

POPULAR TELEVISION AND VISUAL CULTURE: INTENTIONS AND
PERCEPTIONS OF *ALIENS IN AMERICA*

A Dissertation

by

LUDOVIC A. SOURDOT

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2009

Major Subject: Curriculum & Instruction

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Major Subject: Curriculum & Instruction

ABSTRACT

Popular Television and Visual Culture: Intentions and Perceptions
of *Aliens in America*. (August 2009)

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This study examined the intentions of a group of individuals who created the sitcom *Aliens in America* broadcast on the CW Network in 2007-2008 and the ways in which three separate groups (bloggers, TV critics and local television viewers) perceived the show. In doing so I attempted to uncover the pedagogical implications of these intentions and perceptions for visual culture studies.

I used a qualitative approach to conduct this study. I gathered interviews the creators of the show gave to media outlets in 2007 and 2008. I also gathered data from three other distinct groups for this study. First, I conducted focus group interviews with 13 individuals who watched and discussed their perceptions of *Aliens in America*. Second, I surveyed the perceptions of bloggers through a narrative analysis of postings published on the CW network website in 2007-2008. Thirdly, I sampled reviews of the show by TV critics to learn about their perceptions of the show.

This study uncovered three key findings. First, the existence of a gap or disconnect between the ways in which the show was intended by its creators and how it was perceived by selected audiences. The second major finding was the unexpected level of engagement with the show exhibited by bloggers and focus group participants and their deep connection with some of the characters. The third finding involved the use of audio cues in some episodes of the series and its possible influence on viewers to react in a certain way to specific situations.

These findings have specific implications for visual culture studies. First, the show presents an immense potential for use with seasoned educators during workshops. Second, these findings indicate that the use of audio cues in TV shows is problematic for younger audiences and requires more media literacy to take place in the art education classroom. Third, teacher education programs could use the show to train pre-service teachers and help them relate to the type of television programming their students are engaging with on a daily basis.

DEDICATION

To my loving wife Keri and son Luke who believed in me from day one and made all of this possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my committee for their guidance and support throughout my graduate studies. I would like to thank Dr. B.S. Carpenter, II for his tremendous support and guidance throughout this journey. I would also like to thank Dr. Larry Kelly for his encouragement, support and the teaching opportunities he provided me. I would like to thank Dr. Chance Lewis for his nuggets of wisdom. Dr. Patrick Slattery, thank you for your guidance and for always pushing me to do my best.

I would also like to thank Dr. Dennie Smith and the entire staff in the Department of Teaching Learning and Culture who have been very supportive over the past two years.

A special thanks to the focus group participants for their dedication to this study.

I would also like to thank Dr. Jean-François Brun for helping me come to the United States many years ago when I was a student at the Université Jean-Monnet in Saint-Etienne, France.

To my dear friend and mentor Dr. William B. Maynard who has believed in me from the start. Thank you for your words of wisdom, for always making time to answer my questions over the years.

And for my family Mike and Carol Chapman thank you so much for always showing your support, for allowing Keri to “extend” her stays in order for me to finish my work, caring for Luke, and always encouraging me.

Special mention of thanks to the entire Seekatz and Reeh family, it means so much to me to have family like all of you in my life.

And last, but certainly not least to my parents, Alain and Annie, who first encouraged me to learn to speak English, you once told me that it may help me in the future...you were right! Thanks for pushing me to achieve my true potential. To my sister Caroline who gave me the competition I needed to strive for more and to my brother Rodolphe who reminded me of where I had come from and where I could go thanks for your friendship and support.

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INTRODUCTION:

ALIEN IDENTITY, TELEVISION, ART EDUCATION AND VISUAL CULTURE

My interest in Television, Art Education and Visual Culture began in the 1980s, while growing up in France. In this dissertation I use the first person to my parents restricted the time I could spend in front of the television set. Homework had to be completed and carefully checked by my mother, before I could turn on the magic box. There were a few exceptions to the rules of course, one of which, was watching the evening news, and staying up to watch the first half of European cup games when a French team was competing (which did not happen very often). As I grew older, my television privileges expanded, my parents allowed me to watch some television series they deemed appropriate. For example, I remember discovering the settlement of Colorado by pioneers in *Centennial*, cheering for James West and Artemus Gordon in reruns of the *Wild Wild West*. A few years later a new show came along and captivated audiences in France and around the world, *Dallas*. These shows helped me learn about the United States, its history and culture. Professional actors dubbed the dialogues in French; it was only many years later when in the United States that I discovered what J.R. really sounded like.

Despite the fact I grew up in a household where the belief was that there were better things to do than watching television, I still feel I learned a lot from watching television shows. I cannot blame my parents for encouraging me to read and enjoy the

This dissertation follows the model of *The Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*.

outdoors, however, their desire to control my television viewing habits has in part influenced me to discover and watch a lot of television over the years.

Over the years my curiosity for this medium has led me to study it carefully and write a thesis about the role of the media in a criminal justice case. I came to the United States in 1996 and discovered a brand new world, cable television. After earning a degree in Radio-Television and working a short stint in television news I decided to become a teacher and try to transmit what I learned in school, and through my travels to children. While teaching in the middle grades in Texas public schools, I always tried to bring elements of popular culture to the classroom. I felt that it helped my students understand the French culture or a specific news event with connections to the social studies curriculum better. I earned a Master of Education and after teaching for a few years I decided to pursue a PhD in curriculum and instruction with a concentration in culture and curriculum and an emphasis in visual culture. The coursework I completed over the past few years has further helped me understand that television was not only a past time for millions all over the world but also a legitimate field of study with far reaching ramifications for education.

Alien Identity

In this dissertation study I examined the intentions of a group of individuals who created the sitcom *Aliens in America* (Guarascio & Port, 2007) broadcast on the CW Network in 2007-2008 and the ways in which three separate groups (bloggers, TV critics and local television viewers) perceived the show. In doing so I attempted to uncover the pedagogical implications of these intentions and perceptions for visual culture studies.

I first became interested in *Aliens in America* because it describes the struggles of a foreign exchange student coming to America to pursue his education. In the show, Raja Musharraf struggles to adapt to a new environment, culture and customs. While Raja's character is fictional, the difficulties he experiences in the show are very close to what I personally encountered when I came to the United States. Upon watching several episodes of the series, I realized that the "Alien" in America portrayed on the screen was a true reflection of myself thirteen years ago. For example, the first semester of University in the United States I too felt like an outsider. I did not always feel like I belonged. I suddenly realized that the world was a bigger place and that I was just a small town boy from the Southeast of France.

My personal background, life history, and education have clearly influenced my selection of this topic. My upbringing in France, my life experience, as well as my education on two continents have had an impact on my beliefs and values. While working on my bachelor's degree in France I studied the history of Islam for a year. I do not consider myself an expert of Islam, but I feel that my education, travels and readings have helped to further enlighten me. I feel that I have a strong understanding of the history and fundamental tenets of Islam. Not only did my experiences growing up in France, the education I received in the United States while attending University help my worldview but also traveling as a young man visiting foreign countries such as, Australia, The United Kingdom and several other countries in Western Europe. As stated above, this dissertation is not an autobiography, but since the inspiration for this study is deeply rooted in my own personal experiences I feel that using the first person in this

study is appropriate. Over the past several years several scholars have argued that using first person accounts are appropriate in qualitative research. Denzin (1989) described a personal experience story as a narrative study of an individual's personal experience usually found in one or more episodes, private institutions, or communal folklore. In this study I share a few personal experiences as described by Denzin (1989) that provide insight into my own perspective. The examples I also share provide the reader insights into my own identity Slattery gives the following definition for autobiography:

(autobiography) can be understood as a partial narrative or a comprehensive life history of the self, psychoanalytic investigations of the self, analysis of identity constructions, investigations of past, present, and future dimensions of the self by an individual, a written text describing one's life journey and future goals, or possibly even distortions, delusions, and embellishments about one's life history.

(P. Slattery, personal communication, March 7, 2009)

Slattery (2009) and Denzin (1989) tell us that a researcher's voice is not only acceptable within qualitative research, but that it may also help make significant connections between one's experiences within a cultural or social context. In this dissertation I will therefore, use the first person, I feel that Leggo (2008) summarized best my beliefs on inserting autobiographical elements to academic writing:

Because so much of my teaching, writing and researching emerge from the intersections of the personal and the professional, I contend that autobiographical writing is always both personal and professional, and that we need to write autobiographically in order to connect with others. (Leggo 2008, p. 90)

In this dissertation, I not only aim to connect with others, but to share my work about *Aliens in America*, a television sitcom with tremendous possibilities for visual culture studies. Over the past few decades, the television medium has evolved and has become a legitimate area of study by scholars, a brief overview of this evolution informs on the possibilities television presents for education.

Television

Indeed, the development of the cable and satellite industry in the past 25 years has allowed audiences in the United States and around the world to enjoy a wider variety of television programming. In turn, this evolution has sparked the interest of scholars around the globe to investigate television programming, specifically television genres, audience and its effects on TV viewers. For instance the field of television studies has emerged and gained prominence in the past twenty years, Buckingham (2003), Bignell (2004) and McQueen (1998), specifically looked at the way television has evolved over time and all provided ways to analyze and explore television texts. Buckingham (2003) defines the current influence of the media in our lives “the media, it is often argued, have now taken the place of the family, the church and the school as the major socializing influence in contemporary society”(Buckingham, 2003, p. 5). Buckingham’s work informs on the ways the media, including television programming should be analyzed and carefully studied to prepare a new generation of informed students. Bignell (2004) explains that the field of television studies has emerged in part because of the development of popular television around the world; he believes that popular programming is a legitimate site of inquiry specifically because of its large audience:

The academic subject of television studies has taken popular television seriously; because it is the television most people watch the most. This is despite the common criticism in the press, and sometimes in the television industry itself, that popular television is unimportant, 'just' commercial, and lacking in artistic values. (Bignell, 2004, p. 3)

In recent years, television networks have capitalized on the popularity of social networking World Wide Web sites such as *Facebook*, *MySpace*, and *Twitter* to enhance and prolong the viewing experience of television audiences. In 1998, McQueen also emphasized the fact that television programming was a worthy subject of inquiry "How can we afford *not* to study something that has become so central to modern society?" (McQueen, 1998, p. 4). Buckingham (2003), Bignell (2004) and McQueen (1998) all agree that the media, including popular television are important to study and analyze since they occupy such a big part in the lives of Americans. Scholars in the field of education share the view of Buckingham (2003), Bignell (2004) and McQueen (1998) on the need to study popular culture and especially television and its application to educational contexts. Twenty years ago, Giroux & McLaren (1989) saw popular culture as a site of interest for educators "popular culture represents not only a contradictory terrain of struggle, but also a significant pedagogical site that raises important questions about the elements that organize the basis of student subjectivity and experience" (Giroux & McLaren, 1989, p. 238). Over the years several scholars (Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Freeman, 2000; Trier 2005) have investigated the content of television shows,

their research primarily focused on race and stereotypes in television shows. Art educators have also recently looked at television as a site of inquiry and possibilities.

Defining Visual Culture

In recent years, art educators have embraced visual culture as a new paradigm (Duncum, 2006) aimed at providing art teachers with new tools to help students make meaning of the visual environment they live in. Tavin (2003) positioned visual culture within three threads:

Phenomenological: a description of the present-day condition in which experience, subjectivities, and consciousness are profoundly affected by images and the practices of seeing, showing, and imagining. *Substantial* an inclusive register of images, artifacts, objects, instrumentaria, and apparatuses.

Pedagogical a transdisciplinary project that attempts to interpret and analyze the wealth of visual experiences in and through contemporary culture [Italics in the original]. (Tavin, 2003, p. 202)

In this dissertation, I am going to focus on two specific threads. First, the phenomenological thread, I believe that individuals who watch a television show such as *Aliens in America* may gain a new perspective or consciousness about Muslims or the ways in which Americans portrayed in the show react to Raja the Pakistani-Muslim exchange student.

Second, the pedagogical thread, in this study I will look at the intentions of the creators of the show, as well as the perceptions of focus group participants, bloggers and television critics to the show. I will also analyze the pedagogical implications of these

intentions and perceptions for visual culture studies. Freedman (2003) provided a comprehensive definition for visual culture:

The visual arts make up most of visual culture, which is all that is humanly formed and sensed through vision or visualization and shapes the way we live our lives. Use of the term *visual culture* inherently provides context for the visual arts in its effects and points to the connections between popular and fine arts form. It includes the fine arts, tribal arts, advertising, popular films and video, folk art, television and other performance, housing and apparel design, computer game and toy design and other forms of visual production and communication. Visual culture is inherently interdisciplinary and increasingly multi-modal.

[Italics in the original] (Freedman, 2003, p. 1)

Freedman (2003) agrees with Tavin (2003) who also saw visual culture as a project that transcends several disciplines. Duncum (2003) described the ways in which visual culture emerged from cultural studies and how much it owed to this field. However, my focus for this study is the field of visual culture.

Following the lead of Tavin (2003), Freedman (2003) and Duncum (2003) many scholars also agreed that visual culture should be an intricate part of the art education curriculum. Darts (2007) perhaps summed up best the rationale of these scholars “Examining the popular images, stories, and products that inform, legitimate, glamorize, and communicate our evolving beliefs, values, and understanding is now not only a natural component of contemporary art education but, increasingly, a necessary one” (Darts, 2007, p. 83). Several other scholars have showed their support for a visual

culture curriculum that allows students to make meaning of their everyday visual experiences, through interpretation and analysis images into the ways in which visual culture could find its place within the art education curriculum (Duncum, 2003; Hermann, 2005; Gude 2007). Visual culture is, therefore, about engaging students in the discovery of the visual in their everyday experience (Duncum, 2004). It is about exploring, questioning, making meaning of images through critical analyses and conversations in and out of the Art classroom. In the past ten years research involving the integration of visual culture in the art education classroom has blossomed. For instance, Tavin (2002) suggested using advertisements to help students develop critical skills to interpret elements of visual culture. He also offered with his colleague Anderson (Tavin & Anderson, 2003) ways to deconstruct Disney animated movies and merchandise in the elementary classroom. Parks (2004) looked at race representation in the movie *Bamboozled*, while Chung (2007) focused on sexism in hip-hop music videos. These few examples show the broad range of projects undertaken by scholars in the field of visual culture; despite their apparent differences, all projects have in common the goal to help students develop critical knowledge about representations of age, gender, race, religion and sexuality. In recent years researchers in art education have looked into the television programming as part of the visual culture curriculum. Freedman & Schuler (2003) investigated television programming and recommended that it should be viewed and interpreted through multiple layers, they believe that students in the classroom should “be encouraged to write, make art and talk about their perception of information presentation, formal qualities, character development” (Freedman & Schuler, p. 23).

They also noted that there is a need for more research to uncover students' interactions with popular visual form. It appears that this need is even more pressing now because of new television shows that specifically target young viewers and contain material that may shape the ways in which they view people who are different from themselves.

New Shows and the Need for More Research

In the past few years the television landscape has evolved tremendously in the United States. Premium cable channels such as Home Box office (HBO) and Showtime have produced television shows that have been innovative and at times controversial in nature (*Big Love, Sex and the City*). Cable channels such as Comedy Central have also offered more controversial programming with shows such as *South Park* and more recently *Reno 911!* The increased dominance of reality TV in recent years appears to have also influenced TV executives into promoting shows that are more provocative than in years past (i.e.: *Nip/Tuck*). In *Reno 911!*, as is also the case with several other shows, humor is very often achieved while poking fun at a character's religion, gender, ethnicity, physical appearance and sexual orientation.

Therefore, there is a need for more research on the television medium and its implications for visual culture. I chose to focus my attention on the television show *Aliens in America* broadcast on the CW network between October 2007 and May 2008. I selected this particular show because I felt it offered an interesting combination of factors worthy of inquiry.

Why Investigate *Aliens in America*?

Aliens in America primarily deals with the interactions of a young Pakistani Muslim in a predominantly white state (Wisconsin) in the post 9/11 era was especially interesting to me. The plotline that consists of transplanting outsiders to a new environment is not revolutionary; this concept has been used in many occasions on television most notably with the *Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971), *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000) and *The O.C* (2003-2007). In the *Beverly Hillbillies* a hillbilly family leaves a southern state to move to California, the show chronicled the clash of cultures between the hillbillies and the sophisticated Californians. In the *Beverly Hills 90210*, the Walsh family moved from Minnesota to Beverly Hills where Brenda and Brandon had to adapt to a new lifestyle. In *The O.C* (2003-2007) a wealthy family adopts a troubled teenager, the show centered on the interactions of the adopted son with a group of local teenagers. *Aliens in America* is the first sitcom featuring a Muslim character in a starring role. I also felt that a show focusing on a Muslim character evolving in a predominantly white region of the United States deserved further scrutiny. *Aliens in America* is a sitcom set in suburban Wisconsin and centers on the lives of a White family who welcome a foreign exchange student into their home. The Tolchuks anticipate that their teenage son Justin will become more popular at school by associating with an international student. In the first episode, their plan takes an unexpected turn when the family expecting to host a blond-haired, blue-eyed Scandinavian high school student, instead meets Raja, a Muslim teenager from Pakistan. The title of the show, *Aliens in America*, is a play on words in that the lead characters, Justin an American student and Raja a Pakistani exchange

student, are both treated, constructed, and consider themselves as *aliens* at school and at home. They are both aliens in different ways and this reality renders them quite similar. *Aliens in America* is also interesting because it portrays teenagers interacting with one another in and outside of school. The show also deals with the representations of interactions between Muslims and Americans in the post 9/11 era and presented many areas of interest for this researcher. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the end of the Cold War have had unexpected repercussions for Arabs and Muslims around the world. The Hollywood industry gradually phased out bad guys from the former soviet bloc and replaced them with villains from the Middle East. In his book, *Reel Bad Arabs, how Hollywood vilifies a People*, Shaheen (2001) examined more than 900 films that portrayed Arab Muslims as villains. He concluded that the repetition of images portraying Arab Muslims as bad people in movies is damaging to Arabs and Muslims around the world because of the popularity of movies produced by Hollywood on all continents. Sut Jhally produced a documentary film with the same title based Shaheen's work in 2006.

The negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in movies and in the news media has become even more problematic since 9/11. Most of the plots in *Aliens in America* originated from an inherent fear of what is foreign reinforced by the events of 9/11. In the weeks and months following 9/11 the representations of Muslims were negative and may have participated in the backlash experienced by Muslims across the United States. The climate following 9/11, the involvement of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq motivated the creators of *Aliens of America* to create a show about a

Muslim Pakistani coming to America (Gross & Miller, 2007). An examination of the representations and perceptions of Muslims after 9/11 and the description of specific events that took place at that time is necessary to understand why *Aliens in America* is significant and worthy of inquiry.

Representations and Perceptions of Muslims in the Post 9/11 Era

Aliens in America premiered on October 1st 2007, six years after the attacks occurred in New York on 9/11/2001. In the weeks and months that followed this tragedy, Muslims across the country were victims of verbal and physical abuse by individuals unjustly blaming them for the actions of a small group of fanatics. It appears that the portrayal of Muslims in the media has fueled that sentiment of hate toward these groups. Ali-Karamali (2008) offered an interesting assessment of the situation in the weeks and months following 9/11:

The media constantly gives a disproportionate airing to the minuscule percentage of extremist Muslims so that we get the impression that all Muslims are just like them. After the September 11th attacks, 20 hijackers illogically became the symbol for the religion of some 1, 400,000,000 people. When non-Muslims commit crimes, we do not assume all their co-religionists are criminals. (Ali-Karamali, 2008, p.219)

In a recent study released by The Pew Research Center on the perceptions of Muslims by Americans shows how little the general public truly knows about Islam and appears to operate on perceptions and assumptions about Muslims, 58 percent of respondents said that “they know little or nothing about Islam's practices” (Pew Research Center, 2007, p,

1), the survey also indicated that “Most Americans believe that their own religion has little in common with Islam”. In a different study also conducted by the Pew Research Center and released in August 2007, Americans said that they “had a positive impression of "Muslim Americans" (53 percent) than of "Muslims" (43 percent)”. According to the respondents to the study the news media had the biggest influence on their impression of Muslims; it was especially true “among those who express an unfavorable opinion of Muslims”, they explained that what “they hear and read in the media” mostly influenced them. Both studies from the Pew Research Center confirm the findings of a study conducted by Madani (1999), who ten years ago examined the depiction of Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. News media. His findings already revealed the existence of an anti Arab and anti-Muslims sentiment in the news media.

The attacks on America on 9/11 combined with America’s invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan appear to have contributed to perpetuate the erroneous image of Islam as a violent faith. The Pew Research Center investigated this question in September 2007, and found that “a 45 percent plurality says Islam is more likely to encourage violence, while 39 percent disagree”, the study also revealed that when respondents were asked for “a single word that best describes their impression of Islam, far more Americans mention negative words than positive ones” (Pew, 2007, p.6). Negative words mentioned by Americans included “fanatic, different, confused/confusing, radical, strict, terror/terrorism, violent” (p, 6), positives words included “devout, peaceful, and dedicated”. Here again, the negative words outweigh the positive ones by far, this survey

is significant and offer a some insight into the way Americans see Muslims living in this country in 2007.

