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White Women, U.S. Popular Culture, and Narratives of Addiction

Jessie Daniels

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Introduction

The U.S. has had the largest per-capita prison population in the world for several decades now, which has everything to do with harsh drug policies. Among those in federal prisons, about half are there for drug offenses, and in 2007 alone, there were 1,841,200 state and local arrests for drug abuse violations in the United States (Tonn, 2014). The U.S. Congress seems to have a limitless capacity for locking up people; in 2003 alone, it created, increased, or expanded nearly forty (40) mandatory minimum sentences (John, 2014). And, the more white people were told about the racial disparities in incarceration, the more they reported being afraid of crime and were more likely to support the kinds of punitive policies that exacerbate the racial disparities (Hetey and Eberhardt, 2014).

The burden of over incarceration in the U.S. is not evenly distributed in the population. While Black people constitute only 13% of the U.S. population, they represent 40% of those incarcerated; Latinx people represent 16% of the population, and constitute 19% of those incarcerated (Hagler, 2015). Almost every race and gender category is more likely to be incarcerated than white women. Among Black people, 1 in 3 men and 1 in 18 women born in 2001 will go to prison at some point during their lifetimes; among Latinx people, 1 in 6 men and 1 in 45 women will go to prison at some point; among white men, 1 in 17 will go to prison. For white women, the expected rate of incarceration is 1 in 111 (Hagler, 2015). It is crucial to keep in mind the juxtaposition of the gargantuan prison system fueled by relentlessly punitive drug policies in the U.S. and the narratives of addiction crafted for entertainment and the ideological justification for

the carceral state. While white women are largely exempt from the harms of the carceral

state, they are prominently featured in sympathetic entertainment narratives about

addiction, as well as agents of the carceral state.

The first decade of the twenty-first century was a pivotal one for drug policy in

the U.S. Some reform efforts gained traction, such as the partial repeal of the draconian

Rockefeller Drug Laws in 2007, the Second Chance Act (supporting prisoner reentry) in

2008, and the Fair Sentencing Act (reducing the sentencing disparity between crack and

powder cocaine from 100 to 1 to 18 to 1) in 2010. Even so, punitive approaches to drug

policy and the resultant racial disparities persisted, leading some to characterize U.S.

drug policy as a racial caste system, or what Michelle Alexander calls "the new Jim

Crow" (Alexander, 2010). However, as the decade came to a close and a new one

dawned, the punitive drug policies of the U.S. began to give way to a call for 'gentler'

policies (Seelye, 2015). In part, the call for this shift toward less punitive approaches to

drug use was the result of very deliberate activism directed at policymakers (Stevens,

2010). Yet, the traction that such calls were able to achieve relied on the discursive

disappearance of Black and Brown drug users, which was replaced with a concern for

white, middle class users (Hansen, 2017; Hansen and Netherland, 2016; Tiger, 2017). It

is our argument that the supposed innocence of white women drives much of this

sympathetic turn toward drug users as "victims" (rather than "criminals") and that it is a

trope propagated through cultural narratives. In particular, our focus here is on two

popular television shows, *Law & Order* and *Intervention*, which regularly feature drugs

and drug users.

We selected these two shows for their prominence in crafting narratives about contemporary drug problems in the U.S. context, in particular around white women. *Law & Order* is one of the longest running programs on television and arguably popularized the police procedural genre in North American television. It features white women in a range of roles, as victims, cops, and prosecutors. The reality-based television series *Intervention* uses the tropes of documentary film to tell a particular kind of story about addiction and coerced treatment often involving white women as characters. It is now in its eighteen season. Both shows have proven to be enormously popular with audiences in the U.S. Although they represent different genres of programs, both situate narratives about white characters, and in particular white women, at the center of their storytelling about drug use, as they flatten, erase or caricature the lives of people of color affected by drugs. We contend that to understand the many layers of encoding of meaning that lie at the intersections of race and drugs, we must grapple with popular culture (Hall, 1973). Thus, given the prominence of these shows in the current cultural landscape and their attention to drug use, we selected these two television programs to better understand how white women have come to have a prominent place in narratives about contemporary drug problems.

White Women, Popular Culture & Addiction in Historical Context

Illicit drug use has long been associated with particular groups of people in ways that stigmatize them while serving political ends. Beginning with the first drug laws in the U.S., which regulated opium smoking in an effort to control Chinese immigrants, American drug policy has been driven by racism and by the desire to protect whiteness in

general and white women in particular. Images intended to incite moral panics about Chinese opium dens featured white women, supposedly lured there by Chinese men. In the early 1900s, when the U.S. was debating the Harrison Act that would regulate the use of heroin and coca products for the first time, *The New York Times* ran a story with a headline referring to a "Negro Cocaine Fiend," perpetuating racist stereotypes about the hyperviolence associated with Black male drug use. This supposed "fiend" was a threat to one main target: white women. At congressional hearings about the Harrison Act, experts testified that "most of the attacks upon white women of the South are the direct result of a cocaine-crazed Negro brain." The scientific experts of the day used their credentials in testimony that lent credence to the criminalization and putative violence of Black men, while they simultaneously reinforced the ideas about the innocence of white women.

Harry Anslinger, the founding commissioner of the federal Bureau of Narcotics, began an anti-drugs crusade in the 1930s that was motivated, at least in part, by a desire to protect white women. In his testimony about the Marijuana Prohibition Act to the U.S. Congress in 1937, Anslinger claimed, "There are 100,000 total marijuana smokers in the US and most are Negroes, Hispanics, Filipinos and entertainers. Their Satanic music, jazz, swing, result from usage. This marijuana causes white women to seek sexual relations with Negroes, entertainers and any others." Anslinger's fear-mongering about drugs mixed easily with his racism (Black, 2007; Hartnett, 1995; Lusane & Desmond, 1991). Often missed in accounts of Anslinger's racial bias is the way that white women are configured as the symbolic center of what must be protected through punitive drug policies.

