

## “They See a Caricature”: Expanding Media Representations of Black Identity in *Dear White People*

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Throughout the history of American television, representation of the black community, particularly African Americans, has been problematic at best.<sup>1</sup> Early representations of the community on the small screen served to reinforce dominant stereotypes and power structures by portraying “black characters [as] happy-go-lucky social incompetents who knew their place and whose antics served to amuse and comfort culturally sanctioned notions of [...] white superiority” (Gray 75). Such caricatured portrayals only endured in subsequent decades, perpetuating regressive stereotypes (Punyanunt-Carter 241-2). Stereotypical characteristics of black Americans in popular media include, but are not limited to, criminality, ignorance, and materialism (Collins 161; Jackson 46; Punyanunt-Carter 243). A significant breakthrough for the community premiered in 1984 in the form of *The Cosby Show*, which is now regarded as a landmark text in black representation on television (Dates 306-8; Jones 182). *The Cosby Show*, a sitcom starring comedian Bill Cosby and centered on an affluent African American family in New York City, was acclaimed for breaking stereotypes through its portrayal of “a vast and previously unexplored territory of diversity within blackness—that is, upper-

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<sup>1</sup> The term black is used to “signif[y] all non-White minority populations,” including the African American and African Caribbean populations. Although “the term Black has a long service in social, political, and everyday life and in its use to denote African ancestry,” African American specifically describes “descendants of [African] persons brought to the Americas as slaves between the 17th and 19th century” (Agyemang et al. 1016).

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The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 7, No. 2  
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middle class life” (Gray 81).<sup>2</sup> *The Cosby Show* was a massive ratings success, although it was criticized by some scholars and social critics for failing to utilize its vast commercial platform to address themes of systemic racism, instead portraying a post-racial America in which racism is no longer a relevant societal concern (Jones 186; Sirota 190).<sup>3</sup>

A noticeable aspect of post-racism is that it allows “for a claim that those challenging racism themselves are ‘racist’ and that their racism is negatively affecting those who want to forget racism or who embrace color neutrality” (Ono 229). A notable example of this phenomenon occurred in February 2017, in response to the debut trailer of the Netflix original series *Dear White People*. Set at the predominantly white Winchester University, a fictitious Ivy League college, *Dear White People* follows the experiences of several black students as they struggle to affirm their identities in the face of social injustice and racial discrimination. The trailer was heavily downvoted on YouTube and lambasted on Twitter, with conservative commenters arguing the series was divisive and promoting racial conflict (Blistein; Sieczkowski). Ironically, such a vitriolic response only validates *Dear White People*’s core theme: that “America is not, nor has it ever been, a “post-racial society” (Bradley).

Portrayals in mass media serve as “an important source of information about African Americans [and] contribute to public perceptions of African Americans” (Punyanunt-Carter 241). Historically, many television series featuring black protagonists and ensembles have privileged white majority audiences, resulting from conscious choices made by producers and studio executives to increase their commercial viability (Gray 283). Such series often present “black Americans as a homogenous, undifferentiated mass, a monolith to which recursive racist

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<sup>2</sup> *The Cosby Show* is credited for paving the way for more authentic portrayals of African American culture on television, such as *In Living Color* (1990—1994) and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996) (Jones 186). Unfortunately, such nuanced portrayals would not become standard for the community. While representation has steadily increased since the conclusion of *The Cosby Show*, African Americans have continued to be mostly “portrayed in stereotypical occupational roles, with negative personality characteristics, as low achievers and with positive stereotypes” (Punyanunt-Carter 242).

