**“I’d Like Y’all to Get a Black Friend:” The Politics of Race in *Friends*.**

**Shelley Cobb**

In March 1995, the cast of *Friends* appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* for their first television interview. Throughout the episode, Oprah stands among the audience commenting and asking questions of the cast on the stage, while regularly asking audience members to do the same. This situates Oprah in the same viewing position as the audience, who are invited to identify with the characters through the “conversation” with the cast but who are kept apart, along with Oprah, by a symbolic fourth wall. Oprah’s questions, ranging from “how good of friends are you all?” to “how has your new-found fame changed your personal lives?,” make the Queen of Daytime TV sound just like any other fan. That is until just before the final commercial break when Oprah pointedly says, “I’d like ya’ll to get a black friend; maybe I could stop by.” After audience clapping and laughs, and some awkward affirmative nodding from the show’s stars, Oprah then says “As a matter of fact, I’m thinking about buying that apartment building next door that ya’ll are always looking at.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Only two-thirds of the way through the first season of *Friends*, and the most famous African-American woman in the world is pointing out that the premise and popularity of the show is predicated on its closed circle of whiteness (Chidester 2008): a circle so tightly wound around racial exclusion that even Oprah with all her wealth and success can only joke about stopping by. Oprah’s seemingly offhand comment not only highlights the lack of black characters on the show, her joke about buying the building next door also evokes the class dimensions that structure the inclusion of Black characters, and the types of jobs they have, when they do appear. On *Friends*, like many shows that appeal to white audiences, Black characters are almost always in a subordinate or superior, but never intimate, relationship with the central white characters (Entman and Rojecki, 148-9). Oprah’s position as both fan who cannot join the “friends” and powerful, wealthy woman who can buy an apartment building in Manhattan evokes these limitations. Moreover, her suggestion that they get a Black friend invokes the growing racial divide on television at the time.

During the “more fractured and competitive marketplace” of the 1990s, network broadcasters had to adapt to niche marketing and new audience demographics such as the “slumpy” audience, identified by Ron Becker (2006) of “socially liberal, urban-minded professionals” ages 18 – 49 (81). He argues that the rise in gay-themed television and gay characters appealed to the slumpy audience’s investment in socially liberal politics as “hip.” With its recurring lesbian characters and general ease with alternative sexual identities and family formations, *Friends* is a prime example of broadcast television’s efforts to attract this demographic. In that same period, as Amanda Lotz (2005) has shown, industrial changes in television created a bifurcation of shows along racial lines as the new networks (UPN, WB, FOX) sought to appeal to Black audiences, and consequently the big three networks became more dependent on shows with nearly all white casts. With its six, young, attractive and white cast members who fit the slumpy demographic, *Friends* was an instant hit for NBC. Building on analyses of race in *Friends* and its representation of gay characters (and others of non-normative identities), this article argues that the racially Othered characters who do appear on the show, however briefly, function as foils to make possible the “hip,” ironic humor of *Friends* that appealed to the white twenty-something Gen X-ers of the slumpy audience. In addition, following Hannah Hamad’s interrogation of the show as a postfeminist ur-text in this issue, I outline how two of Ross’ girlfriends, Charlie and Julie, exemplify Jess Butler’s argument that “the versatility of postfeminism functions as a double-edged sword with regard to women of color” (50). Both characters as independent, “career women” are allowed “to participate in [postfeminism’s] deployment and rewards” but their inclusion in the postfeminist sensibility of *Friends* “works to conceal the underlying power relations that reproduce hegemonic ideas about race, gender, sexuality and class” (Butler 50). I argue that the main narrative function of both Charlie and Julie, as characters marked by difference, is to ensure the “fated-ness” of Ross and Rachel, while at the same time Charlie must bear the weight of the ongoing post-racial politics of respectability and classed hyper-mobility that construct black women’s limited entry into postfeminist womanhood, not to mention the rarefied white world of the “mainstream” American sitcom at the turn of the millennium.