Systematic studies of media consistently find a connection between representations of addiction and narratives about race. People who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups are more often portrayed as "addicts" (Taylor, 2008; Williams, 1995). Research also finds that Black people are more likely to be portrayed as menacing when compared to the portrayal of white people in news stories involving drug use (Peffley, Shields, and Williams, 1996; Reeves and Campbell, 1994; Reinarman and Levine, 2004; Williams, 1995). Even though someone could be an "addict" and not break any laws, dominant media narratives about "addicts" and "lawbreakers" often regard these two labels as synonymous and thoroughly racialized. In this trajectory, "addicts" always become "lawbreakers," and they are almost always coded as racial Others (Dixon and Linz, 2000).

Stereotypes of race and addiction have been paired specific racial and ethnic groups with particular substances. For example, Asian Americans, particularly Chinese immigrants in the early 1900s, were configured as "opium fiends," in popular press accounts (Shah, 2001). The portrayal of the "drunk Indian" in Hollywood films configured Native Americans as uniquely vulnerable to alcohol throughout the 1950s and 1970s, a period in which Native Americans were driven even further into government-created poverty and launched a powerful resistance movement (Kilpatrick, 1999). Propaganda campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s warned against the encroaching "Marijuana Menace," and these efforts were joined with anti-Mexican sentiments (Galliher and Walker, 1977; Himmelstein, 1983; Meier, 1994). The U.S. government contributed to the hysteria, racism, and xenophobia by asserting that marijuana use led to violent crimes, most often by racial and ethnic minority group members; it did this

through the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (Himmelstein, 1983; Meier, 1994). The association between Latinx and marijuana is so endemic in U.S. culture that it makes possible spoofs like in films such as *Up In Smoke* (1978) in which Cheech Marin plays weed-addled Latinx character (List, 1992; Sears and Johnston, 2010). Yet, missing from this body of research is any mention of white women.

Active drug users are routinely portrayed as risk-taking *outsiders* who should be actively excluded from society (Becker, 1963; Taylor, 2008). Addiction concepts became part of American culture early in the nineteenth century, and along with them, addiction tropes became a feature of American storytelling (Room, 2005, p. 229). The persistent metonymy in portrayals of addiction is one of utter degradation, moral failing (Harding, 1986; Sulkunen, 2007), and more recently, disease (Reinarman, 2004). Whether as the result of "moral failure" or "disease," the audience can expect the "addict" to do terrible things because of their substance use. Such a character will betray, steal from, or even kill others while in the grip of addiction. In part, audiences are horrified by such acts because they represent violations of the norms of intimate relationships: they are done to parents, lovers, or children (Room 2003, p. 229). Several scholars have documented the ways in which understandings of and responses to addiction are critical to reinforcing gender, race, and class norms. Treatment facilities, including drug courts and mandated programs, that advocate abstinence approach also try to instill values of self-control, character-building and sexual propriety in drug users (Hansen, 2017; Kaye, 2012; McCorkel, 2013; McKim, 2017; Tiger, 2013). In so doing, these forms of treatment also reinforce norms of gender and whiteness and in particular norms of white womanhood.

From the beginning, the widespread use of crack cocaine in the U.S. was strongly associated with Black communities in popular media (Reeves and Campbell, 1994). Black and Latinx people were, and continue to be, the focus of law enforcement efforts and popular culture narratives in the putative 'war on drugs' (Alexander, 2010; McWilliams, 1991; Reinarman and Levine, 2004). Yet, the enforcement of the 'war on drugs' and its representation in popular media stand in stark contrast to the actual rates of substance use; research consistently finds that drug use is fairly evenly distributed across racial groups (SAMHSA, 2009). So while drug use is criminalized for those deemed racialized Others, whiteness operates to create exceptions for white users and protect them from state intervention (e.g., Herzberg, 2011; Netherland and Hansen, 2017). White peoples' drug use is deemed acceptable (and often legal) because medical experts decide that it falls under the rubric of "medical need" (Herzberg, 2011). Even when white drug use involves illicit drugs, it is often portrayed as a medical, rather than a criminal, problem (Netherland and Hansen, 2016). White women, in particular, have often been at the center of this sheltered "medical" use of drugs. Although white people use drugs at about the same rates as Black and Latinx people, they less likely to be targeted by law enforcement for it. And, although white women use drugs, they are largely absent from depictions of involvement with illegal drugs in the American media landscape, with the exceptions of the cases we analyze here.

Whiteness & White Women's Role in the U.S. Drug War

Whiteness is socially constructed and actively maintained. It is not an immutable category, rather it is accomplished through active efforts of human beings, who create

and maintain boundaries of who is, and is not, white. For those who exist within the

ontological boundaries of whiteness, it can be difficult to see, name, and describe. But for

scholars who exist outside those boundaries, from W.E.B. DuBois onward, it is

somewhat easier to articulate: ''black folks have, from slavery on, shared with one

another knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people'' (hooks,

1992, p. 338). The aim of studies of whiteness, like this one, is to problematize the ways

it has remained unremarked and ''normal.'' We want to call attention to the

representational power of a gendered form of whiteness and how it functions to reinforce

a system of domination.

We also draw on the concept of the white racial frame (Feagin, 2013). In the U.S.,

there is a dominant framework from which those in power view North American society.

This concept encompasses multiple levels of analysis, including racial stereotypes (the

cognitive aspect), metaphors and interpretive concepts (the deeper cognitive aspect),

images (the visual culture), emotions (feelings), and inclinations to discriminate. This

frame buttresses and grows out of the material reality of racial oppression. We rely on the

white racial frame to explain how whiteness gets operationalized in popular culture and

has material consequences through public policy. Within this frame, white women play a

particularly important symbolic role in the racist drug war, which is similar to the pattern

observed in the U.S. phenomenon of lynching. As Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1895)

documented, the pattern in this form of racial violence was one in which Black men were

criminalized and sexualized as a mythological threat to white women. The symbolic

defense of white women is not limited to the U.S. context but is also linked to the

colonial project.