Other media outlets may have contributed to fuel the negative image of Islam with the American public. In the movie *The Kingdom* (Berg, 2007) released in September 2007, a team of FBI agents travels to Saudi Arabia to investigate a terrorist attack against an American compound in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This action movie sends a very negative message to moviegoers about Islam. San Francisco chronicle movie critic Mick LaSalle summarized the movie and its possible effects on Americans in his review of the film “The Kingdom taps into the current American fear of all things Middle Eastern, re-creating what could be described as a collective American nightmare” (LaSalle, 2007, p. E-1). The movie did not achieve blockbuster status, and grossed 45 million dollars at the U.S box office; the film earned an R rating upon its release, therefore most of the people who saw the movie were over the age of 18. However, this movie also grossed an estimated 77 million dollars in rental fees (DVD-Home Video Rentals, 2008) since its release on DVD. It is hard to estimate the negative impact of this specific film on moviegoers; it is however, safe to conclude that a movie that perpetuates stereotypes about the Middle East and specifically the Muslim faith is only going to fuel the negative image of Muslim around the globe.

In recent years the National media has tried to enlighten Americans about Islam. Iran-born C.N.N. reporter Christine Amanpour presented a series of in-depth investigations into three globally prominent religions (Catholicism, Islam and Judaism) worshiped around the world (Amanpour, 2008). In *God's Warriors* she provided a

historical background and pertinent analyses aimed at informing the American public about the three religions. In her reporting Amanpour managed to shy away from the stereotypical view of Islam usually found on network news, television series and as mentioned earlier in motion pictures.

In the months following the attacks on America, Muslims living in the United States were harassed. For example, a week after September 11th 2001 a man drove his car at high speed up the steps and into the front door of the Grand Mosque at the Islamic Center of Greater Cleveland in Parma, Ohio (Newsnet5.com, January, 9, 2002). Several incidents involving Muslims took place on passenger planes. In November 2006, police removed and arrested 6 imams from a US Airways flight in Minneapolis, Minnesota after a passenger raised suspicions about their pre-flight prayers and boarding activities (Browning, 2007). Muslims and Arabs were profiled and the victims of stereotypes. Multicultural educator Walter Stephan reviewed the body of research on the subject of prejudice and stereotyping. Based on his examination of research he concludes that stereotypes are “frequently negative, overgeneralized, and incorrect” (Stephan, 1999, p.16), this definition summarizes very accurately the depiction of Muslims in the news media following the attacks on 9/11. News reports were too often inaccurate and portrayed Islam as a religion of hate. In his research Stephan also points out that “people tend to pay more attention to information confirming stereotypes and remember it better than disconfirming evidence” (p.17). This last finding shows that it would take a significant amount of positive media coverage in order to change the way TV audiences feel about Muslims.

The media coverage of Muslims living in this country is as stated above, misleading and inaccurate, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in May 2007 revealed that contrary to the common belief perpetuated by the news media that the Muslims living in America were not violent and living in poverty but rather peaceful law abiding citizens who believe that “hard work pays off in this society” (Pew, 2007, p1). In July 2007, the weekly newsmagazine *Newsweek* published a special report on “Islam in America” and specifically looked at the lives of several families living in the United States. They reported enjoying their lives in the United States especially the fact women were able to wear headscarves in public (Miller, 2007). The story also revealed that Americans are also respectful of the religious practices of Muslims living in this country. A *Newsweek* poll conducted in 2007 showed that a majority of Americans are open to the idea of Muslim women wearing headscarves in public places “69 percent of Americans said they thought Muslim American students should be able to wear headscarves in class” (Miller, 2007, p.28). Another individual interviewed for the story praised the Americans for their acceptance of his faith and explained that it was easier to practice Islam in America than in England. The body of work conducted by the Pew Research Center, the council on American-Islamic relation and *Newsweek* clearly indicates that the Muslims living in America are contrary to common belief “middle class and mostly mainstream.” (Pew, 2007, p.1)

In the Special report on Islam in America published by *Newsweek* in July 2007 several individuals also expressed concerns about the treatment of Muslims in America in the post 9/11 era, one individual specifically said that the anti-Muslim sentiment in the

country is getting “worse, not better” (Miller, 2007, p. 25). This anecdotal experience reflects accurately a trend observed by the Council on America-Islamic Relations, The C.A.I.R is recognized as the largest American Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. In 2006 the C.A.I.R recorded 2,467 civil rights complaints, compared to 1,972 cases reported in 2005, the group reports that this number “constitutes a 25.1 percent increase in the total number of complaints from 2005” (C.A.I.R, 2007). The group also received 167 reports of anti-Muslim hate crimes, a 9.2 percent increase from the 153 complaints received in 2005. It appears that a new anti-Muslim backlash has emerged in the United States in the past few years. This phenomenon is unfortunately, not new and started in the days following the 9/11 attacks. This short literature review shows that the misrepresentation of Muslims and Arabs in the media often leads to misunderstanding with the American public.

Aliens in America first aired on the CW in October 2007. However, David Guarascio and Moses Port (the creators of the show) started planning for the sitcom in 2005. In an interview with National Public Radio (N.P.R), they explained that they used the geopolitical situation between the United States and the rest of the world as a source of inspiration (Gross & Miller, 2007). Therefore, the show cannot be dissociated from the geopolitical context of the post 9/11 era. That is why investigating what the creators of *Aliens in America* intended to accomplish when producing the show and how selected audiences perceived it is critical in this particular geopolitical context.

However there are several other reasons why *Aliens in America* deserved a closer examination.

The first reason has to do with the fact the CW network is the only broadcast network that targets young adults between the ages of 18 and 34. Several shows broadcast on this network portray teenagers and children, therefore people that are younger than the targeted audience are likely to watch these shows. The CW network emerged after the WB network (owned by Time Warner) and the United Paramount Network (owned by CBS) ceased their broadcasting operations in September 2006 (Seid, 2006). The acronym CW combines the “C” from CBS and the “W” from Time Warner. The decision to combine the two operations came after years of low ratings for the two networks combined with losses in advertising revenue. In order to reach their goal of reaching young adults between the ages of 18 and 34 the network has developed a strong presence on the web to support and promote their programming. For example, the CW has set up several “lounges” or online communities on its web site to allow viewers to interact, and share ideas and feelings about the show with other viewers across the country. The CW is also very active on the social networking site *Facebook* where viewers have access to previews of their favorite show, watch behind the scene footage and interviews of cast members. The CW’s target audience combined with its innovative efforts to reach younger viewers on the World Wide Web through blogs and social networking influenced my decision to investigate a show broadcast on the CW network.

Second, I was interested in investigating *Aliens in America* because this show and others such as *Reno 911!* and *South Park* achieve humor while poking fun at a character’s religion, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. I was interested in finding out how television viewers, bloggers and television critics would read, react and

perceive the show. I was also curious to find out about the appropriateness of achieving humor about the events that took place on 9/11/2001.

In addition, I was curious to find out the possibilities *Aliens in America* presents for the visual culture curriculum; especially the kind of experiences students in K-12 settings as well as preservice art education teachers could gain from analyzing and deconstructing such a television program.

Statement of the Problem

Aliens in America is a visual text with important implications for the field of art education. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the intentions of a group of individuals who produced this sitcom, as well as the reactions of selected audiences to the show. This work establishes the pedagogical implications of these intentions and perceptions for visual culture studies.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- 1) What were the intentions of the individuals who created *Aliens in America*?
- 2) How did focus group participants, bloggers and Televisions critics perceive *Aliens in America*?
- 3) What are the pedagogical implications of the intentions of the creators of *Aliens in America* and the perceptions of the show by selected groups of viewers for visual culture education?

Delimitations

This study investigated the sitcom *Aliens in America* broadcast on *the CW* network between October 2007 and May 2008. A panel of television viewers residing in the Bryan/ College Station and Houston metro area representative of the network's target audience was selected to participate in focus group interviews. This study focuses on *Aliens in America*, the historical context during the time it was produced. This study also looked at the pedagogical implications of this show for visual culture education.

Definition of Terms

According to the online version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word intentions come from intend and means "to have in mind as a purpose or goal" (intend, *Merriam-Webster online dictionary*, 2009). The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides several synonyms to intentions that include "purpose, aim, objective or goal" (intentions, *Merriam-Webster online dictionary*, 2009). For this study, I considered the word "intentions" broadly. First, I looked at what the creators/writers set to accomplish through the show. Secondly, I looked into what means they used to reach their goal.

Perceptions: I also used this term in this study to describe the ways in which focus group participants, television critics, and bloggers experienced, understood and interpreted the sitcom *Aliens in America*.

Organization of the Study

The remainder of this study is organized into five sections, a bibliography, and appendices in the following way. The second section presents a review of literature of the evolution of television during the 20th and early 21st century. This section also

reviews recent trends in art education specifically visual culture, and television as a site of inquiry within this field. In the third section, I detail my research design and the rationale for analyzing interviews given by the creators of the show, using focus groups, analyzing blog postings and the reviews of the show by television critics. I provide an explanation of the data collection process in section four as well as an analysis of the data and a discussion of the findings. The fifth section contains the summary, conclusions, implications of findings for visual culture education and direction for future research.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Aliens in America aired on the CW Network from October 2007 to May 2008.

This show was different from others broadcast at the time because of its subject matter and the marketing tools utilized to promote it. A show such as *Aliens in America* appears to be the result of several changes within the television industry over time. Furthermore, one cannot understand how *Aliens in America* came about without a clear understanding of the ways in which television programming has evolved in the United States and in Western Europe since the 1990s. Therefore, I present a review of literature and a brief history of major events that affected television programming and viewing habits in this country to understand the context in which *Aliens in America* can be placed. In this section, I also provided a literature of the field of visual culture as it pertains to this study, including the pedagogical repercussions of the events that followed 9/11 for visual culture.

An Evolving Landscape

Technology has made the television medium available to a majority of the American population and the World over the past fifty years. In the 1950s, Americans enjoyed their favorite programs on black and white television sets. On June 12, 2009 the switch to digital television will be complete and every household in the country will be able to receive watch TV with a vastly improved picture and sound quality. This transition is one of the many changes that have enabled the television medium to enhance the viewing experience for millions of people. In return, over the years, the number of hours spent watching television by adults and children has dramatically

increased. Cable and satellite TV now allow viewers to be connected to the rest of the world 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Television programming has also evolved in many ways since the 1950s, however it appears that what Americans watch today can be traced back to the 1990s. Watson (2008) argues that a shift in the quality and content took place in the 1990s:

As the 1990s advanced, so much of entertainment television seemed to be a celebration of pure irresponsibility, designed to shock and appeal to the most base instincts in human nature. The comical presentation of unconscionable acts, such as torturing act in a *Beavis and Butt-Head* cartoon, had taken on the mantle of avant-garde despite its crass commercial intentions. Those on television who violated commonly held canons of decency or politeness achieved prominence and profit, with no apparent penalty to be paid. (Watson, 2008, p. 195)

At first glance, Watson's analysis may sound a bit harsh; however, the fact that she chose an example from *Beavis and Butt-Head* broadcast on the cable channel MTV between 1993 and 1998 shows the influence and impact of the music television network. After its launch in 1981, MTV slowly departed from a lineup consisting of music 24 hours a day/seven days a week to a more diversified programming. MTV is credited for providing America's youth with groundbreaking programming, the network is credited for launching *The Real World*, a new incarnation of the reality television genre pioneered by *An American Family* broadcast on PBS during the 1973 television season (Roman, 2005). The rise of MTV's popularity in the 1990s has pushed other networks to provide viewers with more controversial programming.

Such shows include *The Jerry Springer Show*, *Ricky Lake* and *Jenny Jones*. Watson (2008) blames them for contributing as what she saw as the “sleazing of America” (p. 126). Bignell (2004) provided a detailed account of what may happen during a typical show, his description matches Watson’s overall feeling of talk shows:

The most commented-upon feature of these programmes is the prevalence of aggressive physical behavior when guests confront each other in front of the cameras and the audience. For example, heterosexual couples appear as guests and suddenly it is revealed that the secret lover of one of them is also present without their knowledge. The confrontation between one of the partners and the lover has given rise to fist fights between them, the throwing of furniture across the set, and the necessity for burly security guards to intervene from the edges of the television studio to separate the combatants. (Bignell, 2004, p. 124)

Leistyna and Alper (2009) were especially critical of these shows, blaming them for portraying working class families in a bad way and providing a questionable cure to the problem “they often have programs about working-class children who are out of control. A popular response is to send these deviant youths to military boot camp or prison and televise the spectacle.” (Leistyna & Alper, 2009, p. 516)

In the late 1990s several non-profit organizations in the Chicago area (where the show is taped) pressured *The Jerry Springer Show* into cleaning up its act and eliminate the airing of fights between guests. Jerry Springer complied; the ratings went down for a time, and back up. In 1998 Jerry Springer also starred in the movie *The Ringmaster*, where he played the host of a controversial television show, in 2003, *Jerry Springer: the*

Opera a musical inspired by Springer's show premiered in London. Today, *Jerry Springer* is still available in nationwide syndication. Another prominent talk show of that era was *Jenny Jones*, it made the headlines in March 1995; Quail, Razzano & Skalli, (2005) summarized the tragedy that took place following an appearance on the show "Scott Amedure came to the show concerning secret crushes to announce his interest in his friend, Jonathan Schmitz. The homophobic Schmitz became outraged at his "ambush" on national television, and shot and killed his friend three days later" (Quail et al. 2005, p. 38). These events were chronicled in the documentary *Talked to Death* broadcast on HBO in March 1997 (Nevins, 1997). *Jenny Jones* was among other shows like *Ricki Lake*, *Sally Jesse Raphael*, *The Phil Donahue Show* and *Montel Williams* who had their glory days in the 1990s and were cancelled or not renewed by their distributors/syndicators in recent years. Quail, Razzano & Skalli (2005) perhaps best summarized the unique culture of daytime talk shows as being a type of vulture culture " (vulture culture) is best understood as the process by which the media scavenge the narratives, discourses, knowledges, and the everyday commonsense of our culture and present them back to us as information, spectacle, and entertainment." (Quail, Razzano & Skalli, 2005, p. 3)

While others were failing, Oprah Winfrey host of *The Oprah Winfrey show*, stayed atop the ratings by modifying the concept of her program. Over the years she has abandoned controversial social issues and instead now focuses on positive topics, well being, ways to improve one's health and the promotion of charitable causes. The cancellation of traditional talk shows marked the end of an era for daytime television. In

the years that followed the landscape would be redefined by new programs imported from Western Europe.

The year 2000 marked the beginning of a new era for television programming in the United States, CBS television broadcast the adaptation of the Dutch reality television program *Big Brother*. This concept emerged in the Netherlands; Bignell (2004) provides the following definition for reality TV “programmes where the unscripted behavior of ‘ordinary people’ is the focus of interest” (Bignell, 2004, p. 100). Television audiences reacted positively to this new genre of programming. In *Big Brother* ten carefully selected candidates lived in a house equipped with cameras and were observed 24/7 and for three months. Each member selected two individuals for banishment, members of the household and the public decided their fate every week. A few weeks after *Big Brother* premiered another reality show, *Survivor Borneo* hit the airwaves. The success was immediate; audiences were captivated by this show where 16 people spend 39 days stranded on a deserted island and where their every move was captured by camera crews. In the following months, several broadcast and cable networks embraced the new reality TV genre and were not only asked to watch but also to participate in new shows being developed. Since 2000, reality TV has evolved and migrated to cable networks big and small. In *American Idol* a panel of judges and the public select the next singing star. Other networks go further, television viewers are now able to get *Supper Nanny*, a show that can help parents communicate and raise their children, or they can turn to the many home improvement shows to renovate their existing dwelling, flip a house or simply redecorate their living room. New concepts are being introduced every year, some

pushing the limits of good taste, like getting plastic surgery on television or shows where women compete against each other to win the heart of an eligible bachelor.

The current decade saw the return to prominence of dramas produced on premium channels such as Home Box Office (HBO) or Showtime. One show in particular is credited for helping the premium network's renaissance: *The Sopranos*. This show premiered in 1999 and quickly earned praise from critics and viewers; earning in the process multiple Emmy awards. Carter (2005) noted that the show drew large audiences despite the relatively limited availability of HBO compared to traditional networks:

The drama about a New Jersey mob family has won more Emmy awards than any other show on cable TV and has frequently drawn audiences larger than programs competing against it on broadcast networks even though HBO is available in only about a third as many homes (Carter, 2005).

Bignell (2004) attributes the success of *The Sopranos* to a clever mix of different genres that is especially appealing to viewers:

The Sopranos contains a mix of genres—family story and mob gangster show – and has achieved the status of ‘quality television’: aesthetically interesting, psychologically and morally complex yet sufficiently connected to existing genres and forms to draw large audiences. (Bignell, 2004, p.139)

The Sopranos ran on HBO for nine years (1999-2007), reruns are now available on the cable network A&E and on DVD. While *The Sopranos* rewrote what was regarded as acceptable in terms of violence and dialogues on television, *Sex and the City* another

very successful show that had an eight year run (1998-2004) also on HBO, the show focused on:

The collective and individual day-to-day activities of four women friends in New York. The four characters are very rarely seen at work, but are wealthy enough to spend much of the on-screen time shopping, going to parties, lunching with each other and dating wealthy professional men. (Bignell, 2004, p. 216)

Creeber (2006) wonders if *Sex and the City* is an example of “third wave feminism” (p.55), while Bignell (2004), sees it as “an example of the representation of women and feminine sexuality in popular television.” *Sex and the City* was a critical and commercial success, some opposed it because of its dialogues, other praised its innovative plots and the fact that for once women were in charge. The broadcast networks took notice and realized that in order to bring viewers back they would have to be creative. The ABC network owned by Disney released two new shows in during the 2004-2005 season, *Lost* follows the lives of several individuals who after surviving a plane crash try to adapt to living on a deserted island, while *Grey’s Anatomy* follows a group of surgical interns in and out of Seattle grace hospital. These two shows are significant since they are representative of new marketing strategies launched by the American broadcasting corporation (ABC) and other major cable outlets. These networks set up multimedia platforms to promote their shows, spark interests in the public and make devoted fans out of the viewers. Newspaper and magazine advertisement campaigns are now supplemented by exclusive previews on the network’s World Wide Web site. In the past five years, the American broadcasting Network (ABC)

has become a leader in web presence to promote shows.” The network spared no expenses in promoting the show; it even created a web site for Oceanic airlines, the fictional airline whose jetliner crashed on the island (Oceanic Air, 2003). ABC also markets tee-shirts with lines or quotes from Grey’s *Anatomy* on its web site. Two blogs based on fictional characters (the nurses in the surgical unit where most of the characters work, and Joe who bartends at the Emerald, the character’s favorite spot to unwind) are also available for viewers to learn more about plots and voice their opinion through posts. *Grey’s* fans can even sign up to receive updates about upcoming episodes on their cell phones. TV viewers can also catch up on their favorite show online where every episode is streamed the day after the show airs on ABC. They may also elect to download their favorite episodes from iTunes, *Lost* was one of the first Television shows offered on iTunes in October 2005 (Apple Inc, 2005).

These marketing strategies are new and were made possible because of an increase in the number of households in the United States with broadband Internet access. *Lost* and *Grey’s Anatomy* are not only relevant because of their marketing strategies but also because of the quality of the plots. According to Johnson (2005), the fact is that these types of shows make viewers think:

Some narratives force you to do work to make sense of them, while others just let you settle into the couch and zone out. Part of that cognitive work comes from following multiple threads, keeping often densely interwoven plotlines distinct in your head as you watch. But another part involves the viewer’s “filling in”: making sense of information that has been either deliberately withheld or

deliberately left obscure. Narratives that require that their viewers fill in crucial elements take that complexity to a more demanding level. To follow the narrative, you aren't just asked to remember. You're asked to analyze. This is the difference between intelligent shows and shows that force you to be intelligent. (Johnson, 2005, pp. 63-64)

It appears that shows such as *Aliens in America* are the result of a reaction of broadcast networks to the success of shows offered on premium cable networks such as HBO and Showtime. In order to compete with *The Sopranos* and *Sex and The City* the broadcast networks and cable channels such as Comedy Central have offered more controversial programming to audiences with shows such as *South Park* and more recently *Reno 911!* The increased dominance of reality TV in recent years has also pushed TV executives to promote and offer shows that are more provocative than in years past (i.e.: *Nip/Tuck*). In *Reno 911!*, as it is also the case with several other shows, humor is very often achieved while poking fun at a character's religion, gender, ethnicity, physical appearance and sexual orientation. *Aliens in America* falls under this new wave of more provocative television programming.

Television programming is not static, it evolves and adapts to new technology, viewers crave interactivity (Johnson, 2005) and enjoy being challenged to think about a complicated plot in *Lost*, identifying with bad guys such as *The Sopranos* in the comfort of their living room, fantasizing about romance and love with *Sex and the City* or simply going back to their high school years and identifying with characters and issues encountered by the characters in *Aliens in America*.

A New Recent Trend: Participatory Culture

In recent years another trend has slowly emerged, participatory culture. This is especially true about television; more networks are using the web to promote their shows. The computer screen has become an extension of the television screen. TV viewers are now able to prolong their experience and exchange ideas with other people across the country. Jenkins (2006) explained that this participative culture did not come about easily “the concept of the active audience, so controversial two decades ago, is now taken for granted by everyone involved in and around the media industry. New technologies are enabling consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content” (Jenkins, 2006, p. I). Consumers of media, especially television viewers are now encouraged to react, post their opinion about the shows they watch, blog about it, create new content and share it with the world on youtube.com. One Cable channel, VH1 who first broadcast in the 1980s and was regarded as a sister channel to MTV, targeting an older audience has embraced participatory culture. The Channel has changed its slogan to reflect its new strategy, “watch and discuss” has replaced “music first” (Baker, 2008, p.11). The network has also developed stand alone web sites and even panned blog parties for viewers across America during the finale of their hit shows. The CW which broadcast *Aliens in America* also opened its website to viewers through virtual community or lounges. *Aliens in America* was specifically selected because the CW network embraced that new trend of participatory culture pioneered by the ABC network and VH1. Blogs posted by viewers of *Aliens in America* are studied extensively

in this study, the example of VH1 presented above helps contextualize and make meaning of the strategy pursued by the CW network.

