through the threat of punishment or through discursive re-  
 25 framing, the interventionists serve as neoliberal experts instructing  
 26 individuals on how to be “healthy.” The interventionists also share a  
 27 similarity with the “white saviors” in feature films (Vera & Gordon, 2003).  
 28 White saviors are idealized versions of white Americans depicted as  
 29 powerful, brave, cordial, kind, firm, and generous. Finnigan and VanVon-  
 30 deren are the white saviors of *Intervention*. The interventionists, then, serve  
 31 multiple roles within the frame of the show, both as experts guiding people  
 32 to “health” and self-sufficiency, while also serving as white saviors rescuing  
 33 “addicts” from excess, self-destruction, and wasted whiteness.

## 35                   **LOOKING AT ADDICTION THROUGH A** 36                   **WHITE LENS**

37  
 38  
 39 The viewing audience of *Intervention* is invited to gaze through a white lens  
 that tells a particular kind of story about addiction. The people who appear

1 on the show to “share their stories about addiction” are disproportionately  
2 white (87%). This is rather remarkable given the long history (recounted  
3 above and elsewhere in this volume) of the association between racial and  
4 ethnic minority groups and media depictions of drug use. The over-  
5 representation of white bodies depicted on *Intervention* is particularly  
6 striking during the current “drug war” era in which African Americans and  
7 Latinos are especially strongly linked with illicit drug use in dominant media  
8 narratives and given the embodied, physical, and social costs to African  
9 American and Latino communities associated with the government-  
10 sponsored war on (some) people who use (certain types of) drugs  
11 (Alexander, 2010; Hansen & Roberts, 2012). If the producers of *Intervention*  
12 were interested in creating a representative portrayal of drug use in the  
13 United States, the consequences of drug use would include incarceration,  
14 since drug offenses are a huge driver of the mass incarceration of people of  
15 color, and all racial and ethnic groups would be featured on the show in  
16 roughly even numbers (or, in proportion to their percentage of population).  
17 My critique, however, is not one that is grounded in a multicultural call for  
18 greater “diversity” or “representativeness” of the people on screen because  
19 I do not claim that whiteness inheres only in bodies socially and culturally  
20 marked as “white.” Instead, I want to call into question the representa-  
21 tional power of whiteness and how it functions to reinforce a system of  
22 domination (Nakayama, 2000). The issue is not only the representation  
23 of whiteness on *Intervention* but also what whiteness is used to do.

24 The producers of *Intervention* present a narrative of addiction that is  
25 embedded in a white racial frame (Feagin 2010). For example, *Intervention’s*  
26 executive producer Dan Partland explains how stories are crafted for the  
27 show:

28 We have a very long list of different elements we try to find in a story. **The most**  
29 **important one is, will the story in some way challenge the stereotype of what addiction is?**<sup>7</sup>  
30 [emphasis added]

AU :6

31 Here, Partland explains that he looks for stories that “challenge the  
32 stereotype of what addiction is.” Given the strong association between  
33 racialized Others and addiction in dominant media narratives, what  
34 Partland is referring to here is, at least in part, whiteness. Ironically, within  
35 the white racial frame in which addiction is almost universally equated with  
36 racialized Others, countering that racial stereotype necessarily requires  
37 casting whites as the “addicts.” This illustrates the persistent power of the  
38 white racial frame as a justifying ideology. It works like this: elite whites  
39 operating within a white racial frame that creates a racialized mythology of

1 addiction as residing in black and brown bodies and then this mythology is  
widely circulated in and through media. This mythology becomes part of  
3 the dominant narrative in the culture and then it is this “stereotype of  
addiction,” to which Partland refers. Therefore, featuring “addicts” who are  
5 disproportionately white becomes the only way to counter the prevailing  
racial stereotypes about addiction. Without an explicit critique of whiteness  
7 that interrogates the origins of racialized mythologies of race and addiction  
and the ways that the white racial frame helps shape the production  
9 decisions, we remain trapped within its hegemonic, normalizing power.