Cultural representations of white femininity and womanhood have been central to colonialism in the West. A recurring theme is the way violence towards white women became a symbol of insubordination to colonial authority. As Vron Ware observes, "In any colony, the degree to which white women were protected from the fear of sexual assault was a good indication of the level of security felt by the colonial authorities" (Ware, 2015, 38). In the historical examples of colonialism and lynching, white women occupy a particular position within the racial and gendered social hierarchy that is complicit in these systems of domination. More than individual white women, it is *white womanhood* that does the symbolic work of justifying colonial oppression and racial violence. When it comes to contemporary drug use in the U.S., the symbolic work of white womanhood continues through carceral feminism, when ideas of gender equality are used to perpetuate racial inequality through the mechanism of the State.

Carceral feminism is the idea that the State should protect women from intimate partner violence and other forms of physical abuse by deploying criminal penalties (Bernstein, 2007, 2010; Sandbeck, 2012). Rooted in liberal feminist notions of the State as an equitable mechanism for the redress of issues thought to affect all women equally, the reality of such policies are increased criminalization, surveillance, policing, and incarceration, and women of color and men of color are often disproportionately subject to the violence of the carceral state (Law, 2014). Further, scholars writing about carceral feminism contend that it only protects some women (white, middle class, and heterosexual) while it simultaneously criminalizes other women (women of color, poor and working class, and queer or gender-non-conforming) by making them more vulnerable to the prison industrial complex (Sandbeck, 2012). And, because of the

opportunities for women to attend law school and pursue legal careers, they are often the

much more than symbolically involved in the prosecution of the drug war; they are, in

fact, the actual prosecutors (Moore, 2008; Pierce, 2003).

Methodology

We conducted a systematic analysis of a reality-based show, *Intervention*, and a

narrative television show, *Law & Order,* using samples drawn from nine (9) seasons over

the same time period (2000-2010). We deployed a mixed method approach to analyze

both programs which enabled us to 1) conduct an in-depth systematic analysis of the drug

narratives portrayed in both television programs and 2) capture a sample size that

included the race, class, gender dynamics of drug storylines that indicated potential

patterns of the framing of drug narratives in both programs.

As a methodological framework, we adapted Griswold's (1987) conceptualization

of the cultural diamond. In this, Griswold posits that the sociological analysis of any

cultural artifact should include four elements: 1) text, 2) production, 3) social context,

and 4) audience reception. Here, we focus primarily on the text of the shows, their

production, and the social context in which they are viewed. For our purposes, audience

reception is beyond the scope of the theoretical questions we are asking, the methods we

chose, and the space available.

For our analysis of *Intervention,* we included nine (9) seasons (2000-2010) with a

total of one hundred forty-three (143). The number of episodes and characters differ

because some characters return to the show for "follow up" episodes, and for these we

counted the episode but did not count the character twice. For *Law & Order*, we

examined the text and social context of each episode viewed, and analyzed a sample of

ten (10) seasons spanning the same time period (2000-2010), with a total of thirty-one

(31) episodes. Within the ten seasons examined, we excluded episodes about non-drug

related crimes (e.g., murder where no drugs were involved), and selected for inclusion in

the sample all episodes that included any reference to drugs in their storylines, including

the mention of recreational and medical drugs.

For the quantitative content analysis, we logged details of each episode we

watched including: a unique identifier for each episode, the name of the main character,

the region, the original air date, substances to which the character is identified as being

addicted (both primary and secondary), their race, gender and (when available), the

occupation, age and sexual orientation of the main character. For *Intervention*, we noted

the region within the U.S. where the episode was filmed, but *Law & Order* is set in New

York City, and so all of the storylines took place within the state of New York and most

within the five boroughs.

For the qualitative analysis, we watched each episode in our collective sample and

took extensive notes on each. For *Intervention*, we kept notes on what particular

characters (including "addicts," interventionists, and family members) said and did. We

logged the title cards (white text on a black background) used extensively in each

episode. Additionally, we noted how the main characters responded to the intervention

and what the reported 'final' outcomes were for each character. For example, each

episode of *Intervention* ends with an epilogue about where the character is now, (e.g.,

"Vinnie left treatment after 29 days, and his mother flew him home first class.") and

recorded each of these. Finally, we noted when there was a relevant subtext to an episode,

(e.g., as when an episode in season two noted, "The producer tried repeatedly to keep Sylvia from driving," this later appeared in several mainstream press accounts about the ethics of the show). For *Law & Order*, we documented characters' verbal and non-verbal communication, and we also noted how the state and its agents (including prosecutors and detectives) responded to and interacted with characters involved with drugs. We recorded the outcome (when available) for each of the characters directly involved with drugs (for instance, whether a character was incarcerated, sought or offered treatment, or died/was murdered). We also observed how drugs were framed in the narratives relative to character and plot.

Findings

Intervention

Intervention premiered on the A&E Network in 2005, and its debut quickly marked a turning point for reality television, with creator Sam Mettler crediting the program with shifting the landscape of reality television by disrupting the overly scripted framework of most reality television (Watkins, 2013). In addition to pioneering a new reality television formula, Intervention solidified its foothold in the reality television market in other ways —the program ran on and off for thirteen years, won an Emmy for Outstanding Reality TV Series, has a solid viewership, and has legions of people competing for slots on the show (the show's tenure peaked at 2.9 million viewers and producers fielded between 300 to 900 requests at any given time (Nededog, 2015; Osgood, 2014). The show's significance in the American popular culture landscape is also evident in the plethora of accolades bestowed upon it, including five PRISM awards given by the Substance Abuse and Mental

Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Entertainment Industries Council to honor productions that are "not only powerfully entertaining, but realistically show substances abuse and addiction, as well as mental health issues" (Daniels, 2012).