<sup>3</sup> The ultimate legacy of *The Cosby Show* has also been marred by the numerous sexual assault allegations levied against Cosby in the 2010s and his recent conviction, resulting in *The Cosby Show*’s near-complete removal from syndication. In 2015, *Ebony* famously featured “the cast of *The Cosby Show* [on its cover] with an overlay of broken glass, insinuating that the legacy of the show had been fractured” (Jones 191).

archetypes can be attached” (Lind 14). However, *Dear White People* became groundbreaking in that does not treat blackness as a monolith and instead portrays a multitude of black identities, some of which are in ideological conflict with each other. Main characters in *Dear White People*’s ensemble include Samantha “Sam” White, a biracial activist; Colandrea “Coco” Conners, a dark-skinned advocate of respectability politics; and Lionel Higgins, who struggles to reconcile his racial identity with his homosexuality. Each of these identities (i.e., Sam’s militant activist or Coco’s respectable public servant) is partially informed by pressures relating to dominant cultural expectations of blackness. Media is a contested site for racial identity, and popular television programs are capable of helping audiences reimagine race (Ford 266). Through application of critical race theory and narrative rhetorical criticism, this essay demonstrates just how *Dear White People*, through its triumvirate of lead characters, strives to expand construction of black identity in popular media and enhance audience understanding of the community. This goal is especially noteworthy and topical when considering ongoing sociopolitical trends in the American sociocultural sphere, specifically the mainstreaming and destigmatization of white supremacy under the presidency of Donald Trump.

### Rationale for Study

The creator and showrunner of *Dear White People* is Justin Simien, who adapted the series from his 2014 film of the same name. The film, which Simien raised funding for independently, was inspired by his experiences as a black student at Chapman University in California (Tully). Dismayed at the tendency for African Americans to be “lumped into one giant experience [onscreen],” Simien wanted *Dear White People* to convey that “there’s as many versions of being black as there are black people” (Meraji). Distributed by Lionsgate, *Dear White People* became a commercial success and received critical acclaim for its examination of modern race relations, black identity, and white privilege. Lionsgate subsequently approached Simien about adapting *Dear White People* for television, and later reached a deal with streaming service Netflix to distribute the series (Warren, “Justin Simien on Bringing”).

The inaugural season of *Dear White People* premiered in its entirety in April 2017, on the heels of the most divisive presidential election in recent memory. While the series continued the social commentary of the original film, it gained newfound significance after Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of

the United States (Bradley). Trump was a controversial candidate due to his long-documented “history of making racist comments as a New York real-estate developer in the 1970s and ‘80s,” one infamous statement being that “laziness is a trait in blacks” (Leonhardt and Philbrick). Trump was also an especially prominent voice of birtherism, a conspiracy movement claiming Barack Obama, Trump’s immediate predecessor and the country’s first black president, was born in Kenya, and therefore not a natural-born citizen. Trump and other prominent birthers challenged Obama’s leadership “in racialized and racist ways even as their discourses attempted to mask racism under pretenses of [...] national integrity” (Pham 89).

During his presidential campaign, Trump continued to espouse racist rhetoric. He repeatedly exaggerated statistics of black crime and “cast[ed] heavily black American cities as dystopian war zones” (Leonhardt and Philbrick), pandering to stereotypes of black criminality that popular American media has long helped proliferate (Collins 161). Trump’s appeals to racism during the election boosted membership in white supremacist hate groups, with the Ku Klux Klan specifically attributing their increase in membership to Trump’s rhetoric (Sanchez 45). Furthermore, Trump was the favored candidate of the alt-right, an extremist white nationalist movement. By championing Trump as a figurehead for their cause, the alt-right received considerable media attention and mainstream exposure during the election (Kirchick 13-7; Ryan 36-40).<sup>4</sup>

Despite these and other controversies, 2016 would ultimately witness Trump’s victory in the presidential election. Despite the illusion of progressiveness produced by the efforts of previous civil rights movements and two-term presidency of Barack Obama, Trump’s election affirms that the proposed post-racial America many believed Obama’s election signified (Ono 228; Wing 45) never existed. Contrastingly, 2016 also witnessed what essayist and television critic Angelica Jade Bastién describes as “a new golden age for black television” due to an increased prominence of black-led series and black showrunners. This opinion is shared by writer Lisa Respers France, who observes that “the last time people were saying there was a ‘golden age of black television’ there was unrest over the civil rights of African-Americans,” likening the difficult social atmosphere of the 2010s to that of

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<sup>4</sup> Notably, many Twitter users who derided the *Dear White People* trailer identified as alt-right and claimed “that the show promote[d] racism and white genocide” (Katzowitz). As noted by Simien, the trailer simply features “a woman of color (politely) asking not to be mocked” (Blistein), thus affirming how contemporary the show’s themes of racism and white privilege truly are.

the 1960s. This comparison is not without merit, as race has emerged as a focal point of sociocultural discourse in Trump’s nascent presidency, with black-led television series increasingly discussing themes of black identity and racial discrimination.

