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Anjali Maya Mahesh Patel April 2nd, 2018

Streaming the Sitcom: The Minority Experience in Netflix's *Dear White People, Master of None* and *Chewing Gum*

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Abstract

Streaming the Sitcom: The Minority Experience in Netflix's *Dear White People, Master of None* and *Chewing Gum*

By Anjali Maya Mahesh Patel

Since its founding in 1997, Netflix has been the pioneer of streaming television, creating interesting, successful shows using data analytics. This thesis examines Netflix shows *Dear White People* (2017), *Master of None* (2015), and *Chewing Gum* (2016), which are part of a new wave of television, created by and starring people of color. These programs fit with Netflix's increasingly global brand by telling diverse stories and giving marginalized artists a platform and voice. They have been immensely popular among critics and audiences for their relatability, humor, and ability to integrate a wide range of social issues, such as gun violence, racism, and homophobia, with as much ease and tact as dating and family life. These shows demonstrate the capability of the situation comedy as a format for social change, by weaving in themes of race and representation to every episode, rather than a few per season. In this project, I explore the ways in which these shows depict race and life as a minority by examining specific episodes, and the role that humor plays in their format and reception. Through this analysis, I hope to reveal how these shows uncover a deeper level of the minority experience, and how this shift in situation comedies has been made possible and easily accessible by Netflix as a medium.

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Introduction

In this project, I examine a new wave of TV, created by and starring minorities, that has surfaced on streaming platforms. By examining Justin Simien's *Dear White People* (2017), Aziz Anzari's *Master of None* (2015), and Michaela Cole's *Chewing Gum* (2016) through the lenses of critical race theory, Othering, and the philosophy of humor, I argue that these shows explore a deeper level of the minority experience, through the unique medium of Netflix and by using humor as a means for widespread appeal.

The way we currently watch television, presented with a plethora of options through computers and without having to read a TV guide, is incredible. Streaming services have changed the way consumers interact with television, and the trajectory of customizable and data-driven programming seems to be accelerating. In 1997, Netflix was founded as an online movie rental site, when CEO and co-founder, Reed Hastings, got a late fee for a DVD rental and realized "there's a big market out there."[1] At this time, the switch from VHS to DVD was beginning, and Netflix made it easier to go online and choose a movie than to go to a video store, like Blockbuster or Hollywood Video. In 1999, Netflix premiered a subscription service, where consumers could receive unlimited DVD rentals for a monthly fee and, in 2000, Netflix began their data-dive, rolling out a recommendation system that used "Netflix members' ratings to accurately predict choices for all members."[2] Netflix continued to grow and in 2007 began their foray into the online streaming world, altering the norms of TV consumption. At this point, Netflix was a distributor, getting old content and placing it on an easily-accessible site. The company made their service available through internet-connected devices like iPads and video game consoles and expanded into Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean by 2011.[3] Their first original show debuted in 2013: an American adaptation of the dark British political drama, *House of Cards*.

This show was unique in the way it was created, and its success emphasized the power of "Big Data," which is information that is used to discover new trends and analyze businesses.[4] Netflix has lots of data from their subscriber base and used that information to create *House of*

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[1] Keating, Gina. *Netflixed: The Epic Battle for America's Eyeballs.* Penguin, 2013, pg 3
[2] "Netflix Timeline." *Netflix Media Center,* media.netflix.com/en/about-netflix
[3] Ibid.
[4] Arthur, Lisa. "What Is Big Data?" *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 15 Aug. 2013, www.forbes.com/sites/lisaarthur/2013/08/15/what-is-big-data/#b38d4ae5c85b.

Cards, a show that "executives at the company knew [would] be a hit before anyone shouted 'action.'"[5] Netflix collects information on what people watch, which devices they use, and when users pause, rewind, or fast-forward. It can target ads towards people that are interested in female leads, certain actors, genres, and themes.[6] In traditional television, a show pilot is made, the pilot then is screened to test audiences and executives, and only then a complete season is ordered. *House of Cards* did not follow this process; *House of Cards* released all thirteen episodes at once, allowing viewers to watch at their own pace, making Netflix the first company to do this[7] and creating the binge-watching phenomenon. This incredibly successful show demonstrated that there was a hunger for new, exciting content, proved Netflix's reliance on data works, and allowed Netflix to begin buying and creating more original data-based programming. Today, they are the leading streaming service in the world, with 104 million subscribers worldwide, and produce critically acclaimed series and films. Netflix is also an industry leader in their commitment to releasing shows that are truly diverse and that delve into the experiences of people of color. Netflix, as a paid-subscriber system, has more freedom in their original programming than broadcast networks regarding the content they can show. Their programming is much less restricted, and they can take more risks from form to content. They are also not dependent on commercial revenue and ratings and release more content (from documentaries to sitcoms) than a traditional broadcast network does per year.

Dear White People, Master of None, and *Chewing Gum* all gained critical and popular acclaim due to their humor, wit, and ability to tackle racial and political issues with as much ease as issues surrounding dating. Characters are allowed to confront their unease about their identity with similar and different people. They are not confined to simple stereotypes and are allowed space to discuss how they are perceived and how race affects their lives. These shows are written by minorities and include a diverse, representational cast. By incorporating the work of scholars like Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, bell hooks and Marlon Riggs, I demonstrate how Netflix has

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[5] Carr, David. "For 'House of Cards,' Using Big Data to Guarantee Its Popularity." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 24 Feb. 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/02/25/business/media/for-house-of-cards-using-big-data-to-guarantee-its-popularity.html.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Satell, Greg. "What Netflix's 'House of Cards' Means For The Future Of TV." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 5 Mar. 2013, www.forbes.com/sites/gregsatell/2013/03/04/what-netflixs-house-of-cards-means-for-the-future-of-tv/#4427e2575517.

created space for minority voices, in their incredibly successful shows. What makes these shows particularly unique is their roots in the traditional situation comedy. However, they incorporate genre-bending factors that add to their narrative complexity.

Comedy is often seen as a tool for change, and well executed humorous dialogue can open audiences to new ideas and ways of thinking. By examining the comedy theory behind these shows, largely using the works of Cynthia and Julie Willett and John Morreall, I unpack how each show is able to confront its audience with real-world issues while driving the narrative forward. I investigate the types of humor used in each show, from the superiority theory of humor to the origins of satire, as well as how humor functions to make each program appeal to more than just a minority group. At the core of this new wave of TV is the question: How, all of sudden, did minority-driven shows become so popular and mainstream? As the traditional sitcom model (multi-camera setup, laugh tracks, live audiences, episodic resolve) unraveled in American network television, space for innovation opened up. Profits and popularity drive content, and in recent years there has been a huge surge in TV shows (across all platforms) that steer away from stereotyping and create dynamic characters of color. This change in representation has been slowly occurring in broadcast television and can date back to early sitcoms, but Netflix and other streaming services have more freedom to embrace new voices, untold stories, and multi-dimensional characters of color. Today, many more outlets exist for minority writers; they are not just confined to network TV. Hollywood is finally embracing content that represents, not just sells. There have also been social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and #OscarsSoWhite, that have entered the American public's consciousness, making people aware of institutional racism. Still, Hollywood remains a very white-male-dominated industry that influences mass-media and perpetuates a race and gender hierarchy.

Audiences of color have always been consumers, and certain networks even cater to specific groups, such as BET (Black Entertainment Television) and Univision. *Master of None, Dear White People,* and *Chewing Gum* are Netflix originals which are welcomed onto the platform because the company knows they have a global and diverse audience. Netflix's freedom from traditional broadcast constraints— from ad revenue to episode length or censored words, adds to their ability to create and distribute shows that delve into unique and authentic minority experiences. These shows allow the creators to spark open dialogue and social change through

entertainment. Netflix is a progressive brand. They dominate the streaming market and have managed to evolve with the times. Their age demographics range greatly, but 73% of their active subscribers are GenX (born mid 1960's to early 80's) followed by millennials[8] (born mid-1990's to early 2000's), meaning that they have a very young audience. Thus, Netflix can cater their shows to the data-driven interests of their clients. Certainly, Netflix does not only release minority shows and films. But their ability to distribute a large quantity of programming as well as make development decisions from data, has given Netflix the power to cater to niche audiences on one platform.

The first chapter of this project explores the history of the situation comedy and representation of people of color in this genre, from the beginning of broadcast television to the digital era. Chapter Two analyzes *Dear White People*, a satirical show that examines race relations on a college campus from the perspective of black students. Chapter Three discusses *Master of None*, an episodic series loosely based on Aziz Ansari's experiences that makes overt social commentary without proposing a concrete solution. Chapter Four studies *Chewing Gum*, a semi-autobiographical British show following a working-class black girl trying to balance her religious life with the need to learn about sex and dating. This thesis considers race and comedy theories behind these shows, factors that allow Netflix to program representative content, and analyzes each show's dialogue, character development, and cinematic features through three exemplary episodes per show.

[8] "Share of Consumers with an Active Netflix Subscription in the United States as of February 2017, by Age Group." *Statista*, www.statista.com/statistics/698020/netflix-subscription-by-age/.

Chapter 1: A Brief History of American Television

Imagining a world without television seems nearly impossible. It is a source of news, entertainment, escape and information, but has evolved drastically since its invention. Television was one of the fastest technologies to integrate into American culture and life, "[it] only took ten years to reach a penetration of thirty-five million households, while the telephone required eighty years, the automobile took fifty, and even radio needed twenty-five."[9] This chapter examines the rise of television in America and focuses specifically on how situation comedies have portrayed minorities and discussed social issues, such as race, class, gender, and prejudice. The situation comedy as a genre for social change has evolved with the times and continues to develop more intricate plot lines and tackle more difficult topics.

The Beginning of Television

American television moved from experimental to commercial in the summer of 1941. It quickly replaced the radio and became the most exciting way for families to access news and entertainment. TV sets were sold as appliances, as necessary to any home as a fridge. At first, television was a luxury but, like the radio, soon became a staple in any modern home. NBC (National Broadcasting Company) was the first network to have advertisements or sponsorships, which turned television into a booming industry. Other networks quickly caught on, and the lucrative power of TV was discovered. However, due to America's growing involvement in World War II, television set factories and most other resources were turned towards war production. The initial three networks NBC, CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System), and ABC (American Broadcasting Company) still existed and were required to air four hours of programming per week, but most of this content focused on supporting the war effort and grew away from commercial development. In 1945, WWII ended, factories were restored to their original purpose, and 1948-1949 became the first fully scheduled television season. Americans were ready to move on from the pain of war and embraced television with open arms.

TV continued to grow exponentially; in 1946 0.02% of American households owned TVs, and by 1955, less than ten years later, that number had increased to 64%.[10] Families were

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[9] Edgerton, Gary. *The Columbia History of American Television*. Columbia University Press, 2009, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/emory/detail.action?docID=908424. pg xi

[10] Edgerton, Gary. *The Columbia History of American Television*. Part 1, pg 89

enamored with television; it became part of their daily lives yet added new challenges to family dynamics. TV sets were marketed towards families, the idea being that TV viewing would increase the amount of time that families spent together. "The television sets themselves had to be 'eased' into the formal spaces for the home,"[11] but they were still "hailed as the great facilitator of 'togetherness,' that highly prized 1950's domestic state of tranquility."[12] Sets were ornately decorated, made to look like furniture pieces, and larger TVs were disguised behind cabinets. TV continued to steadily rise in popularity, with local station programming making up the majority of content. People watched high school baseball games, community groups would promote their events on small-time talk shows, and it became another way to get to know the community and people in it. Television was a product that was here to stay for Americans. In 1955, Gary A. Steiner and his team were asked to investigate "the present place of television in the minds of its public." His results were not shocking but give a good sense of how TV affected people's daily lives. The average American viewer would watch TV for about 3.5 hours a day, "but largely took the medium for granted. Like a steady diet of bland candy, TV was filling but flavorless, […] [and] people seemingly consumed it out of habit more than passion."[13] This is to say that most of the programming was not the inspiring, daring content that viewers today receive. TV was mostly looked at as a medium to sell ad revenue. Thus, the content had to have a mass-appeal, which often translated to mundane.

The Rise of Situation Comedies

Many of the most popular shows on television during its early years were inspired by radio programs. Radio situation comedies (sitcoms), which followed the same formula of a "simple comic premise […] played out by an ensemble cast of characters,"[14] quickly turned into televised series, and in November 1947, *Mary Kay and Johnny* became the first TV broadcasted situation comedy.[15] Commercial TV penetrated family life in a powerful way; they were navigating the murky waters of postwar culture. Families were able to focus on themselves and not the war effort, women were beginning to work full time jobs, and white families began to

[11] Edgerton, Gary. Part 1, pg 85
[12] Ibid. Part 1, pg 94
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid. Part 4, pg 19
[15] Ibid.

own their own homes and move to the suburbs in record numbers, instead of living with parents or in-laws. The idea of a small, isolated nuclear family, living away from their extended relatives went seamlessly with television as a bonding activity and escape from normal life. Situation comedies are particularly family-friendly, and are still sometimes viewed as a "small time"[16] genre, meaning that they do not tackle social and political issues with as much time and consideration as dramas or films. Sitcoms are considered a purer form of entertainment, seen "as an alternative to work, education, and seriousness,"[17] but this may also be because the plot lines resolve within a single episode. Thus, there is not much time to develop and explore the tension.

Sitcoms are arguably repetitive and formulaic; writers recycle the same story arcs and the shows are rarely innovative. Brett Mills describes the families of conventional sitcoms as, "disturbingly traditional."[18] When sitcoms first developed, this was true, but they have evolved with the times. Programs used to only touch on the intricacies of interacting with family and friends and resolve at the end of every episode, known as "episodic" television compared to serial plotlines that carry over multiple episodes or seasons. The result of this format is that anyone can pick up in the middle of a season and still be able to enjoy the show, making it a perfect candidate for syndication. However, it also means that story arcs are limited to twenty minutes, and not much deep development can really occur. The sitcom has been unwaveringly popular for over fifty years: "[It] has quietly and consistently given pleasure to millions for decades."[19] Sitcoms have been incredibly important for TV representation and the entertainment industry's ability to make money. Their quiet power lies in their ability to introduce difficult topics or interesting characters in a comfortable and familiar setting. Although the sitcom has remained largely centered on white relationships and values, it has still broken the norms with shows like *The Cosby Show* and *All in the Family.*

One cannot examine the history of situation comedies without looking at *I Love Lucy*, because it set the standard for sitcoms throughout the network era (mid-1950's to mid-1980's)[20] and even into today. It followed real-life couple Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, as Lucy and Ricky Ricardo, a newly married couple that navigated topics such as Lucy's career and starting a

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[16] Mills, Brett. *The Sitcom*. Edinburgh University Press, 2013. pg 1
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid. pg 21
[19] Ibid. pg 4
[20] Lotz, Amanda D. *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. New York University Press, 2014. pg 2

family. The show established many features of what became traditional sitcom fare like the multi-camera approach (where three cameras are set up around the set and record each scene simultaneously), which was previously only used for live TV, flat lighting that didn't need to be changed for every scene, and filming in front of a live studio audience.[21] Although multiple cameras meant more crew to operate and more film used, it was less expensive than single camera setups because it required fewer hours of technical production.[22] The flat lighting also saved money, and made for quicker filming times. Lastly, *I Love Lucy's* legacy of filming in front of a live studio audience allowed for the feeling of community and togetherness that TV has always strived towards, and hearing the laughter at home brought viewers into this community. It also allowed the actors and writers to immediately see what jokes landed and what simply didn't work. The ones that fell flat would be cut from the final product. Actors were forced to, "[dig deep], and come up with a way to *make* [the audience] laugh."[23] Both the performers and the viewers at home fed off the energy from a live audience. These techniques were so successful that some sitcoms are still filmed this way including *The Big Bang Theory, 2 Broke Girls,* and *Mike and Molly.*

TV has always been a business meant to generate revenue in the form of ad money. The commercialization of TV became an incredible way for advertisers to sell their product to a mass audience, and by the 1974-75 season, CBS, NBC, and ABC had cornered the $2.5 billion TV advertising market,[24] forming a three-company oligopoly. Primetime ad spots were higher priced, and content aired during this time was known as the "least objectionable programs,"[25] meaning that it had a wide audience appeal. Primetime TV is usually between 8pm-11pm Eastern Standard Time and is when the largest number of viewers tune into programs.[26] These networks knew how much the others charged per ad slot and maintained high prices, setting an industry standard. Sitcoms were a perfect fit for primetime programming because they had mass

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[21] Edgerton, Gary. Part 4, pg 28
[22] Battaglio, Stephen. "Networks Rediscover the Single-Camera Sitcom." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 7 July 2001, www.nytimes.com/2001/07/08/arts/television-radio-networks-rediscover-the-single-camera-sitcom.html.
[23] VanDerWerff, Todd. "Do Sitcoms Taped before a Studio Audience Have a Future?" *TV Club*, Tv.avclub.com, 14 Sept. 2011, tv.avclub.com/do-sitcoms-taped-before-a-studio-audience-have-a-future-1798227404.
[24] Edgerton, Gary. Part 7, pg 39
[25] Ibid. Part 7, pg 11
[26] Lotz, Amanda D. *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. pg 2

appeal and advertisers could reach the largest possible audience. Broadcast TV was hailed as a medium for advertising that could reach over thirty million consumers in the US and internationally. The big three networks mostly produced standard, family-geared shows, which meant that nothing controversial was aired during prime advertising slots; where companies wanted to reach the largest audience. Sitcoms of the time were very idyllic; they often centered on family-type structures, with an emphasis on family values, respect, and responsibility and usually involved learning a concrete lesson at the end of each episode. Erik Barnouw, a broadcast historian, writes, "Except for the occasionally disturbing documentary, evening television confirmed the average [person's] view of the world. It presented the America [they] wanted and believed in and had labored to be a part of. It was alive with handsome [people], and symbols of the good life. It invited and drew [them] into its charmed circle."[27] Television was a way to advertise for big companies, but for the audience, it was an easy escape: a medium to visualize the American dream and be reminded of what they wanted to achieve. Sitcoms became tightly packed vessels that engaged wide audiences through idealistic images and were ultimately used to sell products to a mass market. As a result, the networks kept situation comedies as least-objectionable programming and did not allow the form to explore issues that might have created discomfort.