**Sitcom Segregation and Stereotyping Black Characters**

Often noted in scholarship on race and America in the 1990s (Berlant 1997, Hill 1998, and Roediger 2002) is *Time*’s 1993 special issue cover-girl “Eve,” the computer-generated face of the United States’ multi-cultural future. This attractive harbinger of a “post-racial” America has been duly critiqued by others. For the purposes of this article, I note, as others have, that its appearance one year after the L.A. riots and one year before the O.J. Simpson trial belies its utopian message. And yet, we might imagine that the idea of “Eve” would appeal to the slumpy demographic and that television producers might have sought to address ethnic diversity on their shows. However, despite NBC’s previous success with *The Cosby Show* (1985-1992)and relative success of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1997), “white” sitcoms like *Friends* (debuting one year after “Eve’s” cover) filled NBC’s and the other big networks’ prime-time line-ups during the mid to late 1990s. *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989-1998), *Frasier* (NBC 1993-2004), *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS 1996-2005), *Home Improvement* (CBS 1991-1999) and *Will & Grace* (NBC 1998-2006) were attracting large, mostly white, (slumpy) audiences, and “black” sitcoms like *Living Single* (FOX 1993-1998), *Martin* (FOX 1992 -1997), *Sister, Sister* (WB 1994-1999), *The Parent’hood* (WB 1995-1999), *Moesha* (UPN 1996-2001) and *Girlfriends* (UPN 2000-2008) successfully attracted “niche” black audiences.

As Gary Younge points out in a 2003 *Guardian* article, this is the sitcom world that Aisha Tyler walked into when she took on the role of Charlie Wheeler. Younge writes that the only prime time show that appeared in the top ten for both black and white viewers at that time was *CSI* (CBS 2000-2015), that “white hits like *Seinfeld* or *Will & Grace* have scarcely featured on African-Americans’ radar,” and that “most white people have never even heard of the most popular black shows like *Girlfriends* and *Bernie Mac*” (Younge 2003). Though Nancy Signorielli’s research shows that on prime-time television from 2000-2008 Black characters had “parity with the U.S. population in terms of their *frequency* of portrayal” (2009, 333, emphasis original), the segregation of casts is starkest in comedies. In fact, Signorielli makes it clear that if situation comedies are “removed from the sample, Black characters no longer achieve parity with their numbers in the U.S. population” (2009, 333). Though Younge argues that this segregation reflects the reality of a culturally, if not geographically, divided America in which “comedies don’t cross over,” Lotz has shown that in addition to sociological arguments that “what is funny results from one’s personal position,” changing industrial conditions and the multiplication of distribution outlets (both cable and the new networks - FOX, The WB, and UPN) played a significant part in separating black and white audiences, a “shift toward viewing of network television by ethnicity that had not previously existed” (Lotz 2005, 144).[[2]](#endnote-2)

This racial segmentation of prime-time sitcoms was, as Herman Gray names it, the “pluralist or separate but equal” discursive context of prime-time television in which *Friends* debuted (1995, 87), and quickly became a television phenomenon. Every season ranked in the top-ten of prime-time shows, and it received much acclaim and several awards (including 62 Emmy nominations with wins for Jennifer Aniston and Lisa Kudrow, and one for Outstanding Comedy Series, as well as a Golden Globe). Its finale was the fourth most-watched in the history of US television (Carter 2004). That popularity seems to have insulated the show, to some extent, from any sustained outrage or critique of its whiteness, though media outlets have pointed out the show’s racial homogeneity on occasion in the interim years since Oprah’s mild rebuke, most recently in the video for Jay-Z’s “Moonlight” which recreates the title sequence and bits from *Friends* with an all-black cast.[[3]](#endnote-3) One of the more entertaining critiques is by the video artist docfuture, who posts on YouTube. The video “A semi-alphabetical listing of Black actors with speaking roles on *Friends*” takes an ironic jab at the show’s whiteness by debating and then listing how many black characters on the show have speaking parts, a list that largely includes waiters, shop assistants, office workers, and others to make the point that in a city that is less than 50% white, *Friends* constructs its New York setting as nearly *all* white (docfuture 2010). When Black characters are present, the majority of these are in minor roles in which they conform to a subordinate/superior relationship with the central, white friends (Entman and Rojecki 2000).

Rob Fishman articulates how the subordinate/superior paradigm for Black characters’ relationships with whites functions through his detailed analysis of a storyline in which Joey takes a part-time job as a tour guide at the museum where Ross works as a Palaeontologist in the episode “The One With Phoebe’s Uterus” (S4 E11). The story arc creates a parallel between Joey and Ross with two Black characters who work in the museum: Rhonda, a tour guide and Peter, a scientist. The tour guides wear blue blazers and the scientists wear white lab coats. When Rhonda tells Joey that at lunch “Only the people in white coats sit over there [points to the scientists’ table] and only the people in the blue blazers sit here…That’s just the way it is,” Joey declares “That’s crazy!” Rhonda then points to the Black scientist in his white lab-coat and explains that they used to go to school together, but that he pretends he does not know her. After Ross chooses to sit with the other scientists at the “white lab-coat table” instead of with Joey, the conflict between them is resolved in a second lunch scene at the museum when Ross chooses a “neutral” table and makes a show of inviting Joey to sit with him. Then Ross gives a speech about integration:

“I look around this cafeteria and you know what I see? I see division. Division between people in white coats. And people in blue blazers. And I ask myself ‘my god why?!’ Now I say we shed these coats that separate us and we get to know the people underneath.”