The narrative of *Dear White People* especially embodies progressive racial politics and rebukes popular notions of post-racism. As Simien himself notes, the series occupies a very different sociopolitical landscape than the 2014 film, explaining that “The movie was written at a time of ‘post-racism’ [...] It was like, you know, we had ‘solved’ that problem already, because Barack [Obama] is in office. Now, obviously, I think that bubble has long since been popped” (Bradley). *Dear White People* is also unique in that it does not focus exclusively on external forms of racist action, instead demonstrating a broader and more complex understanding of racism by portraying the effects of internalized racism and colorism on the black community. Ultimately, *Dear White People* is a strong case study to examine the contested nature of race in Trump’s America and how it is negotiated in popular media texts.

## Framework and Methodology

To analyze the racial content of *Dear White People*, this essay employs critical race theory and queer theory for its theoretical framework. Scholars employ critical race theory to study race in relation to hegemonic power structures and social justice (Delgado and Stefancic 3; Wing 48). Although the theory was initially pioneered within the field of legal studies (Matsuda 1331), critical race theory can also be harnessed to identify “the ways in which race [is] constructed and represented in [...] American society as a whole” (Crenshaw xiii), popular media being an especially prominent preceptor of race. However, in order to examine LGBT representation in *Dear White People*, queer theory is also necessary for this project. Queer theory is employed by scholars to research alternate gender identities and challenge heteronormativity, which encompasses “the beliefs and practices that privilege heterosexuals and heterosexuality” in society (Jenkins and Lovaas 8).

For its method, this essay applies narrative rhetorical criticism to select scenes from all ten episodes of *Dear White People*’s inaugural season (each referred to as a “chapter” in the series’ overarching narrative). Narrative rhetorical criticism is a specific form of textual analysis, a variety of critical methodology used by scholars to separate “the primary, linguistic meaning of a text’s component parts [from] the

secondary, or textual meaning” (Altman 15). Textual analysis comprises several distinct methods, including rhetorical criticism, which scholars employ to identify the persuasive messages embedded in oral or visual communications. Within media studies, this article employs narrative rhetorical criticism specifically to identify the primary theme of a narrative, as well as the narrative elements that support this theme (Foss 326-7). Because “television and society mirror each other” (Flichy 75), narrative rhetorical criticism can be utilized to understand how popular television narratives reflect “the [current] state of culture” (Gronbeck and Sillars 212). Therefore, narrative rhetorical criticism is an appropriate means through which to theorize *Dear White People*’s portrayal of black identities, particularly during a period of destigmatized prejudice and racism following Trump’s election.

### Black Identity in *Dear White People*

*Sam*. In *Dear White People*, Sam is the creator and host of the eponymous college radio show, which is intended to educate white students about racism and microaggressions through satirical humor. Although the show is popular amongst Winchester’s student population, it is also controversial. In the series pilot, “Chapter I,” one caller tells Sam that “I find your show offensive and highly divisive. We need to come together at times like this [...] Race is a social construct” (00:05:36-00:05:46). This is an example of how post-racial discourse displaces racism by ignoring white privilege and suggesting that “if racism does exist, it is primarily, if not entirely, carried out by those opposing racism[,] thereby performing strategic racial moves that help to avoid and ignore racism’s past and present effects” (Ono 229). In response to this and similar accusations of racism, Sam asserts in that “[the] show is meant to articulate the feelings of a misrepresented group outside the majority.” Sam’s philosophy is best encapsulated by a speech she gives on air at the conclusion of “Chapter I,” expressing her outrage and indignation after a blackface party is thrown on campus:

