

***RACE, SUBURBIA AND THE TELEVISED  
AMERICAN DREAM***

The relationship between race and the American suburbs has been one of possibility, contradiction and exclusivity. Post-World War II social adjustments to the domestic front emphasized a white, middle-class family. Government supported suburban development through the assistance of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), a department that worked to create neighborhood solidarity through homogeneity, harmony and attractiveness. The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, helped to build neighborhoods conducive to husbands who commuted to the city to work, women who were stay-at-home mothers and wives, and children who lived and went to school in a tightly knit, local community (Haralovich 118). Home ownership represented social status (in the 1950s and the present day): buy the house, have the family that lives in the house, and you have achieved the American Dream.

As the draw of suburban living built momentum in its idealized location and lifestyle, television was also gaining significant popularity as a preferred mode of entertainment for the American suburban family; in 1949, 3 percent of American households owned a television, by 1954 the number climbed to 24 percent, and by 1956 it had increased to 72 percent (Bogel 42). As Lynn Spigel explains, “the ideological harmony between utopian dreams for housing design and for technological solutions to distance created a joint leverage for television’s rapid growth in the postwar period...In the years following World War II, this technological utopia was joined by a

complementary housing utopia which was for the first time mass produced” (Spigel 7-8). Suburban audiences, residing in their homes designed for convenient and comfortable television viewing, were interested in not only seeing the outside world, but were also primed to look at themselves, if even as a hyper-idealized version of what they aspired to be. As if working in tandem, popular sit-coms such as *Father Knows Best* (1954-1963), *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966), functioned as a way to entertain with story-like depictions of suburban communities, while at the same time using their narratives to act as a kind of advertising to already suburbanite viewers, or those eager for the move. Absent in the real life communities of early suburbia, as well as their on-screen counterparts, was any indication that people of color could be part of this utopian mode of living. As a way to examine the relationship between race and suburbia, specifically between Anglo and African-Americans, this paper will consider two television shows, *Beulah* (1950-1953) and *Weeds* (2005-Present), with close attention paid to the manner in which these programs structure home, family, and work within their narratives to convey a version of the televised American Dream.

In her article, *Sit-coms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker*, Mary Beth Haralovich connects the real-life American suburbs of the 1950s, with its televised fictional reflection, explaining that:

“The suburban middle-class family sit-com of the 1950s and 1960s centered on the family ensemble and its home life; breadwinner father, homemaker mother, and growing children placed within the domestic space of the suburban home. Structured within definitions of gender and the value of home life for family cohesion, these sit-coms drew upon

particular historical conditions for the their realist representation of family relations and domestic space.” (111)

The physical home was the focal point for the non-fictional suburban family and its fantasy mirror, the suburban sit-com television show. No room was off-limits to story and camera: parents conferenced in their bedroom, before going to sleep; a mother’s space was the kitchen, but it was not exclusively for her as the family moved in and out of it, helping with dishes and getting meals ready; and the dining room was a flexible space of formal dinners that might include non-family members, as well as family only. “The home was a space not for comedy riffs and physical gags but for family cohesion, a guarantee that children can be raised in the image of their parents” (Haralovich 116).

Home and family went hand in hand in the televised suburban landscape; the American Dream was not for the singleton. Houses were bought by families or by married couples with plans for children. The family was the focal point of television shows from the 1950s, creating a now-familiar comical theme of parents and children in suburban America (Haralovich 113). These programs, in character and in narrative design, were constructed to appeal to an entire family audience, drawing them in through the similarities between viewer and viewed. Children, most commonly a teen and a pre-teen, were the center of television households. American children in the suburbs were shown to be polite, but also headstrong and goal-oriented, emulating the ambitious culture of their adult role models. But while troubles with children and housekeepers were part of the storylines, by the end of each episode, there was a resolution that reinforced not only family harmony, but also the cohesive design of suburbia itself.