What follows is a series of individual “confessions” from tour guides and scientists expressing their shared humanity (as they shed their coats) that become increasingly outrageous.

As Fishman demonstrates, these scenes’ intended humour is in the ironic performance of Jim Crow segregation, in which racism is displaced onto difference in coats, and in Ross’ ironic performance of an inspiring speech on inclusion. The jokes work not dissimilarly to the way the show ironically performs jokes about sexuality. Examples include the montage of hugs between Joey and Chandler at the end of which one asks “Do we do this too much?” and the other says “Yeah. Get off me!” or when Ross and Joey are caught napping together and Joey jumps off the couch saying “Dude! What are you doing?!” The immediate dismissal of any homosexual connotations (Miller 2006) is emblematic of the ironic humour around identity politics in *Friends*. Symptomatic of the depoliticized post-feminist, post-civil rights, post-Stonewall, post-Reagan and postmodern era of the 1990s and its young adult cohort, Generation X, the ironic jokes appear clever and even progressive as they signal that all that historical conflict is supposedly over now. However, the jokes rely on the normativity of white heterosexuality and stereotypes of the racial Other, controverting the joke’s assumptions about political progress.

Fishman points out the several ways the blue blazer/white lab-coat story uses racist tropes. First, he examines Rhonda’s use of “Black diction,” such as how she “substitutes ‘you’ for ‘you’re’ and ‘don’t’ for ‘doesn’t’” which he argues “implicitly marries Blackness to a lack of education or knowledge of the English language” (109). Ironically, this is reinforced by the fact that the (educated) scientist never speaks. Second, Fishman points to the conflation of race and class in which Rhonda’s “indictment of her former peer seems to pass judgement on social mobility,” implying, as he argues, that the “Black scientist has left behind the stereotypical Black world for the White sphere of professionalism” (110). Third he points to how they each fulfil the subordinate/superior paradigm of relations between Black and white characters delineated by Entman and Rojecki. In addition to Rhonda and Peter we could create a long list of black characters on *Friends* who relate to the central six as either subordinate or superior. It would include: four of Chandler’s bosses, and Claudia, his subordinate in Oklahoma; Ross’ divorce lawyer; the librarian at the University where Ross is employed; at least two waiters; a theatre director whom Phoebe convinces that Joey has learning difficulties; Rachel and Phoebe’s self-defence trainer; Phoebe’s boss at the toner supply warehouse; the nurse who brings Rachel’s baby for a feeding in the hospital, and the guy who sells the armadillo costume to Ross; (amongst several others). Finally, Fishman argues, as this list of characters makes clear, that the Black characters are never on a level playing field and that they are, “positioned as the ‘Other’…only allowed to hover around the edges of the mainstream, and certainly not invited to join the ranks of intimate acquaintances” (111). Though both Charlie and Julie cross these boundaries temporarily through their relationships with Ross (and in Charlie’s case Joey as well), their narrative expulsions ensure the postfeminist “happy ending” of Ross and Rachel and the closed circle of friends, a conclusion that conforms to the ways class and race configure the heterosexual white woman as the subject of postfeminism.

**The Spectacle of Whiteness**

*Friends* keeps the “Other” at the edges by reinforcing the image of the six friends in, as Phil Chidester articulates it, a “closed circle,” a visual metaphor found in the private space of Monica’s apartment that the friends gather in: notably, in the cluster of couches and chairs in the living room and the seats and space around the kitchen table. The “eerily familiar cluster of couches in the foreground” of Central Perk, at which they alone sit, keeps the circle closed in their usual public space as well (Chidester 2008, 162).[[4]](#endnote-4) For Chidester, “*Friends* incorporates the closed circle as a core visual metaphor to represent whiteness” (160).[[5]](#endnote-5) Jillian Sindall argues, similarly, that ‘even though the show foregrounds and celebrates kinship networks which challenge the mythical nuclear heterosexual family…the visibility of these ‘alternative families’ is made possible only by simultaneously rendering invisible other kinds of ‘difference’” (Sindell 1998, 143). The alternative families of *Friends* and its closed circle of whiteness make just enough space for non-heteronormative characters, who are white of course, including: Ross’s ex-wife Carol and her partner Susan; the children of Phoebe’s brother and sister-in-law, for whom she serves as surrogate; Chandler’s divorced parents and his father who performs in a gay burlesque show;[[6]](#endnote-6) and Joey’s mother who is happy that her husband has a lover. These characters and storylines that undercut the cultural centrality of the heteronormative nuclear family are the background that reinforces the friends as familial group themselves.