My jokes don’t incarcerate your youth at an alarming rate or make it unsafe for you to walk around your own neighborhoods. But yours do. When you mock or belittle us, you enforce an existing system. Cops everywhere staring down the barrel of a gun at a black man don’t see a human being. They see a caricature. A thug [...] You don’t get to show up in a Halloween costume version of us and claim irony or ignorance. (00:29:27-00:30:11)

Besides hosting *Dear White People*, Sam also heads Winchester’s Black Student Union (BSU), a student advocacy organization similarly dedicated to combatting racist ideology on campus. However, Sam’s struggles and experiences with racial prejudice not only affect her externally, but internally as well. Internalized racism occurs when individuals from “socially stigmatized groups [...] accept and recycle negative messages regarding their aptitude, abilities, and societal place, which results in self-devaluation.” Internalized racism has been observed as a major obstacle to black collectivism, as it “undermines collaborative action for racial uplift” (Harper 338-9). In *Dear White People*, Sam’s internalized racism is a product of her biracial identity, which she worries invalidates her blackness. Such a phenomenon is not uncommon amongst biracial individuals, as American media and society often limit perceptions of race to monoracial constructions. Consequently, there exists prominent and “culturally accepted notion[s] that the interracial child must select the identity of one parent, usually the parent of color” (Wardle 53). Among biracial individuals, such notions provoke “tension between the two racial components of the self” (Cohn et al. 183).

Ethnic theorist William E. Cross Jr. pioneered an identity theory described as the “Negro-to-Black conversion experience” a model that has become prominent in scholarly literature to describe the acquisition of black identity (Cross Jr. 93; Hall 120). According to Cross, black individuals begin to question notions of race and social hierarchy after their earliest encounter with racial prejudice. They subsequently “immers[e] him or herself in the world of blackness,” denigrating white culture while idealizing black culture (107). However, such actions are externally defined and adversarial, “based more on opposition to white standards than on the affirmation of what it is to be black” (Cohn et al. 184). Cross’ model is also applicable to biracial individuals of black and white heritage, as studies indicate these individuals are more likely to claim black as identity nomenclature, especially in primarily white environments (Hall 121).

Sam is one such individual. Throughout the first season, *Dear White People* hints that Sam’s public militant persona is partly exaggerated to affirm her blackness to both herself and her peers on Winchester’s campus. It is observed that “racial identities are not [wholly] given at birth as immutable traits, but rather are partly performed [with] strategic actions that people take to work their racial identities” (Harris 60). Such actions are more noticeably common amongst biracial individuals, as their acceptance “by the black community is predicated on the

individual's adoption of the mores of that community and the exhibition of specific culturally related behaviors" (Harris et al. 221). Besides her parentage, Sam is also ashamed of her musical interests, listening to folk music in private but playing hip-hop in public, as to not contradict her black performativity. Most notably, Sam also hides relationship with Gabe, a white Winchester student, out of fear she will be ostracized by her black peers.

Although there is a considerable number of biracial actors and actresses working today, there have been few explicitly biracial characters in either film or television (Warn 191). Therefore, Sam's character is important for not only increased representation of biracial characters in mainstream media, but also for its authentic portrayal of biracialness. It is not uncommon for light-skinned or biracial individuals to face discrimination within African American communities, as darker skin is often regarded as more racially authentic (Brunsma and Rockquemore 33, 44). In *Dear White People*, Sam combats the feelings of inadequacy she experiences as a light-skinned biracial woman by performing an exaggerated version of blackness to prove her identity to her peers. Ironically, despite Sam's shame at her mixed heritage, biracial individuals generally enjoy higher social status than monoracial black Americans based on their lighter skin tones (Fryberg et al. 92). Sam's skin thus also allows her a greater degree of privilege than many of her black peers, including Coco. Although Sam yearns for darker skin color, darker skin is also "associated with more race-conscious views and higher levels of [...] discrimination" (Hunter 245), discrimination that Coco has experienced to a greater extent than Sam.