The development of the cable and satellite industry in the past 25 years has allowed audiences in the United States and around the world to enjoy a wider variety of television programming. A closer look at the ways in which scholars have investigated popular culture and television and its relation to education provided me with interesting background to frame my study of *Aliens in America*.

Popular Culture, Television and the Challenges for Educators

The television medium falls under the broader umbrella of popular culture. In 1987 Art educator Paul Duncum defined popular culture as “as a mass-produced, mass-distributed, and mass consumed artifacts; typically involving content that is relatively clear and simple; and produced by a small group of professionals for the consumption of others” (Duncum, 1987, p. 6). Cultural scholars Joe Kincheloe and Peter McLaren see popular culture as a domain of struggle

Dominant and subordinate cultures deploy differing systems of meaning based on the forms of knowledge produced in their cultural domain. Popular culture with its TV, movies, video games, computers, music, dance and other productions plays an increasingly important role in critical research on power and domination (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p.310).

In 1994, another scholar of critical pedagogy, Henry Giroux, called for educators “to be informed by [the] emphasis on popular culture as a terrain of significant political and pedagogical importance” (Giroux, 1994). He believed that popular culture is a

powerful influence on students; he wrote, “How we understand and come to know ourselves and others cannot be separated from how we are represented and imagine ourselves” (Giroux, 1997, p.14). Giroux believes that the news media and popular culture are powerful forces that influence the way children see themselves and others.

Brady (1997) also wrote about the relationship between education and popular culture:

School is an important site where the construction of a narrow range of identities not only takes place but can be challenged pedagogically...it is around the relationship between popular culture and education that an approach can be theorized that will enable people (teachers, parents, boys, girls, administrators) to intervene in the formation of their own subjectivities and to enable and exercise power in the interest of transforming forms of domination and conditions of oppression into emancipatory practices and democratic possibilities. Educators must become more attentive to the various pedagogical sites (both in and out of schools) in which the politics of remembering and forgetting produce different narratives of a national past, present and future (Brady , 1997, p. 224).

Brady(1997) was concerned with the ways in which the relationship between popular culture and education could be beneficial and lead to emancipatory and democratic practices. It appears, that several scholars have agreed and followed Brady (1997) in the study of what she described as “the relationship between popular culture and education” (p. 224). Giroux (2000) revisited the work of cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall and concluded that Hall’s work “provides an important theoretical framework for developing and expanded notion of public pedagogy” (Giroux, p. 341). Wright & Sandlin (2009)

describe public pedagogy as “a term referring to the educational force of popular media” (Wright & Sandlin, p. 118) they also looked at the ways in which popular culture’s applications to adult education and noted that popular culture presents is a powerful pedagogical tool:

Individual life experiences, beliefs, morals, ethics, political choices, and personal Philosophies-our identities-are filtered through the images, commentary, and artful editing of the forces that operate through popular culture. Popular culture as a facilitator of, and catalyst for, self-directed learning can bring about learning that is far more powerful, lasting, and lifelong than learning in formal educational settings and other traditionally researched areas of teaching and learning. It must also be a site for ever-expanding educational research into that learning. (Wright & Sandlin, 2009, p. 135)

While Wright and Sandlin recognize the power of popular culture for lifelong learning they also recommend that more be conducted on the subject. Sandlin along with Schultz and Burdick brought together a group of artists, scholars, activists and public intellectuals to help define the field of public pedagogy. This work informs on the “concepts and practices” of public pedagogy and “provides new ways of understanding educational practice, both within and without schools” (Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, in press). Brady (1997), Giroux (2000), Wright & Sandlin (2009), Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick (in press) all agree that popular is a powerful pedagogical tool, they also realize that more research needs to be conducted on this topic. However, popular culture is also worthy of inquiry because of the challenges it poses to educators across the country.

Molnar (2000, 2004) has denounced the commercialization of schools in the United States. He explained that school districts rely more and more on corporate sponsors to help them balance their budgets “One of our most disturbing trends is schools attempting to raise money by engaging in activities that undermine their curricular message and, in some instances, promote unhealthy student lifestyles” (Molnar, 2000, p. 24)

He also explained that in many instances schools rely heavily on private sources of funding and even purchase “curriculum materials produced largely by or for an outside corporate entity”. Molnar (2004) noted that electronic marketing has also become an issue in public schools; he explained that school districts agree to show programming 12 minutes of news programs provided by Channel One every day and receive in return free television equipment. The issue is that the programming provided by Channel One also brings commercials to the classroom. Molnar (2004) also denounced the sponsoring of sporting events in schools events by popular brands, he felt that such practices sent confusing messages to students:

Pedagogically marketing in schools is destructive. Who should students take more seriously, a health and nutrition teacher who encourages them to eat a balanced diet low in fat, sugar and salt or a principal who promotes an exclusive agreement with a bottling company that includes bonuses if students meet certain consumption goals? (Molnar, 2004, p.84)

Over the past 30 years, sociologist and documentary filmmaker Sut Jhally has worked tirelessly to study the power of images in television and films, advertising. He

founded the Media Education Foundation in the early 1990s and has since written, produced and directed several documentaries to inform the public about specific issues that are not necessarily covered in depth by traditional media outlets. Jhally (2005) explained that above all, he sees himself as a teacher:

I believe that the role of teachers is to give students the tools they need to be able to negotiate a complex world and to give them the tools that they need to be in charge of that world-to be active participants rather than passive recipients of other people's actions. So what I always want to stress in teaching is that the world that we live in is a created world, that it's been constructed by someone, and that there is no such thing as a "natural" version of the world...it is always created by someone, and therefore the issue of *power* is what is central to how we analyze the world. [Italics in the original] (Jhally, 2006, p. 1)

This concept that someone else has constructed the world is significant and is at the core of this study of *Alien in America*. Investigating the intentions of the creators *Aliens in America* and the means they used to accomplish their goals is significant since it informs on the ways in which they used the power they had as show producers to create a representation of Muslims and Americans. With *Aliens in America*, Moses Port and David Guarascio constructed their reality of life in high schools and the ways in which some Americans may react to a teenage Pakistani Muslim moving to their neighborhood.

Jhally as investigated this issue of power in several documentary films that he either, wrote, directed or produced through the Media Education Foundation. Jhally & Katz (1999) examined the "relationship between pop-cultural imagery and the social

construction of masculine identities in the U.S. at the dawn of the 21st century” (Jhally & Katz,1999). This documentary was especially interesting to me on a personal level, in the film Jhally & Katz (1999) look at school shootings that took place in Littleton, Colorado and Jonesboro, Arkansas. I was living in Jonesboro in March 1998, when two students shot and killed four female students and a female teacher. After the tragedy, people in the community did not know how to react to what had happened. Most people were stunned and could not believe such a tragedy could take place in their small town. Others blamed video-games and the media for this horrible event. Through their examination of school shootings and the representations of men in popular culture Jhally & Katz (1999) uncovered what they described as an ongoing crisis in masculinity. Jhally & Huntemann (2000) actually produced a documentary about video games and looked at video-games and the questions of gender, race and violence. The testimony of a military expert is especially interesting since he details “the demonstrated effectiveness of simulation games in training military and law enforcement personnel to overcome a natural inhibition to shoot other human beings” (Hinchey, 2003). In recent years, the army has even been using a video game on its website as tool to recruit young men (White, 2005).

In their documentary *Killing Us Softly III: Advertising's image of Women*, Jhally & Kilbourne (2000) analyzed the ways in which women are objectified in advertising, they specifically addressed issues of weight control, the sexualization of young girls and the ways in which women are used to sell products. Jhally & Kilbourne (2000) assessment of the ways in which women are used in adverting is compelling. Jhally &

Kilbourne (2000) not only exposed and denounced the use of women in advertising but also warned of the consequences of such practices on the self esteem of young women. In 2004, Earp & Jhally investigated the aftermath of 9/11 and the justification for the invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration. He summarized what he tried to accomplish with *Hijacking Catastrophe 9/11, Fear & the Selling of American Empire* with these words:

Our mission is educational, and after 9/11 there wasn't a lot of information coming from mainstream media. The trauma, the sense of patriotism, the fear in the media of being labeled un-American, all of this created a media climate that shut down thinking and debate about the policies we were seeing emerge right after 9/11, then in the lead-up to the war and beyond. *Hijacking Catastrophe* has given us a different kind of profile, one more explicitly connected to the requirements of democratic citizenship, the fundamental demand in a democracy for information (Jhally, 2005)

This excerpt is very useful to me and describes the climate in the weeks and months following 9/11. In this documentary Earp & Jhally (2004) emphasized the use of fear by the Bush administration “to subvert the democratic processes” (Trbic, 2006). Earp & Jhally’s work provided me with useful information about the ways in which the media covered the lead-up to the war.

As stated above, Jhally’s work has been very useful to my own research; his analysis and deconstruction of the media reveal that our world is indeed constructed (2006). Through his work with the Media Education Foundation Jhally tells us that the

influence of popular culture on children is a worthy cause that deserves to be investigated. I strongly believe, that this study of *Aliens in America* will contribute to efforts by other scholars to investigate the complicated relationship between popular culture and education. Cortés (2000) also concerned with the influence of popular culture on children introduced the idea that children are exposed to several curricula on a daily basis, he identified “the immediate curriculum, the institutional curriculum, and the media curriculum” (Cortés, 2000, p.18). In a television interview with *The Open Mind*, Cortés explained that the media curriculum is “very powerful and can greatly influence children of all ages” (The Open Mind, 2000). Multicultural theorist Geneva Gay also felt that television can have a negative effect on our youth and our schools “The images are too easily accessible and their influence is too powerful for teachers to ignore how ethnic groups and issues represented in television programming...students bring this information and its effects to the classroom with them”(Gay, 2000, p.123).

Mahiri (2000-2001) takes a different stand and argues that educators must find ways to adopt some elements of popular culture in their teaching to connect with students:

If schooling is to survive. . . I suggest that teachers continue to become more aware of the motives and methods of youth engagement in pop culture in terms of why and how such engagement connects to students’ personal identifications, their needs to construct meanings, and their pursuit of pleasures and personal power. Teachers should explore how work in schools can make similar connections to students’ lives, but the real challenge is to make these connections

to and through changing domains of knowledge, critical societal issues, and cognitive and technical skills that educators can justify their students will actually need to master the universe of the new century. (Mahiri, 2000-2001, p. 385)

Scholars view popular culture and television as a site of struggle that influences students. They agree that it should not be ignored but instead studied and utilized in the curriculum to reach children. Over the years several scholars have investigated television shows seeking to answer different questions. A quick review of this body of work is necessary to place this study of *Aliens in America* in context.

Research on Television and Education

Over the years, several scholars have investigated the content of various television shows. Jhally & Lewis (1992) conducted a study about stereotypes in the *Cosby Show*. This study is very interesting since these researchers presented the show to Black and White American audiences and collected their reactions to the show. McKinley (1992) investigated how the television show *Beverly Hills 90210* influenced the ways in which young female viewers constructed their identity. Freedman (2000) studied the television show *Dangerous Minds* with preservice teachers through a cultural studies framework and examined its influences on their perceptions of students of color. Trier (2005) has studied extensively the ways in which students and teachers are represented in films such as *Mr. Holland's Opus*, *the Breakfast Club* and *Dangerous Minds*. Watson (2006) provided an interesting analysis of the television show *Ally McBeal* broadcast between 1997 and 2002 in the United States on the Fox television

network. These scholars specifically analyzed why this show became so popular and examined issues of sexuality and feminism in the show. Finally, Bindig (2008) explored the television show *Dawson's Creek* through a feminist cultural studies perspective. These studies were very informative and allowed me to understand the type of shows that had been investigated in the past. It also helped me realize that television programming had evolved tremendously in the past decade. These studies also provided me with some valuable background into the way these movies and television shows are being watched and analyzed by viewers. However, Jhally and Lewis' study was published fifteen years ago. Trier's analysis is more recent but he utilizes movies produced in the 1980s and 1990s. Freedman conducted her study in 2000, but here again she investigated a television show that aired during the 1996-1997 season. Mc Kinley's work was published in 1992, Bindig's book was published in 2008 but her analysis is about a show that has been of the air for five years, as did Watson (2006).

Therefore, there is a need for more research looking at television programming that specifically targets young viewers, since in the past few years the television landscape has evolved so much in America. That is why I selected *Aliens in America* which belongs to this new category of shows for this study. The show targets young viewers, specifically while achieving humor poking fun at ethnic, cultural, racial, religious, and other forms of identity.

In recent years, a new field of study known as visual culture has emerged. Duncum (2003) offered an interesting analysis of the theories and practice of visual culture in art education. He described the ways in which visual culture emerged from

cultural studies and how much it owed to this field (Duncum, 2003, p. 19). Art education has since adopted the study of visual culture. Advocates of visual culture believe that students should be engaged in analysis and criticism of a wide range of images, including television programming in the art education classroom. I believe that a television sitcom such as *Aliens in America* should be of interest for art educators. The study I conducted examined the intentions of the producers of the show, the perceptions of selected audiences and the implications of these perceptions and intentions for visual culture studies. A brief literature review of the field is necessary to understand the possibilities *Aliens in America* presents to visual culture.

The Case for Visual Culture in Art Education

In 1984, art educator Vincent Lanier argued that art educators should not shy away from popular culture since in his opinion it presents similarities with the study of art “whatever our attitude about the contemporary popular culture, it cannot be denied that these media engross enormous numbers of young people in ways analogous if not similar to the aesthetic experiences of museum, gallery, theater, and concert hall” (Lanier, 1984, p. 236). That same year Paul Duncum published a paper in Art education entitled, “What, Even Dallas? Popular Culture within the Art Curriculum.” In this piece, he reviewed proposals by several educators to include elements of popular culture in the Art Curriculum. It is only in the late 1990s that a debate took place between art educators/scholars about what Darts (2008) describes as “the adoption of a visual culture paradigm for the field” (Darts, 2008, p. 103). Mirzoeff (1999) contributed to this debate in providing the following description of visual culture “(visual culture) is concerned

with visual events in which information, meaning, or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology [which is] any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil paint to television to the internet (Mirzoeff, 1999, p.3). Darts reported that this paradigm shift was initially met with resistance, and compared the struggle in establishing visual culture with the same issues facing popular culture since, “popular culture is deemed to be less pedagogically worthy and even morally inappropriate for study in the art classroom” (Darts, p. 106). Darts refers to the struggle experienced firsthand by Duncum who argued in 1997 that popular culture had its place within the art education curriculum “it is from popular culture that most people weave their identities and establish their relationships with other and the environment” (Duncum, 1997, p.70). Tavin (2003) noted the emergence of visual culture when he wrote “a new project called visual culture has emerged that supports the study of popular culture in order to understand and challenge the way subjectivities are constituted through images and imagining” (Tavin, 2003, p. 198). Tavin along with his colleague Hausman (2004) expanded his initial idea and explained that the art education classroom should be a space for dialogue and unique learning experiences:

The subjects and themes for classroom study should be expanded to encompass the scope and scale of our students’ experiences. This can include deeply felt experiences, political and social issues, environmental decision-making, and images in mass media, as well as works of art, architecture, and design. (Tavin & Hausman, 2004, p.48)

In recent years, several other scholars have showed their support for a visual culture curriculum that allows students to make meaning of their everyday visual experiences through interpretation and analysis images (Darts, 2004; Gude, 2007; Hermann, 2005). Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001) envisioned a multicultural and visual cultural education curriculum to prepare students to make meaning of and for life (p.6). They believed that teaching visual culture was a necessity to help a new generation interpret the messages they encounter on a daily basis “students also need instruction in visual literacy or reading the cultural message of an image” (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr 2001, p. 11). These scholars joined Duncum (1987, 1999) in asking educators to “stand up against injustice and to work to create a democratic, caring community” (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr 2001, p. 12). Duncum (2003) probably summarizes best how art educators envision what the study of visual culture could mean to students in their classrooms:

What matters the most is that we ground art education in the opportunity for students to inquire critically into their own cultural experience in such a way that they come to know not only something of the contemporary pressures and processes acting upon them but also to discover the chance to have their own voice (Duncum, 2003, p.24).

In the past five years several scholars have specifically looked at the pedagogical repercussions of the events that followed 9/11 for visual culture. I am especially interested in this line of inquiry since the creators of *Aliens in America* used the post 9/11 geopolitical climate as a backdrop for the show. I strongly believe that this study of

Aliens in America will add to the existing research about visual culture in the post 9/11 era.

Visual Culture in the Post 9/11 Era

The attacks that took place in New York on 9/11 were unprecedented in U.S history. In response to that tragedy the U.S government deployed troops to Afghanistan and invaded Iraq. Since then the justification behind the invasion of Iraq has come into question. These events were part of the policy known as ‘the war on terror’ enacted by George W. Bush and his administration. Since the beginning of ‘the war on terror’ several events have damaged the image of the United States around the world. The release of pictures depicting the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib is one such example. The reporting by 24 hour news outlets during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the ensuing insurgency have provided the American public with countless images of war and suffering. These images have informed the American public about the conflict and have helped shape their opinion. In recent years, several art educators have critically examined “the visual dimensions and pedagogical repercussions of the war on terror” (Darts, Tavin, Sweeny & Derby, 2008, p. 200). These scholars specifically looked into the controversy following the publication of cartoons portraying the prophet Muhammad with a head cover filled with bombs in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. The publications of these cartoons were very controversial since most Islamic sects generally prohibit visual representations of Prophet Muhammad.

These scholars also analyzed the pictures depicting prisoner abuse that took place in the Abu-Ghraib jail in Baghdad Iraq following the invasion of the country. In the end these

scholars believed that the controversies and abuses that took place during the war on terror could be used in a positive way in the art classroom. Darts et al. explained:

Combined with developing perpetual, analytic, and artistic skills to interrogate specific visual culture fallout from the war on terror, art educators can help students identify, deconstruct, and challenge sites of cultural and ideological influence, power and control. (Darts, et al, 2008, p. 213)

Pistolessi (2007) looked at the state of art education in the age of Guantanamo.

Guantanamo refers the detention camp opened by the U.S government at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba to detain non citizens suspected terrorist and enemy combatants captured during military operations in Afghanistan. In that piece she looks at the issues of censorship since the beginning of the conflict in Iraq. She decided to create with her students at California State University an installation called “the peace project”. Students were involved in the conception of the installation. They had an opportunity to interpret the work and see the reaction of people in the university community. In the end, she reflected on her experience with the project, the difficulty she encountered and the censorship that cripples schools and threatens art projects (Pistolessi, 2007). However, Pistolessi (2007) was hopeful because of the level of engagement her students displayed during the project.

Since 9/11 many more educators have looked at the repercussions and political implications of the geopolitical climate for visual culture. I selected these two examples because they informed my study of *Aliens in America*, specifically the ways in which art

educators have turned painful events into learning experiences for student in the art classroom.

Summary

Today, the field of visual culture is firmly established and offers many possibilities to art education students and scholars. Visual culture is therefore about engaging students in the discovery of the visual in their everyday experience (Duncum, 2004). It is about exploring, questioning and making meaning of images through critical analyses and conversations in and out of the Art classroom. That is why I am interested in identifying the implications of a sitcom such as *Aliens in America* for visual culture studies. This study will specifically examine the perceptions and the intentions of the individuals producing this show, the perceptions of young viewers to the show and the meaning of these intentions and perceptions for visual culture studies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this study, my goal was to examine the content and context of the television medium through the study of the sitcom *Aliens in America* broadcast on the CW network. I was especially interested in the intentions of the individuals producing this sitcom, as well as the reactions and perceptions of selected audiences to the show. In order to gain a full understanding of the intentions of the show creators I gathered interviews they gave to newspapers and electronic media outlets¹ in 2007 and 2008 (when the show aired on the CW network).

Another aim of this study was to examine the perceptions of the show by different audiences. Three distinct groups were selected to be included in this study. First, a group of 13 individuals volunteered to participate in focus group interviews where they were invited to watch, answer questions and engage in discussions about their perceptions of the sitcom *Aliens in America*. Second, the opinion and perceptions of a larger sample of viewers were also surveyed through a narrative analysis of blog postings published on the CW network website during the 2007-2008 television broadcast season. Thirdly, to gain a complete understanding of the ways in which the show was perceived by a group of entertainment journalists, nine national and regional newspapers, one national newsmagazine and one trade journal were also analyzed for this study.

¹ I contacted Mr. Guarascio who agreed to be interviewed for this project, professional obligations prevented him from granting me an interview.

Rationale for Using a Qualitative Approach

For this study a qualitative research approach was used. Merriam (1988) explained that in a qualitative approach the main objective is to understand “the meaning of an experience” (p. 16), she added that “qualitative research assumes that there are multiple realities-that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception. It is a highly subjective phenomenon in need of interpreting rather than measuring” (p. 17), she concluded “in qualitative research one is interested in process, meaning, and understanding” (p.19). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explained that the qualitative researcher uses various methods to make sense and interpret phenomena, Creswell (2007) went further and explained that the final report of a qualitative study is an extensive document reflective of the views held by all parties involved “the final written report involves or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature, or signals a call for action.” (Creswell, 2007, p. 37)

For these reasons, I felt that a qualitative approach would allow me to accurately describe and interpret the perceptions of selected audiences to the show. This approach also allowed me to understand the meaning making process they went through while watching the show. For this study, several sets of data were collected over an 18-month period (September 2007-March 2009). First, newspaper and magazine articles, as well as online publications offering a critic of the show were collected. Second, focus group interviews with adult television viewers were conducted in February 2009. Thirdly,

blogs postings were gathered overtime between September 2007 and July 2008. Finally interviews given by with the show creators in 2007 and 2008 were collected. This approach and the volume and diverse nature of the data collected allowed me to gain unique insights into the intentions of the show creators and the perceptions of selected audiences to the sitcom *Aliens in America*.