Race & Representation in Sitcoms

The content divide for white audiences and audiences of color occurred first at the local level with segregated programming for black and white audiences mirroring the racially charged culture of the time. *Amos 'n' Andy* (1951-1953), originally a radio show, starring two white men, adapted by CBS, about African Americans from the South who moved to Chicago to start a new life, became one of the most controversial broadcasted shows because of the racist and stereotypical casting. Although the creators used African-American actors, the show depicted African-Americans "in a stereotyped and derogatory manner."[28] Actor James Edwards said of the show, "[…] Negroes are being pushed back 25 years by perpetuating this stereotype on television. The money involved (and there's a great deal) can't hope to undo the harm the

[27] Edgerton, Gary. Part 7, pg 11
[28] MacDonald, J. Fred. *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television since 1948*. Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1992. pg 29

continuation of *Amos 'n' Andy* will effect."[29] Many stations in the American South refused to air it because of its all-black cast, while the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) held nationwide protests against the show's portrayals of African-Americans and the implications for black communities. *Amos 'n' Andy* only lasted for two and a half seasons before being pulled from CBS's lineup. Other situation comedies focused on immigrant families learning to navigate American culture, such as *The Goldbergs* (1949-1957), about a Jewish family in New York balancing assimilation with preserving their culture, and *The Life of Riley* (1953-1958), the story of a blue-collar, Irish-American family living in California.[30] Sociology and Black Studies professor Dr. George Lipsitz argues that early sitcoms "placed more emphasis on nuclear families and less on extended kinship relations and ethnicity."[31] Thus, even if ethnically diverse families were seen on TV, the shows rarely addressed issues specific to their race, religion, or culture.

Marginalized people were not excluded from television representation, but they were separated into their own white-washed shows or featured as supporting, often stereotypical, characters. Most situation comedies maintained the core idea of family togetherness, regardless of race. Audience preference moved from "the loud, high-pitched humor of vaudeville, [to] low-key, slice of life comedies,"[32] which reflected the adjustment to postwar culture. They wanted to see normal families living their American dream, with predictable and modest humor. These sitcoms, however, largely ignored racial tensions and prejudices.[33] Josh Ozersky, a cultural critic, wrote, in reference to the Vietnam War, the Cold War, race riots, and the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King and President John F Kennedy: "Few things are more striking, in retrospect, than the sheer obliviousness of prime-time television in 1968 to the cultural turmoil surrounding it in the real world."[34] This quote emphasizes that TV moved towards showing viewers what life could and should be, instead of integrating social issues into the narratives. Sitcoms were seen as an escape, and rather than harness the power of comedy to create social change, they offered

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[29] Ibid.
[30] Bareiss, Warren. "The Life of Riley: U.S. Situation Comedy." *The Museum of Broadcast Communications - Encyclopedia of Television - Life of Riley, The*, www.museum.tv/eotv/lifeofriley.htm.
[31] Edgerton, Gary. Part 4, pg 19
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid. Part 7, pg 28

idyllic views of white families unaffected by difference, prejudice, or culture beyond the white normative.

As the years went on, sitcoms began to address important social and cultural issues. *All in the Family* (1971-1979), is often described as the "first continuing series to ever tackle issues such as Vietnam, racism, women's rights, homosexuality, impotence, menopause, rape, alcoholism, and many other relevant themes." [35] *All in the Family* seemed to be a parody of many traditional situation comedy tropes. The main character, Archie Bunker, was close-minded and often hostile (instead of the usual affable lead), and the family did not live a perfectly happy life. It depicted real generational and racial anxiety, and the Bunker family had African-American neighbors, The Jeffersons. They were similar to the Bunkers; George Jefferson would get into crazy situations like Archie, and Edith Bunker and Louise Jefferson would often plot to make their husbands friends. The neighbors even got a popular spinoff sitcom, *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985). Both shows made it easier for other prime-time sitcoms to include minorities and discuss racial issues. Around the same time *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) became popular. It was about an independent, hardworking woman with a career in news producing. While *MTMS* did not tackle a slew of controversial topics, it did "[take] character-driven sitcoms to a whole new level of emotional depth and sophistication."[36] The characters were a dynamic, interesting workplace family. They resembled real people while still maintaining humorous relations and selling ad slots. Most importantly, *MTMS* made moves from episodic to serial story arcs. While many issues resolved themselves at the end of each episode, other plotlines carried over multiple episodes and sometimes seasons. This aided in character development, allowed audiences to get more invested in the show, and gave the creators the freedom to create more intricate plots.

*M*A*S*H* (1972-1983) was the next huge situation comedy hit that is said to have combined both the topicality of *All in the Family* and the deep character affection from *MTMS.*[37] It followed a team of military doctors stationed in South Korea during the Korean War. *M*A*S*H* is known as the first dark sitcom, as it balanced humor with the realities of war, from disease to death; "No matter how zany the characters' antics got, they always remained grounded

[35] Ibid. Part 7, pg 36
[36] Ibid. Part 7, pg 37
[37] Ibid.

in the horrors of the situation around them."[38] The show lasted for eleven seasons and is one of the most-watched series finale of all time (with over 60% of U.S. homes watching),[39] emphasizing the popularity and influence of the series. *M*A*S*H* epitomizes a situation comedy that is emotional and explores serious situations but uses humor as a tool to make the circumstances more tolerable.

Although *M*A*S*H* was not a diverse show, it pushed the boundaries of what could be shown on broadcast television. Similarly, *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) succeeded in the way African-Americans were portrayed on television. Instead of simply incorporating a token, stereotyped supporting character, *The Cosby Show* was about an upper middle-class, African-American family in Brooklyn, that dealt with similar issues as predominantly white sitcoms (*I Love Lucy*, *Three's Company, The Beverly Hillbillies,* etc.) such as school, parenting, in-laws, and work. The Cosby family were the stars of the show, not supporting characters, and it was popular across all demographics. The show addressed historical events such as the Civil Rights movement and Apartheid in certain episodes, but it did not continuously tackle racism, prejudice, and life as a minority in America. African-American TV series struggled at this time because of an expectation that black entertainers were expected to represent all African Americans[40] and "if a role [seemed] too accepting of white social dominance, the star as well as the character he or she is portraying may be attacked as too acquiescent. If the role is one of a middle-class suburban black, it may be assailed as too bourgeois and unsympathetic to inner city [people.]"[41] *The Cosby Show* is arguably a show about a black family but not a show about being black in America. Some executives have claimed the popularity of the show was because "the Huxtable family didn't come across as black,"[42] or that, "a lot of [*The Cosby Show* style sitcoms] are very white."[43] Within the racist discourse of the time, it is clear that most networks did not want to attract certain viewers, thus to attract the "middle-class white viewer"[44] they "offered positive

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[38] Andress, Justin. "Netflix Removed 'M.A.S.H.' From Streaming, But The Series Remains Influential." *Inverse Culture*, Inverse, 5 Apr. 2016, www.inverse.com/article/13829-m-a-s-h-remains-one-of-the-most-influential-sitcoms-of-all-time.
[39] Lowry, Brian. "Critic Says 'MASH' Top Show of Character." *Variety*, 21 Sept. 2012, variety.com/2012/tv/awards/critic-says-mash-top-show-of-character-1118059360/.
[40] MacDonald, J. Fred. *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television since 1948*. Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1992. pg 124
[41] Ibid.
[42] Edgerton, Gary. Part 11, pg 15
[43] Ibid.
[44] MacDonald, J. Fred. *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television since 1948*. pg 182

African-Americans who approximated the mores of bourgeois Caucasians, and negative blacks who personified the derisive stereotypes familiar to most white viewers."[45] *The Cosby Show* pushed the boundaries of race depiction and is credited with starting a trend of quirky family sitcoms such as *Full House* (1987-1995)*, The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990-1996)*,* and *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992)*.* In these shows, we see more of the "universal appeal of white, middle-class, American values."[46] They do address some social issues, like *Full House's* progressive family and mom who had been a victim of a drunk driving accident, but they continued to leave diversity and social issues as single-episode issues, while *Fresh Prince* is accused of "[attempting] to capitalize on the commercial success of black youth culture, especially the popularity of rap and black cinema."[47]

As the television industry grew, so did the number of networks and channels, in what is known as the post-network era. These began to narrowcast: to divide audiences by age, interest, and race. The CW, WB, Fox, AMC, FX, and Univision are just a few of many that entered the industry from the 1980's into the 2000's.[48] Previously, programs like soap-operas, talk shows, and teen programming had been limited to a few hours a day, often at odd times, on the original three networks, but narrowcasting proved better for audiences and advertisers. Consumers were excited about more targeted programs, ease of access, and eventually less of a time-bound element. Most importantly, as time went on, it increased the number of markets and platforms for shows, which increased the diversity of programming and talent on screen.

The Digital Era & Television Today

Television is now in the Digital Era, where the growth of channels and platforms from the post-network era has continued with the rise of the Internet. In the mid-2000's digital video recorders (DVRs) became popular and audiences grew to love the ability to time-shift their viewing habits. People were no longer confined to planning their whole lives around a certain airtime. "[Although] many homes gained the technical capability of watching whatever television content whenever they wanted to, the industry fought this revolutionizing potential and

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[45] Ibid.
[46] Edgerton, Gary. Part 11, pg 18
[47] Gray, Herman. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness".* University of Minnesota Press, 1995, pg 134
[48] Lotz, Amanda D. *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. pg 6

made very little programming accessible on demand, thus slowing change."[49] The entertainment industry did not want to adjust to the change; to lose ad revenue from live viewers was a threatening idea. In 2001, Home Box Office, already known for their high-quality premium service, debuted "HBO on Demand," the first-ever subscription-based video on demand (VOD) service. As VOD and cable networks were growing, so did the New Golden Age of Television, marked by shows like *The X-Files* (1993-2002)*, The Simpsons* (1989-present)*, Seinfeld* (1989-1998)*[50]* and more. "What is usually required for this kind of revolution is a confluence of business, technological, and artistic currents, and that's what you had beginning around the time of *The Sopranos*."[51] These shows pushed character development, challenged norms of what kinds of characters are seen on TV, and became part of a larger cultural conversation, "the idiot box gained heft and intellectual credibility to the point where you seem dumb if you are not watching it."[52] People did not want to miss out, and these shows became widely watched, reinforcing TV's place in the hearts of consumers. In 2005, ABC made the bold move to partner with Apple and released some of their programs for purchase on iTunes.[53] This allowed audiences to test consuming TV in a new and leisurely way. *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) became one of the first shows to be released on iTunes at $1.99 an episode.[54] The Digital Era was in full swing, and in November of 2005, "thirty-eight million American households already had high-speed broadband access; 24 million had cable video on demand, and 10 million had digital video recorders,"[55] American audiences were well aware of the shifts towards a more personalized, digital TV watching experience. The digital shift allowed TV to stay relevant and remain a part of people's busy lives. The rise of DVRs also helped many in the entertainment industry realize that television was becoming, "a more user-driven, on-demand experience."[56]

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[49] Ibid. pg 7
[50] VanDerWerff, Todd. "The Golden Age of TV Is Dead; Long Live the Golden Age of TV."*TV Club*, Tv.avclub.com, 20 Sept. 2013, tv.avclub.com/the-golden-age-of-tv-is-dead-long-live-the-golden-age-1798240704.
[51] Reese, Hope. "Why Is the Golden Age of TV So Dark?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 11 July 2013, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/07/why-is-the-golden-age-of-tv-so-dark/277696/.
[52] Carr, David. "Barely Keeping Up in TV's New Golden Age." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 9 Mar. 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/03/10/business/media/fenced-in-by-televisions-excess-of-excellence.html?mtrref=en.wikipedia.org.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Edgerton, Gary. Part 12, pg 9
[55] Ibid. Part 12, pg 6
[56] Lotz, Amanda D. *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. pg 7

Netflix expanded to streaming content in 2007, as did Hulu. The way people consume TV and interact with the medium has drastically shifted because of these companies.

Streaming services allow consumers to watch TV on their own time, and platforms like Netflix began releasing all the episodes of a show at once, creating a culture of binge-watching. "Forty-six percent of millennials—people in the 18-to-34 age group—watch shows after they air, according to media researcher Comscore, and 42% of viewers binge-watch multiple episodes of a show, one to two times per month."[57] Streaming is quickly replacing traditional ways of watching TV, and many consumers are ditching expensive cable packages and instead subscribing to multiple streaming services. These individuals, known as cord-cutters, seem to anticipate where the TV industry is heading. Not only do streaming services provide access to old shows and movies (originally broadcast on networks or in theatres) that audiences can access whenever they want, but they also release their own content, becoming direct competitors with large networks. Standards for program quality is high. Netflix is particularly concerned with releasing quality original TV, and use data to pre-determine if shows will be successful. As stated above, they began the trend of releasing original content with their adaptation of the British show, *House of Cards*. It became incredibly successful and Netflix has continued to release original programming such as *Orange is the New Black*, *Narcos*, and many more. Netflix also does not have to abide by the same rules and regulations as broadcast networks, and they have much more information on their consumers than the other platforms. They track when users watch content what content (e.g., people tend to watch more movies on the weekend) when they pause content, if they ever return to it, what people search for, browsing and scrolling behavior, as well as in what zip code the program is watched.[58] This allows Netflix to gain information on their original shows as well as anything they are distributing that may have aired originally on broadcast TV or in theatres.

This technology allows platforms like Netflix to educate many of their decisions in a way that networks cannot, such as those about program lengths, number episodes per season, and what kind of content to show. Additionally, Netflix is not confined to ad

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[57] Reuters. "How Network TV Finally Figured Out Binge-Watching." *Fortune*, 11 Mar. 2016, fortune.com/2016/03/11/netflix-changing-game-network-tv/.
[58] Bulygo, Zach. "How Netflix Uses Analytics To Select Movies, Create Content, & Make Multimillion Dollar Decisions." *Kissmetrics Blog*, Kissmetrics, blog.kissmetrics.com/how-netflix-uses-analytics/.

revenue, as they make their money on the number of subscribers rather than views or Nielsen ratings. All of this allows Netflix to cultivate a progressive, forward-thinking brand that produces socially conscious shows they can be sure will be hits. Cindy Holland, Netflix's Vice President of Programming commented, "We're programming for diverse and eclectic tastes and for an increasingly global audience. So the folks working on those titles and the folks here at Netflix serving those consumers have to increasingly be more reflective of the audience we serve and the programs we make. It's something we're very focused on."[59] Many networks and platforms are trying to increase their representation and diversify the entertainment industry, but Netflix's data allows executives to see that the bottom line won't be affected by adding minority voices. They have understood that users are interested in learning about social issues and watching television that depicts the experiences of a diverse range of people. Netflix has capitalized on this and not only creates content for a diverse audience but imports programming from abroad. The company has given a platform to minority creators who in turn have been able to propel television, specifically situation comedies, into the modern era by incorporating race and minority experiences in every episode.

[59] Ryan, Maureen. "Netflix's Cindy Holland Reveals Streaming Service's 'Commitment to Diversity'." *Variety*, 19 Nov. 2016, variety.com/2015/tv/features/cindy-holland-netflix-directors-1201633472/.

Chapter 2 - *Dear White People*: Wokeness & Satire in College

Dear White People, a 10-episode series based on Justin Simien's 2014 film of the same name, debuted on Netflix in April 2017. The show focuses on a group of black students at Ivy-inspired Winchester College and their experiences at this predominantly white institution. It demonstrates how students of color cope with daily life at an institution where racism and history seem to be swept under the rug. It seeks to break down the boxes and stereotypes by telling the stories of students with vastly different backgrounds and lives. *Dear White People* acknowledges that racism is alive and well, and, instead of convincing people of this, it shows how racism manifests itself in whom it is targeted towards. The most recently released of the shows analyzed in this project, *Dear White People* discusses racism, interracial relationships, colorism, and homosexuality while maintaining a satirical tone that does not take itself too seriously.

The format of the show fosters deep character development. Each episode is focused on a different character, delving into details ranging from their first semester experiences at Winchester University to the childhood encounters that have shaped who they are today. What links the characters in this story is they all identify with the black community, are part of black student groups on campus, and live, or have lived, in the Armstrong-Parker House, a historically black residence hall that serves as an inclusive and safe space. However, characters have incredibly diverse upbringings and react to the campus blackface party (the catalyst of the show) in many different ways. The show aims to paint a dynamic and nuanced picture of the black experience in college, focusing on intersectionality as a mode of understanding each character more deeply. Lionel Higgins (DeRon Horton), a shy reporter, deals with his sexuality and race, while Reggie Green (Marque Richardson) is tired of being confused for a football player and takes his activism seriously, Rashid Bakr (Jeremy Tardy) hails from Kenya, and Coco Conners (Antoinette Robertson) grew up in a rough part of Chicago but openly embraces her white peers, not to mention Sam White (Logan Browning), the biracial main character whose radio show "Dear White People," is known for stirring the pot and keeping the student body aware of injustices on campus- big or small. Unpacking these characters episode by episode allows the audience to understand their lives and offers unique and insightful perspectives on the events at Winchester.