*Coco*. Because white Americans are afforded higher societal privilege than black Americans, light skinned or biracial individuals more easily obtain opportunities to "earn more money, complete more years of schooling, live in better neighborhoods, and marry higher-status people than darker-skinned people of the same race or ethnicity" (Hunter 237). This discrimination defines colorism, as "the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts" (237). Colorism is distinct from racism in that it is a biological prejudice based on skin tone, rather than a social prejudice based on racial identity, although "the hierarchy employed in colorism [...] is usually the same one that governs racism: light skin is prized over dark skin" (Harris 54). Although all African Americans experience racial discrimination, the frequency and severity of such discrimination is far higher amongst darker-skinned African Americans due to colorism. Similar to racism, colorism "consists of both overt and

covert actions, outright acts of discrimination and subtle cues of disfavor” (Hunter 241).

Like Sam, Coco’s first encounter with racial prejudice occurred early in her childhood. The cold open of “Chapter IV” includes a flashback to Coco’s elementary school days, where she and a group of girls are playing with dolls. Coco’s classmate tells her to “take the ugly one,” the sole black doll in the toy box. Another flashback to Coco’s freshman year of college reveals that during a Greek party where fraternity brothers asked sorority sisters on dates, Coco was the only woman not chosen, leaving her embarrassed and dejected. The series depicts both incidents as formative experiences regarding Coco’s understanding of both blackness and beauty. In the present-day narrative of “Chapter IV,” Coco angrily highlights Sam’s light-skinned privilege. Coco explains that, “People take one look at my skin, and they assume that I’m poor or uneducated or ratchet,” stereotypes that Coco points out Sam is not subjected to. Coco also tells Sam that the campus tolerates her aggressive and militant rhetoric because “you look more like them than I do,” allowing Sam a higher degree of social capital. To compensate for her own lack thereof, Coco attempts to dissociate from stereotypical views of black culture by conforming to politics of respectability.

Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham is popularly credited with coining the term “respectability politics” and defining its basic parameters (Di Leonardo 358; Patton 725). As defined by Higginbotham, respectability politics “refers to efforts among African Americans to distance themselves from stereotypes and presumed inferiority by embodying a public image that garners respect” (Patton 725). Such an image can be culled by conforming to majority white expectations and values “by behaving in a so-called respectable manner, i.e., dressing, acting, speaking, and even protesting in certain acceptable ways” (Newman and Obasogie 541). Several prominent black celebrities, most notably Bill Cosby,<sup>5</sup> have endorsed respectability politics, with a common argument being that they combat popular racial stereotypes such as laziness and intellectual inferiority (Di Leonardo 359; Harris 35; Patton 730). However, a prominent criticism of respectability politics is that they cater to dominant white ideologies, rather than promoting acceptance of black community values. Higginbotham herself asserts that “respectability’s emphasis on individual behavior serve[s] inevitably to blame blacks for their victimization” (202).

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<sup>5</sup> Cosby’s endorsement of respectability politics was reflected in *The Cosby Show* during its run on television, and the series has been criticized for advocating an inauthentic version of blackness that white audiences could more comfortably accept (Collins 167; Jones 186, 189).

Respectability politics is a major focus of *Dear White People*, which contrasts Sam's complete rejection of respectability politics with Coco's adoption of them. While Sam is the head of the BSU, Coco is the treasurer of Winchester's Coalition of Racial Equality (CORE). In contrast to the BSU, CORE emphasizes political correctness and politics of respectability. Representing CORE, Coco attends elite fundraisers and appeals to Winchester's older, primarily white donors and alumni. To project an image this group will find respectable, Coco's speech is largely devoid of any African American slang. Coco also tailors her hair and makeup to match Anglo-American styles of beauty, as white beauty is the dominant aesthetic in the United States and idealized in media (Hunter 238). Ultimately, Coco's appearance and language amongst Winchester's donors is intended to reward her with access to privilege and career advancement, a strategy often employed by African Americans in white-majority fields: "When non-whites seek to succeed in white-dominated environments, they may disclaim interest in leisure activities associated with minority racialized groups, avow interest in leisure activities coded 'white,' [and] distance themselves from non-whites perceived as angry or political" (Harris 60).