In return, the wide range of data collected and analyzed allowed me to look into the pedagogical implications of these intentions and perceptions for visual culture studies.

Rationale for Using Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interview were used to investigate the perceptions of the television sitcom *Aliens in America* with two groups of adult television viewers. Morgan (1997) defined focus groups as “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher. In essence, it is the researcher’s interest that provides the focus, whereas the data themselves come from the group interaction” (Morgan, 1997, p. 6). This approach was therefore, used because I could serve as the moderator of the discussion between the subjects involved in the study. In addition, this approach also afforded ample opportunity for participants to engage in productive exchanges about the show where they were able to share their diverse opinions and perspectives (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). Focus group interviews also enabled me to show episodes and excerpts of the sitcom to participants and to further study their reactions to the program, for example: body language (posture, facial expressions and eye movement). The combination of focus group interviews and blog

analysis enabled me to highlight specific comments made by bloggers and then compare it to the reactions of focus group participants.

Focus Group Interview Population

Although there is no set rule for selecting the number of participants in focus group interviews, Morgan (1988) determined that a good number is somewhere between six to ten individuals per group. Therefore I asked 13 individuals (divided in two groups) living in the Houston metro area to voluntarily participate in this study. All participants were college students at a major research university in the Southeast. Some participants were undergraduates, while others were pursuing advanced degrees in their respective field. I purposely decided to assemble a very diverse group of individuals to participate in this study in an attempt to represent the viewership of the CW network. One of the participants in the study identified herself as Hispanic another one as Native American and Hispanic, two as African Americans, the rest of the participants (nine individuals) identified themselves as White. Participants were selected using a snowball sampling methods. Participants were between the ages of 19 to 37. Individuals in this age group were specifically selected to reflect the viewership of the CW network. The participants were divided in two focus groups, focus group #1 and focus group # 2. My aim in assembling such a diverse group was to gather data from individuals with different scopic regimes. Rose (2007) defined a scopic regime as the ways in which “both what is seen and how it is seen are culturally constructed” (Rose, 2007, p. 2). In recent years, shows such as *Aliens in America* have achieved humor often while poking fun at a character’s religion, gender, ethnicity, physical appearance and sexual orientation. I felt

that gathering a diverse group of people with different gender, ethnicity, national origin and religious affiliation was necessary in order to truly capture, analyze and interpret their perceptions of the show. For this study I changed the name of focus group participants to protect their identity.

Focus Group Data Collection

Participants were identified and first approached through informal face-to-face interactions between October and December 2008. In early February 2009, potential participants were contacted by phone and e-mail, I briefly explained what the research was about and the amount of time participants would have to commit to this project. I gave participants several days to decide whether or not to take part in this study. All the individuals contacted accepted to participate. Prior to the first focus group interview session participants signed the consent forms and received detailed information about their rights as participants in a research study involving human subjects. I followed the guidelines set by the office of research compliance at Texas A&M University.

Participants were given several dates when the focus group interviews were to take place. Their availability determined their group assignment in focus group #1 and focus group # 2. Participants in focus group # 1 were Beth, Brad, David, Elisa, Kathy and Lola. Participants in focus group # 2 were Beth, Conner, John, Margaux, Nicole, Nerissa and Vanessa.

Rationale for Using Blogs as Data

Tremayne (2007) explained that blogs first emerged on the World Wide Web in the late 1990s and they evolved over time into its current form. Tremayne stated that

blogs are different from other sites found on the web “blogs are distinguished from other web sites in their dynamism, reverse chronological presentation and dominant use of the first person” (p. vii). Today millions of Americans currently maintain a blog to inform family members or to simply share their experience dealing with an illness (McLellan, 1997), exchanging fashion tips with others, or simply writing about their daily lives. The blogosphere has become the term to define all blogs and the links that connect them. In recent years, the television industry has turned to blogs to promote upcoming shows and offer viewers a forum where they can express themselves, discuss and at times argue about their favorite show. The CW network, hoping to capitalize on this new medium to reach television viewers, developed several “lounges” or online communities on its web site to allow viewers to interact share ideas and feelings about the show with other viewers across the country. The online community dedicated to *Aliens in America* was created a few weeks before the show was to premiere on the network. Visitors of the CW site were able to watch trailers of the show and behind the scene footage and interviews of cast members.

Trenayne (2007) argued that the blogosphere is a new space that presents many advantages for researchers since the information shared between bloggers is usually mainly text, which is often archived. Blogs can therefore, be revisited and analyzed once several bloggers have taken part in a discussion. An analysis of these kinds of electronic narratives provided me researcher with valuable information about the ways in which TV viewers decipher and share their opinion about a television show, such as *Aliens in America*.

Methodological Choices for Investigating Blogs

I utilized a thematic analysis approach to investigate the content of the blogs. I believe this approach helped me understand how viewers perceive the content of the show. This approach to analyzing narratives presented me with a great number of possibilities focusing on the content of the narrative as opposed to the language and grammatical structure utilized.

In addition, thematic analysis is concerned with “what is said” rather than the “how”, “to whom”, or “for what purposes” (Riessman, 2008, p. 54). According to Riessman, this type of analysis allows to study a wide variety of narratives whether the text presents itself in written, oral or group meeting format. Therefore, thematic analysis is frequently used since it seems to adapt to most types of narratives and it appears to be well suited when attempting to analyze electronic narratives such as blogs.

This approach allowed me to focus specifically on what bloggers had to say about the show, how they understood it, agreed or disagreed with the plots, issues or portrayal of specific groups.

The data consists of 30 different threads and approximately 250 posts. The posts were printed and organized chronologically by threads to allow for a microanalysis of data by using a “detailed line-by-line analysis [used] to generate initial categories (with their perspectives and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among categories.” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 57; Sanderson, 2008, p. 920)

Rationale for Using Reviews by Television Critics

Aliens in America was broadcast on the CW network between October 2007 and May 2008. Investigating further the perceptions and opinions of the show by television critics working for print and online media outlets provided me with valuable contextual and sociological clues about the show. I purposely selected newspapers from all regions of the country to eliminate the overwhelming influence of the two entertainment poles in the United States which are the New York and Los Angeles media markets. I felt that giving voice to critics in smaller media markets provided more depth to this study. I also selected newspapers representing a wide range of ideological stances. I realize that the coverage of entertainment news differs greatly from the ways in which politics or current affairs are reported; however, I felt that since, as stated above, many storylines in *Aliens in America* dealt with societal issues gathering information from newspapers on different sides of the political spectrum was necessary. The review from critics also provided me with information about the way the show was read and perceived by individuals who did not necessarily fall under the target audience of the CW network. In summary, I included several newspapers from the New York media market but also several daily publications from smaller markets (the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *The Seattle Times* *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*) since I was interested in finding out if there were regional differences in the ways in which the show was perceived. I also included one newsmagazine (*Newsweek*) and one trade publication (*Variety*). I also included the point of view of a journalist writing for Islamonline.net to get one perspective of the Muslim world about the show.

Methodological Choices for Studying Reviews by Television Critics

I chose to conduct a thematic analysis of the reviews published about the sitcom. This approach allowed me to take an in-depth look at the ways in which television critics perceived the show. I was also able to make connections between the data collected through focus group research and blog analysis and found interesting similarities as well as differences between the two data sets.

Validity and Reliability

I used several strategies and techniques to ensure the validity and reliability of this study. Creswell (2007) suggested that triangulation should be used as one validation strategy, he defines triangulation in these terms “in triangulation, researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators and theories to provide corroborating evidence. Typically, this process involves corroborating different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). Throughout this study, I have used different sources including the creators of the show, a sample of television viewers, bloggers and a sample of television critics. I have also utilized different methods (focus group interviews, thematic analyses of blogs and reviews by critics as well as interviews). I have thoroughly examined the literature and constructed my theoretical framework based on television studies and visual culture studies.

Merriam (1988) also suggest using members check when conducting qualitative research “member check-taking data and interpretation back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if the results are plausible” (Merriam, 1988, p. 169). Therefore, during the last focus group session I conducted I shared the data I had

collected with the two focus groups and asked for feedback from participants. I also encouraged them to communicate with me through e-mail and share any thoughts, remarks and any additional comments they may have had throughout the study.

Merriam (1988) also suggested that when using a qualitative approach a researcher should disclose his biases and assumptions and worldview at the beginning of the study. I disclosed my biases, assumptions and worldview in the fourth section of this study.

Merriam (1988) noted that reliability presents interesting challenges to qualitative research

(Qualitative research) seeks to describe and explain the world as those in the world interpret it. Since there are many interpretations of what is happening, there is no benchmark by which one can take repeated measures and establish reliability in the traditional sense (Merriam, 1988, p. 170).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested using the terms “dependability” or “consistency” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 285) when assessing the findings gathered through the data collection process. Merriam (1988) stated that using triangulation increases the dependability of results obtained when using a qualitative approach “especially in terms of using multiple methods of data collection and analysis, triangulation strengthens reliability as well as internal validity” (Merriam, 1988, p. 172). As stated above I used multiple methods, sources and theories while conducting this research. Finally, Creswell (2007) stated that reliability can be improved through a careful data collection process “reliability can be enhanced if the researcher obtains detailed fieldnotes by employing a

good-quality tape for recording and by transcribing the tape” (Creswell, 2007, p. 209). Focus group interviews took place in February 2009, every session was video recorded to ensure the accuracy of the data collected prior to being transcribed. Focus group interview transcripts were labeled to identify themes. A in depth analysis of blogs allowed me to identify key themes in blog threads. An extensive study of reviews by TV critics allowed me to identify key themes.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study; one of them is the sample size for focus groups (13 individuals). The second limitation is that despite all efforts to recruit individuals that are representative of the target audience of the CW network this sample may not completely reflect this population. I selected college students to participate in focus group interviews, some of the implications of this study are for use in K-12 arts education classrooms. I feel that selecting college students is a limitation of this study. However I feel that their own experiences in schools in the United States provided me with interesting insights on possible use of the show in K-12 settings.

FINDINGS

The Creator's Views and the Main Actor's Perspective

In this section, I present the intentions of the creators and executive producers of *Aliens in America*, Mr. David Guarascio and Mr. Moses Port. In order to get a better understanding of what they had in mind when creating and writing for the show I also decided to include interviews given by Mr. Adhir Kalyan who played the role of Raja, the Pakistani exchange student. In addition, I elected to include the perspective of Mr. Sameer Gardezi who worked as a writer on the show. Mr. Gardezi's account is especially relevant since he is of Pakistani descent and Muslim like the fictional character Raja. For this section, I analyzed several in depth interviews given by Mr. Guarascio, Mr. Port, Mr. Gardezi and Mr. Kalyan to National Public Radio, *the New York Times*, and almuslim.com, an interactive news and discussions forum about issues of interest to Muslims living in the English speaking world.

Defining the Word "Intentions"

According to the online version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word intentions come from intend and means "to have in mind as a purpose or goal". The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides several synonyms to intentions that include "purpose, aim, objective or goal". For this study, I considered the word "intentions" broadly. First, I looked at what the creators/writers set to accomplish through the show. Secondly, I looked into what means they used to reach their goal. In addition, I also collected specific examples in their personal life that inform their overall aim when creating *Aliens in America*.

Background Information on the Creators of Aliens in America

Aliens in America first aired on the CW Network in October 2007, the television network started promoting the show during the summer of 2007. Several promotional clips were showed in primetime and made available on the World Wide Web primarily on YouTube.com and on the network's web site. As it is often the case before the start of every television season, several news outlets were able to preview the pilot episode of the series and solicited interviews with the creators of *Aliens in America*.

National Public Radio's Terry Gross interviewed Mr. Guarascio, Mr. Port and Mr. Gardezi a month after the show first aired. This conversation took place for Terry Gross' award winning program *Fresh Air*. The second interview I used was given by Mr. David Guarascio to the *New York Times*' Mrinalini Reddy in November 2007. The third interview took place between Mr. David Guarascio and Altmuslim.com contributor Wajahat Ali also in November 2007. Finally, the last interview I used was given by Mr. Adhir Kalyan to New York Times contributor Joe Rhodes in May 2008. Most of the interviews used for this section were conducted when the show first aired; Mr. Kalyan's interview took place in May 2008 (at the time when the fate of the show was being decided by the network). A few days after the interviewed appeared in the New York Times the network announced that the show would not be renewed for a second season.

The Birth of Aliens in America

Most of the journalists who interviewed Mr. Guarascio and Mr. Port asked about the process that went into creating a sitcom. The pair replied that their long standing working relationship and friendship has helped them tremendously when working on

Aliens in America. Mr. Guarascio and Mr. Port met as undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania where they hosted a radio show on WQHS the campus radio station (Gross & Miller, 2007). They reported having a lot of creative freedom when producing the show, in part because the show aired in the middle of the night which gave them a lot of flexibility in what they could offer listeners, Moses Port explained:

We had sort of a list of songs, and a certain amount of airplay and a format we were supposed to follow, and we just didn't follow any of it because even the people who ran the radio station were not listening to what we were doing. But for us it was just a lot of fun, and we liked sort of creating and sort of essentially making each other laugh (Gross & Miller, 2007).

Upon graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, Guarascio and Port moved to Los Angeles and put their creativity to work in the entertainment business. Their big break came about when they worked on the very popular sitcom *Mad about You*², starring Paul Reiser and Helen Hunt. They went on to work as executive producers of another popular NBC sitcom, *Just Shoot Me!*³ Starring David Spade, Laura San Giacomo and George Segal. In an interview with NPR's Terry Gross they explained that their working relationship amounts to a marriage as Moses Port shared:

David has referred to me as another wife. But, you know, it's a relationship. And we--there's definitely, when you're writing together--we write everything, we speak out every line. We're sitting there and we share a computer. We're working

² *Mad About You* ran on NBC from 1992 to 1999.

³ *Just Shoot Me!* ran on NBC from 1997 to 2003.

off it and we're talking out the entire script, so we hash it out and we, you know, but ultimately, at the end of the day, it's fun. We make each other laugh and we enjoy the process (Gross & Miller, 2007).

Guarascio and Port have worked on different projects together since the early 1990s, when they were asked to produce a new sitcom for NBC about whatever they were interested in, they built upon their personal experiences to create *Aliens in America*.

The co-creators explained that they wanted to create a show set in high school tapping into their own past experiences, they also expressed an interest in adding a twist to the story by bringing in a foreign exchange student and devout follower of Islam, David Guarascio detailed that process with Terry Gross:

I think it began--Moses and I were just trying to think of an idea for a new TV show. It's sort of what we get paid to do. And we were sharing our own sort of nightmarish high school experiences with each other, all these embarrassing stories, and wondering if there is a fresh take on a high school show about teenage life, a fresh, honest take that could be--because it's sort of one of those areas that you see tried quite a bit in TV and in film. And I think at the same time we were talking a lot about what was going on in the world in American culture, geopolitically, the war in Iraq, and I think sort of it was in that stew where we sort of came up with the idea of this Muslim character, this Pakistani Muslim character coming to this small town (Gross & Miller, 2007).

This excerpt was especially interesting to me since Mr. Guarascio clearly describes what he, and Mr. Port intended to do with the show. It appears that the geopolitical context in

the United States and around the world at the time (between 2005 and 2007) played an important factor in the decision making process to create the show. In an interview with Ali (2007), David Guarascio provided more information on how the show came about:

My writing partner Moses Port and I were just in the phase of trying to think of a new idea for a TV show. We were talking about our own high school experiences and all the insecurities, anxieties, and nightmare experiences of high school. We were wondering if there was a fresh take on the form of a TV show, a comedy about high school. At the same time, we were talking about the geo political situation of the world at the time, which has gotten worse since then. We first started talking about it in 2005. We also started talking about politics and the giant gap that exists between Americans and really the rest of the world, specifically the Muslim world. In that stew, we sort of came up with the idea for the show (Ali, 2007).

The Creator's Personal Experiences as a Source of Inspiration

Mr. Port and Mr. Guarascio shared with Terry Gross that many personal stories from their teenage years made it into the script of the show. For example, in the show, Justin's mother is very involved in her child's life. Moses Port admitted that he may have used his own experience when writing the part of Franny Tolchuck in this exchange with NPR's Terry Gross:

My mom will be listening to this. I know my mother was quick to show up at school, but I'm not sure it was always--sometimes it wasn't even in defense of us, it was just out of interest and being connected to what was going on in our lives.

Terry Gross: A little embarrassing, though, huh?

Mr. Port: Yeah.

In the lengthy interview they gave to Terry Gross, Mr. Port, Mr. Guarascio and Mr. Gardezi explained how some of their stories during their high school years made it made into the script of *Aliens in America*. Mr. Port explained that some of the difficulties he encountered at school had to do with his religious affiliation:

I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania. And I was one of three Jewish kids in a class of 900. And I do remember being in music class and being in it around holiday time and we'd all sing Christmas carols and then the teacher would say, 'OK, now we're going to sing a Hanukkah song,' and they would have the three Jewish kids stand up and sing it in isolation. As if--obviously they weren't meaning to be discriminatory, but it was obviously so awkward, and there's that feeling--that's part of the outsidersness that we were trying to imbue in the script (Gross & Miller, 2007).

Moses Port's example is very telling and explains in many ways why he, along with Mr. Guarascio and Mr. Gardezi decided to produce a show about someone coming from another country and feeling like an outsider. Mr. David Guarascio also shared a personal story that further informs on what their intentions were when producing *Aliens in America*:

For me, I think probably what maybe comes through in the show the most is, I grew up in New York on Long Island and I moved in the middle of my junior year to a small town in Michigan. And I just went from being a very sort of

comfortable, secure place in sort of the community that I grew up in and I--I mean, to my mind I might as well have been moving to Pakistan because Michigan seemed so different to me from what I was used to in New York. It was just sort of a less--in truth, it was sort of a less cosmopolitan sort of atmosphere even in high school. And I went from sort of really fitting in from one place to not fitting in at all in the other place. And every day at lunch was sort of a challenge as to how to handle my time because I didn't have anyone to sort of eat with for that second semester of my junior year. So I'd find corners throughout the school just to feed myself and hopefully seem inconspicuous and not look like the kid who absolutely doesn't have any friends (Gross & Miller, 2007).

The self described nightmarish high school stories by David Guarascio and Moses Port are not unusual; they decided to incorporate some of their experiences in the show.

Sameer Gardezi served as a writer on *Aliens in America* and brought another perspective to the show, one that is unique, because he is like Raja the fictional character of Pakistani descent and Muslim himself. Gardezi's experience was similar to Moses Port's experience in high school because of his religious beliefs, especially during the Holy month of Ramadan when observing Muslims do not eat or drink anything during true dawn until sunset. Ramadan is also a time of self-reflection and prayer for Muslims around the world. He explained that other students were curious and often cruel while he was fasting:

And I'd say a very memorable experience and, I mean, it happens yearly, it's just whenever I have to fast for Ramadan and it's during those lunch periods where I

really have to figure out what I'm supposed to do with my time. And, you know, kids can be cruel. I remember the main thing was, you know, trying to see whether people can get me to eat. And it would always be kind of so painstaking just sitting there with your friends and trying to socialize while they're chewing down. And then always the same question, 'Hey, Sameer, you know, why aren't you eating?' Or, you know, 'Sameer, you know, do you want some of this. Oh, I'm sorry I forgot.' Mine turned out not to be as funny as everybody else's did (Gross & Miller, 2007).

Gardezi went even further in his description of what life was like in high school and explained that one specific instance made it verbatim into the script:

I've dealt with similar situations that Raja did. For instance, you know, in the classroom, you know, getting questions in this odd manner as to I was specifically connected with the terrorist attacks even though I had nothing to do with it. And, you know, the simple religious conflicts that exist, too: having to pray five times a day, how does that interfere with someone else's life, you know, how other people perceive it. (Gross & Miller, 2007).

The scene Gardezi is referring to was part of pilot episode and was used by the network to promote the show. Gardezi went on to explain that most of the students he interacted with in high school did not understand the differences between Pakistan, where he was from, and other countries where most of the people are Muslims:

I think that I naturally got lumped into this often-found conflation where India is the same thing as Iraq, and Iraq is the same thing as Morocco. So there was this

uneasy conflation that happens so I think that, you know, I would get the stereotype of Apu from "The Simpsons" all the way from, you know, "Aladdin."

So it was disparate stereotypes (Gross & Miller, 2007).

Gardezi's example is significant and his experience appears to confirm that most Americans know very little about Muslims because of a lack of interest and a lack of understanding of their faith and beliefs. One explanation is the widespread confusion between Arab Americans and Muslims living in the United States. Wingfield (2006) describes the two groups as "Overlapping yet distinct". He explains very well the clear distinction between the two groups.

Arabs, like Hispanics, are a linguistic and cultural community, not a racial or religious group. Arabs are those who speak Arabic as their primary language and share in the culture and history of the Arab world, which stretches from Morocco to the Arabian Peninsula. Most Arabs are Muslim, but most of the largest Muslim countries are not Arab—Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Turkey, and Nigeria. The more than 200 million Arabs make up only a relatively small percent of the more than 1 billion Muslims (p.253).