The white lens through which we are invited to view *Intervention* occludes  
11 our vision from other realities of drugs and addiction. The putative war on  
drugs, begun in the 1970s and continuing through today, has been a war on  
13 African American and Latina/o people who have disproportionately borne  
the brunt of draconian drug and law enforcement policies (Alexander,  
15 2010). In 2009, the United States incarcerated some 2.4 million people in  
federal, state, and local prisons and jails. One in every 99.1 adults in the  
17 United States is incarcerated, the highest incarceration rate in the world. Of  
those incarcerated in state prisons for a drug-related offense, fully 75% are  
19 African American or Latina/o, even though whites make up a majority of  
the population in the United States, and whites use and sell drugs at roughly  
21 similar rates compared to other racial groups. In 2010, over 1.6 million  
people were arrested on non-violent drug charges.<sup>8</sup> Yet, all the carnage and  
23 destruction created by the punitive “drug war” is missing from view in the  
therapeutically imbued *Intervention*.

25 The white lens through which the viewing audience is invited to see  
*Intervention* creates a narrative that is consistent with the social construction  
27 of addiction in the United States. In that it encourages a bifurcated  
approach to addiction in which there are “deserving addicts” who are  
29 worthy of treatment and “undeserving addicts” who should get punishment  
(Acker, 2002; Dingelstad, Gosden, Martin, & Vakas, 1996). While  
31 “deserving addicts” are featured on *Intervention*, “undeserving” drug users  
and dealers are featured on shows such as *Cops* (Brenton & Cohen, 2003;  
33 Doyle, 1998) or MSNBC’s seemingly limitless supply of reality-based prison  
shows, such as *Locked Up*. One writer has referred to this programming as  
35 “prison porn” (Parker, 2010). These media representations are deeply  
racialized and are heavily laden with assumptions about addiction and its  
37 consequences and about the appropriate responses to drug use. For the  
people of color almost exclusively featured in shows such as *Cops* or *Locked*  
39 *Up*, regimes of punishment are the only solutions available within the  
logic of these programs. On such shows, characters often appear without

1 back-stories, childhoods, and families or lost potential. They are inherently  
 3 criminalized, irredeemably lost to society and utterly lacking in humanity. In  
 5 contrast, the mostly white characters appearing on *Intervention* are given  
 7 back-stories, lost childhoods, and caring families. The white drug-using  
 9 people featured on *Intervention* are ideal types of unrealized potential,  
 always on the brink of redemption through renewed will power and self-  
 sufficiency. They, in contrast to those inherently lost souls on *Locked Up*,  
 can be or have anything, if only they can overcome their addiction.

## 11 WASTED WHITENESS

13 *Intervention* crafts stories that audiences care about through the deployment  
 15 of individual tragedy (Kosovski & Smith, 2011). These tragedies are racially  
 17 inflected with concerns about white status decline. Each episode tells a  
 19 portion of the main character's story in flashback. The recreation of the  
 21 past through a montage of family photos suggests to the viewer that the  
 23 character "wasn't always like this." In what might otherwise be a remark-  
 25 able and humanizing move (were it not for the way this reinscribes white  
 27 privilege), the degraded image of the "addict" is contextualized by  
 childhood photos that give the character dimensionality. Take, for example,  
 the episode that features Kristen (Season 2), a twenty-four year old white  
 woman from Wisconsin who identifies as "an alcoholic and a heroin  
 addict." The title cards at the beginning of the episode speak to the contrast  
 of squandered potential referring to Kristen first as "The Mother" (she has a  
 6-year-old daughter,) and then as "The Heroin Addict." Kristen's mother,  
 Janet, faces the camera and asks:

29       What happened to the little girl I knew? She was in the gifted and talented program. She  
 always wanted to do something with art, something creative.

31 This idealized memory of Kristen as a child described by her mother is  
 33 intercut with images of a smiling, blonde girl, seemingly carefree, riding her  
 35 bicycle. This happy childhood was "shattered" when, at age 13, Kristen  
 37 parents divorced. Every episode of *Intervention* features an idyllic childhood,  
 shattered by some personal tragedy, as central to the eventual addiction. In  
 the narrative of *Intervention*, the arrow between personal tragedy and  
 addiction is drawn as if it were direct, unambiguous, and causal (Kosovski  
 & Smith, 2011, p. 855). Kristen's sister, Erin, offers a stark contrast to this  
 39 lost past with her assessment of Kristen's present reality: "I don't know how  
 you can get any worse than an alcoholic, heroin-addicted prostitute."

