

**AQUARIUS and *institutional racism*:**  
**A semiotic analysis and the use of racism within**  
**media representations**



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## **Abstract**

Within this thesis the concept of institutional racism has been analyzed within the first season of AQUARIUS. The reason this thesis has researched representation lies in the fact that, among other system of communication, representation forms our culture by exchanging meaning and language as Stuart Hall notes. Within media representations the representation of institutional racism has been troublesome, as it often has been too focused on personal prejudice instead of focusing on the structure of an organization. Through Barthes' take on semiotics, which he called mythologies, the research question has been answered of what signifiers represent institutional racism and how this reflects upon other media representations. Next to the term of institutional racism the terms of institutional sexism, internalized racism, and passing have been researched within this thesis as these concepts can be considered effects of institutional racism. Within the analysis there has been focused on how a dominant ideology is sustained within the Los Angeles Police Department within AQUARIUS through three sub questions. These sub questions focus on 'others' within the Los Angeles Police Department within AQUARIUS, on the treatment of African-American citizens within AQUARIUS and lastly on how the dominant ideology is sustained within the Los Angeles Police Department within AQUARIUS. These found signifiers have, in the results sections, been grouped back into three dominant group of signifiers to see what the representation of institutional racism within AQUARIUS consists of. These groups are concluded to be 'community-control', 'preferred-action', and 'razzing one another' which all allow institutional racism to sustain within the Los Angeles Police Department within AQUARIUS.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Research into media representations is no strange subject within media studies, as Stuart Hall has noted; meanings get conveyed through representations and form our daily life.<sup>1</sup> Within this thesis the representation of racism within the American context has been researched. That should not be considered uncommon, as Ronald Takaki describes in his book *A Different Mirror*, America is a country which is founded on freedom and liberty for all but has, at the same time, been systematically oppressing its minority citizens since its founding.<sup>2</sup> This thesis will be looking at the representation of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) within *AQUARIUS*, which sets in the 1960s and deals with cases surrounding the Black Panther party and also various forms of racism.<sup>3</sup> Representation of the LAPD has its own lineage as well, such as the recent Netflix series *THE PEOPLE VS. O.J.* in which the murder case of Simpson's ex-wife is represented.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Jonathan Munby argues that in cinema the gangsta movie genre, which revolves around the ghetto experience, became more active after the Rodney King beatings, in which an African-American man was assaulted by the LAPD.<sup>5</sup> These examples show a working of representations Hall speaks about, wherein media representations make meaning of the world.

This thesis has continued on analyses on the movie *CRASH* which revolves around the LAPD as well.<sup>6</sup> As Hsuan Hsu argues "*Crash* normalizes white privilege not only by presenting a cornucopia of hate speech, but also by suggesting that all races are equally intolerant – that blacks, Koreans, and Latinos all participate in and reap benefits from various forms of racism no less than whites."<sup>7</sup> Susan Giroux expands on racists within *CRASH* as "some racists can be decent, caring human beings and some decent caring human beings can also be racists" drawing a conclusion that everyone can be racist.<sup>8</sup> Although Giroux concludes that "stereotypes play out differently among those groups with power to counter such representations and those who are powerless to contest them in a systematic way" she argues that "racism is reduced to individual

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 15-29, second ed. (London: SAGE, 1997): 15.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: a History of Multicultural America* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> John McNamara, writer, *Aquarius*, NBC, 2015-2016.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Scott and Larry Karaszewsky, writers, *American Crime Story*, Netflix, February 2, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Munby, "From Gangsta to Gangster: The Hood Film's Criminal Allegiance with Hollywood" in *The New Film History*, 166-179 (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007)

<sup>6</sup> *Crash*, directed by Paul Haggis, United States: Bob Yari Productions, 2005, DVD.

<sup>7</sup> Hsuan Hsu, "Racial Privacy, the L.A. Ensemble Film, and Paul Haggis's *Crash*," *Film Criticism*, September 22, 2005, 148-49.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Searls Giroux and Henry A. Giroux, "Don't Worry, We Are All Racists!" in *Third Text*, November 2007, 745-59.

prejudice, a kind of psychological mechanism for negotiating interpersonal conflict and situational difficulties made manifest in emotional outbursts and irrational fears” making everyone responsible for their acts of racism.<sup>9</sup> This thesis will expand on this statement by Giroux and focus more on her point of prejudice in a systematic way. This will be done by researching institutional racism within AQUARIUS instead of personal prejudice. In this sense, Hsu’s critique states that in CRASH everyone reaps benefits from various forms of racism, in AQUARIUS racism is shown more adequate as the reaping of these benefits is not equal which is a more fitting representation as per Hsu.

The following research question has been answered within this thesis:

What signifiers are used to represent institutional racism within the LAPD in the first season of AQUARIUS and how does this reflect upon representations of forms of racism within institutions?

The groups of signifiers that have been identified are signifiers of ‘community-control,’ ‘preferred-action’, and ‘razzing one another.’

## **2.0 Theoretical framework**

Within this theoretical framework four concepts are presented which have been the foundation of this thesis. These concepts; institutional racism, institutional sexism, internalized racism, and passing are all connected as the work of different authors establish. These concepts have been relevant to this thesis as they are concepts which are causes or effects of institutional racism. The relevance of these concept lie in the fact that the signifiers which are researched represent these four concepts, with the goal of this research being how the different concepts represent institutional racism and how this form of racism is employed within AQUARIUS. For this thesis these terms have been instrumental in saying more about institutional racism in-depth, as it has enabled this thesis to look at the workings of including and excluding members within the LAPD in AQUARIUS. Before the four concepts are presented this section will expand on the relevance of research of representation within media.

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<sup>9</sup> Giroux, 749, 751.