In another interview given to *New York Times* contributor Mrinalini Reddy, Mr. David Guarascio admitted that he did not know much about Islam and Muslims and had to do research for the show:

Embarrassingly enough I started with *Islam for Dummies*, we read a variety of books and continue to try and educate ourselves. (Reddy, 2007).

Port and Guarascio gave more details about how they educated themselves about Islam to altmuslim.com contributor Wajahat Ali:

We first started by reading books. We started with "Islam for Dummies" and ended up with Reza Aslan's "No God but God." We got some DVD's with Muslim teenagers talking about their experiences. We contacted the Muslim Public Affairs Council⁴. We had them on the set when we shot the pilot to help us with Raja's prayers. We also hired couple of writers in the staff that are Pakistani Muslim and one is also practicing Muslim. We hired a dialogue couch to help with Adhir's accent. We don't get everything perfectly right we discovered over time. We are endeavoring to represent Raja and his devotion as accurately as possible. There's a lot of variety of opinions and interpretations of things just like with any religion or large group. All that sort of allows us to leave an accurate, respectful description where it still leaves room for this specific character we want to represent (Ali, 2007).

It appears that the hiring of Mr. Sameer Gardezi coincides with their efforts to know more about Islam and an intention to getting it right. In this last excerpt, the creators of the show also talked about Adhir Kalyan, the actor playing Raja. The selection of Kalyan is very informative and clearly shows that they intended to select someone that would be able to portray a Pakistani Muslim accurately. Kalyan's perspective on his role playing Raja also informs on the intentions of the creators of *Aliens in America*.

⁴ MPAC (The Muslim Public Affairs Council) presented David Guarascio and Moses Port with a media award for bringing humanizing and multi-dimensional portrayals of Muslims to millions of television and film viewers during their annual Media award dinner.

Portraying a Muslim Character, the Actor's Perspective

In an interview with New York Times contributor Joe Rhodes, David Guarascio explained that there was something special about Adhir Kalyan when he auditioned for the part of Raja, the Pakistani-Muslim exchange student “There was something about him, he seems extremely wise beyond his years which is such a key component of the character”, Moses Port added “And he imbued the material with a sweetness that really elevated the material, there was a kind of soulfulness that we hadn’t seen with anyone else” (Rhodes, ¶ 8). Asked about his work on *Aliens in America* Kalyan appeared to be well aware of his responsibilities “I understood that I had a responsibility not just to the character, but to the Muslim community, it was important to understand the core things in his life and to portray him as a complete person, not a stereotype and also not as an absolute saint” (Rhodes, 2008 ¶ 10). In that same interview Kalyan reveals that he is not himself a Pakistani-Muslim but that he grew up in South Africa in a family tracing his roots to India. Kalyan felt a connection with his character very early because of his own experiences growing up in South Africa:

Growing up in this post apartheid era, the first generation of teens in South Africa living in this new democracy, I often found myself feeling different, I was often the only person of color in an otherwise all-white school. And within the Indian community, because of my training with an English acting teacher, my accent was very different. And to an extent, so were my aspirations. I’d tell people I wanted to be an actor and they would say, “yes, yes, that’s very nice. But what do you want to DO?” (Rhodes, 2008, ¶18).

When Kalyan auditioned for *Aliens in America* he had been living and acting in England, he said that the events of July 7, 2005⁵ helped him realize the discrimination and profiling specific groups were faced with after the tragedy:

And also by the time I auditioned for “Aliens in America” the July 7 bombing had happened in London. So I’d had those experiences where I would get onto the tube and people would get off. So there was a lot about Raja that I understood (Rhodes, 2008, ¶ 19).

The selection of Kalyan to portray Raja, the exchange student in *Aliens in America* appears to have been a good decision for the creators of the show, since he understood the responsibility that came with his role. Through his answers Kalyan seems to understand and agree with the intentions of Mr. Guarascio and Mr. Port for the show.

Summary

Through a careful examination of interviews they gave to several media outlets I was able to determine the intentions of the creators of *Aliens in America*.

Their primary goal was to produce a sitcom about life in high school. They based some of the plots on their own experiences as students and incorporated what they described as “nightmarish experiences” into the show. While looking for new twist on the high school sitcom genre they decided to incorporate an exchange student in their story.

They explained that they were inspired by the geopolitical climate following 9/11. Therefore, they intended to produce a sitcom about a teenage Pakistani Muslim

⁵ On July 7, 2005 a group of four suicide bombers killed 52 people in central London. Three subway trains were targeted and one bus. One of the suicide bombers was of Pakistani descent another one of Indian descent.

moving in with a White family from Wisconsin for a year. They admitted that they did not know much about Islam prior to the show. They educated themselves and even sought the help of a writer of Pakistani descent, who was also Muslim. They also contacted the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC)⁶ for advice while shooting the series. Their commitment to guaranteeing the accuracy of the portrayal of a practicing teenage Muslim from Pakistan is also displayed in the choice of Adhir Kalyan to play Raja.

They decided to cast Kalyan because he understood their vision for the show. An interview with the actor revealed that he too, intended to be respectful of Muslims around the world with his portrayal of Raja. He clearly stated that he felt a sense of responsibility to the Muslim community.

The creators of *Aliens in America* were well intentioned and exceeded the expectations of the Muslim community living in America.

A careful examination of postings by bloggers, the review of the show by TV critics and the comments by a group of television viewers reveal a gap between what the creators of the show originally intended and the ways in which the show was perceived by these groups. My analysis of postings by bloggers helped me understand how they perceived the show.

⁶ *Aliens in America* was the first television show to feature a Muslim character in a comedy. Because of the success MPAC had with the creators of *Aliens in America* it decided to open a Hollywood bureau to serve as a bridge between the Muslim community and the entertainment industry.

Tales from the Blogosphere

The postings for this study were retrieved from the CW network World Wide Web site. The comments were posted by viewers of the show between May 2007 and July 2008. I printed and organized the posts chronologically by threads to allow for a microanalysis of data by using a “detailed line-by-line analysis [used] to generate initial categories (with their perspectives and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among categories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 57; Sanderson, 2008, p. 920). The postings were divided into main themes that emerged; each theme given a name, they are 1) The representations of Islam and Muslims 2) The connections between viewers and the characters.

Upon yet a closer examination of the postings two themes emerged within the representations of Muslims. First, the blogger’s appear to be concerned with the accuracy of the portrayal of Muslims second, they react critically to this portrayal.

The Representations of Islam and Muslims

When the show first aired viewers praised the writers and actors for a job well done, however very quickly several individuals voiced their concerns about the ways in which Raja and by extension all Muslims were portrayed on the show. It appears that bloggers had a hard time with the first name and the last name of the main character Raja Musharraf. Several bloggers expressed concerns about Raja’s name arguing that a Muslim from Pakistan would not be named Raja:

I am surprised how little research the writers of the show must have done. No Muslim would ever be named Raja...it is a very Indian name, very Hindu name.

If they wanted a stereotypical Muslim name they should have chosen:

Muhammad, Salmann. (Post #1, 10/17/2007)

While it is not possible to identify the author of this posting, one may speculate that he/she is of Pakistani descent and therefore, very concerned with the portrayal of Pakistani Muslims on the small screen. This specific posting reflects a desire to not only correct what appears to be an erroneous fact, but to also inform and engage other viewers about it. This initial posting appeared on the *Aliens in America* lounge on October 17, exactly two weeks after the pilot episode aired on television. Several lounge members responded to this post arguing that there are Muslims with a lot of different names “I don’t see a problem with the name Raja. On babynames.com Raja falls under these categories: Hindu, Muslim, Sanskrit, Arabic, Indian” (Post # 2, 10/17/2007). This post is very interesting, the author of this post appears to have been intrigued by post #1 and decided to not only get involved in the conversation but actually researched the issue by visiting babynames.com. This post shows that bloggers are engaged television viewers are very concerned with what is written about their favorite show. Within the same thread another lounge member offered his/her own analysis of Raja’s name explaining that “Hindu names sound more friendly to Americans than Muslim names” (Post # 4, 10/17/2007). This participant implied that the show writers may have selected to name the main character of the show Raja instead of a more traditional Muslim name such as Ali or Muhammad. Raja’s name was debated at length for several weeks, a blogger wondered if his name had something to do with the fact “his family goes back to the time before Pakistan and India split” (Post # 9, 10/19/2007). This post shows that

some viewers of *Aliens in America* were aware that India and Pakistan were at one point united under British rule until the two countries parted ways in the 1940s. Another set of threads dealt with the accuracy of Raja's portrayal in the show. Here again, bloggers focused on his name, this time around his last name, Musharraf. One viewer felt that the show creators took the easy route when selecting a last name for the main character

Raja:

But why is his last name Musharraf? They had to go with the easiest name they could think of; the name of Pakistan's president? I really think they took 30 seconds coming up with his name; that's the only thing that really bugs me about the show. (Post #15, 10/22/2007)

Another participant in the discussion provided additional information about Prevez

Musharraf:

Well, "President" might be stretching the truth just a bit. "Military dictator" is perhaps a bit closer. He may be a relatively benign military dictator, to be sure, but he did sort of oust the former president in a military coup. And what's this I hear about him instituting emergency rule? Seems to me as if he's trying to hold on to his power just a *bit* too hard. (Post # 7, 11/8/2007)

Another blogger picked up on this post and added more information about the current political situation in Pakistan:

It is not stretching the truth at all. He fulfils al the obligations required of the Pakistani Constitution, wherein the president is NOT elected by popular vote but by the legislative assembly. In 2004, he was given a vote of confidence by the

Pakistani Electoral College, confirming his position until his term of office ended in 2007... Like it or not, he IS the constitutional President of Pakistan [uppercase in the original]. (Post # 8, 11/08/2007)

Here again, it appears that viewers of *Aliens in America* who posted on the lounge were very concerned about the accuracy of the portrayal of Raja by the show. It is also clear that most bloggers were well informed about world events. Another theme within the representations of Islam and Muslims is the influence of the show on the public's perceptions of the religion and its followers.

Throughout the year, several threads dealt with a criticism of the portrayal of Muslims in *Aliens in America*. Some bloggers were truly offended by the show "Yeah, it looks ridiculous on so many levels. I won't even go into it but I will say that whoever wrote or produced this show is a moron. I think it's actually rude." (Post # 4, 5/20/2007)

Others were more specific in their critique of the show:

It's just another stereotype-fueled show. We are trying to make everyone in the world equal, yet television is constantly telling us that every Muslim is a terrorist or that every African-American is a thief. That's not right! This will only last a few episodes just because they've probably already started filming and they usually let them finish off the episodes that they've filmed. if not, no episode will be aired after the first few for being racist and immoral. (Post # 6, 5/20/2007)

This post was actually quite puzzling since the CW network had a good track record of featuring people of color in leading roles in their shows. The parallel between African-American being portrayed as thief and Muslims as terrorists even more disturbing since

Aliens in America features African-Americans as school administrators. It is unclear whether or not this viewer actually saw a full episode of the show, his posting appeared on the CW lounge on May 20th 2007, and it appears that at that time only short promotional clips were available to the general public, which may explain his harsh criticism of the show. This individual may have actually been referring to the Hollywood movie industry that has been portraying Muslims and Arabs as the enemy of America for the past 25 years. Another blogger explained that the show is politically biased:

To the person who thinks the show is just pure entertainment....come on...It's extremely blatant with its liberal message. Watch the Rocket Club show again. Invasion of privacy, racial profiling of a Muslim as a terrorist. Even though the writers won't admit it so as not to turn away the conservative viewers it is clearly politically motivated. (Post #20, 10/23/2007)

Other bloggers had a different outlook on the show, one posting is interesting, and its author is trying to praise the show but in the process appears to be disrespectful to Muslims:

I really, really love this show. It's nice to see finally a show succeeding in showing the "human" side of Muslims. I love that this show is a light-hearted comedy and I think it's a brilliant way to educate Americans and help them understand Muslims better (Post # 5, 3/27/2008).

This blogger meant well but chose to focus on what he/she describes as the "human" side of Muslims. He/she probably tried to express his/her appreciation to the show's creators for featuring a Muslim character in a positive light. Another blogger went one

step further and compares *Aliens in America* to other shows broadcast on The Fox television network and on ABC; this individual framed the issue differently and provided a different analysis of the show:

Everyone is talking about how horrible the show is for stereotyping Muslims.

Like popular shows such as 24 or Lost doesn't? This show actually is one of the least-racist portrayal I've seen on American television. The whole point of the show is to look into how ignorant AMERICANS can be. Just watch that family.

They are the completely stereotypical, and Raja in contrast appears to be the only intelligent, moral one. Think about it-you've got the 'I'm such a man' dad, the 'clean, organized, kid-obsessed' mother, the 'doesn't fit in but wants to be cool' son, and lastly a 'popular, cheerleader, party-going' daughter. They all claim to be Christian but don't really go to church, and are terrified of anything bigger than their own little town [upper case in the original]

(Post # 1, 3/30/2008).

This post was very organized and quite different from most posts on the site. Here the author built his argument in favor of the show by comparing it to other series; he/she then conducted a short analysis of the main characters in the show. Overall, AIA's viewers turned bloggers were very active on the show's lounge. Most of them are critical of the ways in which Muslims and Pakistanis are represented in the show; others offered a more constructive criticism of the show.

The Connection with Characters in the Show

Another theme emerged from close reading of the blogs, the strong connection viewers appeared to be constructing with characters and actors on the show. This construction manifested itself in two ways, first, the identification with the show, second, the rationalization of events taking place on the show. Bormann's symbolic convergence theory is useful in attempting to make sense of the posts. Bormann (1985) described his theory in the following terms "The theory explains the appearance of a group consciousness, with its implied shared emotions, motives, and meanings, not in terms of individuals daydreams and scripts but rather in terms of socially shared narration of fantasies" (Bormann, 1985, p. 128). The television show *Aliens in America* was watched on a weekly basis by approximately 2 million viewers. The CW lounge allowed viewers to enhance their viewing experience of the show with others. The blogs become a tool for individuals to share their views and engage in dialogues about the show. Television viewers are able to make connections between what they see on television and what they experience in their daily lives. The "group consciousness" described by Bormann emerges through the threads, "emotions are shared" about the show, the group attempts to make meaning of the show through discussions. Bormann wrote "Symbolic convergence theory creates a symbolic climate and culture that allows people to achieve empathic communion as well as a "meeting of the minds" (Bormann, 1985, p.134). The "meeting of the minds" took place on the *Aliens in America* blog, individuals shared their feelings about the show, and some asked questions while others expressed their frustrations about a plot line or the portrayal of a specific group. The

significant aspect of this blog is that it created a community of people coming together because of their shared interest in the television show *Aliens in America*. In February 2008, one blogger asked fellow lounge members an interesting question “do you think a show’s popularity can be determined by the level of activity in its corresponding official forum? Why or why not?” (Post #1, 02/04/2008). The author of this message clearly tried to have a constructive discussion with other bloggers, one member replied “a forum is really a place to complain” (Post # 8, 02/03/2008), another blogger actually acknowledged the power of the forum and in doing so validates Bormann’s theory “a forum can also be a place of praise and of discussions, questions and clarifications. Sometimes a forum actually becomes something akin to a true community founded on common interest” (Post # 10, 03/08/2008).

As stated above, lounge members were not only aware that the blog is a useful tool they also use this forum to express a sense of connection they constructed with characters and actors of the show. It is as if viewers of the show considered the characters on *Aliens in America* as family members. In several threads lounge members referred to characters using their first name and acting as if they personally knew them “I’ve never liked Gary better” (Post # 3, 03/17/2008), “the laughs are real and the pain is as well, when Claire started to tear up while talking to Raja I really felt her pain” (Post # 5, 3/ 17/2008). These two examples show that viewers identified wholeheartedly with the events taking place on their television screen. The comment “the laughs are real and the pain is as well” was especially telling, the television viewer appears to be in complete communion with the characters on the show. However, it appears that this

particular blogger did not seem to see Raja and Claire as characters but as real individuals with struggles and feelings just as himself/herself. Another post by a different lounge member focused on Fran's (the mother in the show) physical appearance "Fran looked so hot in that top that showed off her shoulders. And she had great hair" (Post # 3, 03/17/2008). Here again, TV viewers were conversing about a character as if it were someone living in their neighborhood. Another viewer went one step further in identifying with the characters when he/she wrote "Gary reminds me of my dad a lot" (Post # 4, 3/17/2008). Another blogger shared a personal story and connected her life to the characters on the show when she wrote "I forgot to mention last week that what happened to Fran last week happened to me. But I did not make the situation worse. I didn't confess until months later but There was no sign anything had happened" (Post # 3, 03/11/2008), in this post the author referred to Fran (the mother in *Aliens in America*) who bumped into another car and leaves a note on the other driver's windshield in order for him to contact her and pay for the damages to his car. The author of this post apparently fled the scene of the fender bender and seems to use the blog as a safe place to share her story. This blogger identifies with the show and adds his/her own narrative and perspective on the event she shares with the character, he/she seems to justify his/her actions when writing "but it didn't make the situation worse".

A secondary theme that emerged within this constructed connection that viewers have with *Aliens in America* is the rationalization of events taking place in the show. In many postings lounge members attempted to make meaning of the plots through personal experiences or knowledge. For instance when news first surfaced online that the

show may be cancelled viewers took to the blog in an attempt to make case against the cancellation. One individual seemed pessimistic and attempted to make sense of the situation with humor referring to the main character in the show “also, aren’t exchange students usually only around for year anyway?” (Post # 2, 3/31/2008), another blogger picked up on the remark and stated “well, for the one year thing, they could probably make a way to let Raja stay longer” (Post # 3, 04/01/2008). In another post a viewer had trouble understanding why Raja’s placement in a class with English language learners “Raja speaks English so well, why does he need to be in a remedial class” (Post # 3, 05/05/2008).

The viewers of *Aliens in America* who also blogged about the show truly identified with characters and actors, they often attempted to compare their lives to what was happening on the show and in doing so develop a strong sense of community with other lounge members. Bormann’s theory of symbolic convergence provides critical insights in understanding the ways in which television viewers are actively engaged in discussing the show but also to allow for “a meeting of the minds” (Bormann, 1985, p. 134).

Summary

The CW network started advertising its fall 2007 lineup in May 2007. Viewers of the show quickly turned to their computer keyboards to voice their opinion and question the content of the show. The analysis of the data demonstrated that several bloggers took issue with the depictions of Muslims and Pakistanis in the show. Other bloggers used

this forum as a platform to inform other viewers and correct erroneous information about Pakistan and its culture.

One significant aspect that transpired from a careful analysis of the blog is the level of involvement of viewers, some of them were very passionate about the show, many bloggers appeared to be willing to share personal information about themselves, using the lounge as some sort of virtual confessional. Several posts reflected on personal experiences that bloggers shared with characters on the show, at times lounge members appeared to be talking about or with family members or people living in their own neighborhood. These postings are powerful, and offer a unique insight into the ways in which the viewers of *Aliens in America* negotiated the show and its content. What started as a marketing tool for television executives to market a show turned into a place where meaning is made, where dialogues about society and stereotypes got started and were the viewers' voice could be heard. For some the postings appeared to have helped them relate or perhaps find answers to dilemmas in their own lives.

The show often dealt with controversial issues (race, religion), one striking finding was the fact many bloggers were very well informed about world events and at times did not hesitate to go online to provide accurate information to the lounge community. The debate about Raja's name and the fact it is also the name of the former president of Pakistan Prevez Musharraf was especially interesting. Some television viewers turned bloggers used the lounge to defend their country or offered an alternative view to what the information presented in the show.

The blog analysis revealed that viewers of the show did more than offer their perceptions of *Aliens in America*; they prolonged their experience with the show online. The show therefore, became a way for individuals to affirm their identity, defend who they are or what they stood for and in the process inform others about their religion or national origin. However, I also noticed the beginning of a drift or gap that appears to form between the intentions of the creators and the perceptions of the bloggers. Despite all the efforts by Mr. Guarascio and Mr. Port and Mr. Gardezi bloggers still perceived Raja's portrayal as inaccurate and insulting. The creators of the show were also accused of being politically biased. Some bloggers bluntly criticized the creators of the show while others praised them for attempting to portray Muslims in a positive light while exposing the ignorance of a portion of the American population. The level of involvement and the rationalization of events that took place in the show were unexpected to me. The individuals that blogged about the show appeared to be well informed and able to comprehend the portrayal of Muslims. Some bloggers even put together an interesting rebuttal about Raja's name, his clothing and accent.

Based on my analysis of blogs postings it appears that a lot of teenagers watched *Aliens in America*. The target audience of the show is 18-34 years-old, however, while it is impossible to determine exactly how old the bloggers that posted on this site were, it is safe to say that at least some of them were younger than 18. I am concerned that these younger viewers may not be able to grasp some of the humor in the show and in turn acquire stereotypical views about Muslims. I will address this issue in more depth later.

A closer look at the reviews of TV critics helped me gain more insights into the ways in which they perceived the show.

The Professional's Perceptions: TV Critics

In this section I looked at the ways in which television critics perceived *Aliens in America*. I selected nine articles that were all published in October 2007, most of them published on October, 1st, the day the show premiered on the CW network. The reviews I selected come from daily newspapers that also provide content online: the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the *New York Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*. I also examined reviews from the weekly newsmagazine *Newsweek* and a trade journal *Variety*⁷. I also selected a review from *Inslamonline.net* in order to get the perceptions from a writer and academic of Pakistani descent. I felt that this wide selection of reviews allowed me to better understand how the show was perceived by media critics across the nation. I felt that this strategy allowed me to gather a good sample of reviews and avoid the pitfall of only analyzing the work of critics based in Los Angeles or New York.