Not only does each episode highlight a character, each is also helmed by a unique director. From *Moonlight*'s Barry Jenkins to *Mississippi Damned*'s Tina Mabry, the episodes are

distinctive to both the director and character in focus. Although the same events repeat in many episodes, having a new direction changes the feeling and emphasis of each occurrence. The directors bring in their personal style that shapes the narrative as much as the writing does. To add to this captivating story arc, where the audience sees multiple perspectives on each event, each character has a unique playlist. Justin Simien, the show creator, and director of the original film, did this to gain a complete understanding of the characters. Music supervisor Morgan Rhodes continued this in the TV version. The music adds another layer of depth to the episode's primary character, showing their interests and personality in a way that dialogue or action cannot. It acts as an additional way to mirror the diversity and uniqueness of each character and their perspective. The one constant throughout the show is the narrator, an unnamed but calming presence, voiced by Giancarlo Esposito. He is not seen on screen as a character, and the show does not identify him. The narrator never yells or laughs, but Esposito's intonation indicates whether or not he agrees with the situation.[60] Instead of using a narrator as a narrative crutch, Esposito acts as a fact-checker and someone to back up many of the historical claims made in *Dear White People*. His character links all of the episodes and clears up any confusion. Esposito becomes the audience's trusted adult voice, guiding the viewers through an uncertain collegiate world.

Dear White People does not conform to a single genre category. With the rise of Netflix's quirky genres, the show, like the characters, breaks out of the box. The thirty-minute episodes are satirical, dramatic, funny, and sad, and embrace the lighthearted nature many associate with college, a time to explore and make mistakes. The freedom Netflix gives, by not forcing their shows to identify as one specific genre has allowed *Dear White People* to exist in an in-between space. Characters can joke about being "woke" enough and then a gun can be pulled at a party with seamless transitions. The show can flip as quickly as real life, which makes it all the more accurate and relatable. Spaces that seem comfortable and relaxed can change in a second, and the audience is immediately placed in the experience of many people of color. This is also why a collegiate setting is the perfect atmosphere for *Dear White People.* College is a time to break down labels and learn about new cultures, but it is also a time for many to let loose, experiment,

[60] Travers, Ben. "Giancarlo Esposito Is Invisible on 'Dear White People,' But It's His Best Performance of the Year." *IndieWire*, 14 June 2017, www.indiewire.com/2017/06/dear-white-people-giancarlo-esposito-best-narrator-2017-netflix-emmys-1201841872/.

and make mistakes along the way. None of the characters are infallible, but they are at a formative age of understanding real-world issues without the constant pressure of being in a workplace or under threat of arrest. They are also in the process of discovering themselves and grappling with their ideas of who they are and should be.

As *Dear White People* is a genre-bending, satirical drama, it is important to understand where satire originates and how it plays out in the characters, particularly in Episode Four, about Coco and Sam. Northop Frye in "Anatomy of Criticism," defines satire as, "a negative attack with a moralizing dimension,"[61] meaning that although it is a joke and form of humor, there is a corrective aspect. It brings people from their thoughts inside the norm to something else and forces a reconsideration of a traditional viewpoint. Within satire, there are three dimensions. First, the pragmatic ironist, one who mocks the alazon (the imposter, or the one who has a sense of entitlement). Alazons' function as easy targets for satire because they can attack from within societal norms. The pragmatic ironist is not a revolutionary by any means, and adheres strictly to any norms in place. They attack the actors in a pre-constructed world. The second dimension is the cynic, one who mocks to challenge all norms and conventions. It is an extreme appeal to common sense, so much that it does not always make sense. Cynics attack the roles within the world. Last is the carnival, mocking the norms, common sense, and anything that falls within it. This element does not always have a point or an end goal but strives to uproot the usual and mock the world, or existence itself.[62]

In many ways, the show itself is a pragmatic ironist, with hints of a cynic. It uses the familiar medium of Netflix to tell a story that can only be accessed if audiences choose to do so. It mocks Winchester, the people that run it, the people that are woke, not woke, and everywhere in between. The show uses a classic serial story arc and what is groundbreaking about it is not the format inasmuch as the content. Characters such as Coco, focused on in Episode Four, fit the role of the ironist, freely mocking those who refuse to stand up for injustices, but also those who want to protest and organize petitions or lock-ins. The cynical aspect emerges as some students try to challenge the norms by protesting and disrupting the lives of students who may be unaware of the issues (or have the privilege of being aloof) or throwing parties as ridiculous as a blackface one. Sam (Episode Six), Reggie (Episode Five), and the Black Student Union fall

[61] Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. University of Toronto Press, 2006.
[62] Ibid.

under this umbrella, hoping to dismantle the oppressive roles and institutions that Winchester and its student body support. Carnival doesn't fit easily into *Dear White People*; the tone is much too serious. The power of the show is that these events, a blackface party or a cop pulling out a gun on a black student, does not seem far-fetched. It addresses real-world issues, and when the world breaks down into nihilism, it is not a societal outlier, especially in 2018.

The writing and direction of *Dear White People* is part of the reason it is so successful. Justin Simien was heavily involved in creating the TV version and even directed a few episodes. The writers and directors for the show are almost all people of color and/or women. This means that through every step of creating this show there was someone with real world, firsthand experience of dealing with issues of racism or sexism. The three episodes analyzed in this section are directed and written by a diverse group. "Chapter IV," about Coco, was directed by Tina Mabry and written by Njeri Brown (*Black-ish*), "Chapter V," featuring Reggie, was directed by Barry Jenkins and written by Jack Moore (*Crowded*) and Chuck Hayward (*Fat Camp*), and "Chapter VI," about Sam, was directed by Steven Tsuchida (*Inside Amy Schumer*) and written by Leanne Bowen (*Cuddle Hotline*). These three episodes stand out in the series because they focus on three very different characters and their approaches to campus racism. This episode group is chronological, and Episode Five is the climax of the show in which a gun is pulled on Reggie. Each director, writer, an actor brings a distinct style to the episodes, allowing them to stand out. Although every episode of *Dear White People* focuses on one character's story at a time, analyzing episodes individually creates room for specific analysis that is exemplified by the chosen episodes, but can be applied to the show as a whole. They are representative of the best, most innovative parts of the show, while also exposing the character's flaws and shortcomings. Fluctuating between frightening and fun, these episodes truly examine some experiences of being black in college.

"Chapter IV"

This episode focuses on Colandrea (Coco) Conners, a south Chicago native who discovered Winchester through her high-school mentor. She is smart, stylish, and has her own ideas on how to best respond to racial injustices. Coco does not believe in sit-ins or protests, calling the sit-in at the President's office a "sleepover," and pushes more towards a "join them [white people] early," strategy. She seeks to blend in with the white students and responds to

their offhanded comments calmly. Chapter IV allows Coco's backstory story to be told, her constant battle with her appearance, her painful childhood, and her desire to align with and be accepted by white students. Coco's episode functions as a way to understand who she is today by exploring her past. She and Sam were freshman year roommates before their major falling out, seen in detail in Chapter IV. In present-day Winchester, Coco is the girl everyone aspires to be. She is invited to the coolest parties, dating the son of the dean, and is treasurer of CORE, the Coalition of Racial Equality. She can eat both in Armstrong-Parker and in the Bechet House, a residence for legacy students. However, she comes from a life of being reminded of her race and trying desperately to forget. A flashback scene of Coco in elementary school demonstrates how early she became aware of traditional beauty standards. Another young black girl takes away the white doll Coco picks up and replaces it with a black doll, saying, "No, you take the ugly one." Coco's doll has dark skin and a small afro, and immediately Coco is made aware not only of what is considered pretty and ugly but what she looks like in the eyes of others. In race theory, this moment is often referred to as "double consciousness,"[63] when a person sees themselves in the third person. They become aware of themselves as if they were looking through the eyes of another and in the context of a situation. This quick flashback can explain Coco's obsession with her looks and desire to fit. We see the malleability of Coco's looks, and her desperation, when she seeks to join the Alpha Delta Rho's, a black sorority on campus, and gate-keepers to all that is cool. A quick side comment from these women about Coco's hair leads her to change her whole look through a painful process of tracks and an expensive weave. The Alpha Delta's yell at her and talk behind her back during the pledge period until Coco finally stands up for herself. Through this interaction, telling off her supposed superiors, Coco gains the confidence to embrace who she is.

While this interaction sends Coco soaring to the top of her social stratosphere, old habits die hard. A scene of duct-taped shoes and red spray paint, indicating that Coco makes her own fake Louboutin's, reminds the audience that no matter how hard she tries she will always have to work to fit into another world of money and privilege. Whiteness is the standard, with historical implications of colonialism and slavery. When Europeans took over, divided Africa, conquered the Caribbean, they imposed not only their economic will but also a social control. Dressing like

[63] Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. A. C. McClurg & Co., Chicago, 1903.

a European was, and often still is the mainstream. Trey Lyon for *The Huffington Post* writes, "White Supremacy is the philosophy, but White Hegemony is the system."[64] Coco changes not only her appearance but also her behavior. As the audience watches Sam and Coco's friendship fall apart, the two exchange heated words about how to best deal with race relations on campus. Coco says, "People take one look at me and assume I'm poor, uneducated, ratchet. So yeah, I tone it down to make myself more palatable." While she doesn't specify what exactly she tones down about her blackness, it is evident that she must conform to a different norm and try to break out of the stereotypes to fit in with another group. Sam resents Coco for giving in and aiding in the white cultural hegemony, while Coco dislikes how Sam has to always stick out and cause trouble. In a lecture excerpt from York University's Lorne Foster defines a white hegemonic society as one in which, "1. The social, political economic, and the cultural are controlled by a white power elite. 2. 'Whiteness' is normalized as the standard to which all groups are expected to conform. 3. White people have preferential access to the good things in life because of their race."[65] The fear of standing out and being targeted is genuine, as is the idea that someone can be attacked for the actions of another. Coco is constantly trying to separate herself from Sam and the Black Student Union, and balance her need for individual success and safety.

Despite her need to blend in, Coco does not take on the role of being the token ethnic friend. She brushes off questions from her white friends about asking if it's "boo or bae," or if it's racist to not date black men. Coco's friends are so ridiculous that it is clear they are parodies of themselves. It is after moments such as seeing a frat boy ask Coco how she got her color "so even," for the blackface party, that her crew of white friends becomes comic relief. Her friends, Muffy and "the marshmallows," as other students call them, act as a temporary easing of tension between the heavy conversations about race and the very real issues that pepper the show's plot. Muffy and company, can be identified in accordance with Northrop Frye's comedy of manners in "Anatomy of Criticism," as the "alazons," or imposters.[66] These are characters that lack self-knowledge, are somewhat absurd, and are the basis of comic action. Although Muffy's

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[64] Lyon, Trey. "Call It What It Is: White Hegemony." *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 29 Nov. 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/trey-lyon/call-it-what-is-is-white-_b_6234484.html.
[65] Foster, Lorne. *The Hegemonic Order of Whiteness in Society*. York University, www.yorku.ca/lfoster/2006-07/sppa4115a/lectures/THE_HEGEMONIC_ORDER_OF_WHITENESS_IN_SOCIETY.html.
[66] Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays.*

transgressive questions aren't laugh out loud funny, they do place her in an outsider position and warrant a smile (or lighthearted eye-roll). Small jokes, like the girl who named her vibrator Idris (for *The Wire's* Idris Elba), are harmless, but give a sense of the questionable things people say and do every day that is not overt racism but shows the deeply rooted biases and stereotypes that are pervasive in our culture. In Frye's framework, Coco is the killjoy, or the rustic, a character that while associated with the alazon group, is a solemn character that does not engage the alazon, and lets the humor bound off them. Their function is to polarize the comic mood, and Coco does this with ease. Her blasé attitude doesn't engage her friends, but their one liners are enough to get their comic and ignorant point across. Coco is acutely aware of her race, but chooses to put that on the back burner, along with any lingering comments about her blackness. She can justify her friends' quips and the overall actions of the blackface party with the idea that "they spend millions of dollars on their lips, their tans, their asses, Kanye tickets because they want to be us. And they got to be for a night. I'm not about to go out on the streets and protest a fucking Halloween party." It is clear that Coco does see the gravity of a blackface party, but chooses to ignore it and instead sees the best in her friends and peers at Winchester.

In this episode Coco addresses privilege within the black community when talking to Sam, saying, "You get away with murder because you look more like them than I do. That's your light skin privilege." Sam is biracial, which makes it more difficult for people to look at her and immediately assign a label. While Sam had to be made aware that she was half black, for Coco it was always evident in the way that others treated her, starting with the doll in elementary school. This episode also shows Troy, Coco's love interest, pining for Sam, while the Alpha Delta's wish they had snagged Sam instead of Coco. Sam is clearly seen as more beautiful and desirable, in part due to her lighter skin color. This is a phenomenon all over the world, often coined "colorism". The lighter your skin, the closer you are to whiteness, the more appealing you are. The term was first used by Alice Walker in her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* where she defined it as "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color."[67] It may seem superficial, but colorism can have impactful consequences. "In 2013, researchers Lance Hannon, Robert DeFina and Sarah Bruch found that black female students with dark skin were three times more likely to be suspended at school than their

[67] Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

light-skinned African-American counterparts."[68] In many regions, light skin indicates wealth, because of the ability to spend time inside rather than doing hard labor outside. However, for many white people, darkness is desirable. Spray tans, hours in the sun, and bronzer are all considered normal to achieve a desired color that indicates relaxation and some form of exoticism. Despite this, Coco's skin color won't be legitimized by her white or black friends. It is a deeply ingrained beauty double standard that is reinforced by popular culture and media. Coco addressing colorism also points out flaws in Sam's narrow way of thinking. She is adamant that Coco's need to conform is undermining her good fight, and struggles to put herself in the shoes of another black woman with a completely different experience.

During a flashback to Coco and Sam's freshman year, there was a fictional but familiar news story about police officers who were acquitted after shooting a black teenager. After a long night of not being chosen by elite fraternity men, Coco, exhausted, came back to Sam and Reggie watching the story. This ruling seemed to add insult to injury: she wasn't picked by a man, came in second (or last) to her white friends, and there was no justice in the world. Sam argued that although it was hard to watch, they had to stay "woke," a term that gets thrown around so often sometimes it can feel like a joke. Coco retorts, "I was born woke […] the shit I saw growing up…" This hints at why Coco and Sam may have such different opinions on how to deal with issues on campus. Coco has lived the horrors that Sam has simply seen on TV. Coco isn't surprised by the blackface party, a gun being pulled on a student, or people gravitating towards Sam and her lighter skin. For Coco, this racism is the reality she has endured through many years of private school. It is the normal, the usual, but her solution is one of peace and understanding or blending, rather than causing a scene and forcing people to listen. While both women hurt for the injustices, Sam has a more optimistic view of what can truly be done to help. This episode is directed by Tina Mabry, who said of the process to Variety, "I could relate given my own backstory. I got my undergrad degree at the University of Mississippi. This is a place where the Klan showed up because we wanted to take away the Confederate flag at football games. That's not something I should've experienced in my lifetime, but I did."[69]

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[68] Tharps, Lori L. "The Difference Between Racism and Colorism." *Time*, Time, 6 Oct. 2016, time.com/4512430/colorism-in-america/.

[69] Toby, Mekeisha Madden. "'Dear White People' Director Tina Mabry Talks Diversity and TV vs. Film." *Variety*, 5 June 2017, variety.com/2017/tv/awards/tina-mabry-dear-white-people-talks-diversity-film-vs-tv-1202452774/.

Each experience of being a black woman in college, and how they choose to act, or not, on issues of racial injustice, is unique, varied, and nuanced. Although it is impossible to understand the formative nature of Mabry's exposure to the KKK, it shines through in her gentle treatment of Sam and Coco's differences. Both characters' points of view are respected and fleshed out, forcing viewers to acknowledge, not choose, the varied responses to black identity on college campuses. Mabry was intentionally chosen to direct this episode in part because of her daily experience as a black woman. Simien said, "Coco and Sam and Kelsey and Joelle, they're big parts of this show, so for me to tell their stories without any female influence just makes no sense. It just felt wrong […] there is a divide — specifically with the black experience, because being a black woman is being different than being a [white] woman."[70] Making conscious decisions toward a more authentic representation of characters is part of what makes *Dear White People*, and Chapter IV, so unique. Coco's episode ends with her staring directly into the camera. The look is one of power, excitement, and intrigue. Every episode ends with the featured character breaking the fourth wall, which adds to the intimacy of the show. The story feels like it is being told directly to the viewer, and forces the viewer to create a human connection with the character.