In the 1950s and into the 1960s, the depiction of work in television suburbs was sectioned off according to family members. While the suburban dream emphasized a homogeneous definition of the family, domestic architecture was set-up to display class attributes and reinforce gender-specific functions of domestic space—fathers worked outside of the house, mothers on the inside (Haralovich 119). In real life, as well as television, the suburban model was based on a white, middle-class family, whose fathers/husbands worked outside of the house earning the sole income, and mothers/wives worked from the inside of the house maintaining a high functioning, uniform domestic front. An additional area of work existed that included employees hired from the outside, by the family, to work on the inside. In this channel of employment, different classes and races gained entrance into this otherwise exclusive world.

Historically, the relationship between the suburbs and race, specifically African-Americans and Anglo-Americans, both on and off television, has been a strained and evolving one. During the 1950s and 1960s, purchasing a home in the suburbs was difficult for non-white families. Loan applications, accepted if submitted by whites, were rejected when filed by black families of similar standing whose backgrounds were carefully screened to make sure they were in fact members of the middle-class. Furthermore, in many communities where non-white families were allowed residency, they were not permitted to buy houses adjacent to each other in an effort to keep one family of color per block and were often sold lots that bordered on the edges of the community as a way to isolate these households<sup>1</sup> (Douglas 139).

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas refers specifically to a study done of Levittown III (Willingboro). He explains the suburban community development done by the architectural firm Levitt and Sons in 2008, *ARSC Student Research Award* *Maya Montañez Smukler*

The American suburb/city split, in its formative years, was acutely influenced by a desire of some to enforce racial separatism and exclusion. The FHA was key in insuring the all-white demographics of such neighborhoods making these practices more public policy than just personal opinion (Beuka 188-189). “White-flight” from cities to suburbs, was in many ways a rejection not only of urban living, but also of the communities of color that inhabited those metropolises. As Haralovich explains, the goals of this utopian ideal would not benefit everyone: “An ideal white and middle-class home life was a primary means of reconstituting and resocializing the American family after World War II. By defining access to property and home ownership within the values of the conventionalized suburban family, women and minorities were guaranteed economic and social inequality” (Haralovich 112). Racial (white) homogeneity was part of the perk in selling the suburban American Dream to potential residents, and its exclusionary philosophies were part of the reality of the racist American Nightmare.

The discrimination experienced in real life suburbia was easily reflected on television—if there were no people of color in those communities off-screen, there would be none on-screen as well. The most popular programs depicting these neighborhoods, such as *Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Donna Reed Show*, had no

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the United States, adhered to bigoted policies with regards to admitting black residents; there would be none until 1959 when a discrimination case was brought to the Appellate Court and gradually the community began to desegregate. Haralovich and Beuka also cite similar racist policies enforced by the Federal Housing Association in suburban communities that even after the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed a suit with the Supreme Court, were still, off the records, maintained (Haralovich 118-119; Beuka 187-190).

significant black character roles<sup>2</sup>. Overall, portrayals of people of color were few and far between during the early years of television programming, particularly rare was the depiction of non-white families. Most well-known were two programs that ran concurrently, each featuring black protagonists: *Beulah* (1950-1953) and *Amos 'n' Andy* (1951-1953). These shows marked the first time in television history that more than one program presenting a cast with non-white leads aired at the same time, a phenomenon that would not take place again for another twenty years (Bogel 26).

*Amos 'n' Andy*, a popular and controversial comedy program, was taken from an extremely successful radio show from the late twenties of the same name that starred two white men playing the voice of the lead black characters. Airing on television in 1951, the show focused primarily on the antics of two friends, Kingfish and Andy, this time played by African-American actors. The show's critics, most vocal being the NAACP, criticized the program for its negative stereotyping of blacks in the vein of minstrelsy; speaking in heavy dialect with exaggerated, flawed grammar, the roles were thought of as caricatures of black men as lazy, dimwitted, clownish and dishonest. In 1953, unwilling to bear the weight of protest any longer, CBS network cancelled the show and in doing so, created a significant void of African-American characters on television that lasted for more than a decade. No black families were depicted as television characters again until fifteen years later, in the 1968 show *Julia* (Douglas 141).