## 2.1 Why representation?

This study focusses on representation within a television series, Stuart Hall has argued that “representation connects meaning and language to culture,” making it an important part of how people perceive their lives, as Hall notes “representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture.”<sup>10</sup> Hall uses a constructionist vision to approach the working of representation, which has two variants; one of which is the semiotic approach which is also used within this thesis. This constructionist approach differentiates between the material world in which things and people exist, and symbolic practices and processes in which representation operates.<sup>11</sup> Hall says about these symbolic practices: “it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts”; this is the base of how our world operates per the semiotic-constructionist approach.<sup>12</sup> Hall establishes the importance in studying representation as “meaning is produced within language, in and through various representation systems” making it an important practice to break down these systems to see on what kind of concepts culture is built upon.<sup>13</sup> These ideas make research into representations relevant as it enables one to look at the world with more knowledge than before. Therefore, looking at AQUARIUS allows for a deeper understanding of the way internal structures of racism are represented within police departments in media. This subject’s relevance lie in the fact that adequate representations of institutional racism have been lacking and therefore will add to the knowledge on forms of representation within media studies.

## 2.2 Institutional racism and institutional sexism

Within this thesis institutional racism has been employed as the concept which explains the form of racism within AQUARIUS most adequately. Within this section there is a definition of the term in the way it has been deployed within this thesis.

Institutional racism is a concept that has been defined within various academic disciplines, but mainly in social sciences as by Stephen Baratz going as far back as the 1970s.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 15-29, second ed. (London: SAGE, 1997): 15.

<sup>11</sup> Idem, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> Idem, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Baratz and Joan Baratz (1970) Early Childhood Intervention: The Social Science Base of Institutional Racism. *Harvard Educational Review*: April 1970, Vol. 40, No. 1, pp. 29-50.

Other research that has been done concerning this form of racism has been about mental health care facilities by Kwame McKenzie in psychiatry.<sup>15</sup> John Downing has defined institutional racism in media studies and specified it as an account of racism that “is based in organizational analysis.”<sup>16</sup> Downing’s research into institutional racism “should not be seen as some unique syndrome that is cognitively and culturally sealed from other value of systems and beliefs,” but as a different form of racism being carried out.<sup>17</sup> The relevance of this concept lies within the subject of this thesis: the LAPD, which is an organization that deals with a multi ethnic society as a near uniform ethnic group of people, making one group have their say over all ‘others.’

To get a clearer understanding of the term, Downing says, it is important to define what it is not by separating it from personal prejudice which is racism on a personal level. Personal prejudice “is presented as an irrational hostility supported by strongly held stereotypes.”<sup>18</sup> Downing makes this distinction, as: “the essence of institutional discrimination is to demonstrate the unpalatable truth that even ‘nice’ people can be racist.”<sup>19</sup> Within institutional racism one is therefore not looking at people, but at the operation of an organization; the routine and processes which can give valuable information of how an organization reproduces inequality.<sup>20</sup> This definition also makes the argument of having a few bad apples within an organization inapplicable to research towards institutional racism, as the structure is at fault – not necessarily people. This does mean an organization has the capacity to change, with the right people in the right places – especially people in the roles with power.<sup>21</sup>

Simply put the formula of institutional racism consists of “routine institutional practices and structures” which are “made unproblematic by routine unreflecting race thinking.”<sup>22</sup> Institutional racism focuses on institutional discrimination, but especially its routine and normalization of it within workplace culture. This realization entails some assumptions as individuals cannot be held accountable for the institution’s actions, as the actions of well-meaning personnel can be subverted by institutional routines and therefore make “workplace cultures in the community of practice [...] the necessary unit of change.”<sup>23</sup> Recapitulating, the first part of institutional racism is focused on routine rather than people, as a person’s intentions

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<sup>15</sup> Kwame McKenzie and Kamaldeep Bhui, “Institutional Racism in Mental Health Care,” *BMJ*, March 31, 2007, 649-650.

<sup>16</sup> John Downing and Charles Husband, *Representing Race: Racisms, Ethnicity and the Media* (London: SAGE, 2005): 9.

<sup>17</sup> *Idem*, 151.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Idem*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> *Idem*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem*, 178.

do not matter. The second part of institutional racism, the unreflecting race thinking, is done through the dominant ideology within the workplace which is sustained through consensual racism.<sup>24</sup> This consensual racism is reached by access into roles with power within the workplace. In these cases, one can think of promoting certain workers who add to the consensual racism and them sustaining the dominant workplace ideology.<sup>25</sup>

Within this case study there also is a female character who is subjected to sexism which is a form of oppression linked to racism. Within this thesis institutional sexism has been considered the same as institutional racism, as bell hooks sets forth “feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression directs our attention to systems of discrimination and the inter-relatedness of sex, race, and class oppression.”<sup>26</sup> This way of looking at oppression is shared by feminist activist Suzanne Pharr, as she states: “it is virtually impossible to view one oppression [...] in isolation because they are all connected: sexism, racism, [etc].”<sup>27</sup> Because of various norms that lie at the base of oppressions from the male, white, heterosexual class the oppression that, among others, ethnic others and women endure can be considered the same.<sup>28</sup> This notion is confirmed by the social sciences as well as by Joe Feagin in his work *Discrimination American Style*.<sup>29</sup> Feagin support this relevance as “insight into the discrimination faced by one group frequently, if not usually, leads to insight into the discrimination faced by the other group.”<sup>30</sup>

### 2.3 Internalized sexism and passing

While this thesis has focused on institutional racism the terms of internalized racism and passing are both effects of institutional racism. Internalized racism shows the psychological effect people endure who are oppressed through racism, and passing shows a tactic of escaping one’s heritage to be considered a member of the privileged class.