Gathering the perceptions of television critics was very different from analyzing blogs or conducting focus group interviews. The goal of reviewers is to inform television viewers about an upcoming program, and providing readers/viewers with enough information to help them make a decision regarding an upcoming show. A review of a television program is usually short and is comprised of several distinct elements, the

⁷ *Variety* specializes in entertainment news and information regarding the show business industry. It has been published since 1905.

title, the plot summary, a reference to existing shows, and a comment on the actors in the show and finally a prediction on whether or not the show will meet its audience. Most of the reviews of *Aliens in America* I examined were very positive while others criticized the show for its content and what they perceived to be an underlying message to audiences. Let's first examine how TV critics titled their review.

What's in a Title?

The first element in each review is the title, it is aimed at capturing the reader's attention, and it is often very catchy, usually references another show and is from time to time of questionable taste. For example, the reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times* used a historical reference and combined it with the title of the show "Humor is no longer alien post-9/11" (Lloyd, 2007). With this title the author attempts to capture the readers' attention with a reference to 9/11 and sets the tone for the rest of the review. The television critic for the *Pittsburgh-Post Gazette* went with something milder "Aliens arrives with a laugh" (Owen, 2007), here again using Raja the alien and comparing him to Justin (the teenager from Wisconsin) who feels alienated in his own environment. *The New York Times* went with "a sitcom with a twist" (Stanley, 2007) while *The Washington Post* elected to make a reference to Islam and the prayer mat used by Muslims "Aliens in America: Roll up the welcome mat" (Shales, 2007). The critic for *The New York Post* titled her review "Allah in the family" (Stasi, 2007), referencing the 1970s TV show *All in the Family*. The reviewer for the *Boston Globe* used a very descriptive title "Aliens is a sweet, gentle, take on teen misfits" (Gilbert, 2007). The

weekly newsmagazine titled the review of the show “Snide and Prejudice” (Alston, 2007) while *Islamonline.net* went with “Funny Little Alien” (Khan, 2007).

The titles of the reviews were informative and offered readers an idea about the rest of the article; it also gave me a preview of what was to come in the article itself. It is worth noting that there are obvious differences between publications such as the *New York Post*⁸, known for its sensationalism and taste for tabloid type reporting and a more thoughtful take on the show by the *New York Times*.

A closer examination of the reviews allowed me to separate the positive reviews from the negative ones and therefore determine the ways in which TV critics perceived the show.

Welcoming Aliens in America

Several journalists were charmed by the show and almost immediately compared it to the 1980s show *The Wonder Years*⁹ (Gilbert, 2007; Stasi, 2007) because the show is narrated by the main character in the show, Justin Tolchuck, the teenage outcast from Other reviewers compared the show to 1970s *All in the Family*¹⁰ (Shales, 2007; Stasi, 2007) for the willingness to take on controversial issues. Lloyd (2007) who reviewed the

⁸ *The New York Post* is part of Rupert Murdoch’s media empire News Corporation. This group owns several media outlets in Australia, England and The United States. Newspapers owned by News Corporation usually follow a conservative editorial line.

⁹ *The Wonder Years* aired on ABC from 1988 to 1993, the show starred Fred Savage. Savage also directed four episodes of *Aliens in America* including the episode entitled *One Hundred Thousand Miles* used for this study in focus group interviews.

¹⁰ *All in the Family* aired in the 1970s on CBS and addressed controversial and socially relevant issues.

show for the *Los-Angeles Times* saw the show as a sign of hope that the country may have moved forward from the climate of fear created by 9/11:

"Aliens in America" is a hopeful sign that we may finally be emerging pop-culturally into the post-post-9/11 age -- or, at any rate, a post-"24" age, in which we are ready to find a little humor in the Clash of Civilizations, rather than just wanting to bathe in bloody fantasies of prophylactic superspies (Lloyd, 2007, ¶ 2).

The comparison with the show *24* that airs on the Fox Television network is especially interesting. *24* premiered in November 2001, and features U.S government agent Jack Bauer who works tirelessly to foil terrorist plots against the United States. The name of the show *24* refers to a 24 hour period in the life of Jack Bauer. In August 2008, *Newsweek* columnist Dahlia Lithwick reported that Jack Bauer and the television show *24* appeared to have influenced the most controversial policies in the Bush administration, the use of torture:

According to British lawyer and writer Sands, Jack Bauer—played by Kiefer Sutherland—was an inspiration at early "brainstorming meetings" of military officials at Guantánamo in September 2002. Diane Beaver, the staff judge advocate general who gave legal approval to 18 controversial interrogation techniques including waterboarding, sexual humiliation and terrorizing prisoners with dogs, told Sands that Bauer "gave people lots of ideas." Michael Chertoff, the Homeland Security chief, gushed in a panel discussion on "24" organized by the Heritage Foundation that the show "reflects real life." (Lithwick, 2008, ¶ 2).

According to Lithwick and others the reality surpassed the fiction depicted in the show *24*. Some critics perceived *Aliens in America* as the anti-*24*, but also as a show about life in high school:

For all its engagement with what might be called political unrealities, "Aliens in America" is at heart just another series about kids on the margins of high school society, whose battles all are local and whose experience of terror is largely confined to bullies, the opposite sex, the possibility of public ridicule, social ostracism and the nagging sense that you actually may be the awful person you imagine other people believe you to be.

Stanley (2007), writing for the *New York Times* agrees and praises the show "Aliens is fresh, funny, and charming in a tart, sardonic way, one of the best sendups of adolescent angst since the *Wonder Years* and *Malcolm in the Middle*. Stasi (2007, ¶), writing for the *New York Post* goes one step further and sees *Aliens in America* as a show with a tone that has not been seen on television in quite some time "it is like a return to the old days when Fox made shockingly politically incorrect shows like *Married with Children* and *In living Color*." (Stasi, 2007, ¶ 3). This last remark is very interesting and appears to suggest that only smaller network such as Fox and the CW would venture into scheduling such programming. It is worth noting that *Aliens in America* was first scheduled to air nationwide on NBC but that the network, decided not to air the show explaining that it would not fit the network's target audience (Ali, 2007).

Owen (2007), writing for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette embraced the show “it’s that rare TV comedy with both humor and heart” (Owen, 2007, ¶ 8), Gilbert, writing for the *Boston Globe* agreed:

It's a gentle show about the bond between two high school misfits, Justin and Raja, and how Raja's worldly perspective helps Justin out of his petty worries. The territory is familiar teen TV - the politics of cliques, fear of what's different from you, nutty parents - but nonetheless well done (Gilbert, 2007, ¶ 2).

Most of the critics that appreciated the show perceived it as a good sitcom, not afraid to take on serious issues praising its tone and original take on the high school sitcom genre. However what is striking about most of the critics that appreciated the show is that did not think it would succeed in the long run. For instance, Gilbert (2007) wrote

It's hard to imagine how "Aliens in America" will proceed beyond that basic plot - in some ways, the fifth episode of a new series is generally more indicative of long-term success than the premiere. Justin's parents don't offer much obvious potential for development (Gilbert, 2007, ¶ 6).

Stanley (2007) is more positive in her outlook for the show “*Aliens in America* has all the most predictable elements of a classic sitcom-ignorant teachers, snobby cheerleaders, bullies and well-meaning but clueless parents-and still manages to seem original (Stanley, 2007, ¶ 13). Lowry (2007) who wrote for *Variety* saw potential issues with the series early on “the series is already sounding alarms about finding fresh avenues into this material, at the risk of turning the cheerful Raja into little more than a prop through which to filter Justin's discomfort” (Lowry, 2007, ¶7), he concluded his review with a

tasteless play on word about the show “*Aliens* won't need breakout numbers to hang on, but the producers would still be well advised to say their prayers -- five times a day or otherwise” (Lowry, ¶ 11).

In summary the critics who perceived the show as an interesting program still did not appear to believe in its long term success. They happened to be right since the show was cancelled after one season. A closer examination of the reviews by journalists who criticized *Aliens in America* will inform on their perceptions of the show.

Alienating Aliens

Two reviews stand out as being extremely critical of *Aliens in America*; the first was published by Tom Shales for *the Washington post*, the second one by Joshua Alston for *Newsweek*. A third review, provided by Amina Khan for Islamonline.net also raises interesting questions about the show.

Shales (2007), is the most forceful in his criticism of the show, he opens his review with these words “Is it racist to make racism funny?” and goes on to criticize the show for its content and the message it is sending to viewers:

But despite plenty of surface sparkle, there is something discomfoting about the show, and not just because it borrows tone and form from other sitcoms with youthful heroes, especially Fox's *Malcolm in the Middle*. The show says not only that racism but also bullying, baiting, ignorance, homophobia and other social afflictions can be quite hilarious. Maybe up to a point but it's a point beyond which *Aliens in America* unfortunately seems willing to go. It's no fun to laugh and then feel guilty about it.

It appears that this critic was only able to see the pilot episode; interviews conducted with focus groups showed that this first episode was loaded with controversial issues and situations. It is worth remembering that the pilot episode of a series is the episode that is shown to television executives who in turn, decide to order more episodes of the show. Shales' perceptions may have been a little bit different and possibly more positive if he had an opportunity to see more episodes of the series. Nonetheless, his perceptions were enlightening and his views were confirmed by Alston's take on the show for *Newsweek*.

Alston (2007) selected a different angle for his review of the show, he decided to analyze *Aliens in America* and the ABC show *Cavemen*¹¹. Alston was, like Shales (2007) very critical of *Aliens in America* and its content (referring to both shows), he wrote:

They both employ racial and cultural differences as a means of exploring what it means to be an outsider. But the execution of both shows demonstrates that their creators don't understand how it feels to be excluded because of your race. And while neither show is racist—at least in the sense of the term that connotes malice—both pull onto the road paved with good intentions and floor the gas pedal. (Alston, 2007, ¶2)

Like Shales (2007), Alston (2007) offers his readers a deeper analysis of the show; he also offers his opinion of the treatment of racial discrimination in the show:

But equating Raja's exclusion with Justin's minimizes the psychological stress that comes from racial discrimination. It's similar to the person who hears that his

¹¹ *Cavemen* aired on ABC in October and November 2007. It was cancelled after 6 episodes. Characters in *Cavemen* were based on the GEICO insurance commercials.

friend's parent has passed away and thinks he's sympathizing when he says, "I know how you feel. I was a complete wreck when my goldfish died." That isn't to say social exclusion doesn't hurt, too, but as we've seen time and again through then-and-now photos of glamorous Hollywood stars, geek washes off, Pakistani doesn't. (Alston, 2007, ¶ 4)

Shales (2007) and Alston (2007) offer by far the strongest rebuttals of *Aliens in America*, Amina Khan who reviewed the series for Islamonline.net focused on the ways in which the show depicts Islam and Muslims through Raja's character:

It seems that through scenes such as the one of Raja praying, the writers are trying to introduce Islam to general public, but this is not done very smoothly. For instance, when Raja is upset, he suddenly starts reciting the Shahadah (Muslim testimonial of faith) very loudly then goes on to translate and explain it to Justin. (Khan, 2007, ¶ 8)

Khan goes on and like many bloggers felt that Raja's outfit amounted to a caricature "The character of Raja at times comes across as a caricature wearing his shalwar kameez and kufi (although most young Pakistani men also wear pants, especially if they are coming to America), with an exaggerated accent." (Khan, 2007, ¶ 10)

Shales (2007), Alston (2007) and Khan (2007) offer different perspectives on *Aliens in America*, they all agree that the show tends to trivialize serious societal issues and promising one thing while delivering something else.

Summary

This examination of the reviews of *Aliens in America* by TV critics revealed that the perceptions of the show varied greatly from one individual to the next. However, this analysis helped me in understanding the ways in which TV critics viewed the show.

Media critics attempted to compare it to other sitcoms to provide a point of reference to readers. Many critics made a connection between *Aliens in America* and the 1970s show *All in the Family* in part because both shows addressed sensitive societal issues. I was particularly interested in the parallel made by Lloyd (2007) about *Aliens* and *24*. While investigating this question I discovered the reported extent of *24*'s influence on U.S policies regarding interrogation techniques. The perceptions of TV critics focus on slightly different themes than bloggers, however, here again, there is a clear disconnect between what the show creators intended and the ways in which their work was analyzed by media critics. For example, Shales (2007) and Alston (2007) were extremely critical of the show, and like some bloggers were completely turned off by *Aliens in America*. Shales (2007) especially disapproved of the underlying message he perceived was embedded in the show "The show says not only that racism but also bullying, baiting, ignorance, homophobia and other social afflictions can be quite hilarious".

This represents a major finding, some bloggers and several TV critics perceived were at opposite ends of the spectrum with the creators of the show. Here again, this gap or sense of disconnect between the perceptions of the TV critics in comparison to the intentions of the creators of the show are simply stunning. The analysis of the perceptions of TV viewers confirmed this discovery.

The Perceptions of Local Television Viewers

In this section, I offered a description of the episodes of *Aliens in America* I used to gather data from participants in my focus groups. I also presented an in-depth account of the data gathered through these interviews.

A Closer Look at Aliens in America

As stated in the first section, *Aliens in America* is about a White suburban family from Wisconsin. Franny Tolchuck is an overprotective and overbearing mother who desperately tries to help her teenage son, Justin, become more popular at school. After a meeting with the school's counselor she is convinced that welcoming an exchange student in her home is the solution to her son's problems at school. Franny Tolchuck is sold on the idea when she is presented with a brochure depicting a smiling Scandinavian student standing along a student who reminds her of her son Justin. The experience takes an unexpected turn when they meet Raja, a Muslim teenager from Pakistan.

The show chronicles Raja's experiences as an exchange student in the town of Medora, Wisconsin. The plot of the show is centered on Raja's interactions with the Tolchuck Family.

I showed four episodes of the show to participants in order to get a better understanding of the ways in which they perceived the show.

Episode 1 The first episode I showed participants in the study was the pilot of *Aliens in America* first broadcast on the CW network on October 1st 2007. In this first installment viewers are introduced to Justin Tolchuck a 16 year-old high school student who has trouble

fitting in High School in Medora, Wisconsin. His mother desperate to improve his social life meets with Mr. Matthews the school counselor who convinces her to welcome an exchange student into their homes and help Justin's social skills. The Tolchucks travel enthusiastically to the airport a few days later to pick up their exchange student. The Tolchucks expecting to welcome a Scandinavian student are very surprised when their new guest turns out to be Raja Musharraf, a 16-year-old Muslim from Pakistan. Franny Tolchuck spend the rest of the episode plotting to send Raja home while the young Pakistani attempts to survive his first day of school in the United States. In the end Franny Tolchuck learns that Raja is an orphan and despite her fears of Muslims and foreigners she decides to let Raja stay in her home.

Episode 2 The second episode I showed participants entitled *No man is an island* aired on October, 8 2007.

During a class discussion Raja explains that he values Justin Tolchucks friendship and that it is the "one thing he could not live without". The news travels fast at Medora High school and the two friends begin being teased for being a couple. Justin quickly realizes that his friendship with Raja is making him a bigger target of bullies at school. He reluctantly asks the assistance of his

younger and very popular sister Claire. She tells him to do what she does with him, totally ignore Raja. The situation is made worse when Raja befriends “small Paul”- an 11-year-old genius – who is an outcast at school constantly bullied by others. Justin finds that he misses Raja’s friendship when he falls asleep in class and wakes up three hours later and realizes that nobody had realized he was missing. Meanwhile, Justin’s sister Claire tries to break up with Jeffrey, her father Gary decides to get involved to help Jeffrey patch things up with her.

Episode 3 The third episode I showed participants is entitled *Rocket Club*, it aired on October 15, 2007. In this episode Justin is forced by his mother Franny to invite Raja to join the after-school Rocket Club. Raja is shocked when he discovers that the club is the creation of Justin’s imagination to get away from his mom. Justin actually spends time with the only two friends he has at school, watches television and eats junk food. Raja does not understand how watching TV is more exciting than building rockets. Raja decides to build his own rocket. Unfortunately he is taken into custody as a suspected terrorist when he tries to buy the parts needed to build a rocket at a local hardware store. Meanwhile, Claire attends the try-outs to be a cheerleader and realizes that she does not make the squad because of her association with Raja.

Episode 4 The last episode I showed is entitled *One hundred Thousand miles*, it aired on March 23, 2008. The Tolchucks plan a family vacation to Vancouver to escape the brutal Wisconsin winter. Their flight is delayed because of the weather. Raja begins praying in the seating area near their gate, other passengers are terrified, airport security intervenes. Raja and the Tolchucks are questioned and the trip is postponed. Raja feels that the family blames him for that happened at the airport, he feels abandoned and misunderstood. He goes to school and asks the school counselor (Mr. Matthews) to provide him with a new family. In the meantime, the Tolchucks realizing that Raja has left their house start looking for him. Their first stop is for the local Mosque. There they meet Mrs. Sadaqatmaland (a Pakistani American) and her teenage daughter Sadika who are hosting a German exchange student. Meanwhile, Justin and his father Gary set off in search of Raja, wreck their van on an icy road and share a father/son bonding moment. In the meantime, the school counselor, Mr. Matthews, convinces Raja to call the Tolchucks to let them know he is safe. In return, Franny Tolchucks asks Mrs. Sadaqatmaland to help her prepare a traditional Pakistani meal to apologize to Raja and welcome him back into their home.

I carefully selected each episode to offer focus group participants an overview of what *Aliens in America* was about. For example, focus group participants had the opportunity to witness the ways in which several racial, ethnic and religious groups were portrayed in the show. In addition, they were also able to watch episodes with different plots where the characters interacted with each other in schools and in the community. Focus group participants were able to gain a good understanding of the overall tone and structure of the show including the ways in which specific groups were portrayed and how humor was achieved. Therefore, the perceptions of the show by focus group participants are based on the four episodes described above.

A close examination of the data collected through focus group interviews reveals that participants were, like bloggers, concerned with the portrayals of specific characters and institutions. Participants also made interesting connections between *Aliens in America* and their lived experiences, and focused on the structure of the show, the historical context, the state of the television industry and its underlying message.

Perceptions on the Portrayals of Jeffrey and Raja

Upon viewing the pilot episode of the show focus group participants engaged in discussions regarding the portrayal of several groups depicted on the show. Despite the fact the show is about Raja's interactions with the Tolchucks, with students, faculty and staff at school and in the community, focus group participants did not focus much on his portrayal but more so on the ways in which he was treated by others. Brad noted that he was unjustly regarded as a threat:

When he first showed up...everybody was worried like oh geez he is a Pakistani whatever... you know...it does not mean anything, the fact he is a Muslim does not mean he is a terrorist. These old pre-conceived notions that we have...that people...just assume about a person before they even get to know them or talk to them (fg1-1)¹².

Lola insisted that he did not look threatening in part because he did not look like the individuals who perpetrated the attacks on New York on 9/11/2001:

When I look at Raja he does not look like offensive, he does not look like a scary guy would did the 9/11 possibly if he had a turban more high in terms of (*making a gesture designating a head cover*) that would have been more characteristic of stereotyping (fg1-2).

In another exchange, Marie, remarked that he was objectified from the beginning of the show, when upon arriving at the Tolchucks the mother contemplates sending him back to his country and compares him as an appliance “(the mom) said we can’t return him like a toaster and they did keep saying that instead of him”(fg2-1).

Nerissa added:

But the father was also the one who slipped in his pronouns and instead of saying him called him “it”, “it” is fine in the house as long as we are still getting the check, I think he was the only character that used the pronoun it, objectifying Raja (fg2-1).

¹² Locating codes are used throughout this dissertation. The first portion of the code refers to the focus group in which the participant took part; the second portion of the code refers to the particular meeting. For example, fg1-1 means that the comment was made in the first meeting of focus group #1.

Focus group participants were quick to note that Raja is actually the nice character in the show and that he is, too often mistreated by other protagonists, that is why when during the episode entitled *One hundred thousand miles* the Tolchucks turn on him participants noted that he father goes as far as calling him Jar-Jar, “he called him Jar-Jar in the first couple minutes of the show”, Marie (fg2-2). In several instances in the series characters in the show refer to other characters and events in other shows or in popular culture. This practice is known as intertextuality. French philosopher and semiotician Julia Kristeva coined the word intertextuality in 1969 in *Word, dialogue and novel* (reprinted in Moi, 1986). Allen (2005) gave a useful working definition of *intertextuality* “the fundamental concept of intertextuality is that no text, as it might light to appear so, is original and unique-in-itself; rather it is a tissue of inevitable, and to an extent unwitting, references to and quotation from other texts” (Allen, 2005, p.1). Calling Raja Jar-Jar is not a compliment as noted by focus group participants. Jar-Jar refers to Jar-Jar Binks a character who first appeared in the movie *Episode I: the Phantom Menace* (Lucas, 1999), the fourth installment of the Star Wars series. This character became the subject of a controversy upon the movie’s release when *The Nations’* Patricia J. Williams accused George Lucas of returning to the minstrelsy genre with this character:

Whether intentionally or not, Jar Jar's pratfalls and high jinks borrow heavily from the genre of minstrelsy. Despite the amphibian get-up, his relentless, panicky, manchild-like idiocy is imported directly from the days of Amos 'N' Andy. And whether it were a white man, a black woman or Al Jolson himself beneath the mask, what would still make all the clowning so particularly

insulting is the fact that Jar Jar's speech is a weird pidgin mush of West African, Caribbean and African-American linguistic styles (Williams, 1999, p. 9).