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<sup>2</sup> I have not seen every episode of these three programs to give an absolutely accurate count on any *small* role played by an African American, but in the large sampling I viewed, there were no *significant* roles played by people of color. In one episode of *Leave it to Beaver*, there is a scene where Wally and Eddie Haskell are having lunch in the kitchen of a white man they are working for and the maid who serves them is black. She has a few, small talk, lines of dialogue.

While *Amos 'n' Andy* broadcast from a predominately black city narrative, *Beulah* inhabited the white suburbs, as a housekeeper for the Hendersons, a white family of three. As a character, Beulah had originally started on radio as early as 1939, making guest appearances on a variety of shows. On air, performed first by two white men (Marlin Hurt, and after his death, Bob Corley), the role was eventually taken over by film actress Hattie McDaniel. Premiering on television network ABC, in 1951, the sit-com would go through three different actresses—Ethel Waters, Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beaver—before being cancelled in 1953. Best described by Donald Bogle in his book, *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television*:

“Beulah, of course, was a type long present in American popular culture: the large, often dowdy, usually darker, all-knowing, all seeing, all-hearing, all-understanding mammy figure, whose life is built around nurturing and nourishing those in the Big House. Lest she appear as a threat or rival to the white women she works for, the mammy, of course, has to be desexed; thus her large size and darker color. Her asexuality also makes her an ideal mother surrogate. Adolescent boys in her care don’t have to struggle with any Oedipal feelings. Girls need not fret about an Electra complex. Long a cherished mainstream cultural icon, mammy—thanks to the character Beulah—had found a place for herself on TV.” (Bogle 22)

*Beulah* is important to consider in a historical examination of the televised relationship between race and suburbia for several reasons: 1) as a timeline marker denoting that during this era, it was one of the only shows, along with *Amos 'n' Andy*,

that had a protagonist and other key characters who were black; 2) as a rarity in programming from the 1950s and 1960s, in that it depicted race and suburbia together; and 3) it presented a detailed juxtaposition of home, family and work in the relationship between blacks and whites in suburbia.

In *Beulah*, the televisual suburban home follows the traditional blueprint: the kitchen is a casual woman's domain, whereas the dining room is more formal and the den is designated for adult leisure time. With the inclusion of race, these typically white domestic spaces are broken down into yet another layer of assignment. While the kitchen is still informal and female run, it is also under the pseudo authority of the black characters. As the housekeeper, the kitchen is Beulah's territory—her work headquarters. At the same time, because of the racial segregation inherent in suburbia's infrastructure, this is the only place where the black characters--Beulah, her boyfriend Bill, who works as a handyman, and her friend Oriole, another domestic—are allowed to converge<sup>3</sup>. While the kitchen is under her jurisdiction, the power she garners from it is simultaneously undermined by the fact that this is the *only* place she is permitted to be herself. Moreover, Beulah's work as a housekeeper keeps all of her attention revolving around family and one that is never her own<sup>4</sup>. This is a show about an African-American character, but only as her life pertains to the white world for whom she works.

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<sup>3</sup> Bill's fix-it shop functions in a similar way, as does Beulah's kitchen. By association, with his job and race, Bill's place of employment becomes a designated African-American space, well equipped for informal interaction as well as focused work.

<sup>4</sup> It is unclear whether Beulah lives with the Henderson family or on her own. Considering how much they depend on her for domestic duties, as well as personal help, if she had her own home, there wouldn't be much time to spend in it.