1 The construction of Kristen's story from a happy childhood to an  
 3 adulthood that could not "get any worse" speaks to lost potential. The fact  
 5 that this is viewed as a tragedy that could not be "any worse" suggests a  
 7 whiteness in crisis. The social and cultural grandeur that whiteness sets itself  
 9 up to (not) achieve brings with it a constant anxiety about the inability to  
 11 achieve those heights (Hughey, 2010). Both the crisis for Kristen's family  
 13 and the tragedy within the televisual framework of *Intervention* are  
 15 predicated upon the high expectations that go along with being young,  
 17 gifted, female, and white in this society. Kristen is not only wasting her  
 19 potential, she is wasting her whiteness.

11 While the show is framed around the issue of substance use, episodes like  
 13 this one in which female drug users are also involved in sex work seem  
 15 equally concerned with intervening on this activity. While Kristen clearly  
 17 frames her involvement in prostitution as one rooted in the political  
 19 economy of low-wage labor ("I worked one shift and paid my rent;  
 21 I couldn't go back to a job where I make six dollars an hour"), the  
 23 producers of the show frame it differently. Toward the end of the episode as  
 25 Kristen is seen checking into a residential treatment facility, they include an  
 27 interview with her doctor at the recovery center who says: "I think the  
 29 biggest challenge with Kristen is that she's gone down to such a low level,  
 31 morally." This reference to Kristen's "low level, morally" is a rather striking  
 33 move from "sickness" to "badness," a reversal of the usual process of  
 35 medicalization (Conrad & Schneider, 2002) in that it moves *away from* a  
 37 medicalized definition of addiction *toward* one rooted in moral failing. As if  
 39 to reinforce Kristen's moral failure (as a woman and as a "healthy" citizen),  
 the producers of the show choose to include part of her farewell speech  
 as she graduates from rehab after 120 days. Kristen says to one of her  
 counselors:

29 I remember when you said **the only hope you had for me was that I could become a lady**  
 31 **and a productive member of society.** I just love you so much. (emphasis added)

33 The counselor nods her head in agreement with Kristen as she says these  
 35 words and they embrace. The coupling of Kristen's twin goals to become a  
 37 "lady" and a "productive member of society" speaks to the regimes of  
 39 gendered dominance and neoliberal notions of self-sufficient citizenship that  
 shape her life chances. These regimes are also racialized and presume  
 whiteness. The way that Kristen will become "a lady" and a "productive  
 member of society" is by adhering to codes of conduct proscribed for white,  
 young, heterosexual women who are the mothers of young children. If  
 Kristen relapses, within the narrative of *Intervention* this will be a tragedy

1 due primarily to a failure of her individual will. It will also be a tragedy of  
wasted whiteness.

3 This tragedy of wasted whiteness is, as Sears and Johnston (2010) suggest  
about predominantly white “stoner” films like *Up In Smoke*, “the specter of  
5 seeing white domination go “up in smoke” – via wasting, as opposed to  
hoarding, white privilege” (Sears & Johnston, 2010). They argue that this  
7 amounts to racial treason and helps explain why (straight) whites in stoner  
films find drug use so menacing. Similarly, Murakawa (2011) argues that  
9 both the meth “epidemic” and “meth mouth” are constructed as symptom  
and cause of white status decline, with dental decay the vehicle for anxieties  
11 about descent into “white trash” status. Thus, it is anxiety about squan-  
dering white privilege that characterizes both white “stoner” films and the  
13 faux epidemic of “meth mouth.” Virtually every episode of *Intervention*  
follows this form of wasted whiteness and squandered white privilege as a  
15 way constructing stories that “in some way challenge the stereotype” of  
addiction, as producer Dan Partland explained. But these are not the only  
17 stories on *Intervention*.

19

21 **“WONDER BREAD LAND”: WHITENESS AND**  
22 **THE ERASURE OF SYSTEMIC RACISM ON**  
23 ***INTERVENTION***

**AU:7**

25 The narratives of whiteness on *Intervention* expand to include the small  
percentage (from 1% to 6%) of racial or ethnic minority group members  
27 who appear on the show. When Native Americans, African Americans,  
Asian Americans, or Latinas/os appear on the show, they both reaffirm and  
29 subvert the usual white-framed dominant narrative. For the most part,  
people of color are grafted onto whiteness when they appear on *Intervention*.  
31 They are extended the privileges of individuality associated with whiteness,  
and their addiction is framed as a “diseased response” to an individual  
33 personal tragedy (Kosovski & Smith, 2011, p. 854) just as it is for white  
people on the show. When race “erupts” in episodes that feature people of  
35 color, producers work to re-frame those moments within the white  
dominant narrative in ways that erase references to systemic racism (Feagin,  
37 2006).