“Internalized racism results from the psychological programming by which a racist society indoctrinated people of color to believe in white superiority,” says Lois Tyson in her guide *Critical Theory Today*.<sup>31</sup> Tyson connects internalized racism and institutional racism, in

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<sup>24</sup> Downing and Husband, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984): 31.

<sup>27</sup> Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (Berkeley, CA: Chardon Press, 1997): 53.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> Joe R. Feagin and Clairece Booher Feagin, *Discrimination American Style: Institutional Racism and Sexism* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1978)

<sup>30</sup> Idem, 40.

<sup>31</sup> Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: a User-Friendly Guide* 2nd ed. (Hoboken: Routledge, 2006): 362.



which this psychological programming comes forth because of an “adherence to a narrow standard of Anglo-Saxon Beauty.”<sup>32</sup> Internalized racism has been defined by African-American scholar hooks as well who, as Tyson, establishes that “white supremacy had assaulted our self-concept and our self-esteem.”<sup>33</sup> Social movements which fought hard to end this racism were the ones in the 1960s, with terms such as ‘Black is Beautiful’ trying to end color cast hierarchies.<sup>34</sup> hooks summarizes internalized racism as the assimilating of African-Americans to the white aesthetic standards.<sup>35</sup> hooks exemplifies this assimilation by referring to her grandmother, who could pass as white and made disparaging comments towards her own family – making internalized racism a form of racism that has been active for a few generations at least.<sup>36</sup>

The passing hooks demonstrates by referring to her grandmother shows a black and white binary, but passing is not limited to this binary argues Elaine Ginsberg: “‘passing’ has been applied discursively to disguises of other elements of an individual’s presumed ‘natural’ or ‘essential’ identity, including class, ethnicity, and sexuality, as well as gender.”<sup>37</sup> This shows that either sex or any other ethnicity posing as a member of the privileged group are passing. This belonging to another group brings multiple aspects with it as, “‘passing’ was a transgression not only of legal boundaries [...] but of cultural boundaries as well.”<sup>38</sup> One who passes for the other group has to oblige to their rules as to pass successfully, making passing “a movement that interrogated and thus threatened the system of racial categories and hierarchies.”<sup>39</sup> With the ruling class in America being “white men in control of the productive labor of black men and the productive and reproductive labor of both black and white women, and then nationally through an economic and political system and a cultural ideology that established a fundamentally racist and sexist hierarchy of privilege and oppression.”<sup>40</sup>

The four concepts of institutional racism, institutional sexism, internalized racism, and passing have given this thesis the tools to research institutional racism in depth. To look broader than only the police department in AQUARIUS itself, enabling this research to focus on effects for the oppressed class as well. The benefit being that looking at sexism also and the way in

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<sup>32</sup> Tyson, 362.

<sup>33</sup> bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994): 173.

<sup>34</sup> Idem, 173-174.

<sup>35</sup> Idem, 176-177.

<sup>36</sup> Idem, 175.

<sup>37</sup> Elaine K. Ginsberg, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996): 3.

<sup>38</sup> Idem, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Idem, 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> Idem, 5.

which some characters can pass for the dominant group, give more information than when only the main group is being researched.

### 3.0 Methodology

The semiotics analysis that has been applied in this thesis focusses on selected fragments out of selected episodes from the first season of AQUARIUS. These episodes have been selected on one of the main storylines, as multiple storylines intertwine in each episode. A storyline had to contain a racial or sexist subject to be deemed appropriate and useful for this analysis. Because all episodes deal with race or sexism in some form episodes have been selected which connect most to the concepts described in the theoretical framework. The selected fragments can be found in the episode list included in the appendix.<sup>41</sup> In this section, firstly a brief overview is given of how semiotics has come into being, secondly the method's operationalization and lastly what its benefits and limitations are.

### 3.1 Mythologies by Barthes

This research has fully relied on the method of semiotics, which Barthes has called mythology.<sup>42</sup> Semiotics is a science that has been established by Ferdinand de Saussure at the beginning of the twentieth century and goes much further than Barthes' fragment of it.<sup>43</sup> De Saussure has laid the base for semiotics by introducing the terms of the signifier, signified and sign which is recorded in the book *Course in General Linguistics*.<sup>44</sup> Semiotics by de Saussure was envisioned as "a science that studies the life of signs within society," semiotics has its roots in linguistics but looks at more than just language alone as signs.<sup>45</sup> The objective of semiotics is to separate "what is social from what is individual; and what is essential from what is accessory and more or less accidental."<sup>46</sup> Making the goal of semiotics to research social structures through its essential foundations, in short to analyze what makes social structures.

Mythology "is a science of forms, it studies significations apart from their content."<sup>47</sup> Semiotics analyzes representations through a signifier and a signified, mythology uses a

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<sup>41</sup> 7.0 Appendix: Episode list

<sup>42</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Translated by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage Books, 2009)

<sup>43</sup> Idem, 133.

<sup>44</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 59-71, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004)

<sup>45</sup> Idem, 60.

<sup>46</sup> Idem, 59.

<sup>47</sup> Barthes, 134.

second-order semiotic system which consists of a first and second order. The first order consisting of a basic meaning of a sign and the second order of appropriation, adding a connotation that builds upon the meaning constructed in the first-order. Barthes calls his method mythology, but what is a myth then?

