

Final Project: Race and Representation in *Dear White People*

Justin Simien's 2017 television series, *Dear White People*, captures the challenges that students of colour face while attending a predominately white Ivy-League college. The show's protagonist, Samantha White, is a biracial woman trying to find a balance between being true to herself and keeping up with the expectations of her peers within the black community. In recreating a still from this show, I explored whether or not there is a middle ground; a community and space for biracial people to feel understood. In this essay, I will focus on the importance of representation of people of colour and explore how a show like *Dear White People*, can create a space for biracial people, to feel understood and accepted.

*Dear White People*, Season 1, Chapter VII: I have chosen this still in particular (see below), because there is a sense of conflict between the two characters. I chose to photograph myself as both characters to explore the internal conflicts that I have with my own biracial identity. The two characters symbolize my connection with both the black and white communities and the fact that I do not fully fit into just one or the other. In my recreation (see below), I wanted to keep the same level of conflict, to represent the constant game of 'Tug-of-War' I endure daily. Despite the tension within the still, I wanted to show the connection between the two sides. On one side, the patterned background is richer in design. On the other side, the pattern is soft and dainty. The two patterns overlap in the middle, symbolizing that one does not exist without the other. Therefore, in terms of my identity, by denying one side of my ethnicity, I would be denying my true self.

*Dear White People* creates a dialogue around the idea of identity and its many facets. As Head of the Black Student Union and voice of the radio show "Dear White People", Samantha

White is unintentionally the face of the black community. She is encouraged to confront the issues of white supremacy and racial bias on campus, despite the fact that she is inherently a part of the 'white' culture. Samantha struggles with the idea that her whiteness consequently invalidates her blackness. To the black community, she is not quite black enough, and to the white community she is deemed as the "Angry-Black Woman" (Sherretz 96). In centering the show around a woman of mixed-race, Simien constructs a space for biracial women alike, to see themselves through onscreen representation.

Samantha conceals her connection to her half-white identity when in the presence of the black community. For example, in the first episode, she is listening to stereotypical 'white' pop music, which she quickly changes to hip-hop as she approaches a group of her black classmates (Bavaro 30). In Vincenzo Bavaro's article, "Taking Back One's Narrative", he discusses this particular scene. Bavaro highlights that this scene encapsulates the split in Samantha's character: the militant public persona and the young woman on the way to self-discovery (Bavaro 30).

In an NPR interview from 2014, director Justin Simien discusses the expectations held within the black community. Simien expresses that people are bound to have untrue presumptions, which consequently place pressure on people of colour, biracial or not. This often results in people of colour having to defend their character upon entering a room (Simien NPR, 2014). This is true for Samantha, as she is shown to constantly overcompensate and prove her blackness to her peers. An example of this is when Samantha attempts to hide her interracial relationship with a white man, from her black peers. Once her friends within the black community discover the relationship, Samantha feels the need to defend her blackness. This is further conveyed as she is approached by her best friend Joelle, who says, "you're not Rashida Jones biracial, you're Tracee Ellis Ross biracial" (*Dear White People*, Ch. VI). Thus, making an

assumption about Samantha's identity and implying that people have a certain expectation regarding her sexuality. Simien's critique of the black community's reaction to the 'taboo' interracial coupling, illuminates the concerns that people of colour often have of power imbalances and fetishization within these relationships. However, Simien also creates a moment where Samantha chooses to stand by her relationship, regardless of the racial stigmas.

Matt Richardson's "Our Stories Have Never Been Told", examines Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*, which presents similar themes shown within *Dear White People*. Richardson reflects on how documentary is used as a 'tool' within Cheryl's film (Richardson 100). Richardson acknowledges the significance of the 'archive' and explains that through creating this 'archive', women of colour have access to controlling their own narratives and histories (Richardson 101). Much like Cheryl's character in the film, in *Dear White People*, Samantha is a filmmaker herself, using the camera as a tool to reach into the past and explore the histories of her black ancestors on campus. The significance of culture and history within the show, suggest that both factors assist in the construction of one's identity (Sherretz 104).

Comparable to Richardson's ideas on the 'archive', B. Ruby Rich's "New Queer Cinema", discusses the importance of visibility and onscreen presence in preserving one's identity (Rich, xv). Simien's show relies on cultural representation, as he criticizes racial stigmatizations and inequalities often seen within predominately white institutions. *Dear White People* addresses this importance of visibility through providing an episode based on each character's experiences and identity within the show. In doing so, Simien creates a space for everyone to feel represented.

Despite its title, the show is an open letter to all, regardless of race. On one hand *Dear White People* is educational to those outside of the black community, as it sheds light on the

history of white supremacy and privilege. On the other hand, the show illuminates the discrimination present within the black community, as it follows Samantha's search for acceptance within a community that denies half of her identity.

Simien's show is a satirical critique on the socio-political climate and the racialized inequality at its core. *Dear White People's* diverse representation of individuals within the black community, provides a platform for people of colour to see themselves on screen, without the stereotypical narratives previously placed upon them throughout history. The show also offers its viewers who identify outside of the black community, a chance to relate to characters of different races. Thus, normalizing the onscreen representation of people of colour and attempting to break barriers between the two communities.

Original Still:



Recreated Image:



Works Cited:

- Bavaro, Vincenzo. "Taking Back One's Narrative": Dear White People, Cultural Appropriation, and the Challenge of Anti-essentialism. *RSA Journal* 29/ 2018
- Richardson, Matt. "Our Stories Have Never Been Told": Preliminary Thoughts on Black Lesbian Cultural Production as Historiography in *The Watermelon Woman.*" *Black Camera*, vol.2, no.2, Spring 2011, pp.100-113.
- Rich, B. Ruby. "Introduction." *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*. Duke University Press, 2013. xv-xxx.
- Sherretz, C. M. D. (2018). The visual representation of African Americans in popular culture: A critical qualitative multi-site case study of the film dear white people and racial identity in the postsecondary classroom (Order No. b 10790970). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Simien, J. (2014, October 14). Dear White People is a satire addressed to everyone. NPR Fresh Air.