If home is Beulah's work, then work is her family. As Bogle points out, *Beulah* invokes a familiar stereotype of the middle-aged African-American woman as the grand nurturer, highly competent at her job as caregiver, partially because of her ability to be utterly selfless; she is powerful in her immediate world of adept problem solving and loving others, specifically her white bosses, but powerless in the larger, racist society that disallows her any autonomy because she is not white. Beulah has no personal life or family of her own to distract from her ability to care for her white employers. Bill, her longtime boyfriend constantly puts off any plans of marriage, stalling her with "Wait a minute, passion pigeon, don't put the horse before the carriage!" While Beulah, exasperated, says things such as: "If marriages are made in heaven, my guardian angel is sure loafing!" There is no practical reason that Bill and Beulah should not wed, both are of legal age, have stable jobs, enjoy each other's company, live in the same community, have the same friends, but the formation of a black family would tip the balance; if Beulah did have one of her own, she wouldn't need to be part of the Hendersons'.

As a housekeeper, Beulah's dual position of both employee and surrogate member of the family allows her to occupy a murky middle ground, which puts a twist on the suburban television model. Her race, class and job blur certain roles that suburban iconography would like to uphold. While not a mother, Beulah still fills the position. Very much a subordinate, as designated by social status, she works under her white female boss, while at the same time, because of her affection for the family and keen insight into the human condition, Mrs. Henderson trusts Beulah's expertise and the two women often work together to solve a problem. The intimate nature of her work, and the status (denoted by stereotype) as supreme nursemaid creates a closeness, but because of

her social differences, it is only on the family's terms. Always available, since stripped of any semblance of her own life, the housekeeper is a plethora of useful and all-knowing advice. "Beulah will take care of everything!" Exclaims Mrs. Henderson, relieved. Forever a confidant, but never a friend, as friendship would demand an equality contrary to the suburban design.

Because of the era in which it was made, the show *Beulah* did not speak openly about race. In the format (under thirty minutes) and tone (comedy) of early suburban sitcoms, racism or racial difference could not afford to be honest. It is only through the relegation of space by way of set design, the show of images, and the narrative's suggestion of the power structure within the character's relationships, that the color lines were drawn. Race and suburbia would not again mingle so blatantly on television until well into the 1970s. At that time, paralleling the struggles and achievements of the civil rights movement, television as a whole, began to reflect a more realistic American population. As a result, many sitcoms focusing on black American families made it to broadcast, but were designated to an urban setting only. Although racist tendencies still proliferated in the real suburbs, an increase in black residents to those communities climbed during the 1970s, and continued with larger numbers into the 1980s and 1990s (Beuka 195).

Television programming, however, did not reflect these geographical shifts. The cultural mindset of American was tied to the idea (and stereotype) of African-Americans living in only urban areas (Beuka 196). Some exceptions included the character of Florida Evans, played by Ester Rolle, who first appeared in *Maude*, as the housekeeper for liberal semi-suburbanite Maude Findlay, before having her own series, *Good Times*,

that took place in the city. The short-lived program *Love Thy Neighbor* (1973), a spin-off of a more successful British show, took place in a generic suburbs called Sherwood Forest Estates and followed a comical set of married couples, one white and one black, who lived next door to each other<sup>5</sup>. A more popular format, during the 1970s and 1980s, was the urban family sitcom genre that included *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977), *Good Times* (1974-1979) and *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985). Each successful in their own right, these shows were comprised of all black casts and told the stories of multi-class, non-white families.

Taking hold of what *Beulah* started in the 1950s, by complicating familiar roles such as hired help, employer and home, with the nuances of multi-racial and multi-class relationships, the present day show *Weeds*, creates similar situations by co-opting depictions of race and suburbia in its narrative structure. Starting its third season in 2007 on Showtime, *Weeds* enlists key pieces of the traditional suburban television paradigm of home, family and work, but twists the formula by introducing foreign factors such as race, urban settings, and illegal drug trade. Starring Mary-Louise Parker as Nancy, the suburban mother whose minimal skill set forces her to sell marijuana in order to make ends meet after her husband dies suddenly, *Weeds* qualifies as a hybrid format: the thirty minute sitcom, but in a style that provides a constant mix of humor and drama.