The narratives of addiction that appear on *Intervention* are crafted through a consistent formula of subject interviews and title cards. As a genre, reality-based shows such as *Intervention* bear some resemblance to key components of documentary film (Murray and Ouellette, 2008; Kosovski and Smith, 2011). The show uses many of the conventions of documentary films, like hand-held cameras and subject interviews interspersed with b-roll of characters involved in their day-to-day lives, which typically means film of the main character scoring, using drugs, and being high. The connection to documentary filmmaking is made explicit at the outset of each episode in which a text announces that the main character has *"agreed to be in a documentary about addiction."* This is followed by another title card that lets the audience in on the central ruse of the show, *"They do not know they will soon face an intervention."* The collusion between producers and families in this lie raises ethical questions about consent and coercion (Kosvoski and Smith, 2011, 856), yet this deception is part of what makes *Intervention* compelling television. It is consistent with other forms of unscripted programming that rely on the "reveal" to add dramatic tension. With *Intervention*, the "reveal" is the moment that the main character walks into the room where family and friends have gathered for the surprise intervention. Prior to this filmic moment, the producers craft a particular narrative about what led the main character to the degradation of addiction and ultimately to the redemption of intervention.

The visual story is composed of a subject interview with the main character which always begins with the same opening: *"Hi, my name is [Kristen], and I'm addicted to [heroin],"* varying only the person's name and the substance with which they have a complicated history. Each episode follows the same narrative arc: it begins with the present-day desolation of the individual's life, the pain caused to loved ones recounted through interviews, and a flashback sequence using family photos, through the audience glimpses what their life used to be like, "before addiction." Typically, this involves stories about what a "good and/or happy kid" they were with "lots of potential" (she was a cheerleader), and that their parents loved them a great deal, with a quick edit to a close up of one of the parents (usually the mother) crying. The narrative then returns to the present tense desolation, and moves quickly to the dramatic climax of the stages interventions on unsuspecting people, referred to as "addicts" (Daniels, 2012).

The basic premise of the intervention is that people are given a stark choice: go to rehab or lose all connection to the people gathered in the room. That threat is coupled with another: the loss of all material support it is within the power of those in the room to control. For many, this means losing their housing, car, mobile phones, and ongoing financial support. Taken together, the dual threat of the loss of social connection and material resources prove to be powerful mechanisms of social control, and for most, impossible to resist.

White people make up most of the characters featured as "addicts" on *Intervention,* and the viewing audience is invited to gaze through a white lens that tells a particular kind of story about addiction. Our quantitative analysis found that are 87% of main characters are white, and of those slightly more than half are white women (N=72

women, N=71 men). However, given that the reported rates of drug use for women are lower than for men (5.9% of women report substance abuse or dependence in national surveys, compared to 11.6% of men), featuring women in equal proportion on the show distorts the reality of gender and drug use patterns. It also gives white women a more central role in narratives of addiction than the epidemiology might suggest.

The over-representation of white people, and in particular white women on the show, is rather remarkable given the long history (recounted earlier) of the association between racial and ethnic minority groups and media depictions of drug use. But, it is not accidental. *Intervention's* executive producer Dan Partland explains in an interview how stories are crafted for the show:

> "We have a very long list of different elements we try to find in a story. The most important one is, will the story in some way challenge the **stereotype of what addiction** is? The next is that the addict and their families have to be completely willing to share their story. You have to choose people who are comfortable with showing you all aspects of their life" [emphasis added] (Lynch, 2011).

Here, Partland explains that he (along with other producers) seek out stories that "challenge the stereotype of what addiction is." And, in fact, this is "the most important" factor in choosing people to appear on the show. Partland is referring to race here, at least in part, given the strong association between drugs and racialized Others. Thus, to counter the stereotype of what addiction is, this requires casting white people as the addicts.

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." While the specific details of Kristen's story are unique to her, the show follows a

strict formula in which each story is made to fit the broad pattern of her story. The title

cards at the beginning of the episode speak to the contrast of squandered potential

referring to Kristen as "The Mother," (she has a 6 year old daughter) and then, "The

Heroin Addict." Kristen's mother, Janet, faces the camera and asks: "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." This idealized memory of Kristen as a child

described by her mother is intercut with images of a smiling, blonde girl, seemingly

carefree, riding her bicycle. This happy childhood was "shattered" when, at age 13,

Kristen's parents divorced. Every episode of *Intervention* features an idyllic childhood,

shattered by some personal tragedy, often divorce, as central to the eventual addiction;

and, in the narrative of *Intervention*, the arrow between personal tragedy and addiction is

drawn as if it were direct, unambiguous and causal (Kosovski and Smith, 2011).

Kristen's sister, Erin, offers a stark contrast to this 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." The construction of Kristen's story from a happy childhood

to an adulthood that could not "get any worse" speaks to lost potential. The fact that this

is viewed as a tragedy that could not be "any worse" suggests a whiteness in crisis. The

social and cultural grandeur that whiteness sets itself up to (not) achieve brings with it a

constant anxiety about the inability to achieve those heights (Hughey, 2012). Both the

crisis for Kristen's family and the tragedy within the televisual framework of *Intervention*

are predicated upon the high expectations that go along with being young, gifted, white

woman in this society. Kristen is not only wasting her potential, she is wasting her

whiteness. The theme of wasted whiteness is not unique to Kristen, but rather a central premise of the show, whose dramatic tension hinges on the lost potential and subsequent redemption of the show's participants.

While the show is framed explicitly around the issue of drug addiction, episodes like this one also implicitly convey the producers' views about sex work by white women. While Kristen explains her involvement in sex work as one rooted in the political economy of low wage labor ("I work one shift and paid my rent; I couldn't go back to a job where I make six dollars an hour"), the producers frame it as a moral failure. Toward the end of the episode as Kristen is seen checking into a residential treatment facility, they include an interview with her doctor at the recovery center who conveys the central message of the episode: "I think the biggest challenge with Kristen is that she's gone down to such a low level, morally."