Coco's boyfriend, Troy Fairbanks, similarly subscribes to respectability politics. Troy is the son of the college's dean, who views Sam's protests, as well as Sam herself, as immature and naïve. In contrast, Dean Fairbanks, who is grooming Troy for professional success in politics, pressures his son to project a more respectable identity. Coco, who is similarly pursuing a political career, specifically likens herself and Troy to a respectable power couple in the mold of the Obamas. Respectability politics noticeably experienced a boon in popular interest in the late 2000s following Obama's election as president, with Obama himself being recognized as employing language associated with respectability in his rhetoric (Harris 35).

In "Chapter I," Lionel learns that Sam and Coco used to be best friends before they had a falling out.<sup>6</sup> In many popular television series, fights between women protagonists are often derived from competing interest in a man. However, this is just one of many stereotypes that *Dear White People* overcomes. Instead, Sam and Coco's friendship fractures due to their ideological differences, with Sam viewing

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<sup>6</sup> Sam and Coco's friendship has already dissolved at the beginning of the series, but their falling out is depicted in a flashback in "Chapter IV."

Coco’s endorsement of respectability politics as a betrayal to their entire race. However, in “Chapter VI,” Coco explains her perspective at length:

I grew up on the South Side of Chicago. I’ve actually seen friends and family members shot. And every time it happens, I wish they had done something, anything to prevent it. Some of y’all in here with your liberal purity, wasting time deciding who’s black enough. Who cares if you’re woke or not if you’re dead? (00:05:31-00:05:57)

Unlike Sam, Coco was raised in the ghetto and lived in constant fear of gang violence. By appeasing whiteness through politics of respectability, Coco hopes to escape this environment and obtain a better life for herself. Therefore, her adoption of respectability politics is motivated entirely by self-preservation. Troy expresses similar sentiments in “Chapter VIII” when he admits in Lionel that his dad pressures him into maintaining a respectable identity “to protect me from all the bullshit he’s faced as a black man” (00:13:54-00:13:57). However, these goals are more difficult for Coco and Troy to fulfill than Sam due to their darker skin color, which more readily lends itself to dominant stereotypes of blackness, including laziness and lack of intelligence. As observed by Margaret Hunter, “people of color with dark skin tones continue to pay a price for their color, and the light skinned continue to benefit from their association with whiteness” (250).

Like Sam, Coco suffers from internalized racism. However, whereas Sam’s internalized racism is derived from her lighter skin and the fear the black community will never accept her, Coco’s is derived from her darker skin and the fear her professional goals will be hindered by stereotypes of blackness. Ironically, Sam and Coco envy each other’s skin color and the varying privilege they represent. This jealousy illustrates the complexity of black identity, both ethnically and ideologically, a significant progression from traditional representations of blackness in mainstream television. However, *Dear White People* also explores black identity from the perspective of black men, particularly one who struggles to reconcile his sexual identity with popular expectations of blackness.

*Lionel.* *Dear White People* introduces Lionel as Troy’s roommate. Lionel is a shy, introverted journalism major who writes about race relations on campus for *The Independent*, Winchester’s local newspaper. Like Sam, Lionel’s greatest fear is that Winchester’s black community will reject him. However, whereas Sam’s anxiety derives from her ethnic identity, Lionel’s is derived from his sexual

identity, as Lionel is gay, something that has historically been treated as incompatible with blackness.