Everything [...] can be a myth [...] I believe this, for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions. Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things.<sup>48</sup>

The signification; the sign in the second order which is appropriated by society is the myth Barthes speaks about in his work, which consists of form and concept. The form in this order is both full and empty of meaning; it is both the sign of the first order but the form of the second order where a concept is to be added.<sup>49</sup> Therefore sign and form are the same with the sign having been associated with meaning in the first order, but in the second order, as form, can be associated with new systems of meaning. Within mythology the “meaning is already complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions.”<sup>50</sup> So when one deals with the form “the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letters remain.”<sup>51</sup> This meaning in the second order is being left as a shell again, as form it can be appropriated again, this time by the concept making a signification complete. Figure one is the second order semiotic system Barthes uses within mythologies, this figure shows, between brackets and in italics, what terms he uses for both orders for further clarification.

1. Signifier ( <i>meaning</i> )	2. Signified
3. Sign = I. Signifier ( <i>form</i> )	II. Signified ( <i>concept</i> )
III. Sign ( <i>signification</i> )	

Figure one: Second-order semiotic system by Barthes<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Barthes, 131-132.

<sup>49</sup> Idem, 141-142.

<sup>50</sup> Idem, 141.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>52</sup> Idem, 138.

When looking at significations, the term concept in mythology is “quantitatively (...) much poorer than the signifier [form], it often does nothing but re-represent itself.”<sup>53</sup> Making concept quantitatively poorer than form, as form represents the content of the concept, which can happen in multiple ways, together forming a signification. To exemplify such concept that gets added to the form, the signifier can be a rose. When a rose is given on Valentine’s Day to ones loved one, then the signification is a rose which stands for passion or love. But when a single rose, with the thorns unremoved, is given by a witch to the protagonist in a fairy tale, the signification could be one of evil with the purpose of hurting the other. Making the first order of signification none the different, with the letters rose intact and the acoustic image still at a distance. But because of the act that is presented while giving someone a rose and the surrounding story, the concept and signification is fully different. Within this thesis the form of four different concepts has been researched, as the next section will expand on.

### **3.2 Operationalization**

The four concepts that have been central within the analysis are: institutional racism, institutional sexism, internal racism and passing. Within the selected episodes the forms in which these concepts are represented as significations have been researched. To help look for these significations this thesis has made use of three sub questions:

1. What signifiers are used to represent one’s displacement within the internal culture of the LAPD within AQUARIUS?
2. What signifiers are used to represent the LAPD’s priority given to cases which involve victims of another ethnicity other than the dominant group within the LAPD within AQUARIUS?
3. What signifiers are used to represent the internal dominant culture of the LAPD within AQUARIUS?

As for the operationalization of the semiotic method within this analysis, the research has looked for any signifiers that represent one of the four concepts that are described within the theoretical framework. These signifiers vary from derogatory language to influencing one’s actions. For the first sub question, there has been looked for the defining of the other, specifically how others than the main group within the LAPD within AQUARIUS are portrayed negatively, and how they try to fit in. For the second sub question the importance of the case

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<sup>53</sup> Barthes, 143.

surrounding two dead African-American men has been the focusing point, to see what importance the police department attributes to these cases and how the LAPD deals with African-Americans. For the third sub question the main group within the LAPD and their rules have been most important, to see how this internal structure is sustained by its members.

### **3.3 Strengths and limitations**

The method of mythologies has its own strengths and limitations. A great benefit of semiotics is that everything can be analyzed through it, as Barthes states about myths.<sup>54</sup> Making everything within a case study relevant, not only speech but also for example setting and gestures. Making this method useful for a researcher to look at the whole picture instead of only one aspect. A limitation on the other hand of the use of semiotics is the subjectivity that is incorporated within the method.<sup>55</sup> As Barthes notes about the method is that it is culturally dependent on how one interprets the case study.<sup>56</sup> With a culture being a frame of reference formed by the exchange of ideas with other members of a culture, which makes and shapes said culture.<sup>57</sup> Therefore culture is something inclusive, something one must be a part of to understand fully. With this knowledge, this research should be viewed biased in a way as a Dutch student of Media and Culture is researching American culture of the 1960s, with the researcher not living within the represented geographical area. Beside this fact the researcher has only learned about this era through academic works, therefore the frame of reference of this analysis is differently than someone who has lived through the period or is an inhabitant of the United States of America. Therefore, this research is done by an outsider of the culture which is represented. This makes for different findings than a cultural insider, which can lead to different results. Therefore, within the analysis section, the researcher has argued why interpretations have been done in a particular way by linking them to theories from the presented framework to justify said interpretations.

### **4.0 Analysis**

Working within a police force seems to have an easy objective, work to arrest criminals, to have a sense of fair justice for all and make sure the streets are safe. Belonging within the LAPD

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<sup>54</sup> Barthes, 131-132.

<sup>55</sup> Idem, 186.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>57</sup> Hall, 15.

within AQUARIUS seems to go about it differently, here it is more important to be a white male of Irish decent and be sure to keep the corporate culture in-tact. If you are for example female, or Latin-American your chances within the police force seem to be more limited because there is an 'us' versus 'them' mentality. While solving crimes justice is not important, but as this analysis will show keeping the 'us' out of trouble is most important. To answer the formerly stated sub questions four cases have been analyzed, firstly the case surrounding the Cuban-American detective Joe Moran and the female officer Charmaine Tully, secondly the case study which centers around the murder of two African-American men, and thirdly the power structure within the LAPD has been analyzed. In which three groups of signifiers have been found those of 'razzing one another,' 'preferred-action' and 'community-control,' which represent the term institutional racism, its analogy of institutional sexism, and its effects of internalized racism and passing.

#### **4.1 The un-Irish-Americans**

For this section two storylines have been selected, first Moran's storyline which centers around him secretly being a Cuban-American, while passing as an Irish-American. A columnist, Salazar, wants to out Moran for more confidence in the LAPD in the Latin-American community, as there are no known senior officers from Latin-American descent. The only problem is that Moran has been passing as an Irish-American since he got back from the Korean war and even his wife thinks he is Irish-American.