This reference to Kristen's "low level, morally" is a rhetorical move that suggests that the producers and her treatment doctor expect a "higher level" for her "morally." As if 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:

> "I remember when you said the only hope you had for me was that I could
>
> become a **lady and a productive member of society**,' I just love you so much..."
>
> [emphasis added]

The counselor nods her head in agreement with Kristen as she says these words, and they embrace. The coupling of Kristen's twin goals to become a "lady" and a "productive member of society" speaks to the regimes of gendered dominance and neoliberal notions

of self-sufficient citizenship that shape her life chances. Specifically, being a "lady" is a

designation historically constructed as only available to white women and is replayed

again here for a contemporary audience. The invocation of "productivity" evokes the

logic of neoliberal capitalism, in which the only valued members of society are those that

are "productive" for capital accumulation. The way Kristen will become "a lady" and a

"productive member of society" is by adhering to codes of conduct proscribed for white

womanhood, particularly for those who are young, heterosexual, and the mothers of

young children. If Kristen relapses, within the narrative of *Intervention* this will be a

tragedy due primarily to a failure of her individual will. And, it will also be a tragedy of

wasted whiteness (Sears and Johnston, 2010) and of her fall from the presumably high

level of morality of (white) "ladyhood" and "productivity." The concerns about morality

of sex work as a threat to "ladyhood" is a particular feature of episodes with white

women; white men are not the subjects of such concerns, nor are people of color.

However, all of those featured on Intervention as "addicts" do become the focus of

concern about not being "productive members of society," a type of class failure. In

Kristen's case, her inability to fulfill the expectations in the capitalist marketplace is also

a failure to achieve the gendered, racialized class status of being a white "lady" with a job

in the legitimate economy. Instead, her descent into drug use is associated with the illicit

economies of sex work and drug use, which are coded as both "not white" and "lower

class." These themes that appear in Kristen's story about ladyhood and productivity

appear consistently in episodes featuring white women as the show works to construct

and reclaim particular notions of white femininity.

Whiteness obfuscates itself and its relationship to the particular traits it is said to embody, including temperance, rationality, bodily restraint, and industriousness (Dyer, 1988, 3). For the white people cast on *Intervention* as "addicts," the narrative of their addiction blurs the focus on their whiteness by sharpening the attention to their three-dimensional individuality. Rather than viewing their story of addiction as somehow typical of all white people, the audience is invited to see the characters on *Intervention* as individual victims of a personal tragedy that has led them to addiction. With their whiteness unremarked upon, the white racial frame of the show's production invites viewers to see the characters not as stand-ins for an entire race but rather as individuals struggling with bodily restraint in order to achieve the goal of temperance through their own industriousness. The audience is invited to cheer them on and hope that they succeed, and in that, the viewer becomes complicit in the racial project of the show.

The counselors on *Intervention* often refer to going to rehab as the "gift of treatment," and it is a peculiarly American kind of luxury item. The rehab facilities that people are whisked away to at the end of each episode are exclusive facilities more like a resort or a country club than they are to the treatment options available to most people in the U.S., and they help subsidize the show by buying advertisements on it. The producers of *Intervention* claim success rates that any conventional treatment facility would envy. According to their marketing materials, "98% enter treatment, 55% remain clean and sober," without any additional sources to substantiate these claims. And, journalists repeat the PR-claims of the show's success rate without any kind of fact-checking (Nededog, 2015).

Despite the unrealistic vision of rehab on *Intervention* and the inflated claims of its success rate, the show's narrative has permeated North American popular culture as *the only* effective and life-saving solution to problem drug use. Now, when celebrities die of drug-related causes, one of the first questions asked is: was there an intervention planned? Implied in this question is the kind of intervention depicted on the show. In no small way, white women like Kristen are at the symbolic heart of this narrative. Within the frame of the show, they can, and should, be redeemed (not incacerated), their lives must be salvaged, because they have so much unrealized potential. It is a constellations of assumptions that rely on gender and whiteness.

Law & Order

If *Intervention* has permeated American popular culture, then *Law & Order* has super-saturated it. It is almost impossible to turn on a television in the U.S. and not encounter some version of this show. *Law & Order* is a police procedural and legal drama, set in New York City, that centers the role of the criminal justice system, the state, and its arms as valiantly protecting the public. *Law & Order* ran for twenty seasons from 1990-2010, giving it the title of longest-running crime drama on American primetime television, and it has generated five spin-off series. Creator Dick Wolf credits the show's rise to prominence to the quality of writing with storylines "ripped from the headlines" (Lambe, 2017).

Each episode of *Law & Order* begins with the distinctive theme song and a voiceover that intones, "In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups—the police who investigate crime, and the district attorneys who prosecutors the offenders. These are their stories." *Law & Order* is

centrally about power—the power of the state to control, regulate, and punish crime.

And, it is wildly popular. In 2004, the series aired its 15th season to over 15 million

viewers, and ratings dipped by 2010 resulting the show's cancellation (Fox News, 2004).

But the original continues in re-runs and through streaming services, and at least one

spin-off is still in production. The show's creator, Dick Wolf, makes light of the show's

social significance pointing to its late night time slot that means "half the audience has

fallen asleep and can't remember: How does this end?" (NPR, 2012). The storylines focus

most centrally on murder (the featured cops are homicide detectives), with the occasional

subplot involving robbery, kidnapping, and white collar crime.

For our analysis we selected the subset of episodes (N=31) that included drug-

related storylines. As with *Intervention*, the characters in the drug-related episodes of

Law & Order are predominantly white and white women are disproportionately

represented. Within the timeframe we analyzed (2000-2010), 71% of the characters

involved with drugs were white, while storylines involving Black characters comprised

18% and Latinx characters constituted 11%. In terms of gender in the drug-involved

episodes, 62% of the characters were women and 38% were men. And, similar to

Intervention, we found that in storylines about drug use, white women's stories were

over-represented, featured in 21 out of the 31 episodes (68%).