In queer media studies, “sexual identities [...] cannot be divorced from issues of class and race” (Avila-Saavedra 7). Although homophobia is a common feature of heterosexist communities, researchers have observed that African American communities exhibit particularly high levels of prejudice towards homosexuality, a phenomenon largely attributed to the intersectionality of black LGBT identities (Battle and Buttarro Jr. 1, 4; Battle and Lemelle Jr. 4, 40; Capitano and Herek 95). Developed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, intersectionality is a theory used to examine multidimensional social identities. Crenshaw, dissatisfied with the tendency of academics to “treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experiences and analysis” argued that when different identities overlap, they produce new, unique identities distinct from their individual components (139). Crenshaw also observed that in cases of intersectionality, individual prejudices, such as racism and homophobia, could act interrelatedly instead of separately. These specific prejudices have been observed operating in tandem to alienate and disenfranchise black LGBT individuals:

Within the black community, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people (LGBTs) are subjected to two unique and simultaneous forms of oppression—first as racial minorities and, second, as sexual minorities. The “same-sex relationship taboo” present in the larger society toward LGBTs also exists along racial lines, thus generating the idea that black homosexuality tarnishes the image of the overall community. (Battle and Buttarro Jr. 1)

Patricia Hill Collins echoes these sentiments, observing that “the homophobia in Black cultural nationalism seems linked to [beliefs] that maintaining a conservative gender ideology is essential for Black families, communities, and the Black nation as family” (111).

Hegemonic masculinity, pioneered by gender theorist R.W. Connell, is a sociological concept describing how masculinities are arranged into hierarchies within communities. According to hegemonic masculinity, specific masculine models are viewed as more socially legitimate or ideal than others. McConnell’s “idea of a hierarchy of masculinities grew directly out of [observing] homosexual men’s experience with violence and prejudice from straight men” (Connell and

Messerschmidt 831). Within heterosexist societies, homosexual masculinity is among the least respected masculine models. Because heterosexuality forms “the bedrock of hegemonic masculinity[,] a fundamental element of hegemonic masculinity, then, is that women exist as potential sexual objects for men while men are negated as sexual objects for men” (Donaldson 645). Because sexual relationships with women are idealized within hegemonic masculinity as markers of masculine validation homosexual attraction to other men is viewed as a deviant aberration that negates one’s masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 840). This idealization is especially true within the universe of black masculinity, as heterosexual promiscuity is “an important part of the depiction of black masculinity, [and] black men’s bodies remain highly sexualized within contemporary mass media. Images of black men often reduce them not only to bodies (the case of the athletes) but also to body parts, especially the penis” (Collins 161).

In many ways, Troy embodies a traditional hegemonic model of black masculinity. Several shots in “Chapter II” depict Lionel’s point-of-view as he watches Troy leave the shower or fantasizes about him naked, emphasizing Troy’s musculature and physical attractiveness. These scenes depict Lionel utilizing the male gaze as described by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey to engage in voyeurism and scopophilia (6). However, while the male gaze in traditional media fetishizes female bodies for male viewers, Lionel’s gaze functions from a viewpoint not fixed along traditional gender lines. “Chapter II” also emphasizes Troy’s sexual prowess. In the episode, Lionel repeatedly overhears Troy and Coco having sex, with Coco commenting on the large size of Troy’s penis. Unbeknownst to Coco, Troy is also pursuing an affair with the married Neika Hobbs, a professor of African American studies at Winchester, further demonstrating his sexual success. In contrast to Troy’s complete embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, Lionel is socially awkward, unmuscular, and a virgin.

As observed by Collins, “avowedly heterosexual African American men routinely deride gay black men, primarily through ridicule [...] or through outright homophobic comments” (172). Such prejudice is powerfully portrayed in “Chapter II” during flashbacks to Lionel’s freshman year at Winchester. Lionel visits a black-owned barbershop to cut his hair, only to leave dejected after overhearing one of the barbers announce “I don’t cut fags” (00:01:05-00:01:08). The barbershop is a recognized cultural space within African American society, meaning that it serves “as a register of cultural identity denoting but not delimiting bodies distinguished