Moran's storyline revolves around criticism of a lack of Latin-Americans in the LAPD. This problem is addressed by Salazar in a column and gets summarized by the detectives in a derogative way: "spics can't get justice 'cause there's no spics in the department."<sup>58</sup> Moran disputes this statement by firstly mentioning there are cleaning ladies and meter maids, making an argument it is enough for Latin-Americans to have low ranking jobs within the department. Another officer disputes this reasoning as "it'd be good if there were a few," as it would be "nice to have some brass I don't have to listen to."<sup>59</sup> Within this conversation they practice one of the pillars of institutional racism per Downing, as the detectives do not question "routine institutional practices and structures."<sup>60</sup> They find it unproblematic there are no Latin-Americans as senior officers, as they believe they would only get promoted because they are

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<sup>58</sup> John McNamara, writer, "Why?" in *Aquarius*, NBC, July 18, 2015: 0:27.

<sup>59</sup> Idem: 0:40-0:43.

<sup>60</sup> Downing and Husband, 11.

Latin-Americans. Therefore, the detectives portray Latin-Americans negatively, as they think Latin-Americans do not possess the quality to be a detective; and are therefore also made unproblematic by their routine unreflecting race thinking, as they agree on this assumption. Therefore, the second pillar of institutional racism is employed, but also the practice of consensual racism, as the dominant ideology is sustained by all three detectives.<sup>61</sup>

In Moran's storyline another factor is at play, as he is passing for an Irish-American instead of being Cuban-American. He is passing as a member of the white privileged group within society, as Moran says himself: "you really think I would've made detective if the brass knew I was a spic?"<sup>62</sup> Here Moran "disguises [...] elements of [his] 'natural' or 'essential' identity" what the practice of passing is per Ginsberg, to be able to make it to detective within the LAPD, as people of other origins are held back.<sup>63</sup> Because Moran is hiding his true identity he seems to be subjected to internalized racism as well, with his fair skin and Irish seeming last name he subjected himself to the narrow standard, or rather construct of as hooks calls it: "white aesthetic standards," as Moran used these features to pass for Irish-American.<sup>64</sup> These aspects show that Moran is passing as Irish-American because he knows he would never have made detective by being himself, which is a result of internalized racism as "a racist society indoctrinate people of color to believe in white superiority," as per Tyson.<sup>65</sup> Because Moran made detective by passing as Irish-American he ends up confirming to the laws of institutional racism which is employed within the LAPD in *AQUARIUS*.

Within Charmaine Tully's storyline she is subjected to institutional sexism, as the only woman at work with the detectives. Within the analyzed storyline Tully is given a chance to ride along with a mixed-race unit, who end up getting killed while having breakfast in the African-American part of town. This storyline is introduced by the two accompanying agents discussing how cute Tully is and how they would want to take her home, showing a pillar of institutional sexism which is unreflecting sexist thinking.<sup>66</sup> Within this fragment Tully is sexualized from the beginning, with the two officers only being stopped by the main character Hodiak, who mentors her in a way within the series. Just before the murder happens the unit starts talking about what they want to do during the day, with them "thinking [to] roust some

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<sup>61</sup> Downing and Husband, 11-12.

<sup>62</sup> John McNamara, writer, "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" in *Aquarius*, NCB, July, 25, 2015: 22:20.

<sup>63</sup> Ginsberg, 3.

<sup>64</sup> hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 173-174.

<sup>65</sup> Tyson, 362.

<sup>66</sup> The two pillars of institutional racism apply to institutional sexism, the only difference being that it is "sexist thinking" instead of "race thinking."

whores down on 44<sup>th</sup>, give [Tully] some company in the backseat.”<sup>67</sup> Instead of being fazed by this remark Tully responds by stating where you could find some whores that time of day by saying: “you gotta go to Slauson,” which leaves the agents visibly impressed.<sup>68</sup> This quick back-and-forth shows Tully has the ability to adapt to the agents’ culture to belong within the male ranks, she is passing in a sense to belong to the privileged group.

Although Tully seems to adjust to their culture one of the agents states it is “too bad you’ll never get to do it,” referring to doing policework on the streets.<sup>69</sup> This belief is shared by her colleagues, which becomes clear after the murder, as back at the station Tully is confronted by a detective who says: “you’re not needed. You never were” which states a sort of incompetence.<sup>70</sup> This attack is based in Tully being different, a woman, as she is attacked on her feminine qualities “that’s not a uniform, it’s a costume. Your costume, your hair and your tits... it’s all got two good men killed today.”<sup>71</sup> In this sense Tully is being punished for being an ‘other’ to the privileged group, she is not a part of the group as she is not passing like Moran for example is doing.<sup>72</sup> The setting of the interaction is of importance too, as this confrontation happens publicly at the station; what shows a shared belief among the gross of detectives that a woman has no place being on the streets with ‘two good men,’ not two good officers, literally ‘men’.

The subject of passing gets touched upon later again in the storyline when Tully literally is forced to be one of the guys when she is dragged into the male locker room by Hodiak, who ‘protected’ her from being objectified at the beginning of the storyline. Here Tully is asked to falsely identify a subject to get a guilty verdict, which all the male officers apparently have done in the past. There is a clear male and female divide in the locker-room with there being four male agents, of which two are topless in towels, clearly stating that “four of us are dead” with the camera showing the officers with Tully’s cheek being visible but blurry.<sup>73</sup> The conversation ends with Hodiak asking Tully if “you gonna stop trying to be one of us, or are you gonna be one of us?” confirming the distance between male and female agents, but giving her a chance to prove that she is one of ‘them.’<sup>74</sup> In this case Tully still has to prove she is worthy of being, not an agent, but one of the male agents who sustain the dominant ideology.