39 Gabe (Season 6) is a 20-year-old young man living in Minnesota. He  
introduces himself in the episode by explaining that he was born in Calcutta,  
India and adopted at an early age into a family with five other children.



1 He also says he is addicted to heroin and cocaine. Gabe says to the camera  
in the opening “there are 3 million street children in the city where I’m  
3 from,” and he allows that he “should feel grateful” to have been taken from  
life on the street in Calcutta, but he does not. Instead, he feels a persistent  
5 emptiness and loneliness. This opening narration from Gabe is intercut with  
scenes with his adopted family, who are white, evangelical Christians.  
7 Gabe’s brown skin and darker hair stand out in the crowd of fair-skinned,  
light-haired siblings and parents.

9 The episode follows the usual narrative of a happy childhood (after Gabe  
is adopted) that is now lost. In interviews about their childhood, one of his  
11 brothers (Matt) says: “I didn’t think of him as different. I mean, they told  
me he was different, but I didn’t really, like, realize it.” Then, there is a cut  
13 away to a childhood photo of Gabe and Matt, which shows a contrasting  
dark/blonde pair of young boys. His father says in voiceover: “He’s just part  
15 of the family, and I explained that to him. I said, “you’re my son, just like  
the rest of the kids.” Why would it be any different?” The father smiles as he  
17 says this, and then there is a cut to a family photo from Gabe’s childhood,  
the one dark brown child among a crowd of seven white faces. The family  
19 and the producers of *Intervention* tell Gabe’s story in a color-blind  
framework that refuses to acknowledge difference. This does not work for  
21 Gabe, however.

In Gabe’s memory of his childhood, he acknowledges the effort his family  
23 put into making him feels included, but this effort could not withstand the  
system racism Gabe encountered both outside and inside the family. As tells  
25 the audience: “Whenever we would go out, people would see me and see the  
family, and ask me questions, about ‘how do I feel, not being part of the  
27 family?’” Gabe goes on to recount an especially painful story about a  
childhood scuffle with one of his brothers that their Grandfather stopped.  
29 He then told Gabe he “shouldn’t be part of this family.” While Gabe is clear  
about locating his unhappiness and his drug use in the racism he experienced  
31 as a child, for the most part, his family seems ill equipped to understand or  
deal with the racism he faces. His father’s explanation for Gabe’s trouble is  
33 this: “There is deeply within him a victim mentality. It’s always someone  
else’s fault.” Here, Gabe’s father is the embodied voice of the white racial  
35 frame, unable to understand his own son’s experience with racism, and the  
production of *Intervention* amplifies this view. This is clear when, during the  
37 intervention, Candy Finnigan interrupts the family members’ testimonies to  
say, “I was handpicked to do this because, well ... I’m adopted, and drugs  
39 and alcohol were just a symptom for me,” and she begins to cry. This  
dramatic and unexpected moment in the highly formulaic show moves the

1 focus away from any discussion of the racism that Gabe has dealt with or  
the problematic (for Gabe) whiteness of his adopted family and puts the  
3 focus instead on the supposed lingering psychological and individualized  
trauma of adoption. This erasure of systemic racism from view in  
5 *Intervention* also reinforces and normalizes whiteness.

Even when characters on *Intervention* raise systemic racism as a feature in  
7 their addiction, this is diminished through the power of the show's larger  
narrative arc. For example, when Gloria (Season 6) a 53-year-old African  
9 American woman living in San Francisco explicitly frames her drinking  
around racial oppression, this is dismissed in favor of a more individualized  
11 tragedy. Gloria says she drinks because: "African Americans don't have it  
very good in this country and that's just what we do." Gloria's explanation  
13 of her drinking recognizes systemic racism and places problems with drug  
and alcohol in that frame. It is, therefore, a remarkable eruption of race-talk  
15 in the usual color-blind paradigm of the show. However, Gloria's narrative  
of systemic racism is immediately overwritten by the producers through the  
17 following text card:

19 She has survived giving birth to a stillborn baby, domestic violence and breast cancer  
and sees herself as a passive victim in life instead of an active participant.