The series marks its Gen X identity as the “Divorce Generation” with these various representations of the non-traditional, non-nuclear family, which are, to varying degrees, the products and consequences of divorce, and the privileging of friendships over family relations (see Ewen and Cobb 2016). Though all the central friends at one point or another express anxiety about their family lives or the expectations on them to create a family life, the humor of the show often displays sympathy for the various attempts to maintain relationships that do not fit the normative model, and certainly the alternative family of the six friends as a replacement for the nuclear family is idealized. In fact, The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) gave awards to the show for its portrayal of a lesbian couple in 1995, 1996, and 1997. And yet, the irony with which most of these portrayals of alternative families are laced “bespeaks a certain cognitive dissonance about the themes which the show portrays, and the difficulties in reconciling its dystopian and utopian impulses” (Sindell 1998, 147). Though Carol and Susan appear on the show semi-regularly, they disappear after season seven; in fact, over an eight-year period Carol appears on only sixteen episodes. The closed circle of friends that functions as an alternative family not only insulates itself in its whiteness, but also in its compulsory heteronormativity.

I would argue that Winfrey’s comment recommending the addition of a black friend recognizes this relationship. The segue into her pointed critique is a comment that she makes to the audience: “You wouldn’t want Ross to get back together with his ex-wife would you?” This sets up the subtext in her reproach to their whiteness: if you can have a lesbian recurring character why can't you have a black recurring character? The whiteness of the show, as Sindell argues, makes the representation of “alternative families” possible. Even so, the characters associated with non-heteronormative identities and sexualities are also kept well out of the tight-knit circle of friends, and as Chidester argues “not enough can be made of the rhetorical power of the invitation to identification…that this visual consistently and persistently extends to the [white] audience member” (167). His assertion that the series interpolates the white viewer in its fantasy of aspiration is compelling considering the show’s continuing popularity. The ideal white viewer of *Friends* constructs, of course, a corollary viewer of color who is excluded from the circle and refused identification with the friends, and I am particularly interested in how that viewer is mirrored in the text itself.

Black characters who appear on the show in the role of subordinate often perform stereotypes: Rhonda, discussed above, evokes the angry black woman; Gary, Monica and Chandler’s neighbour, who knocks on their door in the middle of the night for candy (S7 E9 “The One with All the Candy”) plays the oversexualized Black man when he looks Monica up and down, says “Hmmm! Seems like I would have remembered you.” Even the “morning’s here guy” (S4 E19 “The One with All the Haste”) who wakes Rachel on a Saturday with exuberant singing has an element of minstrelsy to his unmitigated enthusiasm. In addition, they and the Black characters on the show in the roles of superior are often nonplussed by the antics and personas of the individual friends, like the clerk in the government building who puts up with Phoebe’s joke about needing to change her name because she’s “hiding from the law” (S10 E14 “The One with Princess Consuela”). There are many examples of this kind of interaction between the friends and Black characters. Ross’s divorce lawyer sarcastically patronizes his client when he comes in for a meeting to annul his Las Vegas marriage to Rachel, saying “Ross, I have been a divorce attorney for twenty-three years and never have I had so much business from one client” (S6 E2 “The One Where Ross Hugs Rachel”). In “The One with Unagi” (S6 E17), Ross ask Rachel and Phoebe’s self-defence teacher for advice on how to attack them, and then leaves him speechless when he suggests that they attack the women together.

Though Chandler often confounds those around him, his Black bosses serve as the audience for some of his worst misbehavior: he tells a shocked Mr. Douglas that he has not fired an employee, Nina, because she is a suicide risk, when the truth is Chandler is sleeping with her (S1 E16 “The One with Two Parts: Part 1”); he offends Mr. Tyler in a job interview when he admits to hearing “doodies” rather than “duties” and inadvertently causes both of them to use the word “poo” (S8 E21 “The One with the Cooking Class”); Ms. McKenna stoically listens to Chandler’s explanation of how he was asleep when he agreed to go to Oklahoma and grows increasingly, but silently, vexed as he calls her the wrong name and misidentifies a picture of her daughter as her son (S9 E2 “The One Where Emma Cries”).[[7]](#endnote-7) Forced to watch the various friends make spectacles of themselves, these characters say little or nothing at all.[[8]](#endnote-8) And yet, nearly all stoically communicate incredulity at the ease with which the main characters break social boundaries and rules. As Chidester notes, the friends’ behaviour changes little between private and public spaces. Engaging in the same ‘lively banter’ and barbs in both, their transgression of social norms is made possible by the privileges of their whiteness, a privilege that is simply not available to (or possible for) those who are marked as the racial Other. These minor characters, then, highlight how the privileges of whiteness engender the ironic humor of the show and depend on the exclusion of black characters, mirrored in the lack of address to black audiences.