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<sup>5</sup> Into the 1960s, influenced by the civil rights movement, popular white sit-coms began to include discussions of race and social prejudices such as *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966). In one episode, Dick thinks he's brought home the wrong baby and a mix-up with a black couple ensues ("That's My Boy"); in another show, Laura and Dick accidentally stain their hands with black dye before going to a dinner honoring an interracial organization ("Show of Hands"). By the 1970s, explicit discussion of racist behavior became more acceptable including an episode of *Happy Days* (1974-1984) where a black teenager becomes friends with Fonzie and the Cunningham family, but encounters bigoted reactions from others ("Fonzie's New Friend").

Home is the focal point of *Weeds* and its primary location is that of Nancy's palatial suburban abode. The house has many of the same characteristics of the usual suburban television home: a kitchen and family room that serves as the main gathering spot for all inhabitants, bedrooms that create private space for children and adults, and two entrances—a side patio door that leads to communal space for casual and hasty comings and goings, as well as a front door for more formal arrivals and departures. In addition to the physical home, Nancy adheres to tradition in that she also has a family whose children's array of growing pangs wreak a variety of havoc on the unit and the space it inhabits. Furthermore, work, as in the 1950s and 1960s suburban sit-coms, both done inside and outside of the home, is an integral part of the family's survival and dynamic with each other.

*Weeds* takes leave from the suburban model in that this home is the center of chaos rather than domestic harmony. Of central importance is that in this family there is no father, and all problems, resolutions, disarray and solace, hinges, in one way or another, on this somber detail. *Weed's* pilot episode begins after Judah's sudden death, and with Nancy already selling marijuana; the suburban family unit has been destroyed and the show will spend each episode trying to reconstruct it, usually with little lasting success.

Conflict was never void in the shows of the 1950s and 1960s, but a harmonious solution, with family and home intact, was always guaranteed by the end of the program. *Weeds*, on the other hand, concludes each episode with a problem so huge that any chance at resolution and reconciliation, let alone an agreeable family dinner, seems utterly impossible. Gone is the notion of home as a measure of achievement and a place

to nurture and find safety. Now it has become a burden, not only financially, but also through the memory of heartbreak. Where in *The Donna Reed Show* or even *Beulah*, kitchens and living rooms encouraged an amicable coming together of family, in Nancy's dishes are piled high in the sink, children eat potato chips for dinner, and uncles watch inappropriate television shows while stoned on the sofa. Where parental bedrooms once were places of nightly discussions between husband and wife about what to do with the latest childrearing quandary, Nancy lays alone in an oversized bed, tormented by her loneliness and sorrow over a dead husband.

Work also is an adjustment. Without a father/husband to be the sole breadwinner, gender roles are laid askew and the mother/wife, now a widow, must leave her assigned role as homemaker and go outside of the house to earn money. With Nancy assuming different and multiple roles, as both mother and father, caregiver and financial provider, the members of her family take on additional responsibilities as well. With one less adult relative to offer guidance, the children, one a teenager, the other a pre-teen, must assume some accelerated maturity. Similarly, Uncle Andy--an unemployed, under motivated, lovable-yet-unreliable grown-up--becomes the second adult in the house, and as a male, begins to assume the role of father. The family's adaptations may be noble attempts at keeping the unit intact, but done under extreme distress each member's added responsibilities only contribute to the general feeling of bedlam in Nancy's house.

With the loss of her husband, Nancy must move outside of her home, community, and racial demographic, not to mention outside of the law, to find work. Her new-found employment links her with a new location--the city--and a new population--non-white men and women--all of which will have a direct effect on her white suburban identity.