There is a distinct pattern of difference in the way white characters and people of

color, both Black and Latinx, are depicted on Law & Order. Throughout the episodes we

viewed in our sample, people of color and more specifically, men of color, were always

touched and handled by the detectives both inside the precinct and beyond it. In one

episode, the detectives accost "Prim," a Latinx man, in his neighborhood and push him

against a wall (Season 16, Episode 19). When Prim asks why he is being targeted, the detective's response is "because you look guilty." In contrast, white characters were almost never physically touched by detectives regardless of their suspected crime.

White women involved with drug use on *Law & Order* are portrayed as "sick" and in need of care, rather than as criminals in need of punishment. Typical of the way white women involved with drugs are portrayed, is the character, "Celia," is a drug user and played by a white woman. In the episode, it is revealed that Celia lost her son because of her "$200 a day" heroin addiction and her son's malnourished and neglected state. Later, Celia is arrested while kidnapping her biological child from his adoptive parents. The detectives locate her on a bus trying to flee in their attempt to arrest her she is offered a choice by the detective—would she like them to physically remove her from the bus, or would she like to exit on her own accord? Celia exercises the choice most convenient for her—electing to exit the bus with the detectives—and this is when they genteelly escort her. As she is being arrested, rather than being thrown against a wall, or the hood of a car, or to the ground as is typical when the suspect is a person of color, a detective helps her on with her coat and another extends a hand to escort her off the bus, and she maintains a modicum of agency over her own decision-making when she offered a choice regarding how she would like to be arrested (Season 11, Episode 13). Throughout the episode, the character is treated with care, dignity and respect, signaling that she is more than merely an "addict." When she tells the detectives her story, she says, "I know, I was sick--I was so strung out, I would have signed anything." Her drug use is not criminalized but treated as a sickness. In contrast, when white men were involved in taking, selling, or distributing drugs in our sample of episodes, the men were

involved in a "big pharma" scandal as a salesperson or physician, or they were in a secondary storyline to the main narrative. Gender and social class intersect in interesting ways here. In the case of Celia, she is depicted as working class—she works as a waitress—and with a previous heroin addiction. Despite her working class background—or perhaps because of it—she is treated with benevolent paternalism by the state and its agents. For instance, when her case gets to the prosecutors, they speak to her in soothing tones, drawing on the fact that she has a child and appealing to her "maternal instinct" to give up her son for adoption, and accept a plea deal with community service rather than prison. Following her son's placement with adoptive parents, Celia goes to rehab and works waiting tables, both of which are used by detectives as evidence that Celia is worthy of redemption. Celia's redemption comes through sobriety and gainful (if low-waged) employment; she becomes, like the redeemed characters in *Intervention*, a "productive member of society." Throughout, the character of Celia is depicted as a rational, caring mother whose drug use is an illness. In this episode, the character's whiteness and gender are used to make her drug use part of a tragic storyline and her ultimate redemption the goal that detectives and prosecutors are working to realize. Celia's story is typical of other episodes in *Law & Order* about white female drug use wherein characters are afforded three dimensional lives protraying their humanity and redemptive potential even when they use drugs and break the law.

Even when white women on *Law & Order* are portrayed as involved with drugs less as illness and more as bad behavior, this too, is easily excused within the white racial frame of the show. For instance, one episode revolves around a character named "Caryn," who is written as an upper middle class white woman, described as "pretty and blond,"

and who becomes involved in smuggling cocaine (Season 11, Episode 18). The detectives

initially question her at home rather than an interrogation room at the police precinct,

suggesting that they assume she is innocent and the questioning is but a mere formality.

As the plot unfolds, Caryn confesses that not only did she smuggle drugs, she is also an

addict, a revelation that elicits empathy from the detectives. Throughout the episode, the

prosecutors and detectives discuss how to minimize the criminal justice consequences for

her because she's a "first timer" who just wanted a thrill. Rather than prosecute her, she is

placed in a witness-protection program that will effectively hide her and give her a new

identity in order to shield her from retaliation by the drug cartels. Thus, white, blond

Caryn is configured as a passive victim of the cartels rather than an active agent of a

dangerous criminal enterprise. Caryn's whiteness, her gender, and her social class matter

in critical ways here. Caryn has upper middle class capital and leverages her class to

(out)maneuver the legal process and carceral state. As an upper middle class white

woman, she is positioned as the paragon of white womanhood. Despite smuggling

cocaine on a military flight because the luggage would not be searched, Caryn's actions

are not positioned as egregiously criminal within the episode. Instead, her actions are

considered within the context of what impact they could potentially have on her husband

and his career as an army ranger (or representative of the state). Her husband comes to

her aid during her questioning, and his white masculinity, social class status, and

occupational prestige as an army ranger further insulate Caryn and position her adjacent

to the state vis a vis her husband and, further, as an innocent woman who just sought a

thrill to escape the mundanity of wifedom. Here, Caryn is emblematic of the historical

and contemporary trope of upper middle class white womanhood a la the second wave of

feminism; in contrast, women of color have never been positioned as innocent, as desirable as spouses, or restricted to the domestic sphere because they engaged both public and private spaces with their labor. Within the frame of *Law & Order,* Caryn's whiteness and her gender make her worthy of protection *by* and *from* the state, and in so doing, the show reinforces white womanhood as innocent and virtuous.