One extended example of a black character who must endure an entire episode of some of the friends making a spectacle of themselves is Kristen, played by Gabrielle Union (S7 E17 “The One with the Cheap Wedding Dress), who moves into the neighbourhood and becomes a romantic object for Ross and Joey to fight over. Their conflict comes to a head when Joey crashes a dinner date Ross has with Kristen. The two men spend so much time arguing with each other that she leaves before they or the audience notice. I suspect many women viewers sympathized with Kristen’s decision to get up and walk away from the performance of masculinity that seemed to be for her but then clearly devolved into a performance for the two men. And yet her growing, and ultimately silent, incredulity at the pair’s behavior at the restaurant table coincides with the camera closing in on Ross and Joey in medium shot, showing only one at a time in over the shoulder shots. When they finally look over and notice Kristen has gone, Ross says “You hungry?” to which Joey replies “Does a bear shit in the woods?” and they have dinner together. The ease with which they shrug off her absence is a particularly stark example of how the group of six carry on with their barbs, banter, gags and pranks without taking any note of the individuals around them, while those others have no choice but to gawp at the spectacle before them or leave, reinforcing the friends’ closed white circle of social intimacy (Chidester 2008). This single episode encapsulates *Friends*’ difficulty including characters of color (and implicit disregard of the critique in Oprah’s request) and quite clearly and succinctly recapitulates the plotting of the initial (and brief) inclusion and subsequent exclusion of both Julie and Charlie.

**Whiteness and Postfeminism**

Though other romantic partners also threaten friendships within the group, such as Kathy the actress who first dates Joey but then falls in love with Chandler, or Emily, Ross’s wife who demands that he end his friendship with Rachel, my argument here is that Charlie and Julie, in addition to the plot work of delaying the union of Ross and Rachel and reinforcing the group’s intimacy when they leave, also do ideological work, doubly functioning to confirm the fated-ness of Ross and Rachel as a couple, as well as the whiteness of the postfeminist tropes of fate and retreatism that Diane Negra has identified (2009).

*Friends* presents Rachel and Ross as destined to be together from the moment she runs into Central Perk wearing a wedding gown in episode one; but “on paper” both Charlie and Julie seem to be a better match for Ross. Both women have a PhD in palaeontology like Ross. Julie and Ross first met in graduate school and then get together during a dig in China. Charlie and Ross work at the university together and she has the knowledge to help him rewrite his keynote speech at a conference after it is lost. A marriage with either would fit the assortative mating trend that has increased in the later twentieth and early twenty-first century in which married couples are more likely to have the same level of educational attainment (Mare 1991). Their education, careers, and intellectual interests put Julie and Charlie on an equal footing with Ross and temporarily allow both women of color to temporarily enter the closed circle of friends. And yet each becomes co-opted into and objectified by the spectacle of whiteness. Julie must suffer Rachel’s racism when they meet at the airport after the former arrives with Ross from China. Rachel, who has gone to meet Ross and tell him that she has feelings for him, sees that he and Julie are a couple and immediately tries to leave but instead pratfalls over a row of seats. His introduction of the two is appropriately awkward and worsens when he reaches out for the flowers that Rachel holds that were meant for him. Rachel attempts to hide her intended confession of love by saying that the flowers are for Julie. She hands them to her and says, “these are for you” and then continues very slowly, articulating each word carefully: “Welcome to our country.” Julie replies with the same, slow, articulation saying, “Thank you. I am from New York.” The intended butt of the joke here, I suggest, is Rachel's stupidity and embarrassment, but it is a joke on her that relies on the privileges of her whiteness that means Julie can only tolerate her racism with bemusement and gently mock her. As Sindell notes, Julie “quickly disappeared and served mainly to foreground the group’s inability to deal with someone who was ‘different’ than them” (152).[[9]](#endnote-9)