by race, practices, and stylistics that signal cultural membership” (Alexander 106). In *Dear White People*, Lionel’s feelings of rejection from the barbershop symbolize his greater feelings of rejection from the black community. Collins observes that the black community’s pursuit of solidarity often results in “distinctive segments of Black civil society,” such as black LGBT individuals, “being routinely submerged for the alleged good of the group” (19). This increased “stigmatization of homosexuality [...] causes more ‘closeted’ behaviors and produces more stress among gay African American men” (Battle and Lemelle Jr. 40). Lionel is closeted until the conclusion of “Chapter II” when he finally comes out to Troy, explaining, “I’m gay. I don’t know why that’s so hard for me to say. I’ve always known” (00:25:51-00:26:21). Surprising Lionel, Troy wholeheartedly accepts his roommate’s sexual orientation and offers to cut Lionel’s hair himself. Although Troy’s character embodies several traditional notions of black masculinity, he also subverts others through his complete acceptance of black LGBT individuals. Troy’s cutting of Lionel’s hair not only cements their friendship but also symbolizes Lionel’s acceptance as a gay man within Winchester’s black community.

Although televisual representation of African Americans as a whole bears a mixed legacy, the African American LGBT community has been portrayed especially poorly. Juan Battle and Anthony Buttarro Jr. state “that [black] homophobic attitudes are [partially] reinforced by the masculine ideology” exhibited in popular media (7). A previously common caricature of black homosexuality in popular media was the “sissy,” described by Collins as “an effeminate and derogated black masculinity. Representations of gay African American men depict them as peripheral characters, often in comedic roles that border on ridicule [and] support the heterosexuality of other males” (171). In response to this and other stereotypical depictions of homosexuality in popular media, “a primary purpose of the critical application of queer theory has been to demonstrate how sexuality is culturally essentialized to inscribe heterosexuality as normal and all other sexualities as deviant” (Avila-Saavedra 6). In *Dear White People*, Lionel represents a complete rejection of the “sissy” archetype, instead embodying a more progressive media model of black LGBT masculinity, where homosexuality is not deviant but instead normalized and can coexist with blackness without either contradicting the other. In addition to Lionel, such normalization is represented through several other black LGBT characters in *Dear White People*’s ensemble, including Neika, who is bisexual, her wife Monique, and A.J., a gay bartender at Winchester, all of whom have already achieved the self-actualization

Lionel acquires over the course of the series. Ultimately, Lionel, along with Sam and Coco, represent more complex and nuanced depictions of blackness and black identity than have traditionally been portrayed in American television.

## Conclusion

As Lionel notes in “Chapter II,” “while endless depictions of white men in particular exist, there aren’t that many versions of [African Americans] in the culture. Culture has a powerful way of telling people what they can and can’t be. For people of color, the options are rather limited” (00:06:50-00:07:06). Although the number of African American actors working in television has noticeably increased compared to previous decades, most roles available to them continue to be rooted in historical stereotypes, and thus television audiences are resultantly much more inclined to make generalizations and negative assumptions towards the African American community as a whole (Punyanunt-Carter 241, 244; Ford 271).

Herman Gray observes that representations of African Americans in popular television are largely situated within existing “hierarchies of privilege and power,” thus conforming to hegemonic whiteness (10). Although black television producers such as Shonda Rhimes and Tyler Perry have been praised for increasing black representation on screen, some commentators have also criticized their various television series for neglecting issues of race and promoting inauthentic versions of blackness based on respectability politics, respectively (Joseph 315; Di Leonardo 361). In contrast, Justin Simien’s *Dear White People* is entirely concerned with race, the subject of which forms the fabric of the series.

Popular television is recognized for its capability to form or reform notions of race amongst audiences (Ford 266), and *Dear White People* deserves critical attention for its attempt to reform conceptions of blackness in the medium. Instead of treating the black community as a monolith, the three protagonists of *Dear White People*—Sam, Coco, and Lionel—each occupy unique black identities, and struggle to reconcile them with culturally accepted notions of blackness. When considering how Trump’s election as President of the United States has ushered in a resurgence of white power norms and destigmatized racial prejudice, *Dear White People* demonstrates significant cultural relevance. *Dear White People*’s triumvirate of protagonists not only subvert prominent stereotypes of blackness that Trump himself has espoused as president, but also represent a milestone in black televisual representation through asserting the complexity of black identity.

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