"Chapter V"

"Chapter V", directed by Barry Jenkins of the Academy Award winning *Moonlight*, tells the story of Reggie Green, a member of the Black Student Union and addresses some of the most intense issues of the whole show. There are nods to Spike Lee's influential films *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and *Do The Right Thing* (1989). This chapter dives into Reggie's psyche, and his quest to keep the revolution alive on his terms, not Sam's. Chapter Five doesn't show much of Sam, but there are a lot of questions about her dating her white teaching assistant from documentary class, Gabe (John Patrick Amadori). This issue is discussed at length by her friends, especially Reggie and Joelle (Ashley Blaine Featherson). The conversation is framed around feeling disappointed, and a little betrayed that Sam would, "let a white man colonize [her] body." Joelle and Sam, as we learn in earlier an earlier episode, met in the comments

[70] Wieselman, Jarett. "For A Divided America, 'Dear White People' Couldn't Have Arrived At A Better Time." *BuzzFeed*, 12 Apr. 2017, www.buzzfeed.com/jarettwieselman/a-divided-america-needs-dear-white-people?utm_term=.rdyppwEVb#.fnweex5RZ.

section of an article Sam wrote, "Don't Fall in Love with Your Oppressor: A Black Girl's Guide to Dating at Winchester." Thus, dating a white guy is a big change for Sam, and for her friend's perceptions of her. Reggie is salty both on principle, and because of his unrequited love for her. Moments where Reggie's emotions get the best of him are what remind the audience that *Dear White People* is a personal show. Reggie is not a militant activist; he is equally saddened by his own emotions as he is by the idea that Sam is betraying who she is and the African-American culture. Gabe, or White Bae, is seen as a white savior by her friends, an idea that is pervasive throughout race theory. Although Sam is half white, she openly and loudly embraces her black heritage, while casting aside her white roots.

With Gabe, *Dear White People* takes on a tricky, historical, and still somewhat controversial topic of interracial dating and marriage. Interracial marriage was not legal in many parts of the United States until June 1967, when the Supreme Court unanimously ruled on Loving v. Virginia. Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote, "the freedom to marry […] a person of another race resides with the individual, and cannot be infringed by the state."[71] However, the last law banning interracial marriage was only formally repealed in 2000 in Alabama.[72] Although the same level of shock as was common in the recent past does not occur today, there are still questions and hesitance over interracial relationships. Interestingly, in 2017 42% of intermarried couples in the US are White/Hispanic, while only 11% are White/Black.[73] This statistic indicates that there are existing cultural boundaries that prevent interracial marriages between black and white people. Frantz Fanon, a philosopher, psychologist, and colonial studies scholar from Martinique, was one of the first to analyze the psychology behind relationships between black men and women with white men and women. For Fanon, the oppressive culture of colonialism that made interracial marriage so taboo were the same ideas that permeate culture today, and influence the way society views these relationships. The ideas of the white oppressors have manifested themselves in every fold of conscious and subconscious thinking, from what colors are associated with to who gets into what relations. He analyzed black men and women separately, particularly in the context of Martinique society, but in a way that can be generalized

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[71] "Loving v. Virginia." *Oyez,* 13 Feb. 2018, www.oyez.org/cases/1966/395.
[72] "Interracial Relationships That Changed History." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/black-culture/explore/interracial-marriage-relationships/#.WrUxTduZNAZ.
[73] Bialik, Kristen. "Key Facts about Race and Marriage, 50 Years after Loving v. Virginia." *Pew Research Center*, 12 June 2017, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/12/key-facts-about-race-and-marriage-50-years-after-loving-v-virginia/.

to a larger population that has experienced a similar cultural hegemony where whiteness is hailed as the ideal.

Fanon illustrated his points by using literature; in this example, he drew from *Je Suis Martiniquaise* by Mayotte Capécia. Fanon wrote, "[The white husband] is her lord. She asks nothing, demands nothing, except a bit of whiteness in her life. When she tries to determine in her mind whether the man is handsome or ugly, she writes, "All I know is that he had blue eyes, blond hair, and light skin and that I loved him."[74] Being treated properly, or forging a genuine connection is not the main concern of this woman. Rather, she is drawn to his whiteness, and what that luxury and privilege can afford her and her children. This is the idea of a white savior, referenced in *Dear White People*: that if there is some amount of whiteness in one's life, problems will go away and access will be prevalent. Colonizers have manipulated it so that whiteness is a goal; yet it is an existence that is elevated above all others. In reality, whiteness is the absence of color. It is associated with religious symbols of angels, purity, virginity (almost exclusively for women), and success.

In contrast, blackness is the opposite; it is the amalgamation of all colors, it is diametrically and hierarchically opposed to whiteness, both in Fanon's work and in popular imagination. The idea of whiteness was not studied for a long time: "to say that one is interested in race has come to mean that one is interested in any racial imagery other than that of white people."[75] In his work, Dyer argues that "whiteness has been treated as invisible and a code for normality on the screen."[76] His solution is to treat white people as their own race instead of not seeing them and allowing whites to continue to be a ubiquitous presence. Colonized people are told that they are completely Other and it is ingrained from birth that they are less because of their skin color. When discussing the black man and the white woman, Fanon says, "I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine."[77] In this conversation, both black men and women are not seen as good enough for the other. There is a cultural pull to always

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[74] Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, 1967. 29
[75] Dyer, Richard. "Matter of Whiteness." *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, by Paula S. Rothenberg, Worth Publishers, 2002, pp. 9–13.
[76] Smith, Justine A. "Why Criticism: Richard Dyer's 'White' and Writing About Race." *Vague Visages • Wave Faces*, 30 Aug. 2016, vaguevisages.com/2016/08/30/why-criticism-richard-dyers-white-and-writing-about-race/.
[77] Fanon, Frantz. 45

marry "up," into a race and a world that has more benefits than it does drawbacks. Whiteness as good or the gold standard infiltrates the way people of color interact with others, even 153 years after slavery was abolished. It taints standards of beauty, worth, and self-awareness. Whites are still not recognized as their own racial group, though whiteness studies has recently aimed to correct this trajectory.

Sam herself is clearly grappling with this complicated history, and for this reason her relationship with Gabe cannot exist without internal obstacles and external obstacles such as looks and assumptions from others. When Joelle emphasizes the "narrative that black men aren't good enough," she also touches on the history of colonization and slavery. As blackness exists in opposition and inferiority to whiteness, black men do to white men. They are seen as not able to provide for a woman, socially and economically, compared to white men. Although Reggie is well educated, compassionate, and holds some level of privilege (he is at an elite university), Gabe's whiteness is Sam's break from her blackness. She says to Joelle, "When I'm with him, it's like a respite from everything," meaning that in Gabe she can let loose, forget her black identity and the societal burdens that come with being an Other. Part of the beauty of this show being set in college is that the characters are still figuring out who they are. Their identities are fluid, influenced by what they watch, who they interact with, and what is going on in the moment. College campuses are hailed as a place for discovery and self-realization. Sam has realized her calling as a social justice advocate but is forced to grapple with feelings that complicate her staunch beliefs on proper relationships and who can truly understand her. Joelle is doing the same, redefining herself in conversation with Sam and supporting her friend on this journey to understand new compulsions and ideas.

Reggie's episode also functions to introduce supporting characters at Winchester: Rashid, an international student, Kelsey (Nia Jervier) the lovable airhead, and Ikumi (Ally Maki) the self-proclaimed "catchall Asian friend." Rashid is the most problematic character because as the only African, he is reduced to stereotypes and not well fleshed out. This discrepancy in representation does not reflect the number of African students on college campuses. In a 2007 report by the *Washington Post*, African immigrant students composed about 25% of the black student body at

top-tier universities.[78] Leaving out this significant and unique population in a show about the black college experience is a mistake. Rashid's character is played by Jeremy Tardy, who although is extremely talented, was born and raised in the US. This is not the same as making white actors look like another race (sporting black or brown face, for example in *Aladdin*), but it echoes similar sentiments; an African actor could have been hired to play Rashid. In Hollywood, the idea of authenticity is still lacking. On a show as dynamic, disruptive, and diverse as *Dear White People*, there should be a stronger commitment to finding people that can have a real-life connection to their character. *Vice*'s Tari Ngangura writes, "Rashid was reduced to a bumbling caricature who couldn't grasp the subtle punchlines of sarcasm, and delivered bitingly witty one-liners like, '*Pinocchio* was my favorite movie growing up.' His character was not multi-dimensional in any manner."[79] In a world where minority characters are so often written off or used as comic relief, it is surprising to see Rashid be short-changed. Despite this, Tardy did work hard to understand Kenyan accents and culture by listening to Kenyan politicians, comedians, and understanding their tones and ranges, while continuing to research so he can be "much more specific."[80] In the same interview with Jet Magazine Tardy says, "There are some very specific dynamics in what it would look like for Rashid to come to America with the culture shock that he'd be dealing with, and the fact that he speaks five languages, […] it's very, very intricate what's going on with Rashid, and I think a lot of that will be explored as we go forward in the series."[81] While this does offer hope for the upcoming season, Rashid's presence or lack thereof is a problematic part of *Dear White People*.

The next supporting character in the show is Kelsey, Winchester's valley girl. Her character serves as comic relief and an occasional eye-roll. She is part of the AASU, African American Student Union, that Sam argues does nothing on campus and is shocked by any racist acts. In Chapter V, the audience sees Kelsey and her new emotional support dog, Sorbet, to ensure her mental health and well-being after the trauma of the blackface party. Reggie, Al, and

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[78] Fears, Darryl. "In Diversity Push, Top Universities Enrolling More Black Immigrants." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 6 Mar. 2007, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/05/AR2007030501296.html.
[79] Ngangura, Tari. "'Dear White People' Totally Failed With Its Lone African Character." *Vice*, 12 May 2017, www.vice.com/en_ca/article/bmwybv/dear-white-people-totally-failed-with-its-lone-african-character.
[80] Tinubu, Aramide. "EXCLUSIVE: Jeremy Tardy Talks 'Dear White People,' Becoming Rashid & All Of That Criticism." *JetMag.com*, 7 July 2017, www.jetmag.com/entertainment/exclusive-jeremy-tardy-talks-dear-white-people/.
[81] Ibid.

Joelle's interaction with Kelsey at the AASU cook-in is hilarious and laden with sarcasm. "I mean, racism? Here!?" she asks, as Al responds, "Yeah I thought Barack Obama fixed all that." Kelsey is similar to Coco's character because she has many white friends, she attends Black Caucus (a monthly meeting of black student groups), but her backstory is not developed. She represents a section of campus that is proud of their heritage but not necessarily exposed to and conscious of the racism that exists, especially in a collegiate bubble. *Dear White People* uses Kelsey to showcase the more laissez-faire attitude of some students. It would be incorrect to believe that all black students are out protesting, and she is a reminder that there is still diversity within a single community.

Lastly, Episode Five introduces Ikumi, an Asian-American girl who quickly befriends *Dear White People's* main characters as the first non-black person to join the friend group (except Gabe) and takes her role as an ironic token to heart. After the group goes to see a movie, they complain about the limited options of black films, "cheap urban drama or tragedy porn." Ikumi brings up the lack of Asian characters or films, saying her race has had two movies since 2000, *The Joy Luck Club* and *Crouching Tiger*. This scene addresses representation on the big screen, which has become a hot topic since 2016 #OscarsSoWhite movement. Ikumi adds another layer to the complex, diverse fabric of Winchester, and symbolizes minorities coming together in solidarity. Although it does not make her character multi-dimensional, it does give the audience a glimpse into what other kinds of students (besides white and black) attend Winchester. The post-movie scene is striking because of its cinematography and direction. The camera is positioned at a low angle, looking up at the characters as they walk home. Lionel begins the criticisms then Reggie, and Joelle continues, digging into *Django Unchained*, a critically acclaimed film featuring black leads that was "accidentally" for a larger demographic. At this moment, the actors look down directly into the camera as they say their line. It forces the audience to engage, and actively listen to the characters' comments on real-world issues, not just events at Winchester. Breaking the fourth wall is a powerful experience, as the characters seem to be talking directly to the viewer; it is a moment that demands attention.

The end of Chapter V is the most commanding sequence of the episode, and arguably of the whole show. It begins at a frat party, the whole crew shows up, Reggie shines during tipsy trivia, and the whole party is dancing to Future's "Trap Nig**" when he notices his white friend, Addison (Nolan Gerard Funk) saying the whole slur referred to in the song. Reggie calls him out,

calmly, but the situation escalates quickly, and it becomes an us vs. them dynamic. Addison says it feels weird to censor himself, and constantly reminds the room he's not a racist and it's just in the song. The shouting gets louder and fights break out in the house, the police arrive and the house falls silent. The police question Reggie, asking if he is a student, and Addison defends him. This is not enough, and they ask for ID from Reggie, as he angrily turns away they pull a gun on him.

Seamlessly transitioning from a lively party to a gravely serious situation is one of *Dear White People's* greatest strengths. This episode's description says the "night takes a harrowing turn," but harrowing does not even begin to describe the emotion and gravity of showing a gun pulled on an innocent black man. Police brutality has been an issue in America for decades, and in 1931 President Hoover created the "National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement," that analyzed police brutality but did not directly address how racialized they were[82]. Through the Civil Rights movement, police constantly attacked peaceful protesters, and in 1991 footage of the LAPD's assault on Rodney King brought police brutality to the center of attention.[83] Although government committees have been formed, the death of black civilians by police officers is alarmingly present today. In a New York Times study of fifteen high profile cases of black people killed by the police, or dying in custody of the police, only two officers were convicted or pleaded guilty,[84] signifying that not much progress has been made. In *Dear White People*, there have been allusions to police brutality in earlier episodes, but to see it happen to a character the audience has spent half a season getting to know is impactful. There is no room for excuses in the situation: it is clear Reggie has not done anything wrong and that the police pulling a gun is a vast overreaction.

The event takes every character in the room to into a terrifying reality, and the episode contextualizes why Reggie would be mad about people saying the N-word. There is no joke, witty comeback, or pop culture reference in this scene, and there is no diegetic or non-diegetic

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[82] Nodjimbadem, Katie. "The Long, Painful History of Police Brutality in the U.S." *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 27 July 2017, www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/long-painful-history-police-brutality-in-the-us-180964098/.

[83] "Fighting Police Abuse: A Community Action Manual." *American Civil Liberties Union*, www.aclu.org/other/fighting-police-abuse-community-action-manual.

[84] Lee, Jasmine C., and Haeyoun Park. "In 15 High-Profile Cases Involving Deaths of Blacks, One Officer Faces Prison Time." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 18 May 2017, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/05/17/us/black-deaths-police.html.

music, making the tone extremely serious. It references years of police brutality and the deeply ingrained prejudices against dark-skinned people. Simien said in a BuzzFeed News interview, "to do a show that's supposed to be about the black experience and not go there felt so irresponsible."[85] Up until this moment *Dear White People* dealt with a slew of issues concerning black lives at elite institutions. However, there is a disconnect from the real world. The show takes place in a collegiate setting, which is often seen as a safe and insulated space, but campus police carrying a real gun plunges the audience and characters back into reality. Not only do police brutality and unnecessary killings happen too frequently in the real world; Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Phliando Castile, and so many more, but it can also occur behind the pearly gates of an elite institution. In this scene, with the camera pointed down the barrel and at Reggie's face, we see not what was going on earlier—a smart, charming, funny guy, but we see a black body fighting for survival. This angle captures both the barrel and Reggie's expression: shock, fear, and horror. Throughout Episode Five, Jenkins uses a lot of close-ups and has characters look directly into the camera. He said in a *Vulture* interview, "we are trying to work the audience into an empathic feeling, so that we understand what it's like to be Reggie. Then in that final shot of the episode, I thought, well, by this point we know what it feels like to have Reggie watching us, so now I want Reggie to feel like we're watching him. I want the camera to creep in on him subtly, from the perspective of the television viewer. I wanted the audience to feel themselves gradually getting closer and closer to this character." The camerawork strengthens the bond between the audience and Reggie, making the scene at the party even more striking. Seeing characters up close and breaking the fourth wall humanizes them and forces the audience to engage with the show. It becomes a form of active viewing that makes each moment more visceral.

Earlier in the episode, Joelle says, "sometimes being carefree and black is an act of revolution," a sentiment which rings true in this scene. Simply existing in a black body put Reggie in a life or death situation. This scene is reflective of Simien's personal views, "[…] people who are oppressed by racism die. It's fatal to be black. That is the reality of our country."[86] Part of the fatalness of being black ties back to ideas of the "Other," and how

[85] Obell, Sylvia. "Inside The 'Dear White People' Episode That Changes Everything." *BuzzFeed*, 3 May 2017, www.buzzfeed.com/sylviaobell/dear-white-people-episode-five?utm_term=.wyvzzMxNy#.gy7ZZ19pG.
[86] Ibid.

Othering can be destructive. Stuart Hall, an activist and cultural theorist, writes extensively about why this "Other" exists in his work, "The Spectacle of the 'Other.'" He argues that there are binary forms of representation, people are seen one way or another. For Reggie, this means he is seen as black and criminal. Images or texts always privilege one meaning or representation over another, and this continues to create images and hallmarks of racial differences. Reggie is a product of years of othering through binary oppositions, linguistics, cultural classification, and a psychoanalytic construction of the self.[87] When someone looks at him, there are years of prejudice and assumptions about who he is. Showing a scene like this addresses part of the black experience that is very hard to understand. It is difficult for anyone, regardless of race, to fully empathize with the lived struggles and prejudice of someone whose skin color amounts to a target on their back. Humor is often used as a tool to bridge this empathy divide, beginning with the Sympathy Revolution of the 1800s. This was a time where the word humor began to be used, and there were reform movements against violence or oppressive institutions like capitalism.[88] The sympathy revolution used comedy to share the perils of others, not in a mocking way, but to develop an understanding and solace for other people. Willett and Willett argue that humor is currently in the era of Radical Empathy.[89] This means that jokes can now go a step further than sympathy, they can achieve compassion and empathy towards others and their struggles. Humor removes the seriousness and establishes trust and rapport that creates empathy, "as in the ability to share and understand the feelings of others."[90] Although the scene where a gun is pulled on Reggie does not use humor, the beginning of the episode and season set the audience up to be able to fully empathize with Reggie. The audience has developed a close relationship with him and sees his character as a funny, easy-going man, not a delinquent who should be held by the police. In a *Vulture* interview, Barry Jenkins said, of filming this scene, "That was the most emotional I've ever felt on a set. Everybody was crying. When that gun was pointed at Reggie,

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[87] Hall, Stuart. "The Spectacle of the Other." *Representation: Culture Representation and Signifying Practice*, edited by Stuart Hall, The Open University, 1997. 237

[88] Willett, Cynthia, and Julie Willett. *On Humor: Or, How Feminists, Animals and Other Social Misfits Use Belly Laughs to Talk Truth to Power*.