Much the same could be said of Charlie’s temporary inclusion in the group, though her initial entry and extended stay depend on her co-optation into the assimilationist discourses of the show, which, as Gray argues about white shows of the 1980s, “are framed almost entirely through codes and signifying practices that celebrate racial invisibility and color blindness” (85). As noted above, both Julie and Charlie are educated to the same level as Ross and therefore more highly educated than everyone else in the group, particularly contrasting Rachel. Rachel, of course, has a university degree and is from an upper-class background, but the show regularly signals that she is not smart, nor interested in learning. In one flashback scene to their college years, she mentions that she switched her major from psychology because there was never any parking near the building in which that department was housed. Even Ross perceives their mismatch when evaluating the pros and cons of Rachel versus Julie in season two, under Rachel’s list of “cons” he writes “Just a waitress.” As women of color, Charlie and Julie must be significantly better than Rachel to be good enough for Ross and to be included in the circle of whiteness. Moreover, Charlie as a Black woman, must be better than even Ross to be good enough for him and the group. Kimberly Springer argues that “educational and career advancement is black women’s twenty-first-century uplift work” (2007, 272). Her real-life example is Condoleeza Rice who epitomizes the “professional black lady at the height of her success,” who disavows affirmative action, claims success based on merit only, and is determinedly asexual (259). Charlie is *Friends*’ “black lady.” Working alongside and in relationships with white men, it is her educational and professional attainment that allows her to hang out with the gang for six episodes. She is not, however, determinedly asexual; rather, her sexuality is linked to her high achievements because she has only ever dated men who have achieved even more than she has. About to be interviewed for a grant by a Nobel-prize winning scientist, Ross discovers that he is Charlie’s ex-boyfriend, and then consequently discovers that every one of Charlie’s former boyfriends has won either a Nobel prize or a MacArthur Genius Grant.

[Insert Figure 1 – Cobb Image]

Caption - In Barbados, Monica (Courteney Cox) shows off her braided hair to Phoebe (Lisa Kuddrow), Chandler (Matthew Perry), Ross (David Schwimmer) and Charlie Wheeler (Aisha Tyler), who apparently find humorous her cultural appropriation of a hair style associated with black women.

Springer also shows that “postfeminism seeks to erase any progress toward racial inclusion that feminism has made since the 1980s. It does so by making racial difference, like feminism itself, merely another commodity for consumption” (251). In a parallel instance to Julie suffering Rachel’s racism, Charlie must suffer Monica’s commodified consumption of blackness and the ensuing spectacle of whiteness and racism in the episode “The One After Joey and Rachel Kiss” (S10 E1). All the friends are in Barbados pretending to be at a conference at which Ross is the keynote speaker and Charlie is a delegate. The humidity causes Monica’s hair to become spectacularly frizzy.[[10]](#endnote-10) To get it under control she has it braided in the hotel salon. Because of the beach location, initially Monica’s braids with shells on the ends seem meant to evoke Bo Derek’s iconic hair from the movie *Ten* (Blake Edwards, 1979). They are, of course, instead the appropriation and commodification of a hairstyle that historically has been worn by black women as an aesthetic of resistance to white colonialism and racism (Johnson 2013).[[11]](#endnote-11) Her cultural appropriation sets the groundwork for the key thing her braids do – give rise to an ironic joke that explicitly characterises Charlie as inauthentically black. The various friends find Monica’s hair and her enthusiasm about it hilarious. When she asks them what they think, Chandler says, “I think I can see your scalp” and Ross says “You got shell fish in your head.” At first, Charlie says, “It’s huh, it’s something” and then in a sign of postfeminist encouragement she says, “You go girlfriend!” With a sceptical look, Ross quizzes her: “You’ve never said that in your life, have you?”

Charlie: “Not once.”

Ross: “I thought so.”

Much like the black scientist Peter from the earlier scene who never speaks, Charlie cannot use the black diction that Rhonda did. The classism, racism and patriarchy that Charlie is required to negotiate as a black character who must assimilate to keep her space amongst the friends is made explicit. It is a *white* man who makes it clear that she is unable to perform blackness, precisely because, for the friends, she has *never been* black. That they all tiptoe around Monica’s inappropriate appropriation and commodification of the braids is in direct opposition to Ross’s outing of Charlie as not really black, and his implication that she makes a fool of herself by trying to be so. As I argue above, to hang out with the *Friends* Charlie must be better than all of them in terms of education and achievement so that she is not classed as too black. And then she is critiqued for performing her own racial identity even as she is confronted with the spectacle of a white woman who has commodified it and who is found amusing for doing so.