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<sup>67</sup> McNamara, “Why?”: 11:44.

<sup>68</sup> Idem: 11:51.

<sup>69</sup> Idem: 12:01.

<sup>70</sup> Idem: 27:53.

<sup>71</sup> Idem: 28:01.

<sup>72</sup> Ginsberg, 3.

<sup>73</sup> McNamara, “Why?”: 37:06.

<sup>74</sup> Idem: 37:20-37:21.



## 4.2 The color divide

The storyline central in this section surrounds the murder of an African-American shop owner, who was a friend of detective Hodiak. Hodiak visits the African-American neighborhood, Watts, after being gone for a long time with now the Black Panther party being in control of Watts. When Hodiak is visiting he is greeted by policeman Tolson, who is stationed there. Hodiak gets greeted right away with the remark that Hodiak hasn't been "seen [...] in the jungle in a dog's age," remarking that where the African-Americans live is a jungle implying they are a sub species of some sort.<sup>75</sup> This is confirmed a bit further in the conversation when Hodiak remarks that he patrolled those streets as a rookie, on which Tolson replies: "back when the monkeys were still grateful for bwana [master] right?"<sup>76</sup> These racist remarks intertwine with Hodiak receiving the facts of the murder, the way in which Tolson makes conversation shows signs of consensual racism, as Hodiak does not hold Tolson accountable to this pillar of institutional racism in the form of unreflecting race thinking.<sup>77</sup> The Black Panthers are at the crime scene too, who apparently did not like the deceased man, Cass, as Tolson remarks: "they hated Cassius for having the good taste to straighten nappy hair to look like ours."<sup>78</sup> This conversation reflects greatly on how African-Americans are treated by the officers of the LAPD they interact with daily, but also shows the effects of internal racism within the African-American neighborhood, as Cass assimilated to, as hooks names it, white aesthetic standards.<sup>79</sup> This contradiction between African-Americans also shows a struggle in Watts with one group fighting proactively against internal racism, and the other who still go about their business as usual as they stay out of trouble with the LAPD. Tolson being a representative of the LAPD dislikes the African-Americans, but does have the ones who assimilate to white aesthetics in higher regard than the ones who pride themselves in being black – in this case the Black Panthers. Showing in a sense that the color cast hierarchy, as hooks describes it, is justified as it pays off to put one's own minority identity secondary by passing.<sup>80</sup>

Within this storyline it might be more important what is not being done by the LAPD than what is. While the murder of a black man who was liked by the police is researched the murder of a young boy named Michael Younger is put on a notorious lazy detective's desk, as

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<sup>75</sup> John McNamara, writer, "A Change is Gonna Come," in *Aquarius*, NBC, July 18, 2015: 6:48.

<sup>76</sup> Idem: 7:17.

<sup>77</sup> Downing and Husband, 11.

<sup>78</sup> McNamara, "A Change is Gonna Come": 7:33.

<sup>79</sup> hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 176-177.

<sup>80</sup> Idem, 173-174.

“you don’t put Lead Butt on a case you want solved.”<sup>81</sup> The reason why the case of Younger is not being solved is because Tolson murdered him by using a ‘cop-hold,’ as Younger wanted to join the Black Panther Party. A ‘cop-hold’ is a choke hold, which Hodiak and his partner discuss after finding how Younger was killed: “you know what they call a chokehold in South Central? – Cop hold.”<sup>82</sup> While Hodiak, throughout the episode, is researching the Younger case, his motive is not justice for all – but mainly justice for his friend Cass who was murdered. The Black Panthers would only stop hiding the murderer of Cass if there would be justice for Younger, as Hodiak says to his partner:

I’m trying to find out who killed a friend of mine. [...] all Bunchy and the cat people [cat people referring to the Black Panther Party] want to talk about is Michael Younger, so I figure if I can turn the corner on that, then maybe I can catch some goodwill on Cass. ‘Cause I need it and Cass deserves it.<sup>83</sup>

One can argue that the only reason for Hodiak being in the African-American neighborhood is to solve a case for a friend of his, making an exception for finding justice for an African-American as Hodiak knew Cass personally. Especially with the personal motive as Hodiak says “I need it” first, and only secondary saying “Cass deserves it.”<sup>84</sup> In the end the situation between Hodiak and the Black Panther Party remains unresolved, as throughout the episode Hodiak gets to know who killed the two men. The only problem is that Hodiak has got to give up Tolson, a police officer, to get the killer of Cass. Hodiak wants to do this, but gets stopped internally as the acting lieutenant says that “somebody high up is protecting Tolson.”<sup>85</sup> This outcome of the investigation of the murder cases of two African-Americans will remain a secret, which means there will be no justice which the Black Panther Party demands. This secrecy shows aspects of institutional racism as the bad apples of this organization are higher up, protecting an officer who has unrightfully killed an African-American teenager. Therefore, this incident shows even when people within an organization want to have justice, the culture of the LAPD is focused on caring for their own instead of having justice within AQUARIUS. Therefore, in the world portrayed by the show, workplace culture is the necessary unit of change, as well-meaning personnel’s actions are subverted which is in accordance with institutional racism.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> McNamara, “A Change is Gonna Come”: 36:15.

<sup>82</sup> *Idem*: 22:38-22:40.

<sup>83</sup> *Idem*: 21:20-21:35.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>85</sup> *Idem*: 36:08-36:13.

<sup>86</sup> Downing and Husband, 178.

### 4.3 The spirit of the LAPD

Within this section interactions between members of the LAPD are analyzed to say something about the internal dominant culture which everyone must conform to. This answer shall therefore focus mainly on how the dominant ideology within the LAPD within AQUARIUS is sustained through institutional racism.