George Lucas denied Williams' assertions, however Jar-Jar's character was not as visible in subsequent installments of *Star Wars*. Moviegoers also reacted negatively to Jar-Jar, calling him annoying and hard to understand. In calling Raja, Jar-Jar, Gary Tolchuck shows his annoyance at the exchange student, most participants picked upon this reference during focus group interviews. Throughout the series, the creators and writers of *Aliens in America* made reference to other popular shows. For instance, in the first episode Raja is walking through the hallway at Medora High school, in the background, comments from random students can be heard, such as, "Apu where is my slushee." This comment, a racially charged reference to Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, the Indian convenience store clerk in the popular cartoon television show *The Simpsons*, is directed at Raja, who is from Pakistan. The comment not only assumes no distinction or history between Pakistan and India but also appears to be an attempt by show creators to reference *The Simpsons* and get a laugh out of viewers. In *The Simpsons*, humor is often achieved while making fun of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon's culture and religious beliefs. During this scene focus group participants picked up on the reference to *The Simpsons* and understood that this example was simply the reflection of the type of abuse that may take place on high school campuses everyday across the country.

During focus group interviews, much time was spent analyzing the portrayal of Claire Tolchuck's boyfriend, Jeffrey. He first appears briefly at the end of the first episode when all family members are gathered around the dinner table. Jeffrey is African

American, athletic, during his first on-screen appearance and he wears a bright red football jersey at the dinner table. It appears that several participants were uneasy about the ways in which Jeffrey was portrayed. Vanessa (fg2-1) saw Jeffrey as a representation of “the football player jock, African American” while John perceived his portrayal as “a caricature” arguing that the portrayal of all characters are exaggerated “They are all bigger than that it actually occurs” (fg2-1). Further in the discussion Marie raised an interesting point regarding the on-screen relationship between Jeffrey and Claire:

I think it’s interesting that it wasn’t overtly obvious and I don’t know, the relationship between a White girl and a black man...where two things are happening...they are trying to make it Ok and acceptable by not talking about it, not making it something that is even discussed or might even be a problem with White parents or they are trying to make it P.C (politically correct), it’s really cool, we are not going to talk about it within the sitcom we want it to be acceptable and I can’t figure out what the ploy is and I can’t figure out if it’s the sitcom wanting to make it P.C. and not talking about it not making it something they want to address make fun of, bring out to the open, play on words or they are deliberately not saying anything about it to make it more obvious (fg2-1).

Marie appeared conflicted here, and wondered how the interracial relationship between Jeffrey and Claire may play out with audiences of the show. It worth noting that The CW network has been commended over the years for systematically including characters of color in sitcoms they broadcast (*Everybody hates Chris*, *Girlfriends*, *The Game*). Other participants in this focus group downplayed the significance of Claire and Jeffrey’s

relationship since his portrayal was perceived by some as not-so-glowing. For example, Nicole saw the way he was portrayed as “insulting” since, in part he appears to lack judgment and common sense since he does not say much and lets “the father to take on the whole thing” “with the dad telling him what to do...it is very strange”. She added that “they made him so non-threatening that he does not have an opinion of his own”. (fg2-1), Nicole is here referring to Gary Tolchuck who advises Jeffrey on how he may reconcile with his daughter. Vanessa, saw Jeffrey’s portrayal as an effort by the creators of the show to provide viewers with a different perspective on African American males.

Vanessa:

I think they are trying a softer side of African-American males, dominantly right now and you think that all the successful African Americans a lot of them are musical artists and they sing about...well it’s all hip hop and stuff...and they sing about derogatory things and stuff like that. If you look at football movies, you see the really big black guy and he cries he is really sensitive like in that movie with Adam Sandler...*The Longest Yard*. He(Jeffrey) is like the big guy, and he is crying, this is like a jock and you would not think he would be very sensitive and have all these feelings for a girl and put himself out there and subject himself to sitting on the lawn all day and you see this side..It’s different to see that (fg2-1).

Participants discussed Jeffrey’s portrayal at lengths. While they had strong opinions about the ways in which Jeffrey was depicted on screen they all appear to get something different from this portrayal. On the show, Jeffrey is not the victim of discrimination or unfair criticism like Raja is, however, participants overall perceived his portrayal as not-

so-glowing.

It is interesting to note that participants did not compare the ways in which Raja and Jeffrey were portrayed in the show. However, they felt it was relevant to share their perceptions of both characters. In several conversations participants also decided to share their views and perceptions of the ways in which life in high school was portrayed in the show.

Perceptions of the Depictions of Life in High School

An investigation of the intentions of the creators of the show revealed that they used some of their own experiences when producing the show. When reviewing *Aliens in America* for the New York Times, Stanley (2007) offered a very interesting assessment on the interest of Americans for high school “high school is an American obsession, less a place of learning than a four-year rite of passage. European coming-of-age comedies don’t as a rule fixate on the 10th-grade caste system.” (Stanley, 2007, ¶ 11). Focus group participants also felt it was a topic of interest. David felt that the portrayal of people in high school in the show was accurate “for me personally, it was not like that, but I could see a lot of students I could go back and think of...they probably felt exactly like that...I think the portrayal of the kid was pretty accurate” (fg1-1), Conner was pleased to see a lot of African American teachers in the show and noted that there are reality less than 1% of educators are African American males (fg2-1). John added that the creators of the show may have exaggerated the depiction of life in schools; however he saw this fact as something positive:

I think it was done intentionally because it is offensive that was the way I read it because yeah these things are completely offensive but I mean I think it's like bringing out in the open to show just how totally repugnant it is (fg2-1).

This remark by John appears to be in line with what David Guarascio and Moses Port intentions were when creating the show. They used some of their own “nightmarish stories” (Gross & Miller, 2007) in the script of the show and appear to have exaggerated some of the situations. Conner agreed with John and also felt that the reaction of the teacher to Raja in the first episode was out of line:

I think it was pretty much typical, when I say typical thinking about the teacher was pretty much out of line when she made her comments as far the way she introduced Raja as a Muslim that's the first thing she said he is a Muslim. His people blew up the buildings that's pretty much how she introduced him... When asked what he meant by typical he added that the portrayal of this teacher was actually accurate in certain schools in this country (fg2-1).

Here is a detailed description of the scene Conner is referring to. In this scene taking place during Raja's first day at school, one of his teachers introduces him to the class, here the dialogue between Raja and the teacher:

Today I am going to put aside our lesson because we have a special guest. For one year we will be in the presence of a real-life Pakistani who practices Muslimism. That means we have an opportunity to learn about his culture and he about ours. So let's be in a dialogue. Raja, you are so different from us, how that does feel?

Raja answers “I am not sure I understand?” The teacher tells him to “think about it.” She turns to the class and asks, “How does everyone else feels about Raja and his differences?” In response, a student raises her hand and the teacher invites her to speak. “Well, I guess I feel angry, because his people blew up the buildings in New York,” declares the student. The teacher answers “That’s good.” Raja tries to object and says, “But that is not true.” The teacher interrupts, “O.K. Raja, in America you have to wait until you are called on, and I would appreciate a raised hand (showing Raja how to raise his hand). The teacher then turns to the class again and asks, “Who else is angry at Raja?” Most of the students raise their hands.

Focus group participants quickly shifted the discussion from the depiction of life in schools to an interesting dialogue about Raja’s faith and the ways in which Americans are portrayed throughout the show.

Raja, Islam and the Portrayal of Americans

Several participants reacted to one particular scene in the last episode I showed them entitled *One Hundred Thousand Miles*, when Raja and the Tolchucks get questioned by security after he started praying in the waiting area prior to boarding their plane. Marie explained that she felt there was a double standard because Raja is Muslim; she explained that if someone with different beliefs had started praying no one would have had a problem with it:

I think the praying part was interesting, the praying created this situation, so what if a women was just sitting in a chair waiting for a plane pulled out a rosary and started praying, I don’t think anyone would bat an eye at that (fg2-2).

The discussion turned to the portrayal of Americans in the show. Marie had a hard time believing that most people would be as insensitive as the Tolchucks; she was referring to a scene when they are looking for Raja at the local Mosque “I think it was very much disrespectful and I can’t imagine people being that ignorant” (fg2-2). Nerissa agreed and noted that when Claire Tolchuck and her daughter are asked to wear a Hijab in the Mosque they raised their voices and told the lady handing them the Hijabs that they were not interested in buying anything (a Hijab is a head covering that hides the hair but leaves the face uncovered). Focus group participants noted that there was an interesting contrast between Raja who is very devout and his hosts who are not. Brad also remarked that the family appeared to be biased against Islam:

It did not sound like his family (Justin’s) was too religious at all, I could not really tell but...she was just so appalled when he was praying to Allah, so like I mean...she would probably have not reacted that way he was praying to god or you know...just the fact that he was praying to Allah...it is not like it went against their religious beliefs, it is just her preconceived notions of Muslims and Islam.

Later on in the conversation Beth picked up on this idea and appeared to suggest that the creators of the show willingly portrayed the Tolchucks as ignorant:

it just seems like they are playing on everybody’s idea of being naïve, maybe not naïve but a lack of knowledge...I don’t know why I am taking that route...it just seems, yes total ignorance, but it’s not only ignorance it’s lack of knowing, not

being stupid but not knowing, not being informed or not informed properly (fg-1-2).

Beth's comment lead to more discussion about the participant's views on America especially White America, Lola who identified herself as African America explained that the portrayal of the Tolchucks may not necessarily be a caricature but could actually be reflection of parts of the population:

I am thinking about that scholarly research that I see, the picture that I get from the literature...what they seem to be saying, or suggest is that the problem is with White America and White America not being comfortable with other people and defining them as other people...I don't know how to paint that picture with the literature...so that kind of seems like this show, you have the mom, who's like frantic or whatever, then the family comes down then you have the White officers...it seems like the people they are showing don't know anything is part of this White America who does not relate to other people...(fg1-2).

When I asked Lola if she felt the show may contribute to perpetuating stereotypes about specific ethnic groups living in the United States she replied:

I don't know about perpetuate but it keeps that constant it is still painting that image that certain parts of White America are not comfortable interacting with people that don't look like them, they are in the suburbs, they only see people in the suburbs that look like them, they only know suburban experience, when they go into certain type of urban areas they don't feel comfortable with all the diversity...like in education, the White teacher does not know how to teach a

diverse population of students...because of background...that' still...that's that picture (fg1-2).

Lola's remarks are very interesting. While it is difficult to gauge accurately how audiences may perceive and process these images depicting White Americans being afraid or not willing to deal with people different than themselves, research has shown that in educational contexts these images are powerful and may influence students' behavior at school. Gay (2000) has noted that the portrayals of ethnic groups in the media is powerful and cannot be ignored by educators. Cortés (2000) also argued that the mass media are often very powerful and compete with schools when it comes to teaching children about diversity. In another conversation about the ways in which Americans are portrayed Lola noted that in the show the Tolchucks (the White family from Wisconsin) had trouble understanding Raja and wished he were more like them, she also made an interesting connection with English language learners in schools:

It sounded like the family...they wanted him to be like them instead of understanding that he is different (not different bad), he is different. It is that story that you hear, for instance for ESL, the teachers are frustrated because they say they don't speak Spanish so they don't know how to teach and say well if they are going to come to the US why don't they just learn how to speak English, they need to know how to speak English why do we have to learn their language and try to accommodate them, there is a lot of that so I picked up on that (fg1-2).

According to Lola, it appears that the show reflected a certain reality that she had witnessed firsthand in schools. Lola's point about English language learners has been

part of a larger debate over immigration reform in the United States in the past five years. Some measures discussed at that time included a heated debate over making English the official language of the United States and among other issues whether or not providing in-state tuition to children of illegal immigrants in the state of Texas. Tse (2001) exposed many myths about immigrants and their perceived unwillingness to learn the English language. Here again, I was amazed to see the range of comments triggered by *Aliens in America* and the connections focus group participants made between the show and contemporary issues facing our country. At the end of this particular session Lola and Elisa engaged in an interesting discussion about the perceptions that people living in other countries may have of Americans. Lola explained:

I could be completely wrong but my perception has always been that people in other countries are more aware somehow I feel than Americans are, not all Americans just kind of in general, I don't know why I think that way...(fg1-2).

Elisa agreed wholeheartedly:

That is always the impression that I get too! But I also get the impression that everyone else thinks that too, they all kind of perceive us to be the ignorant ones but we sort of live up to that expectation... (fg1-2).

Lola agreed and stated:

I do think in a lot of ways that we do live up to it because we don't always accept people, we look at people, oh they are different what is wrong with them, it can just be Black, White it does not have to be race, we just don't get to know one another I guess.

Beth may have summarized best how many participants in that group felt when she said that the perceptions people have of Americans may be due in part to the way we portray ourselves in television shows “What are they going to think of us? Now that’s going to be the new perspective of how people are viewing us” (fg1-2).

While discussing the ways in which The Tolchucks reacted to Raja the tone of the conversations changed. I noticed that focus group participants started identifying with some of the experiences Raja was going through on the screen in front of them. The result is a series of powerful conversations between participants and myself that I must admit took me by surprise.

Connecting with Aliens in America

Upon reading the interviews given by the creators of the show, Mr. David Guarascio and Mr. Moses Port and writer Sameer Gardezi, I realized how much of their personal experiences they put into the script of the show. Their intentions were to produce a comedy about high school with a twist. I must admit that I was surprised to see how focus group participants connected to Raja. I believe that I would not have been surprised if one of the participants had been of Pakistani descent or Muslim and felt a connection with him. However, I was amazed to see that the show triggered various emotions often times even painful recounts with some of the participants.

Lola, who was reacting to the portrayal of Americans in the show and connected it to her own life (Lola, who identified herself as African American), shared the first personal experience.

(The show) portrayed White America unaware of other cultures, and it was...especially in this environment for myself I feel like there are two different worlds my culture that I have when I have when I am around people that look like me and there is the other experience when I am here (fg1-1).

Beth (who identified herself as White) explained that she had a similar experience since she had been living in town “I am sorry I am White and I have a problem with this town”. Lola replied that she had some unpleasant experiences in home state of Louisiana but never to the extent of what happened to her while attending this large research university in the Southeast:

Someone calling me the “N” word...Somebody doing other stuff...it was the first day of class, last...2007 so I have had that experience. So to me it was how I perceive and how I continue to perceive sometimes White Americans, certain types of White Americans... (fg1-1).

During the same discussion she explained that during the last presidential election several news networks appear to have unwillingly promoted individuals with divisive messages that could have sparked the kind of behavior she was a victim of:

Even during the elections...anything that goes on when somebody different than our culture or whatever it is for America... Between Fox and CNN and the rest of them, there was one incident when some police guy or sheriff deputy I think he was...when he would get up to speak, he kept saying Barack Hussein Obama... Barack Hussein Obama...so they just kept saying that...and you just kept hearing the all...terrorist...terrorist...well he is a terrorist...well he is

conspiring with Ayers...and to me that was just pumping so much into what it is and that might really not be the case..so that kind of stuff that you tend to hear...unfortunately...often.

This comment by Lola was particularly interesting and triggered several discussions about the ways in which Americans were portrayed in the show.

For instance, Nerissa reacting to the ways in which Raja was treated by a teacher in the show who called him Roger instead of Raja, explained that she related to Raja's character and that this occurred quite often in schools:

I cracked up that he just corrected him and continued, he did not miss a bit, Raja, blah, Blah, and he asked hi question anyway but I definitely go through that and I have had this conversation before where I have to explain my name is Nerissa, I say Nerissa, I don't mean Nelissa, I don't mean Norissa (*emphasis on double R*), I don't mean any Neri, No! you can't call me Neri. I don't mean any of the ways that people try to change it, I mean Nerissa and if you attempt it that's fine and if you can't I do not want to hear the excuse but it is usually excuses and it is exactly that attitude, "I don't have to try", I am going to call you Neri because you really mean Neri (fg2-2).

Vanessa who identified herself as Hispanic, agreed with Nerissa and shared her experience with the group "Just going back to the name thing, as a different outlook on it, I get so frustrated with people because they don't pronounce it right and they just butcher my name completely", she added that when she is away from home and travels to the college town where the large university is located she has given up on people

pronouncing her name properly. She even admitted that when she meets new people she introduces herself she pronounce her name the way European American would (fg2-2).

The stories Nerissa and Vanessa are unfortunately not unique, over the years may scholars, have offered suggestions on ways to bring culturally responsive teaching practices and make the curriculum culturally meaningful to schools across the nation (Banks & McGee Banks 2003; Banks 2008; Gay 2000; Pang 2005; Larke & Carter 2002; Sleeter & Grant 1999).

This example shows that Nerissa and Vanessa connected on a deep personal level with a fictional character on the screen on front of them. They could relate to this fictional character because they had similar experiences in school themselves. In this case the show was a reflection of the reality they had experienced in schools.

In another discussion about the episode when Raja is questioned by airport security both Vanessa and Nerissa shared the same frustrations while living in a town that borders Mexico.

Nerissa expressed her frustration about the way she, like Raja has been harassed at a specific airport in a town that borders Mexico:

But the whole terror issue was not very different from my experience growing up on the border, in this episode it was people being terrified about the terrorists because he was purchasing supplies but on the border it is different it is the regular interrogation of are you American or are you Mexican? And constantly there is this reminder with the same animosity.

Flying in and out of (name of town with held) airport and flying in and out of any other airport nobody asks your citizenship, for any old person if you are showing your passport at one point they may ask you your citizenship but it is not common practice across the board. In (name of town withheld) airport I have been stopped and asked for my citizenship four separate times...waiting for a flight...by assorted individuals in the airport, "what's your citizenship", by the security person, "what's your citizenship", by the person at the X-Ray machine, "what's your citizenship?" it is a different take on the issue, it is the implied discrimination, or the implied assumption that I have to prove over and over and over that I am an American... it is complicated and it is hard to take it the right way, because it is not everyone in the room that is asked by immigration four separate times, it is because I fit the profile that my bag is unpacked and that I am asked four separate times, it's complicated (fg2-2).

When asked if Nerissa felt that the added scrutiny may be in fact due to 9/11 she added that she believed it had to do with a deep fear of the other "I would say the similarity is the same kind of attitude of fear and the same kind of assumption about the other and the parameters of what the other must include" (fg2-2).

Nerissa appears to be referring here to deeply rooted prejudice and preconceptions about people different from ourselves or what Slattery (2006) described as "messages of prejudice and hatred, or sedimented preceptors" (Slattery, 2006, p. 145) who clog our judgment and ability to relate to people who come from a different

background than ours. Nerissa As Slattery (2006) described fear turns to prejudice, a feeling Lola was familiar with when she shared her experience shopping:

I can go to certain stores, I can walk in, carry my person, looking normal I suppose and then nobody would say anything to me and then 4, 5, 10 seconds later somebody else would walk in White, and it's the complete opposite..."Hi how are you doing, can I help you with this?". It's just like I just walked in nobody said anything maybe I am being sensitive I don't know maybe they were not paying attention when I walked in but it makes it feel like they were purposely ignoring me but then they gave more attention to somebody else (fg1-2).

Again, the painful experiences shared by Lola, Nerissa and Vanessa are unfortunately not uncommon; they felt comfortable enough within the group to share their stories. They connected with Raja, a fictional character on the screen on a deeper more personal level than other members on the panel. In turn, they perceived the show as an accurate reflection of their lived experiences.

While Lola, Nerissa, And Vanessa saw the show as an accurate reflection of real life they, along with other participants, appeared concerned with some of the sound effects which appeared to cue and influence television viewers to react certain way to the action on the screen. A closer examination of these discussions pertaining to the structure of the show is necessary and adds more information about the ways in which focus group participants perceived the show.

Cuing Audiences?

Nerissa picked up on the audio cues that play throughout the first episode very early in our conversations; here is what she shared with the group:

They have these musical cues right that kind of clue the audience in on what you are supposed to also respond so when they play, this crazy, it sounds like a wild sound and that's supposed to be freaking out...characters on the screen are freaking out and you are supposed to be freaking out, it's the same music that they played at the end when the mom was looking over at Jeffrey and he was not exactly what she was expecting and there was a freak out of the music cue. The way that they cue the audience that's not necessarily related to what any of the characters on the show can hear but they cue you in on as to how to respond. Oh this is the funny music, it's like circus and she is running down the stairs in a panic back inventing that grandma died and it is the music cue, the wild sound, it does not sound like anything we are used to, part of it were those unspoken portrayals right, I was bothered by the music cuing the audience in because I don't know that a middle school audience would see this and be able to navigate Oh this is satire, I am not supposed to believe what I am watching, this is not how people are supposed to respond to each other (fg2-1).

In this example Nerissa not only noted that the creators of the show used audio cues to achieve humor, however she also raised an interesting point regarding their intentions. Having a screeching sound play in the background when The Tolchucks first meet Raja at the airport clearly appear to suggest that the audience should also feel frightened by

individuals who look like the teenage Pakistani Muslim seen on screen. John agreed with Nerissa and picked up on a specific point Nerissa made:

The music cues Nerissa was talking about, it had that sound, it was like somebody botching the whole thing like AHHHHHH, it's put in there, you almost get the sense that's how Americans perceive it, you know as that little bit of strain in there that's like torture, and kids are going to be able to get something like that.

Both John and Nerissa bring up a point that is crucial to this study, how will younger viewers negotiate this content? I will address this question in more depth in the next section. However, in our conversation Marie provided some interesting insights on this question and also wondered how younger viewers would react to the show:

If they are not ready yet or if they have not been taught that visual cues and music cues, the pauses and the slow motion pans are to get our attention, rotate our thought pattern, who knows what they are thinking? (fg2-2).