White women portrayed as suspects on *Law & Order* always have the capacity for redemption, no matter how mired in drug addiction they might be. They could redeem themselves from their descent into illicit drug use through family, therapy, or community service because their drug use was seen as a minor character flaw not central to their identity. For instance, one episode features a storyline involving affluent students at an elite prep school on Manhattan's Park Avenue (Season 15, Episode 10). "Maria," the lone student of color in the group, portrayed as a scholarship student from Washington Heights, is only able to attend the school with financial assistance. When one of the young white girls, "Sabina," is recovering from a drug overdose, one of the detectives expresses surprise at her drug use, commenting, "Smart girl such as yourself, going to Princeton and all." Sabina replies that she "made a mistake," and the detective tells her to stay in school and get herself some drug counseling. In contrast, the detectives never make similar comments to Maria even though she's attending the same school and similarly drug involved. Sabina, the young white girl, is seen as full of potential ("going to Princeton and all"), and her drug use is a minor detour from her path to the Ivy League, if only she can get help for her "mistake." Sabina's whiteness and social class is juxtaposed next to Maria's Otherness throughout the episode, with Sabina's mother commenting that scholarship students are from "a different world with different norms"

and later saying that Maria is "from that neighborhood. She must have taken them to that awful place." Sabina, as an affluent white girl, is never held accountable for her own actions —instead, her drug use gets attributed to her proximity to her working class Latinx peer. Furthermore, Washington Heights, comprised mostly of people of color, gets derisively labeled as "that neighborhood" implying that it is not as "good" as the affluent white neighborhood of Park Avenue (here problematically equating whiteness with goodness, despite three of the girls involved with drug use being white and only one was Latinx). This all works to reify the presumed innocence of white women while further propagating harmful tropes about people of color, criminality, and drug usage while also holding people of color accountable for the criminality of white people. Once again, whiteness and gender work together in such a way to make her addiction a tragedy that requires empathy rather than a punitive, carceral response.

The fictional characters Celia, Caryn, and Sabina on *Law & Order* represent recurring themes about the role of white women on the show and are very much like the non-fictional characters on *Intervention*: white women involved in drug use who are afforded a sympathetic, three-dimensional telling of their stories that makes their addiction a tragedy of wasted whiteness and defiled womanhood. Drug involvement for these white women characters moves them into a temporary, contingent spoiled identity (Goffman, 2009). This portrayal of white women exists in stark contrast to both narratives that involve people of color, in which drug addiction is framed as the inevitable result of an ontological criminality, and to the lived reality of the carceral state in the U.S., which overwhelming targets Black and Latinx people while it largely exempts white women.

However, we found a striking turn in this general pattern to the portrayal of white women in the *Law & Order* episodes. This show also regularly features white women in prominent roles as agents of the carceral state, arresting and prosecuting people of color. Each episode features two detectives and two prosecutors; many episodes also include the interim or permanent district attorney. Although there have been many cast changes throughout the long run of the show, the role of white women as agents of the state remained rather consistent. While white women were very rarely cast in the role of detectives most consistently in the first ten seasons, white women were cast in one of the recurring roles of prosecutor. In several of the spin-off series, such as *Law & Order: SVU*, women are featured in recurring roles as detectives and prosecutors. For this, *Law & Order* is touted by some fans as "dismantling gender stereotypes." One described the show as portraying women as "strong-willed and hardworking alongside their male counterparts" (Hussain, 2016). But, rather than dismantling gender stereotypes, *Law & Order* uses the patina of gender equality in order to reinforce the racial order. By creating recurring white women characters who are agents of the carceral state, *Law & Order* returns to an older narrative about drugs in which racialized Others are the primary users and dealers of drugs, and thus a threat to society.

In this return to that older narrative in this quasi-gender-equal frame, white women become the embodiment of carceral feminism. For example, a character named "Nora," an interim district attorney played by a white actress, refers to a potential suspect as a "ghetto kid turned pro," reifying the stereotype that Black men can only be successful through sports and entertainment. Later in the same episode, she says that the young man embraced the "thug life image," a comment associating him with criminality,

even though he is a successful professional athlete. Her character in this episode is both a symbol of (white) women's gender advances and an agent of the carceral state who is adjudicating this young, Black man's fate. The not-so-subtle racism of her remarks is never challenged within the show, but is portrayed as just part of the gritty knowledge required of those who work within the criminal justice system.

Throughout the run of *Law & Order*, there were a succession of prosecutors played by white women: Claire Kincaid (Jill Hennessy), Jamie Ross (Carey Lowell), Abigail "Abby" Carmichael (Angie Harmon), Serena Southerlyn (Elisabeth Rohm), and Alexandra Borgia (Annie Parisse). Each played the "second chair" (always female) role to the male lead Jack McCoy (Sam Waterson). Because McCoy remains the same over the run of the show but the women change regularly, it makes the women seem interchangeable. Throughout *Law & Order*, white women are props, offering support but little challenge to Jack McCoy, and softening the rough edges of the image of the carceral state by giving it the hue of gender equality. However, when they are given more lines to develop their characters more fully, it is often to push for even harsher state-responses. For example, in one episode Abby pushes for a more punitive sentence for a Black man who has killed a white woman. In another, Serena suggests that the "hollow formality" of advising someone of their civil rights is not necessary for "illegal immigrants." Alexandra promises a victim's mother that the sentence will be "extremely harsh." The characters these women play are acolytes to the carceral state, yet they nevertheless yield immense power over defendants, most of whom are Black or Latinx. When Alexandra's character is killed by a suspect she is investigating, McCoy is enraged, conducts an illegal prosecution to convict him, and secures life sentences. In death, Alexandra slips back into

the passive, white woman who must be avenged, and McCoy takes up the mantle of white male protector through the carceral state.