Firstly, the “routine unreflecting race thinking” that is a pillar of institutional racism per Downing is apparent within AQUARIUS.<sup>87</sup> There are uncalled for remarks in people’s faces but also behind their backs, like Hodiak who remarks: “the Polack could talk less and bathe more.”<sup>88</sup> While this remark is made towards a person of another ethnicity it is not limited to this, because Irish-American colleagues get messed with as well. An example of this is Hodiak who remarks towards a fellow Irish-American: “Got to admit I was wrong, Cut. Kissing ass does pay off.”<sup>89</sup> Although there is a difference in the messing with colleagues, as the first remark is based on heritage while the second is based on behavior, with the former being more hurtful than the latter as one cannot decide what descent one has. Although it seems normalized behavior to call another out on their features, this being nature or nurture, there is also a flipside to this behavior, as there is a great common bond between the whole police department. When Hodiak returns from the murder scene of the two murdered agents the acting lieutenant starts a motivational speech of some sort:

All right, everybody. Everybody, god damn it! Stop and listen! If you got hard information, write it up. [...] And if I see anyone waste a single second on tears, fire yourself. Time is the enemy. This son of a bitch is our prey and we hunt with God’s own fury until he is caged or dead. Go.<sup>90</sup>

At this point it does not matter what descent one has, or how well they get along everyone is part of the team as they hunt like a pack of wolves as the lieutenant’s speech connotes.

Although this picking on one another seems to be a standard practice, the actors might be unaware of its consequences. This is apparent when the department finds out Moran is Latin-American and two detectives are making fun of him while Moran is coming into the room. In this fragment Moran comes into the office with a near empty bottle of liquor and a loaded gun

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<sup>87</sup> Downing and Husband, 11.

<sup>88</sup> McNamara, “Why?”: 8:53.

<sup>89</sup> McNamara, “A Change is Gonna Come”: 20:44-20:46.

<sup>90</sup> McNamara, “Why?”: 21:15-21:54.

in his hand while he exclaims: “yeah, Cut, I knew you’d find my little secret funny. I knew you’d be the first to stop being my friend.”<sup>91</sup> While Moran walks in everyone in the office stops what they are doing, when Moran a moment later waves around his gun Cut stops his colleague from trying to take Moran’s gun, in fear of escalation.<sup>92</sup> Cut also tries to comfort Moran by saying: “well, I’m your friend, Joe. We razz each other, that’s what us cops do.”<sup>93</sup> Here it becomes clear that what a member of the privilege group considers ‘razzing each other’ goes much deeper for the minority group and adds to internalized racism. It is a clear example of what hooks states about white supremacy which assaults the minorities’ self-concept and self-esteem.<sup>94</sup>

The way in which the ‘other’ kind of people get kept outside happens by what Downing calls the “routine institutional practices and structures.”<sup>95</sup> One example of this is the interaction given in the previous paragraph where Hodiak commends Cut for kissing ass, this remark was directed towards Cut’s promotion to acting lieutenant, a title which later in the series would become permanent. This promotion of Cut to lieutenant says something about the way the LAPD within AQUARIUS is structured as Cut also was ‘razzing’ Moran while he walked in. Therefore, this kind of behavior of keeping ‘others’ out, or at least harassing them in a way seems to be the kind of behavior the higher ups in the organization appreciate. This especially seems true when taking a broader look at the case of the murdered African-American boy by the cop Tolson, as Cut states when Hodiak says he will go to internal affairs himself: “threatening a brother officer with Internal Affairs [...] Sam, you’re a lot of stupid things, but you’re not a rat [...] Somebody high up is protecting Tolson.”<sup>96</sup> Cut specifically tells Hodiak not to go any further with this case to protect him and also Tolson, this shows a structure within the organization which, as Downing describes it, subverts the action of a well-meaning individual.<sup>97</sup> The presence of such a structure is not only limited to the LAPD internally, but also happens during interactions with the District Attorney’s office (DA), where it is not looked down upon to lie to get a conviction. This for example happens during the case of the murdered police officers where the DA remarks: “she’s not quite as good as you. [...] I meant she’s almost as good a liar as you.”<sup>98</sup> Hodiak plays dumb in his reaction to the DA by saying “I’m not a liar”

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<sup>91</sup> McNamara, “It’s Alright Ma”: 33:55-33:57.

<sup>92</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>93</sup> Idem: 33:56-34:00.

<sup>94</sup> hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 173.

<sup>95</sup> Downing and Husband, 11.

<sup>96</sup> McNamara, “A Change is Gonna Come”: 36:00-36:12.

<sup>97</sup> Downing and Husband, 178.

<sup>98</sup> McNamara, “Why?”: 38:05-38:17.

while at the same time Hodiak is grinning, as he knows they both know he does lie to get convictions but this seems tolerated. This toleration is represented especially when the DA says how the process will go further and gives Hodiak a pat on the shoulder before leaving like he wants to say he did a good job.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, the institutional racism within the LAPD within AQUARIUS might go even further than only the LAPD, but also further up into the branches of justice.

#### 4.4 Results

While analyzing the episodes, through the three-formulated sub questions, the following became clear of the signifiers which express the different forms and extension of institutional racism.