Nerissa went a step further in her analysis and linked her personal experience on campus and in the neighboring community with the message conveyed through audio cues:

It's also the end goal, part of my issue is just is the end goal tolerance, are we going to tolerate people that are different? Tolerance is as far as we are willing to go with it or are we going to be inclusive and learn something, that's the same question that I have at our institution, (turning to Vanessa), I would say that you and I have the same kind of background, I grew up on the border too and I came to this university but I did feel like the outsider and I did feel like I am targeted I

was shoved off the sidewalk because I don't look like anyone else and my experience here was very negative and I still struggle with that but by the same token...is tolerance, enough tolerance seems like a little baby step and it is not quite the inclusiveness of I think what progress is. But that (*pointing at the screen*) seems to be teaching general populations tolerance, freak out quietly in your head tolerate and run around the corner and figure out what you are going to do next...that's my concern.

Here, Nerissa is denouncing what she perceived the show was conveying, in her opinion being tolerant should not be the end goal and does not necessarily mean progress. She is taking issues with the audio cues that appear to convey a message that being afraid of others is ok as long as one appears to be tolerant in his/her daily interactions with people.

Again, I did not expect focus group participants to connect on such personal levels with character and plots in the show, this unexpected level of engagement raises several questions when it comes to determining how younger audiences who may not have the maturity to grasp the subtleties of audio cues may decipher this show. I address these questions in the next section. Throughout the focus group interviews participants showed willingness and a keen interest in the show. They shared interesting insights about the state of the television industry and its effects on shows such as *Aliens in America*.

The "Real" Television Landscape

The review of literature conducted for this study showed that the television landscape has evolved tremendously in the past twenty years. Focus group participants

had strong opinions about the ways in which television programming has evolved over the years. Several noted that *Aliens in America* was very fast paced and that it appeared to be in line with a younger audience, David explained that the show reminded him of a preview for a movie (fg1-1), Conner compared the show to “a bunch of highlights”, “or tiny little snippets of our own lives...” that represents “entertainment for us” (fg2-1). Most participants attributed these new shows that are fast-paced and provocative to the development of reality television. Liz believed it all started with MTV (fg1-1), David agreed and named MTV’s *The Real World* (this show premiered on MTV in 1992 and features 8 to 10 teenagers selected to leave in a house for 6 months while being filmed). Focus group participants went on to discuss several they believed contributed to the widespread success of reality television.

They also attempted to compare the tone and the ways in which humor is achieved in *Aliens in America* to shows such as *South Park*, Brad explained “They are not afraid to touch, make fun of...you know anybody, like nothing is uncharted territory” (fg1-1).

David also agreed with Brad and added that *Aliens in America* was similar in many ways to Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* or *The Colbert Report* because of its overall tone.

Throughout the focus group interviews, participants were asked to share their perceptions of the show, they confessed that they thoroughly enjoyed the process. Some of them even admitted that the show caused them to think about their life and beliefs.

Let's now examine the self-examination process some participants encountered during this study and what they may have learned from it.

Could Aliens in America Force You to Be Intelligent?

Johnson (2005) explained that in recent years television programming has evolved to the point where many programs now require viewers to be fully engaged and invested as they watch in order to follow the complex plots and elaborate storylines. Several participants shared with the group that after each session they would discuss the show at home with their husband, significant other, or family members, Liz attributed this to the fact the show made her think. This explanation is in line with the argument made by Johnson (2005). Focus group participants went beyond our group conversations and engaged in discussions with other people, analyzing the content, attempting to make meaning of the show and reflecting on their own lives. Beth explained:

I have taken it home and talked about it a lot because my husband is in the sociology program and going through the race and culture and I told him that he needs to watch this and he said why, so I try to explain it to him, what we talked about in here. I think it is one of these things as someone who is studying and furthering our education and doing research, I don't think I would have watched this, just sit down and goof off and waste my time, I would actually watch this to further my own thinking process (fg1-2).

In the other focus group Conner had a similar comment about the show and the ways in which viewers may react to Raja:

I think whoever is watching are questioning their beliefs, kind of like what was just stated you know, in as sense, does everybody that looks like Raja a bad person...he was portrayed as a very nice person sometimes you do have to see something that you have not seen before and have not been exposed to, and may be you will understand well it is like it is shown, this is tangible this person is who he is, this person can be like he was depicted on the screen.

During that same conversation Vanessa agreed that the show made her think and reflect on her own behavior:

It makes you think more bad for him, because he is that nice guy who does nothing wrong and you see all these things happening to him, it just breaks your heart it makes you take a step back and think...well do I do that with other people? That is how I see it. It makes you want to be nicer to other people.

Here again, my participants surprised me with their openness and the disclosure that they actually took their assignment home. However, their actions appear to validate Johnson's work, shows such as *Aliens in America* and *Lost* may actually force you to be intelligent and as Jonson argue make us smarter (Johnson, 2005).

Throughout the duration of the focus groups interviews participants had an opportunity share their perceptions of the show and share what in their opinion was the underlying message of *Aliens in America*.

So, What Was This All About?

Marie perhaps summarized best the feeling of most focus group participants when she said:

I think there are so many political undertones in this that it would be hard to actually separate their underlying message with comedy but if you are purely just looking at the comedy sure there's parts to laugh at and truth is you are probably a little bit laughing at yourself more than you are at the others that are portrayed in here...oh yeah that's funny to me because we are seeing either family or friends do something like that.

In summary, focus groups interviews allowed me to gain a better understanding of the ways in which individuals that matched the target audience of the CW perceived the show. They focused mainly on the portrayals of Raja the Pakistani-Muslim exchange student and the ways in which life in high school was depicted in the show. The most surprising part of this process was the identification of participants to what was happening to Raja on screen and they opened up about their own struggles. Focus group participants also provided some interesting comments on the state of television programming in this country and even compared *Aliens in America* to other shows. In the end they appeared to have enjoyed this process and went as far as discussing the show at home with family. Like bloggers and TV Critics some participants took issue with the show, its contents, and the portrayal of ethnic groups in the show.

However, there are two main findings obtained from focus group interviews. First, the fact participants identified and denounced the use of audio cues used to achieve humor in the show. Several participants noted that these cues could in fact influence TV viewers to feel a certain way about a specific situation. In the case of *Aliens in America* cue younger viewers to be afraid of someone that looked or dressed like Raja. Several

participants noted that the use of audio cues could be problematic with younger audiences who may not be equipped to decipher subtle jokes or satire in television programming. The second major finding is the fact that like bloggers, focus group participants truly connected with the show, they empathized with the main character. While some bloggers attempted to rationalize what was happening on the screen using their own lived experiences, focus group participants identified with the discrimination Raja was subjected to and even shared similar personal stories. Here again, this level of engagement from bloggers and focus group participants was unexpected and made me wonder how younger populations may cope with plots on the show that may remind them of personal struggles. I attempted to provide answers to these questions in details in the next section.

Summary

Throughout this research I wanted to find out how what the creators of the television show *Aliens in America* intended to do when producing the show, I was also interested in finding out how bloggers, television critics and a groups of local television viewers perceived the show. During this process I have learned a great deal about all groups represented in this study and how they perceived *Aliens in America*. In the next section I summarized my research and I explained what the implications of the intentions of the show creators and the perceptions of bloggers, TV critics and local TV viewers mean for visual culture studies.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR VISUAL CULTURE STUDIES

Summary of the Study

In this section, I summarized the findings of my research by revisiting the two main research questions and responded in details question #3 regarding the pedagogical implications of the intentions of creators and the perceptions of the selected groups for visual culture studies.

This study aimed at examining the intentions of a group of individuals who created and produced a television show in 2005-2007 and the ways in which three separate groups (bloggers, TV critics and local television viewers) perceived the show. I decided to examine the show *Alien in America* because it aired on the CW network, a television broadcasting entity that had, in recent years, developed a very large online presence to promote its shows and invite audiences to continue their viewing experience on the World Wide Web. In addition, I felt that *Aliens in America* fit into a new category of television shows that are purposely provocative and achieve humor while mocking someone's religion, gender, ethnic group, or sexual orientation. While the content and pedagogical possibilities of television shows had been investigated by educators and scholars in the past (Jhally and Lewis, 1992; Freedman, 2000; Trier, 2005) more work is needed to add to the research on the possibilities, challenges, potential uses and implications of the television medium for visual culture studies. This study aimed to add to existing research conducted by Carpenter (2003), Duncum (1987, 2004, 2006), Darts (2007), Darts et al. (2008), Freedman and Schuler (2003), Pistolessi (2007), Tavin (2000).

Television programming has evolved significantly in the past ten years and *Aliens in America* appeared to be one example of this new type of show that tends to push the envelope while attempting to achieve humor. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the intentions of a group of individuals who produced this sitcom, as well as the reactions of selected audiences to the show. I doing so I attempted to uncover the pedagogical implications of these intentions and perceptions for visual culture studies. The questions that guided my research were: 1) what were the intentions of the individuals who created *Aliens in America*? 2) How did several groups of viewers perceive *Aliens in America*? 3) What are the pedagogical implications of the intentions of the creators of *Aliens in America* and the perceptions of the show by selected groups of viewers for visual culture education?

I used a qualitative approach to conduct this study, to gain a full understanding of the intentions of the creators of the show I gathered interviews they gave to newspapers and electronic media outlets in 2007 and 2008 (when the show aired on the CW network). I also gathered data from three distinct groups for this study. First, a group of 13 individuals volunteered to participate in focus group interviews where they were invited to watch, answer questions and engage in discussions about their perceptions of the sitcom *Aliens in America*. Second the opinion and perceptions of a larger sample of viewers were also surveyed through a narrative analysis of blog postings published on the CW network website during the 2007-2008 television broadcast season. Thirdly, to gain a complete understanding of the ways in which the show was perceived by a group

of entertainment journalists, nine national and regional newspapers, one national newsmagazine and one trade journal were also analyzed for this study.

The data I gathered from the creators of the show allowed me to gain an understanding of the ways in which they intended the show. In turn, the ability I had to investigate three districts groups (bloggers, TV critics and local TV viewers) helped me reveal how they perceived the show.

This study uncovered the following key findings. First, the existence of a gap or disconnect between the ways in which the show was intended by its creators and how it was perceived by selected audiences. For instance, despite all the efforts by Mr. Guarascio, Mr. Port and Mr. Gardezi to portray Raja as accurately as possible bloggers still perceived Raja's portrayal as insulting. The same was true for some of the TV critics whose perceptions of the show were at opposite ends of the spectrum with the creators of *Aliens in America*. Some focus group participants also took issue with the show, its contents, and the portrayal of ethnic groups in *Aliens in America*.

The second significant finding is the unexpected level of engagement with the show exhibited by bloggers and focus group participants. Bloggers tried to make sense of the plots in the show using their lived experiences. They also displayed a deep personal connection with the characters referring to them as if they were members of their own family. Focus group participants also connected with the plots unfolding before their eyes. For instance, some participants not only empathized with Raja's character but also identified with what he was going through and even shared personal stories of discrimination and struggle.

The third finding involved the use of audio cues in some episodes of the series, several focus group participants noted that it was as if the sound effects were used to influence viewers to react in a certain way to specific situations. Focus group participants noted that the use of audio cues is problematic especially with younger viewers. They pointed out that younger people watching *Aliens in America* may not be equipped to fully understand satire and in turn up developing stereotypical or negative views about Muslims.

Findings Related to the Literature

These findings confirm what Darts (2007) wrote about the nature of media messages “intended and perceived meanings are forever dependent upon historical, cultural, political and personal contexts and conditions and are perpetually contested in flux” (Darts, 2007, p. 82). This dependence on historical and cultural facts are obvious in *Aliens in America*, the creators of the show admitted that the geopolitical climate in 2005-2007 influenced their decision to produce a show about a Muslim Pakistani exchange student. This show came about in part because of the fears exhibited by the fear of Muslims exhibited by groups in the Americans population. The reactions and the ways in which blogger and focus group participants perceived the show was also dependent on cultural and personal contexts and conditions. During focus group interviews one participant mentioned that the show could not have been produced in the months following 9/11 because of its subject matter. It is also true that if I could assemble the same people ten years from now they would probably have a very different take on the show. In this same article Darts (2007) also argued that the media are far

from ideologically inert (p. 82). Several bloggers strongly believed that *Aliens in America* was ideologically charged, this study showed that this observation was correct since Moses Port and David Guarascio clearly stated that their inspiration for the show came from “the giant gap that exists between Americans and really the rest of the world, specifically the Muslim world” (Ali, 2007). Moses Port and David Guarascio therefore intended to produce a show that would carry a message of hope and understanding among people.

Throughout this study I have analyzed the intentions of a group of individuals who produced a television show; I also investigated the ways in which the several groups perceived the sitcom. I believe that the gap that I uncovered between the intentions of the creators of *Aliens in America* and the perceptions of selected groups has specific pedagogical implications for education and visual culture studies.

Pedagogical Implications for Education

The gap or disconnect between I uncovered between the intentions of the creators of *Aliens in America* and the perceptions of the three groups used in this study is not unusual according to Darts (2007). This gap or disconnect means that different individuals will watch the show, negotiate its content and come up with a different conclusion than someone else. This is in part due to the fact that we all have a different scopical regime (Rose, 2007). However, I see this disconnect as a wonderful opportunity for educators. I specifically believe that *Aliens in America* presents some interesting possibilities for teacher education and in-service training.

First, I believe that *Aliens in America* could be used as an effective tool to help seasoned educators to reexamine their teaching practices. Educators that have been in the field for several years may not be familiar with new approaches or teaching strategies to serve the needs of their students. In recent years, the student population has become increasingly diverse (Banks, 2008), seasoned teachers may not be equipped to serve the needs of all of all students especially students with a different socio-economic, linguistic, ethnic or religious than their own. I feel that using *Aliens in America* with experienced educators would allow them to watch a teacher on screen ignore the questions of Raja, a student with a different ethnic and religious background. Using *Aliens in America* would allow teachers to reflect on their own teaching practices in a non-threatening way. They could also be asked to deconstruct and analyze a scene from the sitcom in small groups, assess the performance of the teacher on screen and come up with other teachers in the group with ways to best handle the situation while serving the needs of students. Such practices would allow teachers to employ culturally responsive teaching as advocated by Gay (2000), Ballangee-Morris & Stuhr (2001) and Giroux & McLaren (1989).

Second, I believe that pre-service teachers could also benefit from seeing fictional teachers handle specific classroom situations and reflect on how they would have respond to similar challenges in their own classrooms. Pauly (2006) explained that pre-service teachers must be aware that images are powerful modes of communication since they “participate within discourses of meaning and power that have real consequences in children’s lives” (Pauly, 2006, p. 118).

I wholeheartedly agree with Pauly (2006), furthermore, I also see *Aliens in America* as a great way for pre-service teachers to connect with their students, and gain a better understanding of the type of television programming their students engage with on a daily basis. Pauly (2006) believes that pre-service teachers should know that images are powerful and carry much power “images, like other languages, carry historically accented, power-bearing meanings, into particular historical, social and political conditions’ (Pauly, p. 128). I also believe that if pre-service teachers understand the pace, tone and type of entertainment their students are used to watching they may elect to adjust their pedagogical style to make learning more relevant to students.

Another major pedagogical implication stemming from the findings of this study is the need for more media literacy in the art education classroom. Media literacy according to Buckingham (2003) ““refers to the knowledge, skills and competencies that are required in order to use and interpret media” (p. 36). His view of media literacy fits under the larger discourse of critical literacy as it also requires “a broader understanding of the social, economic and institutional contexts of communication, and how these affect people's experiences and practices” (p. 38).

I believe that more media literacy is needed in the art education classroom because of the controversial content of television programming in shows such as *Aliens in America*. In this study bloggers and focus group participants showed a high level of engagement with the show. Because of their age (18-34) and lived experiences focus group participants were able to identify, analyze and understand the humor and satirical nature of the show. They not only took part in discussions, but also empathized with

Raja, the teenage Pakistani Muslim. Because of their age and experience they were able to reflect on the actions taking place on the screen and made meaningful connections with their own lived experiences. On the other hand, the postings from bloggers show that some of them did not appear to always grasp the satirical nature of the show and in turn may develop stereotypical or negative views of diverse groups. As noted by focus group participants and myself, the use of audio cues by the creators/producers of *Aliens in America* in the show presents an interesting challenge for visual culture educators. Freedman (2003) stated the pressing need for media literacy in these words “in the new visual culture environment, high-level interdisciplinary interpretive skills and concepts are becoming increasingly important for all students”. Such skills are necessary to help students make sense of the world they live in Freedman and Schuler (2003) argued that the art education classroom is the place to investigate television and help students make sense of it:

It is not the amount of time by itself that is a predictor of the influence of television on students, but the relationship students have with what they are watching. This means that neither the impact nor what is learned from television is beyond our influence as art teachers” (Freedman & Schuler, 2003, p. 22).

Freedman and Schuler have also recommended that television programming should be viewed and interpreted through multiple layers, they believe that students in the classroom should “be encouraged to write, make art and talk about their perception of information presentation, formal qualities, character development” (Freedman & Schuler, p. 23). In their opinion, teachers and students should conduct closer

examination of the “purpose of production and the use of formal qualities” (p. 23), Freedman and Schuler are here specifically interested in technical aspects of the program “camera angles, lighting, editing, costume, set design” (p.23). A close examination of *Aliens in America* should include an in depth examination of the ways in which women are portrayed in the show (Jhally & Kilbourne, 2000). Such analysis would allow for constructive discussions in the art education classroom on the image of women in advertising and in the media. Students should also be encouraged to challenge the portrayal of life in schools in *Aliens in America* including the representations of men and masculinity in the show (Jhally & Katz, 1999) and a careful examination of stereotypes. Another discussion must also take place about the fact students portrayed in the show are bullied and in several instances students portrayed in the show display homophobic behavior. An examination of *Aliens in America* would not be complete without a deconstruction of Raja’s character, especially the ways in which his faith is portrayed in the show. The art teacher could also ask students to look for images of Muslims in the news media and films which would in turn allow for interdisciplinary linking through visual culture as advocated by Taylor, Carpenter, Ballengee-Morris & Sessions (2006). One final activity could also be to encourage students to examine the use of audio cues in the show and research other examples of the use of such techniques in sitcoms and film making. Carpenter & Sourdout (in press) summarized the possibilities *Aliens in America* present for students:

We believe that engaged critical analysis of this show may help students gain a better understanding of the world around them, help them identify social, cultural,

political, and other issues at school and in their community, and empower them to question and seek solutions to these potentially problematic situations. (Carpenter & Sourdot, in press)

Media literacy in the art classroom should however not be limited to interpreting media messages. Art educators should continue to encourage students to not only be educated consumers of media but also becoming producers of content for mass consumption. The level of engagement exhibited by bloggers and focus group participants was very encouraging to me; witnessing firsthand the power of images the power of images as described by Pauly (2006) was spectacular. I feel that art educators could build upon the involvement and engagement with blogs or fan sites and allow students to analyze the content of such platforms in the art education classroom. For instance, students could examine web content related to their favorite television shows and examine graphics, sound effects the overall content of the site. They could then, develop their own site using the techniques and analytical skills they have learned in class. I strongly believe that such activities would enhance the acquisition of media literacy skills by students in the art classroom, and would help making the learning experience of students more relevant. According to Darts (2006) art educators can positively influence students in making meaning of the world they live in through media literacy:

Art educators clearly have an important role to play in our mediated culture.

With the media increasingly ingrained in the routine and 'texture' of everyday

life, media education is simply too central to our students' personal, social, and political existences to be excluded from the curriculum. (Darts, 2007, p.88)

I believe that *Aliens in America* could be a useful for art educators to help students acquire critical thinking skills that would allow them to make meaning of the world they live in.

Implications of This Study and Recommendations for Future Research

The television landscape has evolved tremendously in the past 25 years. Every year television executives look for new ways to attract and retain viewers. This study has shown that viewers turned bloggers were very passionate about the shows they watch. The personal connections focus group participants made with characters in the show provided interesting insights in the ways in which television viewers negotiate the contents of television programming. I believe that this study combining an analysis of data collected from blogs, focus group interviews and TV critics allowed me to gain an understanding of the ways in which several groups perceived the content of a television show. I feel that such a model could be used to investigate the ways in which other television viewers negotiate television shows broadcast on networks with a strong online presence. Johnson (2005) argued that shows such as *Lost* force you to do work to make sense of them. An investigation of this show using the same the model I used with *Aliens in America* could yield interesting insights into the ways in which young viewers negotiate the content of the show and explore the ways in which identity is constructed in *Lost*.

Yet another study could involve using *Aliens in America* and examining identity representations in the show. *Aliens in America* is the first comedy starring a Muslim character. An in depth analysis of the entire series would be interesting to find out if the show contributed to eliminate stereotypes about Muslims, African Americans, American high school students or if the show perpetuated existing stereotypes.

Concluding Remarks

This study of the intentions of the creators of *Aliens in America* and the perceptions of selected audiences allowed me to gain an understanding of the ways in which different individuals decipher, analyze and understand a television program. I am hoping to build a research agenda that involves using television programming in the art education classroom to help students make meaning of the world they live in. I strongly believe in Dewey's words "Education, is process of living and not a preparation for future living" (Dewey, 1897/1971, p.87). In the future I hope that my work may contribute to helping children acquire analytical tools that will help them decipher, analyze and understand the world they live in. It is, I believe, an essential part of helping prepare the next generation of Americans.

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