**The Whiteness of Postfeminist Fate and Retreatism**

On a narrative level, Charlie and Julie appear to be just two more in a long line of Ross’ girlfriends who delay the inevitable romantic conclusion of his and Rachel’s relationship. I have argued that in themselves as characters they do much more than just plot work, they also iterate the class and race politics of postfeminist female subjectivity for women of color. Finally, they also expose the necessary whiteness for key tropes of postfeminist popular culture – fated-ness and retreatism. After Ross breaks up with Julie in his attempt to get together with Rachel, which fails, Rachel briefly dates a character named “Russ” who is Ross’ doppelganger (played by David Schwimmer) in another of the many tactics the show deploys to delay their happy union in season two. During the closing credits of that episode, Julie visits Central Perk to return some of Ross’ stuff and catches the eye of a despondent Russ who has been dumped by Rachel. The music swells to comic melodramatic crescendo as the two fall in love at first sight. Because the joke of Schwimmer playing Russ is that he is Ross and Ross is Russ, there is an ironic postfeminist fated-ness to Julie’s final removal from the show. Charlie is also removed from the *Friends* group in a postfeminist fated way when her multiple Nobel prize winning ex-boyfriend returns into her and Ross’s life. In a scene in which he confesses to sabotaging Ross’ chances for a grant because of his feelings for Charlie, he says to her “I think about you all the time, do you think about me?” Ross emphatically answers “No” at the same moment Charlie says, “Yes, I do”. The comic melodrama of their reunion begins with Charlie awkwardly putting her hand to Ross’s face as she apologises and then Benjamin does the same. To much audience laughter, their hands slide from Ross’ face to intertwine with each other in a gesture that signals they are meant to be together. The apparent fated-ness of these couples parallels the fated-ness of Ross and Rachel that is signalled in episode one when Rachel enters Central Perk wearing her wedding gown moments after Ross says, “I don’t want to be single. I just want to be married again.”

Sindall argues that Julie’s “difference…is not merely ignored or erased, but explicitly coded as a form of disruption” (152), which applies to Charlie as well. Julie and Charlie function as more than just stop-gaps on the way to Ross and Rachel’s reunion – they also provide the ideological buttress for the centrality and prioritization of the white couple’s happy ending. That they are Ross’ equals but do not end up with him works to prove that Ross and Rachel should be together. Charlie and Julie’s racial otherness rewrites their similar interests and educational achievements with Ross as difference, and the whiteness that binds Ross and Rachel as the center of the friendship group rewrites their differences as signs of their destiny as a couple. We might wish to read Charlie and Julie’s ability to disrupt, however temporarily, the whiteness of the *Friends* group as deconstructing the series’ hegemonic ideologies; however, their disruptive breaches of the closed circle become neutered when they are paired up with men who are just another version of Ross, or a better version of Ross. Any threat to *Friends*’ whiteness is permanently removed by Charlie and Julie being contained by the same postfeminist romance tropes that ensure Ross and Rachel’s happy ending and Rachel’s idealized postfeminist femininity.

As the last woman Ross dates before finally getting together with Rachel, Charlie, as a Black woman, highlights how the fated-ness of Ross and Rachel also requires that Rachel’s plot must end in retreatism. When Rachel gets off the plane taking her to her dream job in Paris, she, in Negra’s terms (2009), “retreats” from her plans to fulfil her professional dreams and returns “home” to New York and to the romantic, and presumably, domestic nuclear family bliss she desires with Ross (with whom she has a child, conveniently absent throughout the final denouement). The climax of *Friends*’ finale is when Rachel appears at Ross’s apartment and they embrace in a passionate kiss, undercut by a joke about them being “on a break” but never once troubled by the ease with which Rachel casts aside her career—a happy postfeminist ending that echoes the many retreatist romantic comedies of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Negra 17). Importantly for this article, though, we must remember that, as Springer clearly shows, the romantic conclusion of postfeminist retreatism is not available in the same way to the black lady whose class respectability depends on her continuing professional work to eschew any possible association with the stereotype of the lazy welfare queen (2007). However, as she also shows, “when a black female protagonist has it all she becomes a snob and is in danger of no longer being authentically black” (272). In the end, Charlie is figured as a snob when she chooses a Nobel-prize winner over Ross. The postfeminist trope of fated love for this highly educated and successful black woman not only removes her from the friends’ closed circle of whiteness, it also, in a racialized postfeminist double-bind, keeps her from “being authentically black” as she is destined to be with another white man.