[89] Ibid.

[90] "Empathy." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy.

it felt like it was pointed at everyone. The gravity, the reality of what we were doing was clear."[91]

Simien, Jenkins, and *Dear White People* are telling a complete story, embracing every aspect, good and terrifying, of a young black man's experience. Reggie's story is nuanced; it shows him at his most confident (like creating the Woke or Not app) to his most vulnerable. At the end of the episode, there is a long take that pulls closer and closer to Reggie's face as he cries. He looks directly into the camera with despair and desperation. It touches an extremely difficult subject, and the creators handled it with sensitivity and seriousness and changed the tone of the subsequent episodes. In the show's quest to provide a complete look at the lives of minority students, it knows when to be lighthearted, evoke empathy, and when a somber reality check is needed.

"Chapter VI"

Episode 6 focuses on the main character, Sam White, who hosts a radio show also titled "Dear White People." The name began as an inside joke between Sam and Coco their freshman year, saying, "Dear white people…" and inserting what they wished they could say to their white friends. Sam turned it into Winchester's edgiest broadcast, waking up the campus to racism and prejudice. This is the second Sam-focused episode, meaning that episode 6 focuses heavily on her attempts to comfort Reggie after the incident. It opens with cross-cutting between stock shots of Winchester, students walking around, a quiet campus, against images of yelling and guns from the party, and the narrator sighing, "I got nothing." The episode picks up right where episode 5 ended, Sam knocking on Reggie's door as the student body struggles to comprehend and cope with the police actions at the party the night before.

In the radio broadcasting studio, Sam states, "Our skin color is not a weapon. You don't have to be afraid of it." This addresses the idea that blackness itself is somehow inherently threatening. From Othering black bodies to comparing them against European beauty standards, *Dear White People* is taking on major issues. In the wake of the attack, there is a meeting at Armstrong-Parker about next steps. This is the first time there is a collaborative

[91] Seltz, Matt Zoeller. "Barry Jenkins on How He Directed Dear White People's Most Pivotal Episode." *Vulture*, 5 May 2017, www.vulture.com/2017/05/barry-jenkins-dear-white-people-directing-lessons.html.

atmosphere with unnamed white allies. It emphasizes how serious the student body is taking the matter, and that it is a time for unity and strength in numbers. Kelsey begins, misquoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, "Can't we all just get along?"[92] In the show's attempt to lighten the mood, Kelsey is the perfect outlet. No one takes her seriously enough to pretend that getting along is the solution. Her character implicitly addresses Hall's "The Spectacle of the 'Other.'"[93] He argues that difference is essential to meaning. That is, one cannot exist without the other, and things must be defined before they can take on certain qualities or characteristics. Audre Lorde, a poet, feminist, and thinker, writes about the uniqueness of difference in her essay, "The Master's Tool Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." Lorde pushes her readers to find the empowering facets of difference and embrace them. It is accepting and learning about what makes an individual unique, what skills they possess, what experiences has shaped who they are, and what they can teach. Blending the differences, or trying to erase them, destroys part of the self and loses the uniqueness that comes from spaces in difference. All 'getting along' signifies is a stamping out of those differences in search of a shallow peace, rather than understanding and embracing differences, racial or otherwise.[94] There is no way (as Lorde's title suggests) to take down a beast like discrimination if you are using the framework that difference is bad. Kelsey's statement is a quick, Band-Aid fix to issues of systematic racism. Although her claim is used as a form of satire, it also addresses ideas some populations may have of how to fix racism and race relations. Without an explicit statement, *Dear White People* is negating the view that a gun being pulled on a black man is an issue of nonharmonious relationships, and forces the audience to address police violence with a head-on approach.

In comparison, Coco's impassioned speech plays on her previously examined background, and she comes across as sensible in the situation: She says, "As soon as you double down on your blackness, they double down on their bullshit. We need to manage our blackness in times like this…" Lionel asks, "You're talking about assimilation?" To which she responds, "No, I'm talking about self-preservation. Who cares if you're woke or not if you're dead?" Coco, perhaps the only character other than Reggie with firsthand experience of friends and family who were victims of police violence, hits the nail on the head. Her poignant line,

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[92]This quote is from Rodney King who said, "Can we all get along?"
[93] Hall, Stuart.
[94] Lorde, Audre. *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*. 1979, www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/lordedismantle.html.

addressing the first half of the season's frivolous preoccupation with "wokeness," uproots the idea of hierarchical activism. Some people want to talk to the administration, others want to make an example out of the officer, but at the end of the day, they are all paths toward the same goal: justice for Reggie and safety for all students, regardless of skin color. Protection is also part of the deeply rooted idea of whiteness as an ideal state of being. In Fanon's work, if a black woman is seeking out a white man, part of the holistic prize of becoming as close to white as possible is the element of protection. The black students on campus and the greater African-American population are living in constant awareness and often fear for their race. During the meeting, Reggie is silent, and ends up skipping his appointment with Dean Fairbanks (Obba Babatundé), and avoids the desperate calls and texts of his friends. In the Dean's office, an unsettling interaction between Sam and the dean occurs. Sam confronts him about how he would feel if his son, Troy, were in the same situation as Reggie. Fairbanks calmly insists Troy would never be found in this situation, "Because I raised him." *Dear White People* again uses not just tensions between white and black people but plays on the anxieties and intricacies within the black community. Dean Fairbanks raised Troy with a certain level of protection, a familiarity with Winchester's campus, and the inclination to fight things through the administration, not protests. Bound up within this is the extreme privilege Troy experiences in the Winchester-bubble for being the son of the dean. He is widely recognized, won the seat of Student Body President, and has been taught to conduct every interaction with elegance and poise, like his highly successful father. Coco and Troy get along so well because they have both assimilated into white culture and use the mantra, "get along to get ahead." These two students from completely different backgrounds have interestingly found themselves aligned in values and beliefs.

More than anything else, "Chapter VI" is about Reggie's healing. His pain happened in a public space, and everyone is talking about it the next day. Immediately after the party, he isolated himself from others. While there was a narrative chance to go deeper into his pain, he shares a poem at an open-mic night a few days later that gives insight into his recovery process:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident
> that all men are created equal
> that they are endowed by their creator

with certain inalienable rights
Among these life, liberty and
the pursuit of happiness
unless you're loud and black
and possess an opinion
then all you get is a bullet
A bullet that held me at bay
A bullet that can puncture my skin
take all my dreams away
A bullet that can silence
the words I speak to my mother
just because I'm
other
A bullet – held me captive
gun in my face
your hate misplaced
White skin, light skin
but for me not the
right skin
Judging me with no crime committed
reckless trigger finger itching to
prove your worth by disproving mine
My life in your hands
My life on the line
Fred Hampton
Tamir Rice. Rekia Boyd
Reggie Green
Spared by a piece of paper
a student ID
that you had to see before
you could identify

me
and set me supposedly
free
Life
liberty
and the pursuit of happiness
for some of us maybe
There's nothing
self-evident
about it.

Spoken-word poetry is a cathartic expression for Reggie. His lines hit on the biases against black people in America, and the treatment they receive as a result of years of racism and fear of the other, fear of difference. In naming other victims of police brutality, he re-centers the episode around the real struggles and pain of those who were not as lucky as he was. The framing of the poem with lines from the Declaration of Independence echoes an earlier episode, where Sam pushes back against a professor who claims every American has the same rights. It brings up that, although these are documents that ideally a country should follow and uphold, that is not the way it has played out in reality. We live in a country that was founded on racism, sexism, and control of power. It is impossible to examine the social issues of today without going back to slavery, colonization, and oppression.

Dear White People makes a lot of jokes about constantly going back to slavery, but it is important to look back to move forward. As one of Netflix's original series, it is crucial to examine why they chose to support this particular show and story. Although an individual show cannot represent an entire company's values, it is clear that Netflix is progressive and wants to create a dialogue about race issues in America. The two other shows in this project add to Netflix's diverse repertoire of programming starring minorities and addressing racial issues, but they also have *One Day at a Time*, *Easy, Grace & Frankie, Orange is the New Black, Narcos*, just to name a few. Netflix, like their shows, is looking back in order to move forward and create representative content.[95] A concrete example of Netflix's commitment to being a pioneering

[95] Ryan, Maureen. "Netflix's Cindy Holland Reveals Streaming Service's 'Commitment to Diversity'." *Variety*, 19 Nov. 2016, variety.com/2015/tv/features/cindy-holland-netflix-directors-1201633472/.

brand is when the *Dear White People* trailer was first released and met with a lot of backlash. The title alone sparked outrage among some Netflix users who argued it was reverse racism. Channel 24 in South Africa noted that upon release there were 423,000 dislikes compared to only 58,000 likes on YouTube.[96] A small Internet movement #NoNetflix and #BoycottNetflix surfaced with many on the alt-right, but Netflix did not report losing a significant number of subscribers.[97] In the first quarter of 2017 they had 50.84 million subscribers in the US[98], and by Q2 they added 1.7 million in the US and 4.14 million abroad.[99] Thus, they remain unaffected by a few boycotts, and Netflix's response indicates that dynamic shows about minorities will continue to stream.

By the end of Episode Six, Reggie has realized his insignificance in comparison to racism as an institution, saying, "right now I have to be a man, not a movement." There is work to be done and fights to be fought, but it is equally important to heal the self. The show allows him to be multi-faceted; he doesn't just care about race issues, and he certainly isn't infallible. This seems to be just the beginning of Reggie's journey. However, this wouldn't be Sam's episode without a little bit of Gabe in the picture. Sam meets his two friends for the first time at a trendy hipster coffee shop. Gabe's friends are the first instance of other vocal white allies seen on the show. The two are knowledgeable, sympathetic, and religiously listen to Sam's show. *Dear White People* seems to be imparting an obvious message by introducing Gabe's friends: the hard labor of dismantling racism needs allies. Sam is surprised when they agree to go to her human blockade protest, possibly because she has encountered so many white people that belittle her causes, but she need not be, and viewers of the show should feel supported by the idea that it is not a two-sided, binary opposition. There are many more people willing to learn than may appear at first glance. This scene is a change from a large majority of the show, where blackness and

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[96] Magau, Mahlatse. "Dear White People, the Show That Made People Cancel Netflix." *Channel24*, 9 July 2017, www.channel24.co.za/TV/News/dear-white-people-the-show-that-made-people-cancel-netflix-20170709

[97] Rife, Katie. "'Alt-Right' Trolls Boycott Netflix Because They're Scared of Dear White People." *AV Club*, 9 Feb. 2017, news.avclub.com/alt-right-trolls-boycott-netflix-because-they-re-scar-1798257548.

[98] "Number of Netflix Streaming Subscribers in the United States from 3rd Quarter 2011 to 4th Quarter 2017 (in Millions)." *Statista*, www.statista.com/statistics/250937/quarterly-number-of-netflix-streaming-subscribers-in-the-us/.

[99] Spangler, Todd. "Netflix Blows Past Q2 Expectations for Subscriber Growth, Adding 5.2 Million New Customers." *Variety*, 18 July 2017, variety.com/2017/digital/news/netflix-q2-2017-earnings-1202497619/.

whiteness are clashing, and everything "revolves around the relationship with white power,"[100] to a widespread and supportive ideal. There are not many instances in *Dear White People* that offer hope for the future of race relations, but this scene is a glimpse into an empathetic and compassionate world. It can be argued that *Dear White People* has two layers of understanding. The surface layer is for people who are not black; it is easy to understand the plot, empathize with the students, and get the mainstream references to the *Scandal* parody. The second, deeper, layer of comprehension that has culturally specific references, like the *Iyanla: Fix My Life* spoof, or saying "nothing [Stacey Dash did] after *Clueless* matters," or Joelle's "waist thin, ass thick," diet.[101] It is not necessary to understand the references and in-jokes to comprehend the show, but it does add another layer of complexity. The show creators are not pandering to a specific audience, but they are creating holistic characters by having writers and directors of color that can make culturally-specific references.

Dear White People has been named one of the "Top 10 TV Shows," by the African-American Film Critics Association, won the SXSW Film Festival Audience Award, and Rotten Tomatoes Critics have given the show a 100% fresh rating. The *New York Times*' James Poniewozik writes, "the show's mission: to intrude on your safe space, to demand engagement, to make clear that, yes — whoever you are — "Dear White People" is talking to you."[102] The show asks audiences to not just watch passively, but think critically about how to be a good ally, how racism is institutionalized, and that every event has multiple perspectives. The show takes on issues that have been around for decades, "its political conflicts feel very of the moment. This is less due to serendipity or clairvoyance than the fact that the scripts are dealing with scenarios that have always been a part of American life, since at least the 1930s,"[103] Although *Dear White People* satirizes "wokeness" as a term and an ideal, it is a very aware show, "it creates a self-contained, detailed, faintly dreamlike world that partly mirrors our own, then lets

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[100] Vann R. Newkirk II, Adrienne Green, Gillian B. White, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. "How Insightful Is Dear White People?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 17 May 2017, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/05/dear-white-people-season-one-roundtable/526920/.

[101] Obell, Sylvia. "23 Times Netflix's 'Dear White People' Perfectly Captured What It's Like To Be A Black Millennial." *BuzzFeed*, 30 Apr. 2017, www.buzzfeed.com/sylviaobell/dear-black-people?utm_term=.fco33Dbzl#.yyL44Ngao.

[102] Poniewozik, James. "Review: 'Dear White People,' the TV Version, Improves on the Strong Movie." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 27 Apr. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/04/27/arts/television/dear-white-people-netflix-review.html.

[103] Seitz, Matt Zoeller. "Netflix's Dear White People Is a Feat." *Vulture*, 27 Apr. 2017, www.vulture.com/2017/04/netflix-dear-white-people-review.html.

us wander around in it. It doesn't just have a setting and a story, it has a philosophy and a vision of life"[104]. *Dear White People* is a show that opens up a conversation. It presents the audience with issues at stake, even if the setting is a fictional Ivy league school. It fills a unique space of dark, witty comedy, but allows itself to be playful, making the show an easy win for Netflix in their quest for diverse and innovative programming.

[104] Ibid.

Chapter 3 - *Master of None* New York's Untold Stories

Master of None, created by Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang, began streaming on Netflix on November 6th, 2015. The second season was released in May 2017, and the comedy-drama has garnered both critical and popular acclaim. It won a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing for a Comedy Series two years in a row, nominations and wins for editing, acting, and directing. The show is remarkable in the way that it does not conform to one style of storytelling, and each episode is unique in perspective and direction. It follows the life of Dev Shah (Ansari) and his experience as a millennial, first-generation New Yorker. The show has been compared by critics to Louis CK's autobiographical sitcom, *Louie* but with an upbeat and inclusive millennial twist. Each episode's title indicates what the show will touch on, from "New York I Love You," to "Old People." This titling choice is representative of the show's straightforward approach. Ansari sums up the core of *Master of None* by saying, "the show's ethos [is] honoring perspectives not seen on TV."[105] Season One takes place in New York, while Season Two hops across the pond and is partially filmed in Modena, Italy. Throughout both seasons Ansari, Yang, and their team tackle the immigrant experience, what it's like to be a first-generation American, representation in Hollywood, Islam and the perceptions of religion, and minority solidarity.

One of the keys to this show, as with any successful minority TV show, is authenticity. *Master of None* is diverse because of its writing staff and dedication to reflecting Ansari's real life. Ansari met Yang while working together on Parks and Rec; he is played by Kelvin Yu (Brian Chang in the show), Lena Waithe plays Denise, and Eric Wareheim plays Arnold. Ansari, Yang, Waithe, and Wareheim comprise the writing team. Having writers who also star in the show adds another level of naturalness and consistency to the performance.

> Ben Travers of *IndieWire* writes, "On another show, grouping three dudes (one white guy, an Indian and an Asian-American) and one black woman might feel like a business decision made to reach as many target demographics as possible. But here, each person has a distinct voice and a strong personality that push past any doubt as to their place in

[105] Yuan, Jada. "Aziz Ansari Wanted to Be the Great Uniter and Ended Up an Activist." *Vulture*, 30 Apr. 2017, www.vulture.com/2017/04/aziz-ansari-master-of-none-season-2.html.

> this reality. This is New York. This is the great American melting pot. This is the dream."[106]

Master of None provides an excellent example of how diversity can naturally enter a show, without privileging one narrative over another, by focusing each episode on individual characters, for example, telling the story of Dev and Brian's parents, Denise's family, and Dev's friends that are not main characters on the show.