Therapeutic and Carceral Agency

In the narratives of *Intervention* and *Law & Order*, we found that white women were afforded different types of agency when it came to drugs and drug-related issues. On *Intervention*, white women are assumed to have therapeutic agency. Even as they might be portrayed as passive victims of their drug addiction, most often as a result of an earlier personal tragedy, such as divorced parents, they still were assumed to have full agency when it came to their recovery. People on the show, such as Kristen, may not be capable of getting themselves into treatment (hence the need for the intervention), but once in there, the norms of abstinence approach to recovery relies on the agency of the individual. The drug addiction of Kristen, like that of the other white women on *Intervention*, is wholly within the power of their individual agency to overcome. Similarly, on *Law & Order*, the white women characters are assumed to have a powerful, individual agency at their disposal that will enable them to master their addiction. Caryn, the cocaine-smuggling character, is given a second chance with the underlying assumption that she will not only be able to kick her drug habit but she will also be able to extricate herself from her obligations to the drug cartel. Even the teenaged Sabina is admonished to "clean yourself up," so she can proceed to college in the Ivy League. In both *Intervention* and *Law & Order*, this kind of therapeutic agency over addiction draws

on an individualized notion of the self, devoid of the need for community, and that is rooted in whiteness.

White women on *Law & Order* were afforded an additional kind of agency as part of the carceral state. In their roles as police detectives, as prosecutors, and as district attorneys, white women wield the power of the state in the service of the drug war. In particular, the series of white women prosecutors served as handmaidens to the carceral state, sometimes stepping out of their secondary role and into the lead when they called for harsher punishment for those under their power. Thus, within *Law & Order* white women's carceral agency puts them on more equal footing with white men, and in so doing, gives them power over people of color, including men and women.

Both the therapeutic model valorized by *Intervention* and the carceral model promoted by *Law & Order* rely on neoliberal regimes of citizenship that compel us all to be "healthy," "sober" and "law-abiding" (Metzl and Kirkland, 2010). Alongside these neoliberal regimes are particular notions of white womanhood. This ideal of white womanhood demands physical attractiveness, (hetero) sexual propriety, bodily restraint, wifely loyalty and motherly responsibility to and sacrificed for (required) biological offspring. These demands are mapped on top of what is required to be considered a good, productive, neoliberal citizen. In turn, these complicated ideologies justify the way contemporary drug problems are addressed in the U.S., from news articles to policy decisions.

Conclusion

In the U.S., there has been much research and analysis documenting the myriad ways racism operates through drug policy, but there has been relatively less attention to the way that whiteness makes this possible and almost no focus on the symbolic role of white womanhood. Our analysis of *Intervention* and *Law & Order* provides one such examination of the ways whiteness and gender reshape the dominant narratives of addiction, which are typically used to demonize racialized Others. For many decades, popular culture representations of drug use in the U.S. have been associated with people of color and with criminality. White drug use, in contrast, has been largely portrayed as exceptional. Historically, white women's drug use has been attributed to the criminal influence of men of color. Policymakers, such as Anslinger in the 1930s, used narratives about white women to justify punitive approaches to drug use.

Our analysis reveals that, in both *Intervention* and *Law & Order*, producers create narratives of white drug users who are fully human and deserving of empathy. In these shows, drug addiction involving white people is not a crime but a misfortune. White women involved with drugs are also portrayed as having failed the standards of white femininity, and thus, the social order. Therefore, they can and must be redeemed to restore the social order, and with it, white dominance. They must also reclaim their class status by overcoming poverty or morally suspect sex work and returning to their roles as "productive" citizens. Meanwhile, in the era of a modicum of gender equality, white women are also depicted as participants in the carceral state. In these roles, white women are actively involved in the state apparatus that works to demonize and criminalize drug users of color.

These representations both reflect and reinforce what is happening in the policy arena in the U.S. The *New York Times* headline calling for a "gentler drug war" (Seelye, 2015) is just one of the many press accounts both documenting and justifying a turn in the policy and rhetoric deployed when widespread drug use and overdose is perceived to affect predominantly white communities. Indeed, the way the current opioid crisis in the U.S. has been racialized as white and gendered female by the media is a necessary precursor for the "gentler" approach to treatment and harm reduction in contrast to the punitive, law enforcement responses when a drug epidemic is located in communities of color.

Our findings from these popular U.S. television shows are consistent with previous studies about whiteness and drugs. For example, one analysis of news stories found systemic biases in the portrayal of stories from white suburban communities and those from predominantly Black and Latinx communities (Netherland and Hansen, 2016). Stories about whites involved a sympathetic backstory, a blameless victim, and policy responses that were oriented towards treatment and harm reduction. In contrast, stories about Black and Latinx people were almost exclusively arrest reports with little or no humanizing content, reinforcing the associations between people of color, drugs, and criminality.

As with colonialism and lynching, in the drug war, white womanhood is central to the symbolic rendering of what is being protected. Hansen argues that the anxiety triggered by opioid overdose deaths and the declining life expectancy for middle age whites is rooted in concerns about the social reproduction of white privilege and the white nuclear family (Hansen, 2017). The soaring death rates, along with the media focus

on white female heroin users, has called white womanhood and family life into question. Cultural representations, such as those on *Intervention* and *Law & Order*, work to reassure the viewer that white womanhood and, thus, the white-dominant social order in the U.S., can be redeemed and restored.

When whites, especially white women, use drugs, a policy paradox emerges that must be resolved. The draconian war on drugs, which is central to maintaining control over people of color, cannot be applied to them. Hence, they must be portrayed as a different kind of drug user – one who is blameless and capable of redemption. For this kind of drug user, the response is not handcuffs and cages but sympathy and support (Hansen, 2017). This is consistent with what we found in the cultural narratives of drug addiction in involving white women.

In order to fully understand contemporary drug problems and the policies that seek to address them, we need to make visible how whiteness, gender, and class operate to maintain social hierarchies. We must also hold producers, networks, and advertisers accountable for portrayals that reinforce racial and gender stereotypes, as well as narratives that suggest white women's lives are worthier of protection. Similarly, we need to expose the ways in which our drug policies, which are often presented as race-neutral, have produced gross racial disparities. Rather than colorblind or white-women-only approaches, we need deliberate attention whiteness and gender in cultural representations of addiction and in drug policy.

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