First, a selection of signifiers can be summarized under ‘community-control’ which includes generally attacking ethnic others and the other sex on their appearance which feeds into internal racism. Examples of this are: the detectives downplaying the importance of Latin-American within the department, stating that a ‘Polack’ needs to talk less and bathe more, or commending African-Americans for passing by straightening their hair. What must be said about these signifiers is that these take place generally, so are not directed at one person per se but seem to be common conceptions between colleagues. These signifiers’ function for institutional racism is to sustain the “routine unreflecting race thinking” and keep everyone on the same page concerning the dominant ideology.<sup>100</sup>

The second group of signifiers can be summarized under ‘preferred-action’ which is based in maintaining “routine institutional practices and structures.”<sup>101</sup> This group of signifiers cause members or aspiring members of the privileged group to keep the internal culture the way it is, by conforming to it while they personally might have a different opinion. This applies to signifiers of doing literally nothing, or follow the lines people with higher ranks ‘strongly advice’ one to take. Examples of these signifiers are: Tully who must lie to get a conviction, or Hodiak who does not go to internal affairs to report a fellow agent who killed an innocent victim. While these actions might not be racially charged, the main function of these is to protect each other and sustain the dominant ideology.

The third and last group of signifiers are best summarized under ‘razzing one another,’

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<sup>99</sup> McNamara, “Why?”: 38:15.

<sup>100</sup> Downing and Husband, 11.

<sup>101</sup> Ibidem.

these consist of personal attacks towards people of other descent or sex. Within these signifiers people are singled out, instead of generalizing like in the group ‘community-control.’ Examples of this are: the attacking of Tully on her feminine qualities, enouncing that a woman never can be an agent and the making fun of Moran after finding out he is from Latin-American descent. These signifiers function to remind someone of them being different, and that they only can serve within the privileged group when they follow and thus sustain the dominant ideology. Therefore, these signifiers also feed into internal racism and promote passing.

The representation of institutional racism within media tends to be uncommon, as has been stated within the introduction. CRASH has attempted to represent racism in different aspects within society, as also within the LAPD, but this has been represented as if racism has equal benefits, meaning that everyone reaps rewards from racism.<sup>102</sup> Within AQUARIUS institutional racism is presented in a more fitting way, when following Downing’s theory on institutional racism, this representation of institutional racism has been attempted in other media representations before but has been problematic. Within AQUARIUS institutional racism is presented as a dominant ideology within an organization, which is preserved by high ranking members who give racist acts free reign but these acts might not always be racially charged, as it is more about protection of the status quo and one another. What AQUARIUS shows is that well-meaning intentions are indeed subverted as one is at risk of losing one’s job when one does not conform to the dominant ideology.<sup>103</sup> This representation therefore makes a case against personal prejudice being at fault, as one’s intentions of fairness for all is subverted by the higher ups within an organization. As opposed to CRASH this thesis has analyzed a different way of representation of racism within institutions, presenting a case study in which the representation of institutional racism has been done adequately.

The answer to the research question is then: the signifiers that are used to represent institutional racism can be grouped in three groups. Firstly, ‘community-control’ which focusses on generally stereotyping others on their physical appearance or descent, secondly the ‘preferred-action’ which is forced upon the members of the privileged group and aspiring members by the senior members, and thirdly the ‘razzing one another’ which is the personal attacking of people of a different sex or descent. These signifiers show that within the institution, while there is personal prejudice, this would be tackled by capable leadership, but because such behavior is encouraged it is fruitful for one’s career to act within the dominant ideology set by the higher ranks within an organization. Therefore, the world portrayed by

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<sup>102</sup> Hsu, 148-149.

<sup>103</sup> Downing and Husband.

AQUARIUS presents a representation of institutional racism that has been flawed in other media representations, as it presents limited blame on personal prejudice but places the ideology within the workplace at fault. Thus, presenting a new way in which representations can operate to represent a complicated system of racism within media.

## 5.0 Conclusion

To answer the research question of what signifiers are used to represent institutional racism there has been focused on: institutional racism, institutional sexism, internalized racism, and passing to form a complete picture of the effects of institutional racism. After analyzing three different episodes this thesis concludes that there are three different tactics employed to keep a dominant ideology alive within an organization, that of ‘community-control,’ ‘preferred-action,’ and ‘razzing one another.’ These three group terms make sure: routine structures and practices are agreed upon as thought out by the leadership, one is forced to take actions to protect each other willingly or unwillingly – even at the cost of ‘others,’ and that one gets personally bullied into the way one is supposed to act within the dominant ideology as an ‘other.’ These three groups are not exclusive to each other, as signifiers can overlap as well and act ambiguous in the concept that is represented.

These findings shed a new light on the field of representations of racism, as it adds to research done into the movie CRASH which was critiqued on that only personal prejudice was at work within CRASH’s representation of the LAPD.<sup>104</sup> Within AQUARIUS institutional racism enables people to perform personal prejudice, but good-willing people are forced to take action that are racist against their own wishes as well, which makes that the necessary unit of change is the organization itself.<sup>105</sup> This makes AQUARIUS a representation of institutional racism that is uncommon within media representations, making this research relevant within the academic field concerning media representations of racism.

Further research can be conducted on how institutional racism within media is interpreted by viewers of AQUARIUS to measure the influence of media on people’s conception of the practice in real life. Such a research would build upon Hall’s vision that representation constructs meaning in our world, giving academia more information into how cultures are constructed.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Hsu, 148-149.

<sup>105</sup> Downing, 12.

<sup>106</sup> Hall, 15.

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## 7.0 Appendix: Episode list

<b>S1E5</b>			
A Change is Gonna Come			
6:43	10:35	4 minutes	
20:10	23:20	3 minutes	
31:25	37:45	6 minutes	
<b>S1E9</b>			
Why?			
0:0	2:10	2 minutes	
8:03	9:35	1.5 minutes	
10:51	12:10	1.5 minutes	
21:15	21:55	0.5 minutes	
27:06	28:45	1.5 minutes	
34:45	38:35	4 minutes	
<b>S1E10</b>			
It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)			
32:00	35:40	3.5 minutes	
20:33	23:15	2.5 minutes	
<b>Number of episodes</b>	<b>Number of Fragments</b>	<b>Total Duration</b>	
3	11	30 minutes	