By Q4 of 2015, Netflix already had 74.76 million subscribers worldwide,[107] giving Ansari and Yang a giant platform. When Season two premiered in Q2 of 2017, Netflix had grown to 103.95 million subscribers.[108] The platform's growth, especially internationally, is reason enough to expand Netflix's portfolio of diverse shows that tell stories of immigrant and millennial experiences. Both seasons were well-received, getting a 100% critic score from Rotten Tomatoes. *Master of None* may be the most mainstream of Netflix's minority shows, partially due to Ansari's breakout role in *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015). Ansari was launched into fame from this NBC show where he played the loveable, dorky, Tom Haverford. NBC, a traditional broadcast network, has pioneered diverse shows, particularly comedies like *The Cosby Show, A Different World, The Office, Parks and Recreation,* and *Community*. However, they all revolve around white main characters, with minorities consigned to supporting roles. Broadcast shows seem to have fallen behind in terms of representation. A study from USC found that 38% of speaking roles go to women on streamed content, compared to 28% in film, black and minority characters' account for 29.4% of speaking roles, but on film, it is only 26.7%.[109] Due to streaming platforms' lack of dependency on ad revenue, content restrictions, and format restrictions, they can take more content risks, like having women and minorities play larger roles in shows, "[the executives] are taking a chance by doing something revolutionary: letting the creatives run the show without so much

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[106] Travers, Ben. "Review: Netflix's 'Master of None' Season 1 Is an Inventive, Addictive and Artistic Form of Social Education." *IndieWire*, 7 Nov. 2015, www.indiewire.com/2015/11/review-netflixs-master-of-none-season-1-is-an-inventive-addictive-and-artistic-form-of-social-education-54728/.

[107] Spangler, Todd. "Netflix Blows Past Q2 Expectations for Subscriber Growth, Adding 5.2 Million New Customers."

[108] Ibid.

[109] Boboltz, Sara, and Brennan Williams. "If You Want To See Diversity Onscreen, Watch Netflix." *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 26 Feb. 2016, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/streaming-sites-diversity_us_56c61240e4b0b40245c96783.0

interference."[110] One measure of how well minority characters are represented, designed to weed out token character representation, is known as the "DuVernay test," named by *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis, after director Ava DuVernay (*Selma, 13th A Wrinkle in Time)*. It is a play on the Bechdel test (where two women talk to each other about something other than men), and Dargis defines it as narratives "in which African-Americans and other minorities have fully realized lives rather than serve as scenery in white stories."[111] The researchers at USC used this test to evaluate a sample of shows on streaming and broadcast platforms, finding that for streaming platforms 36% of shows passed this test, while on network TV, only 33% passed.[112] Although this number is not staggering, it demonstrates that streaming platforms are ahead of broadcast shows and are setting the trend for diversity to become the industry standard.

Master of None has a very diverse cast and writer's room which translates onto the screen. The show works to make the supporting characters into leads, by giving them a backstory and personality that does not only center around Dev. Compared to *Dear White People, Master of None* discusses social issues in a very subtle way. By exploring racism, the struggle of immigrants, and religion through the lens of character experience, it sheds light on the issues without proposing a concrete solution; part of the joy is that there is no pressure for a fix or activism. One continuous question throughout the show is if and how humor, and the situation comedy, can help bridge social and cultural divides. The history of comedy has evolved to make people more sympathetic towards each other, going from Plato's ridicule to the engaged and empathetic self.[113] It was not until the 1870's that the "self-transcendence" movement of comedy began. This is when people are thought to have developed a "sense of humor," meaning that they were able to separate their self into the self and something that rises above and sees differently. People realized that they could be made fun of and it was something different than the core of their self. This is also known as decolonizing the self. From this developed "radical empathy," meaning to feel one's pain in a way that you can make

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[110] Ibid.
[111] Dargis, Manohla. "Sundance Fights Tide With Films Like 'The Birth of a Nation'." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 29 Jan. 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/01/30/movies/sundance-fights-tide-with-films-like-the-birth-of-a-nation.html.
[112] Boboltz, Sara, and Brennan Williams. "If You Want To See Diversity Onscreen, Watch Netflix."
[113] Willett, Cynthia, and Julie Willett. *On Humor: Or, How Feminists, Animals and Other Social Misfits Use Belly Laughs to Talk Truth to Power*.

fun of your self.[114] Radical empathy is the beginning of self-deprecating humor, which builds trust and in turn, can create a true bond. When people joke about something, especially the self, they are put in a vulnerable position, and can appeal to the humanity of the audience. *Master of None* constantly employs a type of radical empathy. Dev doesn't take himself too seriously, and all of the characters have a light-hearted and relaxed attitude. They embody the idea that "it's ok to be curious about the lives of others,"[115] and through humor they help create a broader cultural understanding. This type of humor is similar to that of previous sitcoms, like *Family Matters, The Cosby Show, The George Lopez Show, Different Strokes*, and more in featuring minority cast that looks not just at racial tensions, but also slice-of-life relatability across races. This is what makes the situation comedy such a successful vessel for diverse casts; the humor can bridge any gaps. Ansari's likability is one of the many reasons the show has been so successful. He is not perfect and has the ability to show intimate moments that make Dev "likable and relatable."[116]

This humor draws in audiences and facilitates conversation and jokes around the heavy subject matter without making it seem too serious or divisive. *Master of None* has been compared numerous times to *Louie*, a show that Richard Lawson of Vanity Fair calls, "[a] groundbreaking, auteurist comedy […] which played with narrative and form and mood like perhaps no other half-hour series before it."[117] The episodes of both series are not sequential, and each feels like a mini-film, a small glimpse into part of Dev or Louie's life. Both the *Louie* format and traditional situation comedy format use humor as a way to bridge the gap of understanding and create universal appeal. As discussed in Chapter 1, sitcoms tell the stories of "domestic and recognizable, stock social situations,"[118] meaning that although they may delve into major issues, they are resolved within a single episode. Sitcoms are meant to allow people to relax, unwind, have a good laugh, and not have to worry about what will happen next week. *Master of None* does contain their stories to a single episode, but it lacks resolve. It is also

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[114] Ibid.
[115] Cruz, Lenika. "Master of None's Greatest Strength Is Its Curiosity." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 12 May 2017, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/05/master-of-none-season-2/525804/.
[116] Goodman, Tim. "'Master of None' Season 2: TV Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 12 May 2017, www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/master-review-1003213
[117] Lawson, Richard. "Master of None Season 2 Is Delightful, but Not Deep." *HWD*, Vanity Fair, 3 May 2017, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/05/master-of-none-season-3-review.
[118] Mills, Brett. *The Sitcom*. Edinburgh University Press, 2013. pg 1

innovative in the way that minorities are portrayed. It does not mock the experience of minorities; it pokes fun at the ridiculousness of the situations and makes fun of itself as much as it does others. Like many sitcoms before it, *Master of None* tells the story of a minority experience without being too heavy. What makes the show distinct is that unlike sitcoms of the 80's and 90's, the plotlines are racially and culturally specific. In today's world of television, this is becoming more popular as seen with the rise of shows like *black-ish, grown-ish,* and *Jane the Virgin* but these are constrained to broadcast television regulations.

As many scenes as there are about Dev being cast in racist roles, there are double the number of scenes about dating in New York, technology addiction, and Dev's millennial life. It is clear that although Dev does encounter bouts of racism and has to confront his skin color and heritage, it is not the biggest part of his life. Every minority story is unique, but *Master of None* finds the balance between discussing timely issues and allowing the characters to have a life of universal stressors and situations that are typical of traditional sitcoms. The show swings from light-hearted comedic moments to moments of profound emotion. Many argue that it is Ansari's charm that allows the show to float around serious topics but also move through romantic-comedy like plotlines: "Dev really is the loveable underdog — both lost puppy and nice guy getting in his own way as he tries to figure life out, but also comfortable in his own skin, in his non-aggressive maleness, in shared moments with his friends and in his own kind of infectious *joie de vivre.*"[119] The episodes analyzed in this section are "Parents," written by Ansari and Yang, directed by Ansari, "Indians on TV," written by Ansari and Yang and directed by Wareheim, and from season two, "Thanksgiving," written by Ansari and Waithe, and directed by Melina Matsoukas. These episodes exemplify *Master of None*'s self-contained episodic style, its balance of racially specific issues and widespread generational problems, and its seamless transitions from humor to seriousness. Although all of these episodes star Dev, the first and last episode explore the stories of his parents and best friend, giving the show a world of possibilities to explore.

"Parents"

"Parents" is the second episode of the first season and introduces Dev's parents, Ramesh and Nisha—played by Ansari's real parents, Shoukath and Fatima Ansari—Brian's

[119] Goodman, Tim. "'Master of None' Season 2: TV Review."

dad, Peter (Clem Cheung). This episode dives headfirst into the experience of the Shah and Chang parents as they immigrated to New York in the 1980's. The storytelling technique follows the "show, don't tell" principle; the parents barely talk about their past but the audience sees it through flashbacks which navigates the stereotypical reticence of immigrant parents. It helps give a voice to what might otherwise be supporting characters and allows the audience to see Dev and Brian as children, and through their parents' eyes. Ansari and Yang came up with the concept for this episode based on the real experiences of their immigrant parents.

> Alan Yang says in an NPR interview, "the germ of that episode actually started when […] I was sitting in Aziz's hotel room, and we were trying to work on the show. And I told him this story about dad, which is real, which is that he grew up in a 500-square-foot hut in Taiwan with a single mother and two brothers. And he didn't have enough food to eat to the point where he had to kill his pet chicken when he was eight years old or something to eat it for dinner. And I was talking to Aziz and said, and now his son gets to sit in a hotel room with a famous comedian and work on a TV show with him. And it was just so staggering. And Aziz had similar stories about the sacrifices his family had made. And it's just something you kind of take for granted sometimes as the children of immigrants, and it's very legitimate. All of the emotions in that episode are very real because I've felt that guilt before and think Aziz has too." [120]

Both characters have similar stories, growing up poor, working hard to get to America, and facing racism and isolation once they reached the land of opportunity. Ramesh came to the US and worked as a doctor, and Peter and his wife opened up a successful Chinese restaurant in Manhattan.

Immigrants make up a large portion of the US. Thus, "Parents," although following specific stories, is a widely relatable episode. In 2017, the same year *Master of None*'s second season came out, immigrants and their US-born children comprised of 27% of the population, approximately 86.4 million people.[121] This growing number is a huge part of a population that

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[120] Gross, Terry. "Ansari And Yang Explore The First-Generation Experience In 'Master Of None'." *NPR*, NPR Fresh Air, 5 Nov. 2015, www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=454755962.

[121] Zong, Jie, et al. "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States." *Migration Policy Institute*, 8 Feb. 2018, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states.

can now see these kinds of relationships and stories told on TV. In a half-serious tone, Dev asks Brian, "Isn't that the gist of every immigrant story? That it was hard? Shouldn't you know more given that it's *your* dad?" Ansari and Yang were very conscious of this, saying in multiple interviews that they wanted authentic glimpses into their parents' past, and that they did not want a caricature of an immigrant couple. There were small nods to this authenticity within the mini-films of Ramesh and Peter's past. Both scenes are completely in the native language, with subtitles, and are layered with Indian and Taiwanese music. It transports the audience completely, and the slightly muted brown color palette is emblematic of the late-1950's, mimicking faded film. Neither scene is particularly sunny and happy, partially because of the washed-out image, but also because neither man had a particularly happy childhood. The visual demarcation between past and present is aided by text on screen that gives the location and year and follows the episode's tone of "show, don't tell." This method works because the audience already knows more about the parents' story than Dev and Brian do. Snippets of 80's era racism, like Peter and his wife not being seated at an empty diner, or Ramesh and Nisha eating their first meal together in America in the hospital cafeteria, paint a picture of the hardships of being an immigrant.

There are links between Ramesh's and Peter's stories, but there are crucial differences "which [get] at the notion that there is no monolithic immigrant experience."[122] Every immigrant story may have the same basic outline, but each struggle and story has unique nuances, and *Master of None* is looking at two small perspectives. The creators also wanted this sharing of stories to be a conversation starter between children and their parents, Ansari said, "it was a great conversation to have, and I think a lot of immigrant kids probably don't have that conversation with their parents because it is kind of odd, even if you're not an immigrant to be, like, mom, dad, tell me your story, like, let's talk about that. It just feels kind of odd to bring that up. And I think it's one of those things where kids are like oh, I'll ask them at some point."[123] Fostering conversation is one of the key elements of *Master of None*, especially because each episode does not offer an answer to the problems presented. Creating dialogue can be productive

[122] Upadhyaya, Kayla Kumari. "Master Of None Is Both Personal and Sweeping in Its Portrayal of Immigrant Stories." *TV Club*, Tv.avclub.com, 7 Nov. 2015, tv.avclub.com/master-of-none-is-both-personal-and-sweeping-in-its-por-1798185544.
[123] Gross, Terry. "Ansari And Yang Explore The First-Generation Experience In 'Master Of None'."

for all audiences watching the show, immigrant or not and in traditional sitcom style, "Parents" plays on family dynamics and the generational gap between parents and their children.

The happy ending and extreme success stories of Ramesh and Peter are not what every immigrant experience is like. Although it is unusual to see a multi-faceted immigrant story on TV, both men are from Asia, specifically India and Taiwan. Asian immigrants are often viewed by white US standards as "model minorities," meaning "a group whose hard work, initiative, personal responsibility, and success offer proof that American meritocracy works as intended."[124] A piece published in *The New York Times*, "The Asian Advantage," attributes this to a range of factors, from a historical emphasis on education to lower rates of divorce among Asian-American couples.[125] It is also important to look at the historical context of immigration from Asia. In 1965 the Hart-Cellar Act (Immigration and Nationality Act) was passed. It removed racist policies of quotas and prioritized highly skilled immigrants and ones who already had family living in the US.[126] A term commonly associated with this is "brain-drain," meaning "the departure of educated or professional people from one country, economic sector, or field for another usually for better pay or living conditions."[127] Years later, in 2012, Chinese and Indian immigrants made up 71.6% of the H-1B visas[128] for people with "specialty occupations."[129] The US has also expedited visas for immigrants that invest money in American development projects.[130] This is a policy that allows the government to hand-pick which immigrants will come to the US and prioritize those that can bring something to the overall economy. Sarah Vang Nguyen argues, "when people talk about the 'Asian Advantage' […], they are inadvertently talking about the 'white agenda.'" Immigrants are welcomed in as long as they can deliver and

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[124] Wingfield, Adia Harvey. "The Professional Burdens of Being a 'Model Minority'." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 6 June 2016, www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/06/professional-burdens-model-minority-asian-americans/485492/.
[125] Kristof, Nicholas. "The Asian Advantage." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 10 Oct. 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/10/11/opinion/sunday/the-asian-advantage.html.
[126] "Asian American History Timeline." *US Immigration Software Online*, www.us-immigration.com/asian-american-history-timeline/
[127] "Brain Drain." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/brain%20drain
[128] "Biggest Brain Drains: India Gets Nearly Two-Thirds of U.S. H-1Bs." *Bloomberg.com*, Bloomberg, www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-08-20/india-nabs-nearly-two-thirds-of-u-s-h-1b-visas.html.
[129] "H-1B Visa for Specialty Occupations." *H-1B Specialty Occupation Visa Program | U.S. Visa*, www.migrationexpert.com/work_visa/specialty_occupation_visa_h1b/
[130] Nguyen, Sahra Vang. "The Truth About 'The Asian Advantage' and 'Model Minority Myth.'" *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 14 Oct. 2015, www.huffingtonpost.com/sahra-vang-nguyen/the-truth-about-the-asian_b_8282830.html.

bring with them skills that help advance the country as a whole. This situation sets many Asian immigrants apart from others; they come in fully employable, or have the economic means to delve into American capitalist life. In "Parents," Ramesh is a doctor, an occupation that requires a lot of training and specialization. Peter doesn't seem to have any advanced degree, but he quickly embraces capitalism by opening up his own business. The context of Asian-American immigration is unique and cannot be generalized or compared to other minorities. This extensive group has been set up to succeed, by the admission only of highly-skilled immigrants to the country. Asian-American is a blanket term for people from a region with over twenty individual countries, and even within Asian communities living in America, there is huge economic variation within one large racial category. *Master of None* begins the work to address larger issues of immigration history, model minorities and the idea that the American dream is still controlled by White Americans.

"Parents" touches on the stereotypes and culture of Asian parents versus White parents. Brian comments, "I have never, ever heard my dad say the word 'proud.' […] It's always like, 'That's it? So that's all you've done?' Like, if I went to the moon, he would honestly be like, 'When are you going to Mars?'" Dev agrees, "Yeah. 'Oh, Brian, you went to the moon? That's like graduating from community college. When are you gonna graduate from Harvard, AKA, go to Pluto?'" "I just feel like Asian parents, they don't have the emotional reach to say they're proud or whatever. Have you ever hung out with a white person's parents, though? They are crazy nice. Yeah. I Had dinner once with my last girlfriend's mom, and by the end of that meal, she had hugged me more times than my family has hugged me in my entire life," emphasizes Brian. This is an interesting facet of the episode because it touches on the internal culture of many Asian-American families. There are plenty of dialogues and narratives about the stereotypes that Asians work exceedingly hard, are good at math, and all go to ivy-league schools. While this is clearly formed through years of stereotyping and forming a master narrative, it has been internalized by many Asian-Americans. However, this episode focuses on the parental pressures and cultural nuances that both men have experienced as Asian-Americans. They are not just stopping at white perceptions of their community; they are delving into the stereotypes within the Asian-American community. In 2011, Amy Chua, a mother and law professor at Yale University, released a memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, detailing the

strict practices of how she raised her two daughters.[131] The book was extremely controversial, some people claim she abused her children, while others applauded her no-nonsense attitude, but Chua shed light on a lot of the cultural differences between Asian and White child-rearing practices and expectations.[132] She brought the term "tiger mom" into mainstream culture and sparked dialogue about Asian cultural expectations and how they manifests when raising a child in America. Chua's book influenced social scientists to study tiger parents and unpack what tiger parenting is and its effects on children. Although Brian and Dev joke about their parents being strict, uptight, and never expressing pride, they are supported in the show. Both men spend time with their parents, are free to pursue whatever career path they wish, and, when Dev's childhood flashback occurs, the audience sees him playing video games, not a musical instrument.