Nancy's job as a drug dealer brings her in contact with another home, in many ways a place distinctly different from her own, yet one that serves as an inspiration for what hers is lacking. Heylia, played by Tonye Patano, a middle-aged, African-American woman, is Nancy's dealer. Putting her own twist on the notion of "women's work," Heylia sells drugs from inside her house—the place of traditional female employment-- and out of her kitchen—the quintessential feminine location. In an added show of distorted and reconfigured domesticity, Heylia not only traffics marijuana, an extremely unladylike profession due to its illegality and potential danger, but business is always conducted in the midst of the most traditional female duties; while baking cookies, or making lunch, Heylia weighs the bags of drugs on her kitchen counter, often times wearing an apron.

The fact that Nancy has to venture out of her pristine "lily white" suburban dwelling, to find economic stability in the form of a job, is already a shock to the suburban system she comes from. That she must learn how to maintain a home from exactly the image her community, historically, was made to reject--the inner city resident and their dwelling—is an added jab at tradition. Furthermore, in direct contrast to Beulah, Heylia represents the complete opposite of a stereotypical black female domestic worker. Fifty years later, the TV tables have turned, and while she is still giving white middle-class, suburbanite women advice from the kitchen, nowadays it is from a place of true authority, her own kitchen where she runs a profitable, self-made business.

In the DVD extras, Romany Malco, who plays Conrad, Heylia's nephew and eventually, Nancy's business partner, explains that, "Nancy has got to teeter-totter between both worlds in order to conduct business. What she finds on our side of the

tracks is a comforting, genuine relationship. Me and my aunt constantly calling her ‘white bitch,’ but at the same time the heart and sincerity, she can feel it.” Nancy has two homes: her own, which she must always be away from in order to try and keep it together, and Heylia’s, located outside of the white suburbs, in the black inner-city. From Heylia’s home, Nancy finds insight into her own domestic unrest. Fed up with her oldest son’s disobedience, Heylia forces some sound advice: “Every night we had family dinner. We were talking about our day, arguing or giving each other the stink eye. All sorts of studies say how family dinners holds things together.” To which Nancy replies: “You guys are better than NPR.” Things do not go as smoothly when Nancy gets home ready to try out Heylia’s remedy. “We’re going to be a family if I have to kill all of you!” She must threaten before getting her household seated around the table. But the connection is made between the two women linking most importantly, their homes and families.

Nancy and Heylia’s relationship is entirely different than any seen before in televised suburbia. Meeting Heylia and her household by working outside of the home, Nancy not only receives countless lesson on how she might run her own house better, but also learns everything there is to know about the drug business. Whereas Beulah’s sage advice functioned as a one-way service for the white people she worked for, Heylia acts on her own accord. She is abrasive and cantankerous, but a valuable mentor nonetheless. Their relationship is as teacher and student, and also that of two businesswomen making money off of each other. Power forms a slippery slope between the experienced black dealer and the novice white buyer.

Coming from a position of innate privilege, because she is white and middle-class, Nancy moves from place to place, and in and out of situations basing so many of

her decisions on arrogant naïveté. Assuming that she could buy pot on good faith, Heylia responds: “If you want weed on credit, you’ve got to leave some collateral...leave your car.” Shocked at first, Nancy learns quickly and hands over her keys. When she questions if her bag of marijuana is underweight, Heylia’s kitchen stands speechless for a minute before bursting into fits of laughter and disbelief. “You never question Heylia’s eyeball. That’s the Rain Man of weed, right there,” clarifies Conrad. “I apologize. I’m still new at this. I stand corrected,” Nancy grovels. Mistakes made from inexperience continuously plague her, and Heylia is quick to correct and criticize; she is an effective, yet harsh tutor. Furthermore, while Nancy is trying to find her footing in the etiquette of drug dealing, she is also oblivious to certain degrees of racial prejudice. One afternoon at Heylia’s, Nancy experiences her “first drive-by shooting.” Stunned with fear, she giggles hysterically, “Is anyone going to call the cops?” Again, with a worldly explanation for everything, Heylia must explain that, “That probably was the cops...white people get soda pop and niggers get drive-bys.”