21 Here, the producers re-frame Gloria's assessment of her drinking as tied to  
racial oppression and instead situate it within the familiar narrative of the  
23 show, that addiction is the result of an individual, personal tragedy  
disconnected from larger systems. By doing this, the show's producers  
25 denude the episode of racial meaning, minimize the role of systemic racism,  
and place drinking problems back in the rhetoric of individual tragedy and  
27 struggle against inner demons. This shift expands the boundaries of  
whiteness within *Intervention* to include Gloria's re-framed narrative at the  
29 same time it excludes the possibility of systemic racism as part of what  
Gloria must struggle against.

31 Antwahn (Season 2) is a 39-year-old African American man living in Los  
Angeles who is introduced to the viewers through title cards as "The  
33 Basketball Player" and then "The Drug Addict." Antwahn, a former NBA  
player, is now a crack cocaine user. For the most part, Antwahn's story is  
35 grafted on to whiteness and told through a color-blind framework devoid of  
any discussion of systemic racism. It is Antwahn who names the dynamic of  
37 whiteness at work in *Intervention*. In a follow-up episode, Antwahn has left  
rehab, along with a young, white woman. As we meet them, they are leaving  
39 a motel where they have been living and have run out of money. As night  
falls, Antwahn suggests that they stay in a homeless shelter while the young,

1 white woman resists the idea. There is some small drama between them as  
they debate going into the shelter, and Antwahn turns and speaks directly  
3 into the camera: “She comes from Wonder Bread Land.” It is a striking  
moment in the nine seasons of *Intervention*, not only as an eruption of race,  
5 but for the way it exposes the whiteness of all the other episodes on  
*Intervention*. In effect, Antwahn here is referring to the other 87% of the  
7 characters (or “addicts”) on *Intervention*. His white, female companion  
cannot imagine herself even entering a homeless shelter, much less staying  
9 there. The reason she cannot imagine this is because, as Antwahn observes,  
she “comes from wonder bread land.” In other words, she comes from a  
11 world of expectations that she as a young, white woman does not belong on  
the streets or in homeless shelters. Antwahn goes on to set up a stark  
13 contrast between himself and his Wonder Bread friend. Gesturing to the  
homeless shelter, he says: “I come from this. *This* is who I am.” Antwahn  
15 actually does not come from the streets or homeless shelters (he grew up in a  
middle-class home), but he uses this identification with the streets to  
17 distance himself from Wonder Bread Land and the expectations of  
whiteness.

19 *Intervention*’s televisual, therapeutic approach to addiction embodies  
whiteness. Whiteness, as Richard Dyer argues, obfuscates itself and its  
21 relationship to the particular traits it is said to embody, including  
temperance, rationality, bodily restraint, and industriousness (Dyer, 1988,  
23 p. 3). Certainly, the traits of temperance, rationality, bodily restraint, and  
industriousness are woven into the narratives of whiteness and addiction on  
25 *Intervention*. And, along with these traits, the key features I have identified:  
individual tragedy, therapeutic recovery from addiction to “health,” and  
27 neoliberal self-sufficiency are embedded in these narratives.

29

## CONCLUSION

31

The analysis of *Intervention* presented here examines the role of whiteness as  
33 a mediator of narratives of addiction. In this chapter, I have argued that the  
imagined neoliberal citizen is white and the narratives of addiction and  
35 recovery are rooted in a whiteness that contains individual tragedy,  
therapeutic recovery to “health,” and self-sufficiency. This analysis finds  
37 that there is a fairly even representation along gender lines on the show, yet  
a stark racial pattern in which whites are significantly overrepresented, while  
39 people from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds appear much less  
frequently on the show. My critique, however, is not to call for more racial

1 diversity among the nonactors who appear on *Intervention*. Instead, I have  
attempted to offer a critique of what whiteness is used to do.

3 The representation of addiction on reality TV occurs within a broader  
social context in which race is heavily implicated in discourse about drugs.  
5 The characters, narrative tropes, and treatment options depicted on  
*Intervention* sit in striking opposition to the broader social context of the  
7 criminalization of drug use by African American and Latina/o people and  
the disproportionate incarceration rates in the United States. In contrast,  
9 *Intervention* frames the characters' stories of addiction as individual  
"tragedies" rather than collective "social problems" associated with drug  
11 use by African Americans and Latinas/os (Gowan & Whetstone, 2012).  
Instead of the punitive approach meted out to drug users through  
13 government-sponsored drug wars and on shows such as *Cops* or *Locked  
Up*, *Intervention's* televisual, therapeutic approach to addiction embodies  
15 whiteness.