Dev and Brian take their parents to dinner at a Chinese restaurant to hear about their childhoods and journeys to America. "Parents" is a nod to the idea that love is expressed in many other ways, even through the journey of coming to America. In scenes where Brian and Dev complain that they don't have enough time to do what their parents ask, like update their iPad or read an article in *The Economist*, Ramesh and Peter say nothing. For them, not having kids that don't have to worry about anything, and are allowed to have petty problems is the pinnacle of their success. All the time they spent working hard now pays off. As Ramesh says, "You realize fun is a new thing, right? Fun is a luxury only your generation really has." Although the cultural nuances of how Dev and Brian were raised is touched on in passing dialogue, this opens up a lot of questions around parental expectations, varying methods of child-rearing, and how parents show affection. This conversation deepens the episode by giving a multi-generational perspective on how children should be raised and what the expectations of first-generation children encompass. The episode simultaneously shows the perspective of the parents and Dev and Brian. This style echoes *Master of None*'s goal of telling stories from voices that are not usually heard. Although the episode is about the boys learning about their parents' past, it also shows the parents' difficulty in expressing hardships with their children. The show takes perspective a step

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[131] Kim, Su Yeong. "What Is 'Tiger' Parenting? How Does It Affect Children?" *APA Divisions*, American Psychological Association, July 2013, www.apadivisions.org/division-7/publications/newsletters/developmental/2013/07/tiger-parenting.aspx.

[132] Zernike, Kate. "Amy Chua: Retreat of the 'Tiger Mother'." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 14 Jan. 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/01/16/fashion/16Cultural.html.

further than many other shows by making the episode about the universal problem of family communication and the specific issues immigrant families may encounter.

"Indians on TV"

"Indians on TV" is an episode that is about exactly what it says: Indians on TV, or a lack thereof. This episode overtly brings up a large social issue and makes a statement about it: there needs to be more Indian and minority representation on the big and small screen. In this episode, Dev and his actor friend Ravi (Ravi Patel) both go up for the same role. Dev gets accidentally looped in on an email chain saying there can't be two Indians in a show, and the executive makes a joke about seeing who can "curry a favor." This leads to an exploration of Indian representation on TV and in film, how stereotypical it is (heavy accents, magical powers, always in a science/tech role), and a debate for Dev and Ravi about their social responsibility to themselves and other Indians. Dev, Ravi, and their friend Anush (Gerard Lobo) are in multiple scenes together, yet *Master of None* does not all of a sudden turn into an "Indian show," meaning that it is not for that specific demographic. Although "Indians on TV" does include lengthy conversations about representation, it also shows the characters going about their lives, outside the space of being constantly reminded of their race. Dev enjoys a basketball game, Ravi tries a new protein powder, and Anush breaks the nerdy, skinny stereotype by being muscular and airheaded. This episode is not based on a single experience Ansari, Yang, or Patel had, rather it is an accumulation of stories and encounters.

> Ansari said in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, "There was no real situation I was in where there could only be one, and they couldn't cast me and a friend. That in particular wasn't based on anything. But I have heard of stories like that where people are like, 'Oh, well, they've already got their ethnic guy so I'm out of the running now.' And it is always this *one* guy. You see this one guy, one girl on a poster with a bunch of white people, and it's like, 'Hey, there's our diversity. That person, they're diverse. Look! It's a diverse show.' It's that one minority."[133]

The issue of browning White actors through makeup and lighting in Hollywood becomes a major part of this episode. It opens with clip after clip of how the media has represented Indian

[133] Rahman, Ray. "Aziz Ansari Discusses the 'Indians on TV' Episode of 'Master of None'." *EW.com*, 7 Nov. 2015, ew.com/article/2015/11/07/aziz-ansari-master-of-none-indians-on-tv/.

characters from Benjamin Jarhvi on *Short Circuit 2* to Ashton Kutcher pretending to be a Bollywood producer for a PopChips commercial.[134] Ansari showcases the characters discovering that Jarhvi, their hero, was played by Fisher Stevens (not Indian) who Ansari eventually interviewed. He realized Stevens was in no way a villain, "he took the role, a well-intentioned if slightly misguided young actor who needed a job during a more culturally insensitive time."[135] It is of course important to factor in that it was a different time, but when people are still sporting brown face in 2012, it seems that not much progress has been made.

In Chapter Two, browning white characters for *Aladdin* is discussed, and there have been countless other examples of stars changing their skin color to fit a part: Emma Stone in *Aloha*, Doona Bae in *Cloud Atlas*, Max Minghella in *The Social Network*, Scarlett Johansson in *Ghost in the Shell* and many more.[136] Half of the battle is simply discussing these issues of representation. It is unique for an entire episode of a show to be about such a niche but widespread issue. The lack of racial representation on TV is backed up by staggering data that analyzed "242 broadcast, cable and digital platforms shows that aired during the 2015-16 season,"[137] which was a follow up to a 2005-6 study. They found that "155 shows lack a single Asian-American character, including 74% of premium cable shows," and that those series regulars were 69.5% white but only 4.4% Asian and Pacific Islander.[138] Although these results show higher representation than the original study, the numbers are still dismally low. Ansari says, "Seeing an Indian character in a lead role had a powerful effect on me, but it was only as I got older that I realized what an anomaly it was. I rarely saw any Indians on TV or film, except for brief appearances as a cabdriver or a convenience store worker literally servicing white characters who were off to more interesting adventures. This made *Short Circuit 2* special."[139]

Seeing more representative, dynamic, and interesting characters is at the heart of *Master of None*. This episode mocks but simultaneously informs, shedding light on an issue that

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[134] Pop Chips. "Ashton Kutcher as Raj." *YouTube*, YouTube, 13 May 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLgaFUOrdLM.
[135] Ansari, Aziz. "Aziz Ansari on Acting, Race and Hollywood." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 10 Nov. 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/arts/television/aziz-ansari-on-acting-race-and-hollywood.html.
[136] "Whitewashing, a Long History." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 22 Apr. 2016, www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2016/04/22/opinion/whitewashing-a-long-history/s/chow-ss-slide-HTTQ.html.
[137] Associated Press. "Study Finds Asian-American Characters 'Tokens' on TV." *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 12 Sept. 2017, www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/study-finds-asian-american-characters-tokens-tv-n800861.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ansari, Aziz. "Aziz Ansari on Acting, Race and Hollywood." *The New York Times*

Hollywood does see, but chooses to ignore. Executives claim, "it's not about race, they say; the only color they see is green."[140] However, a study from the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA "found that films with diverse leads not only resulted in higher box office numbers but also higher returns of investment for studios and producers."[141] Thus, taking the time to cast characters that are authentic to the role and creating personalities that feel true pays off. Ansari admits that he had a really hard time casting an Asian male lead to play Brian Chang in *Master of None*, "it was *hard*. When you cast a white person, you can get anything you want: 'You need a white guy with red hair and one arm? Here's six of 'em!' But for an Asian character, there were startlingly fewer options, and with each of them, something was off."[142] There is a cycle of minority actors that have to take stereotypical roles in order to get to better opportunities. However, these actors must grapple with the implications of parading tired tropes again and again. Returning to ideas of accepting, and living in the space of difference, television is a medium perfectly suited to emulate what many people's real world could and should look like. Ansari's show takes a stand by casting a lot of Indian actors, but he is showing that minority actors don't have to play sidekick roles, and just because an actor is Indian, he (or she) doesn't have to fit certain stereotypes. "Indians on TV" also addresses the nuances of racism against Asian-Americans: When his friends convince him to leak the racist email, he says, "People don't get that fired up about racist Asian or Indian stuff. I feel like you only really risk starting a brouhaha if you say something bad about black people or gay people." Overt racism against Asian-Americans seems to be taken less seriously because of the way they are viewed as a specific kind of Other. It is important that this is addressed on the show because there is a hope that Asian-American racism will continue to be explored and interrogated as people become more aware of oppression and feel empowered to stand up for themselves and others.

Racism against Asian-Americans has an interesting and slightly complicated history. Asia, or as it used to be called "The Orient," still holds a place of fascination, mystery, and exoticism. In Edward Said's groundbreaking text *Orientalism,* he discusses how the region has never truly had time to tell its own story. Its narratives have constantly been appropriated by the West through missionaries, geographic exploration, expansionism, tourism, and voices from the

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[140] Chow, Keith. "Why Won't Hollywood Cast Asian Actors?" *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 23 Apr. 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/04/23/opinion/why-wont-hollywood-cast-asian-actors.html.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ansari, Aziz. "Aziz Ansari on Acting, Race and Hollywood." *The New York Times*

outside.[143] Orientalism is the study of where our current ideas of Asia stem from, whether political, social, economic, or cultural.[144] *Orientalism* was published in 1978, yet forty years later many of the concepts presented in the book about Asian-Americans are still present. It seems that although perceptions of Asians have changed, they have only changed to benefit the economic and political interests of the countries that are still in power. The shifts that have occurred are certainly progressive, however at the core, Asia and its people are still being used by the West for economic gain. It is the age-old imperialist question, "what can we get from you?" As previously discussed, the idea of being a "model minority" creates pressure around to how to behave and therefore blurs the lines of racism. The economic success and what skills Asian immigrants could bring to the US drove Americans to appreciate and accept them as a population.

Media representation has always been an issue for people of color. Current media places Asian-Americans as eager to "avoid being seen as an Angry Ethnic, if they want to get ahead […] [there is] pressure to be a subservient 'Uncle Taj.'"[145] Asian-Americans are just beginning to get the opportunity to play roles that break out of the current stereotypes. Ansari accepts that Hollywood is still a white-male-dominated industry, but gives credit where it is due, "I wouldn't be in the position to do any of this, and neither would Alan, unless some straight white guy, in this case, Mike Schur, had given us jobs on *Parks and Recreation*. Without that opportunity, we wouldn't have developed the experience necessary to tell our stories. So, if you're a straight white guy, do the industry a solid and give minorities a second look."[146] Although this episode specifically focuses on Indian representation on TV, similar concepts can be applied to minority representation as a whole. Ansari and Yang are most familiar with Asian representation given their backgrounds, and critics note the show is "casually groundbreaking […] I've never seen three Indian-Americans on screen at the same time speak without accents, let alone an Indian-

[143] Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Mahdawi, Arwa. "From Apu to Master of None: How US Pop Culture Tuned into the South Asian Experience." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 9 May 2017, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/may/09/from-apu-to-master-of-none-how-us-pop-culture-tuned-into-the-south-asian-experience.
[146] Ansari, Aziz. "Aziz Ansari on Acting, Race and Hollywood." *The New York Times*

American character have sex with a white character on TV."[147] That *Master of None* practices what it preaches, accounts in part of the success of this episode and the show as a whole.

"Thanksgiving"

"Thanksgiving" comes late in Season 2, where many of the previous episodes have been about characters other than Dev. This episode focuses on Denise's coming out story. It tells a very specific story by filling in how Dev and Denise met and brings in elements of Waithe's own coming out. This episode opens the show up to a broader dialogue about blackness, sexuality, intersectionality, and minority solidarity. The episode is structured to focus on six Thanksgiving celebrations hosted by Denise's mother over the years, from 1995 to 2017. It opens when Denise and Dev are around five years old, their first Thanksgiving together, and takes the audience all the way to present day. This episode's attention to detail, from set design to dialogue, captures each year's unique experience. Each year they filmed had unique posters in Denise's room, from Jennifer Aniston to Hilary from *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, hairstyles for her Aunt Joyce (Kym Whitley), Grandma Ernestine (Venida Evans), and mom Catherine (Angela Bassett), clothing styles, and political conversations that were specific to the time.[148]

Although the episode is not the exact story of Waithe's coming out, she said in an interview with Vulture, "I felt comfortable putting very autobiographical, vulnerable things into it. In my other stuff, I had no desire to tell that story, so I was like, 'Why not tell it in this way, with this character who people seem to really connect with and love?' It's also great to give Dev and Denise an origin story. It was so organic and came together so well."[149] In addition to having Waithe write and star in this episode, Ansari and Yang insisted that they tap into a talented director that could understand the gravity and nuances of the story. They hired Melina Matsoukas, more recently known for her work on Issa Rae's *Insecure* and Beyoncé's *Lemonade*. The *Master of None* team is very aware that they are not qualified to tell a black

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[147] Murthi, Vikram. "Indians on TV: How Aziz Ansari and 'Master of None' Navigate the Anxieties of Representation." *IndieWire*, 10 Nov. 2015, www.indiewire.com/2015/11/indians-on-tv-how-aziz-ansari-and-master-of-none-navigate-the-anxieties-of-representation-129132/.

[148] Yuan, Jada. "Aziz Ansari and Lena Waithe Recap Master of None's 'Thanksgiving'." *Vulture*, 8 June 2017, www.vulture.com/2017/06/aziz-ansari-recaps-master-of-none-thanksgiving.html.

[149] Jung, E Alex. "Lena Waithe Wrote Her Most Personal Story for Master of None." *Vulture*, 17 May 2017, www.vulture.com/2017/05/lena-waithe-master-of-none-thanksgiving-episode-conversation.html.

woman's story. Yang says in a Buzzfeed interview that the episode is "largely a story about black women relating to each other, and the last time Aziz and I checked in the mirror, neither of us were black women."[150] This is, but should not be, a revolutionary concept but it is, and its presences works to create authentic and relatable television. Ansari and Waithe were very conscious about every choice made in "Thanksgiving." Waithe says, "I hope I set a trend with other black or brown folks in this business to stop trying to be something that you think society wants you to be, because you hurt someone who's going to come after you […] It's a huge, huge problem that we're still working through, and I'm happy to be a Jackie Robinson."[151] This episode makes a lot of references to the social issues that plague our time, such as police brutality and institutional racism. Over the years, Denise's family talks about everything from Clarence Thomas, to OJ Simpson, to Sandra Bland.

"Thanksgiving" also introduces two of Denise's girlfriends, Michelle (Ebony Obsidian) and Nikki (Erica Mena). Michelle is the first girl Denise has ever brought home, and she is not greeted warmly by Denise's family. Denise has been instructed not to tell Grandma Ernestine that Michelle is a romantic partner. Thus Grandma Ernestine, unaware of the situation, is the only one who is nice to Michelle. It is an interesting dynamic to make the oldest and most traditional member of the household seem the most progressive. Catherine and Aunt Joyce are angry the entire dinner, drinking wine in an attempt to offset their disappointment. Michelle is an ideal partner, smart, well-traveled, kind, and well dressed—but Denise's family does not give her the time of day until after the next year, when they meet Nikki, an unintelligent diva, who is obsessed with Instagram and wore a revealing outfit to Thanksgiving dinner. Nikki's social media handle is *nipplesandtoes23*, which makes Michelle look like an angel when she returns for Thanksgiving 2017. A scene of Michelle helping Catherine in the kitchen humanizes the two and indicates that although Catherine won't say she likes Michelle, Denise knows her mom finally approves. Juxtaposing Denise's two relationships displays how Denise is navigating the dating world, how her family is handling her sexuality, and how both narratives grow and mature as time goes on. Denise and her family are not infallible, and the episode perfectly captures how awkward it can be to bring home a significant other, regardless

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[150] Jones, Marcus. "Everything You Need To Know About The 'Thanksgiving' Episode Of 'Master Of None'." *BuzzFeed*, 25 May 2017, www.buzzfeed.com/marcusjones/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-thanksgiving-episode?utm_term=.vsdLLWPa6#.qj7aaQK9B.