**Conclusion**

As Jess Butler argues, “the tendency, in feminist criticism, to conceptualize postfeminism as primarily exclusionary obscures the ways in which this discursive formation includes (albeit in specific and limited ways) non-white and nonheterosexual subjects” (2013, 43). *Friends* gives Charlie and Julie, two women of color, brief access to postfeminist tropes, but ultimately in ways that remove them from the show and the friendship group. As Hamad has shown in this edition, *Friends* was particularly tuned to millennial postfeminist culture, and its treatment of Charlie exposes the whiteness of postfeminism and the need for more critical engagement with the racialized double-bind of postfeminism for ethnic minority women. In our current moment when the proliferation of alternative viewing platforms continues apace, and the industrial conditions of making television must keep adapting to new demographics with increasing consumer power (Lotz 2014), it might seem that *Friends*’ insistent whiteness and treatment of racially othered characters would be out of place in a televisual landscape that includes *Blackish* (ABC 2014 - ), *Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC 2015 - ), *The Mindy Project* (Fox 2012-2105 and Hulu 2015 - ), and *Master of None* (Netflix 2015 - ). And yet, the most highly-rated sitcom of 2016 was *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2007 - ), a show about a group of mostly white friends in their twenties who hang out in their apartment together trying to sort out their careers and romantic lives (the show’s one character of color, Rajesh Koothrappali, is often the butt of racist-tinged jokes about Indians and Indian culture). Though *Forbes* may feel confident proclaiming “Note to Networks: Diversity on TV Pays Off” (Berg 2017) and Teenvogue.com (Bateman 2017) has noted that old shows streaming on Netflix like *Friends* and *Fraiser* are sexist and homophobic, it’s clear that whiteness continues to have a powerful appeal, to Millennial audiences who are the key demographic for *The Big Bang Theory* and to Gen-Xers, who, along with Millennials, are key audiences for the ongoing syndication of *Friends*. Even in our most beloved and/or banal popular shows, we must see “the racing of whites,” as Richard Dyer (1997) argues, to “dislodge them/us from the position of power…[and] undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in the and on the world” (2); in the terms of this article, we must see the ironic humor in the spectacle of whiteness as the cover for racism that it is.

A**cknowledgements**

Thanks to my co-editors Neil Ewen and Hannah Hamad for their collaboration on this project, their feedback on this article, and our comraderie over *Friends*. Additional thanks for feedback must go to Diane Negra and the anonymous peer reviewer of this special issue. Finally, I am grateful to the University of Southampton which gave me a semester of leave to focus on several research projects, including writing this article and editing this issue.

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1. The full episode can be found on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaC57X6RIPc>. In 2016, the Oprah Winfrey Network uploaded three portions of the episode to YouTube (Yandoli 2016). The segment in which Oprah tells them to get a black friend is not included. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For more on American sitcoms with all, or largely, Black casts in the early 1990s, see Gray (1995), and for more on the mid 1990s Black cast sitcoms of FOX see Zook (1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Duffy (1996) and Doyle (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. There are only a few instances in the series when secondary characters take over the friends’ space in Central Perk; see “The One with the Bullies” (S2 E21). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Sindell notes that spokespeople for the show argued that it “just happened to be a group of white people” (1998, 143). See Warner for an example of a television producer not on the show who defended its casting as “a particular look they were aiming for” (2015, 57) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The representation of Chandler’s father is highly problematic in that, played by Kathleen Turner, “Daddy” as Chandler calls him, would seem to be a transgender woman but who is generally treated as a cross-dressing man. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. It’s worth noting that Chandler has a white boss who appears in three episodes over a four-year period who performs the role of an obnoxious white man in power, for which Chandler must act as the internal audience. See S3 E 24 “The One with the Ultimate Fighting Champion,” S5 E 12 “The One with Chandler’s Work Laugh,” and S8 E11 “The One with Ross’s Step Forward.” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Non-black minor characters are also put in this position, such as the maid, hired by Chandler and falsely accused by Monica of stealing clothes, who is awkwardly investigated by her employers (S8 E7 “The One with the Stain”) or Rachel’s boss who gives her a job after she inadvertently kisses him, then accuses him of sexual harassment, and then accidently grabs his crotch when going for a handshake (S5 E17 “The One with Rachel’s Inadvertent Kiss”). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Though it seems as if Julie is a threat because she appears just as Rachel discovers that Ross is in love with her and that she wants to be with him, she is an additional threat to Rachel’s best friendship with Monica. The ironic jokes about Monica cheating on Rachel by going shopping with Julie, and at Barneys, Rachel’s holy place of consumption, exemplify the sitcom’s comedy mode which imbues the friends’ arguments and jealousies in their platonic friendships with erotic tension for laughs. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. It is worth noting that though there are black actors in the background of the two episodes set in Barbados, a country that is 90% Afro-Carribean, Charlie is the only black character who speaks. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Before Monica gets it braided, her hair “with a little extra body” is the butt of two Diana Ross jokes which further corroborates my argument that the braids are racial appropriation. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)