The producers of *Intervention* present a narrative of addiction that is  
17 embedded in a white racial frame. The interventionists, then, serve multiple  
roles within the frame of the show, both as experts guiding people to  
19 "health" and self-sufficiency while also serving as white saviors rescuing  
"addicts" from excess, self-destruction, and wasted whiteness.

21 The viewing audience of *Intervention* is invited to gaze through a white  
lens that tells a particular kind of story about addiction. *Intervention* crafts  
23 stories that audiences care about through the deployment of individual  
tragedies are racially inflected with concerns about wasted whiteness and the  
25 squandering of white privilege. The therapeutic model valorized by  
*Intervention* is underpinned by neoliberal regimes of self-sufficient citizen-  
27 ship that compel us all toward "health" and becoming "productive members  
of society," and, as discussed here, these regimes are also racialized and  
29 presume whiteness. Failure to comply with an intervention becomes a  
"tragedy" within the narrative of the show, and tragedy of wasted  
31 whiteness. On the relatively rare instances when people of color appear on  
*Intervention*, they are grafted onto whiteness and extended the privileges of  
33 individuality associated with whiteness. When race "erupts" in episodes that  
feature people of color, producers work to re-frame it within the white-  
35 dominant narrative in ways that erase references to systemic racism.

The white lens through which we are invited to view *Intervention* occludes  
37 our vision from other realities of drugs and addiction. Missing from view in  
the therapeutically imbued *Intervention* is the devastation created by the  
39 punitive "drug war." In its place, we are left with the partial view of  
addiction in "wonder bread land," in which everyone had a happy

1 childhood, shattered by a tragic event, that led to the tragic waste of  
 3 whiteness that is addiction.

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AU :8

7 Bonner (2008); Fernandez, Begley, & Marlatt (2006); Kershaw (2009);  
 9 Reinerman (2005); Salmon (2004).

## 11 NOTES

13  
 15 1. “This TV show saved my life,” he said. “I get choked up when I think about it,”  
 17 A former contestant says of *The Biggest Loser*. Quoted in *Harvard Magazine*,  
 19 January–February 2012. Available online at [http://harvardmagazine.com/2012/01/  
 21 biggest-loser-contestants-share-tips](http://harvardmagazine.com/2012/01/biggest-loser-contestants-share-tips). This is not the universal experience of contest-  
 23 ants on such transformation reality TV shows, but it is the one producers want to  
 25 push forward. Many former *Biggest Loser* contestants have regained the weight lost  
 27 on the show, and some have spoken out about the health-damaging effects of the  
 29 experience. Kai Hibbard, former contestant, says ““I have people that come up to  
 31 me and talk to me and ask me why they can’t lose 12 pound in a week when I did.  
 33 When I didn’t. It didn’t happen. It’s TV,” she said. “I helped perpetuate a myth  
 35 that’s dangerous.” From: [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504763\\_162-20008214-  
 37 10391704.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504763_162-20008214-10391704.html)

2. *Ibid.*

3. The head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, Anslinger, claimed that “fifty  
 percent of the violent crimes in districts occupied by Mexicans, Spaniards, Latin-  
 Americans, Greeks or Negroes may be traced to this evil” (Bonnie & Whitebread,  
 1974, p. 100).

4. Census, 2010, Quick Facts, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>.

5. According to the National Household Survey on Drug Use, in 2010, among  
 persons aged 12 or older, the rate of current illicit drug use among Asians was similar  
 to that among Native Hawaiians or Other Pacific Islanders (3.5 and 5.4 percent,  
 respectively), but the rate among Asians was lower than among other racial/ethnic  
 groups. The rate among persons of two or more races was similar to that among  
 American Indians or Alaska Natives and among blacks (12.5, 12.1, and 10.7 percent,  
 respectively). The rate was 8.1 percent among Hispanics and 9.1 percent among  
 whites. <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/NSDUH/2k10NSDUH/2k10Results.htm#7.1.3>.

6. From “Intervention RN: Frequently Asked Questions,” website of Joani  
 Gammill, RN. <http://www.interventionrn.com/drupal1/node/2>.

7. Joe Lynch, “How A&E got rich off of recovery,” *The Fix*, March 25, 2011.  
 Available online at <http://www.thefix.com/content/affliction-network?page=all>.

8. Drug war statistics, from Drug Policy Alliance, [http://www.drugpolicy.org/  
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