Suburbia embodies duality: the calm and fearful, perfection and failure, individuality and conformity. It offers some of the best that America can be: home ownership, safe neighborhoods, community; and the worst: conventional, isolationist and homogeneous. In many ways, Nancy personifies these contradictions, imperfections and inconsistencies. She spends almost as much time at Heylia’s home as she does her own, and at this point in her life, the inner city address is most definitely a more relaxing and productive space than her own neighborhood. In West Adams, she can get away from her troubled kids, her broken dishwasher, her lazy brother-in-law and nosy neighbors. Sitting with Heylia and Conrad at their kitchen table, there is always something to eat, and



engaging, grown-up conversation that relates, even if sometimes in a completely new way, to what Nancy is going through, embarking on, and figuring out. Even the unending lectures and chiding from Heylia on the right way to do everything that Nancy is doing wrong, seem a relief, as do the racist nicknames, each uttered with a mix of affection, suspicion and spite. Barbie, snowflake, MILF (Mother I'd Like to Fuck), white lady, over-privileged-white-woman and white bitch, let her know that she is being paid attention to, which in the turmoil of her newly widowed life, must be greatly needed. Although on more than just speaking terms, Nancy and Heylia are not friends. Business roles and class differences keep them at a cordial distance. However, at the same time the illegality of their work provides them with intimate details of each other's lives. This keeps the conversations honest and frank, and establishes a bond of trust between the two women that matters plenty in life, death and the avoidance of a prison sentence.

The complexities and contradictions of suburbia are embedded in the show itself, not only internally in the storyline, but what might also be gleaned from the philosophy of the production team. In the promotional material on the DVD extras, including interviews with cast and crew, there is no mention of themes that pertain to race.

Elizabeth Perkins, who plays one of Nancy's neighbors, at one point exclaims: "Drug use, adultery, eating disorders, as soon as you bring any of those issues into a family drama, you become controversial!" Indeed, but what of the unique and unusual relationship between a white suburban mom and her second home in a predominately working class, African-American neighborhood in urban Los Angeles? Perhaps the show's creators do not find this controversial, or even out of the ordinary, but what gives pause to this notion, is the way in which not a single interview clip mentions the race

dynamic that permeates, uninhibited, throughout the show. In a sense, *Weeds* is a show about race, without ever admitting that it is a show about race. A marketing packet for the second season names one of the show's target audiences under the category of "Subscribers and Non-Subscribing Quality Seekers—with an Edge"<sup>6</sup> as an "African-American skew," while at the same time, the "Important niche targets" focus on those who might be fans of all the top-billed white actors, Mary-Louise Parker, Elizabeth Perkins and Kevin Nealon, with no mention of the black actors, although Tonye Patano and Romany Malco are listed third and fourth in the credit scroll and play significant roles on the show<sup>7</sup> (*Weeds*, Promotional Material 4).

If, as the promotional material proposes, "*Weeds* suggests a kind of 'laugh at yourself' attitude by taking real life difficulties and the less than idealistic realities of human nature and poking fun at them," it also indicates a significant marker in the discussion of race and suburbia (*Weeds*, Promotional Material 6). A show most interesting because of its purpose, even if not wholeheartedly stated, in bringing together a population and location that have always been connected if mostly just by their dubious efforts to be kept apart; race and suburbia have forever been on each other's minds. When asked what June Cleaver would think of the show, Mary-Louise Parker added: "I don't

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<sup>6</sup> Showtime's network tagline is "Quality TV with an edge."

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, in the first season's marketing material, target subscribers are listed as 54 percent male, 46 percent female. Curious for a show whose main protagonist are women and the character's problems seem mostly swayed, even if stereotypically, toward female interests: concerns with the economic and domestic stability of the family, the loss of a husband, romantic relationships, often from the female character's point of view, and a mother's concern for her children.

think June would judge, I think she'd be really sweet about it." A more interesting question would be: what would June do if Heylia or Nancy were her neighbors?

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