[151] Jung, E Alex. "Lena Waithe Wrote Her Most Personal Story for Master of None." *Vulture*

of sexuality. The show creators are aware of how groundbreaking it is to see five African-American women and an Indian man in an episode altogether, discussing issues that are pertinent to their community. Waithe says, "There's a lot of Donald Glovers, Jordan Peeles, Justin Simiens. And there's a lot of me's, too. I just want to go find them and help open the door so they can walk in."[152] "Thanksgiving" received incredible responses from fans and experts. Waithe and Ansari won an Emmy for Best Comedy Series writing, making Waithe the first black woman to win in this category.[153] The episode also sparked an Internet collaboration between Netflix, Black Girl Nerds, and Cassius (iOne Digital) using the hashtag #FirstTimeISawMe where users shared pictures of the first time they saw themselves represented in media.[154] The feeds are filled with shows from the 80's and 90's, though some cite *Master of None* as the first time they saw themselves on TV. Others have yet to see themselves represented but are hopeful given the outpouring and excitement in response to this hashtag. If there was ever a question of television being a force for social change, the answer is in the reactions. Although "Thanksgiving" does not focus solely on social issues or shy away from comedy, it does provide a detailed story about a family of strong black women and an even more untold story of a black woman coming out. Waithe says, "[Ansari and I] felt like it didn't look like anything I'd seen on TV before, and that's our litmus test. Have we seen this before? What's the most honest way to tell this story?"[155]

"Thanksgiving" is *Master of None's* best example of intersectionality, defined as "the complex, cumulative manner in which the effects of different forms of discrimination combine, overlap or intersect."[156] The audience not only gets to see Denise grow up and struggle to come into her own as a gay black woman but also observes the crusades of her three female role models in a single-parent household. The wide generational perspective shows the range of discrimination Denise's family has faced. Intersectionality was only added to Merriam-Webster

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[152] Jung, E Alex. "Lena Waithe Wrote Her Most Personal Story for Master of None." *Vulture*
[153] Butler, Bethonie. "Why Lena Waithe's Historic Emmy Win for 'Master of None' Is so Meaningful." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 18 Sept. 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/09/18/why-lena-waithes-historic-emmy-win-for-master-of-none-is-so-meaningful/?utm_term=.1a279c6b5325.
[154] Battle, Marquaysa. "People Of Color Are Sharing The First Time They Saw Themselves In Media." *Elite Daily*, Elite Daily, 1 Aug. 2017, www.elitedaily.com/life/culture/first-time-i-saw-me-netflix-black-people-of-color-representation-media-diversity/2033572.
[155] Yuan, Jada. "Aziz Ansari and Lena Waithe Recap Master of None's 'Thanksgiving'." *Vulture*
[156] "New Words: Intersectionality." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, Apr. 2017, www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/intersectionality-meaning.

in April 2017, though the term has been around since 1989 when Kimberlé Crenshaw used it in her essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," where she discusses those who are "multiply burdened"[157] need to "challenge all forms of discrimination."[158] Intersectionality is looking at all the ways a person may be subject to discrimination, factoring things like gender, economic status, race, ethnicity, and more. In "Thanksgiving," young Denise and Dev find out they're disenfranchised minorities, which they humorously confuse with restaurant franchises, like McDonald's. Catherine asks, "Denise, how the hell you know what a franchise is, but you didn't know Dev ain't black?" This provides an innocent perspective from which it is clear that Denise isn't thinking about race and difference and identifies people through other markers, like friendship. Catherine defines disenfranchised minorities as, "A group of people who have to work twice as hard to get half as far […] and Denise you're black and a woman, so you'll have to work three times as hard." This statement provides a framework for Dev and Denise to grapple with their brownness and blackness.

For many minority children, there is a moment of realization that they are Other, and must come face to face with their race. In this episode, it is Denise who has to understand that her friend Dev is Indian, and not African-American, and the implications of what their skin color may mean for their future. Part of this marginalization of being black and a woman is why Catherine is so heartbroken when Denise comes out to her, "I don't want life to be hard for you […] being a black woman in this world and now you want to add something else to that." Although the audience doesn't see the intimate hardships that Denise endures, this episode and her mother's reaction gives a sense of how homosexuality is received in the African-American community. Her mom's reaction comes from a deep place of care and love, not wanting things to be harder for her child compounded by the stigmas around homosexuality. Aunt Joyce tries to comfort Catherine, "Denise ain't never been arrested, she in college, she keeps her job, and she respects her elders. Honey, if she wanna lay around with some women, that's her business."

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[157] Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 1, ser. 8, 1989. Pp 140-145, *8*, chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf.
[158] Ibid.

In Marlon Riggs' 1994 film *Black Is…Black Ain't,* he explores notions of sexuality and intersectionality within the African-American community.[159] His film asks questions about what it means to be black "enough" to fit into certain communities, and how persistent many African-Americans are with the narrative that homosexuality and blackness are incompatible. When Denise talks to Dev about coming out to her mom, she touches on this. She describes children as trophies, and being lesbian (or Lebanese, as she jokingly says), is a tarnish on the trophy. The metaphor of the trophy is interesting because it is something you show off, something to be proud of, and something to handle with great care. Instead of homosexuality being something to embrace openly, it's something to be ashamed of, something that makes Catherine question her parenting style. The insecurity runs deep through the African-American community, where homosexuality is slowly being accepted. Riggs looks at it through the lens of male sexuality; black men have historically been castrated and lynched; thus, reclaiming their sexuality places emphasis on women, and being as macho and dominating as possible.

Eldrige Cleaver, an activist and early leader of the Black Panther Party, argued in his 1968 book, *Soul On Ice*, that black homosexuals are "outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man."[160] He believed that black homosexuality is a manifestation of a desire for whiteness and to "abandon black masculinity for the traditionally submissive position of the white female."[161] These comments are contextualized around James Baldwin, an author, and social critic, best known for *Notes of a Native Son*, who was one of the two openly gay black men to be involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Denise must navigate a space that is filled with preconceived notions of homosexuality and bring her family around to a place of understanding. "Thanksgiving" references issues of homosexuality within the black community and the strain it can put on families of any race. "Thanksgiving" is the first episode in which *Master of None* truly looks at African-American identity and explores cultural tensions that often differ from the Asian-American identity of earlier episodes.

Master of None is a situation comedy that weaves themes of diversity and understanding in every episode. The disjointed, episodic style offers vignettes of Dev's life and develops the supporting characters like his parents and friends. By simply telling stories of immigrants and

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[159] Riggs, Marlon T, director. *Black Is ... Black Ain't*. California Newsreel, 1994.
[160] "Soul on Ice." *Soul on Ice*, by Eldridge Cleaver, Ramparts Press Inc, 1968, p. 103.
[161] Armengol, Josep M. "In the Dark Room: Homosexuality and/as Blackness in James Baldwin™'s Giovanni's Room." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2012, p. 672., doi:10.1086/662699.

existing as a minority actor, Ansari pushes the audience to empathize with his characters and take up new perspectives. The show breaks the traditional sitcom model of resolving each narrative within an episode, leaving many stories open-ended and simply making statements about the world without proposing solutions. *Master of None* isn't here to propagate myths; it is striving to find truth. What is uncovered […] is a lot like the life Ansari and Yang expertly recreate: surprising, enriching, and oh so divine."[162] It is a passion project that exemplifies Netflix's commitment to letting their creators and artists have free reign over the programming they create. *Master of None* serves as a platform to tell overlooked stories and has brought forward talented people like Waithe and Wareheim.

[162] Travers, Ben. "'Master of None' Season 2 Review: Aziz Ansari Travels to Italy and Returns with a Stunning Romance." *IndieWire*, 12 May 2017, www.indiewire.com/2017/05/master-of-none-season-2-review-netflix-aziz-ansari-1201811828/.

Chapter 4 - *Chewing Gum*: Netflix's British Gem

Chewing Gum is a two season, twelve-episode, British sitcom written by and starring Michaela Coel. It is based on her one-woman senior thesis play, *Chewing Gum Dreams* (2012), that was later picked up by the Royal National Theatre.[163] The television version premiered in the UK on the E4 channel in October 2015, and Netflix picked it up for their platform a year later. The show became a hit, and Coel won two British Academy of Film and Television awards (BAFTA) for Breakthrough Talent and Best Female Comedy Performance. It follows Tracey (played by Coel), a twenty-four-year-old Ghanaian-British girl living in Tower Hamlets (East London) with her very religious mother and sister. Tracey's desire to lose her virginity and explore the world leads to hilarious, ridiculous, and sometimes uncomfortable plot lines. The series has been lauded "for portraying life around the council estates without the grungy poverty porn clichés, and with a great sense of vibrancy and humour."[164] It does not show poverty in a depressing or condescending way. Coel's show touches on class, race, religion, and discrimination with a lot of humor which prevents anything from feeling too heavy. Even in moments where Tracey is kicked out of the house or mistaken for a drug dealer, the audience sees her make the most out of it.

Chewing Gum follows the format of a traditional situation comedy: episodic structure, limited settings for action, focus on one main character every episode. However, it also pushes the genre by breaking the fourth wall, openly showing sex and drugs, and leaving plot lines open. The show seeks to break the ingrained stereotypes about people that live on council estates (the British equivalent of US subsidized housing), and to tell Coel's personal story. The show is not completely autobiographical. It draws from many of Coel's own experiences, but she reinforces that Tracey is not her. *Chewing Gum* could be seen as a show about an unconventional family as is common throughout sitcom history, but Tracey's need for sexual liberation is a twist that brings it into the 21st century. The title comes from the idea that "'we (people that live on the estate) stick together like chewing gum on concrete.' It's an interesting metaphor, uplifting in that it implies solidarity and tenacity and brightness, before you realize that dried chewing gum is also

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[163] Kaplan, Ilana. "'Chewing Gum': Meet the Mastermind Behind Netflix's Sex-Obsessed Britcom." *Rolling Stone*, Rolling Stone, 11 Apr. 2017, www.rollingstone.com/tv/features/meet-the-mastermind-behind-sex-obsessed-comedy-chewing-gum-w475402.

[164] Neutze, Ben. "Why Chewing Gum Is the Most Exciting New Show on Netflix." *Daily Review: Film, Stage and Music Reviews, Interviews and More.*, 29 Nov. 2016, dailyreview.com.au/chewing-gum-exciting-new-show-netflix/52961/.

litter that we step over every day. What this show is asking us to do is to stop and look."[165] It is a show meant to spark conversation, challenge norms, and expand what is shown on mainstream television.

Chewing Gum stands out from the other shows analyzed in this project because it was originally on broadcast television and is a British show. Broadcast TV in American has a lot of restrictions by the FCC: programs can be fined for using various words or showing certain forms of nudity. The UK has many restrictions as well, but is known for allowing programs that push the envelope of broadcast television. The Office of Communications (OfCom), the British FCC, "allows nudity and profanity to be aired on terrestrial television after 9pm."[166] This is known as, "The Watershed Policy," and asks parents to be active participants in preventing children from watching programming after a certain hour. Additionally, the UK is much less rigorous in proscribing profanity and allows words like "bloody, bastard, and goddamn,"[167] at all times of day. TV censorship is taken much less seriously in the UK, which gives networks more freedom and less worry of being fined or taken off the air. Finally, in a significant formatting difference, British shows tend to have fewer episodes per season than American shows: "the classic amount for comedies is just six episodes per [season],"[168] compared to the twenty or more episodes in America. It makes sense that *Chewing Gum* could only make it to the US via a streaming platform, and it also says a lot about Netflix's business model.

Netflix is known for their ease of service and their incredible programming. From *Bojack Horseman* to *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, Netflix picks shows that may be too alternative, weird, or raunchy for network television. *Chewing Gum* probably wouldn't have been acquired by a major network in the US, but Netflix saw its potential as a sex-positive, empowering, and diverse show. Their platform also lends itself to large amounts of content because instead of filling slots, they have a vast library where users are free to pick what they want to watch. Netflix has more room to experiment with niche shows because not every show they pick up will be

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[165] Gyarkye, Lovia. "The Comedic Genius of Netflix's Chewing Gum." *The New Republic*, 11 Apr. 2017, newrepublic.com/article/141977/comedic-genius-netflixs-chewing-gum.
[166] Brown, Laurence. "Lost in the Pond: 5 Major Differences Between British and American Television." *Anglotopia*, 9 Sept. 2013, www.anglotopia.net/british-entertainment/brit-tv/lost-in-the-pond-5-differences-between-british-and-american-television/.
[167] Ibid.
[168] McAlpine, Fraser. "Five Bizarre Things About British Television." *BBC America*, www.bbcamerica.com/anglophenia/2012/01/five-bizarre-things-about-british-television.

forced into a time slot. Netflix is known for taking content from outside the US for their platform, both because they have a global audience and because they are looking to acquire as much content as possible. *House of Cards* is adapted from a British show of the same name, but many shows are taken directly from other countries markets and put directly on Netflix: *One More Time* (South Korea), *Nobel* (Norway), *Fauda* (Israel), *3%* (Brazil), *Luther* (UK), and even *Black Mirror* (UK).[169] Because of their global influence, Netflix acquires both English speaking and foreign-language content, which allows them to appeal to large audiences. For Netflix, the world is their oyster of programming, and they seek to curate and distribute as much quality content as they can.

Although Netflix did not develop the concept of *Chewing Gum*, they were still able to brand it as a "Netflix Original," giving it the endorsement and weight of something Netflix created. It takes a lot of time and money for Netflix to produce shows, but by acquiring international content (usually about a year after the program aired in its home country) they cut production costs and can endorse something that has already been wildly popular in a similar English-speaking audience. *Chewing Gum* has been compared by Coel and critics to Issa Rae's *Insecure*, based on her web series *Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl.*[170] The obvious parallels are that both star and are written by black females who navigate the world and dating. Coel is quick to say that her show isn't just boundary-pushing because it's British: "that's my sense of humor. If I moved to America and I lived there for 20 years, it's gonna be the same kind of show that I make here, we'd just have different accents. I feel like there's a bunch of really awkward people whose lives make other people uncomfortable, and they're all across the globe."[171] The combination of Coel's quirky sense of humor with the brashness and dry wit of British sitcoms, are the makings of an international hit.

As discussed in the first chapter, the genre is not commonly seen as a vessel for social change because traditional sitcoms will encounter and resolve an issue within a single episode. What sets *Chewing Gum* apart is that issues of difference, race, religion, and class, are

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[169] "The Best Foreign TV Shows on Netflix." *Thrillist*, Thrillist, 17 Apr. 2017, www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/best-foreign-tv-shows-on-netflix.
[170] Mohdin, Aamna. "The Rise of the Awkward Black Girl." *Quartz*, Quartz, 27 Aug. 2017, qz.com/1062383/issa-rae-and-michaela-coel-with-insecure-and-chewing-gum-awkward-black-girls-are-finally-having-a-moment-on-tv/.
[171] Myers, Owen. "Michaela Coel Is Doing Whatever The Hell She Wants." *The Fader*, www.thefader.com/2017/04/04/michaela-coel-chewing-gum-season-two-interview.

overarching themes of the show; thus, they infiltrate every episode. This begins but does not conclude a conversation and allows a wide range of people to meditate on issues every week, instead of just a few times per season. Unlike lesson-centered sitcoms of the 1990's, Coel's program allows her characters to make mistake after mistake and barely learn from them. It is a sitcom, but it follows many of what Jason Mittell calls, "complex narrative devices."[172] Mittell argues that shows with "narrative complexity redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration— not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance."[173] This means that there are plot lines that carry over many episodes, as well as conflicts that occur and resolve within an episode. Coel speaks to this: On having the freedom to write more experimentally in the second season, with the guarantee of Netflix distributing the show, she says, "I was like, 'You know what? I can afford to start a story, and not finish it by the end of the episode. I can afford to leave cliffhangers.'"[174]

Chewing Gum also breaks the fourth wall through "visually represented direct address"[175] as Tracey turns and talks directly to the audience. This is part of "complex narration"[176] that forces the audience to put themselves in the character's shoes and engage with them. It gives a first-person account of what Tracey is doing and thinking and alters the reality of the world the audience experiences, as it is only her commentary. Tracey is the only character in this show who speaks directly to the audience, which puts every interaction and scenario in her perspective. This is an interesting choice for a show that is already in the perspective of a minority and written by a minority. It is yet another platform for Tracey to speak her mind and comment on any situation. This stylistic choice reads like a diary, with Tracey sneaking looks at the camera that say as much as dialogue could. Additionally, authorship is a factor in some complex television. Mittell discusses how shows used to be associated solely with the stars, while now having certain creator's names attached to shows creates an association with the audience. TV authors (such as Sorkin, Daniels, or Rhimes) "can serve similar functions of creating common

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[172] Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York University Press, 2015.
[173] Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* p.18
[174] Maloney, Devon. "Michaela Coel, The Prodigy Behind Netflix's 'Chewing Gum,' Is The Future of Comedy." *Complex*, 7 Apr. 2017, www.complex.com/pop-culture/2017/04/michaela-coel-chewing-gum-netflix-season-2.
[175] Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* p.49
[176] Ibid.

audiences and branding [and] as an anchor for understanding programming, delimiting potential appeals, tone, style, and genre."[177] In the same way that directors are known for certain styles and have a huge following, TV show creators have begun to develop a similar reputation. Coel has branded herself with a certain style of comedy, bright visuals, and outlandish scenarios. *Chewing Gum* is a prime example of how a situation comedy can embrace complex TV features to allow for a more in-depth exploration of social issues.

Chewing Gum is also unique in its style of humor. It is awkward and uncomfortable and Coel doesn't miss an opportunity to make fun of anything. She uses physical humor, wit, and sarcasm throughout each episode. Tracey's humor falls into two major categories: relief theory and superiority theory. Relief theory is rooted in science, and the idea is that laughter releases energy, often nervous energy and tension. Freud studied the relief theory of comedy and argued that the pleasure is in saying something that is not allowed, or taboo.[178] A revised look at relief theory by Willett & Willett argues that the relief occurs after disturbing social norms and that it is not just a mental relief, but a physically cathartic experience.[179] In *Chewing Gum* the audience may cringe at Tracey's antics, but laughing about them allows for that mind-body relief and is also what makes the laughter so cathartic. Coel says, "I enjoy making people uncomfortable. For me, I don't want to write a show that doesn't make people uncomfortable. I don't think I know how to write a show that doesn't make people uncomfortable."[180] She is okay making people feel uncomfortable, embracing the awkwardness and using it to make the audience feel better about a situation through catharsis. The superiority theory of humor says that people make fun of things that are below them: a form of mockery of those with less power or resources.[181] It's typically seen as punching down, but there are also ideas that superiority theory can punch up by attacking those in a position of power to bring them down to a different level.[182] This is similar to the idiom, knocking someone off their high horse. This theory of punching up seems more humane

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[177] Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* p.97
[178] Morreall, John. "Philosophy of Humor." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 20 Nov. 2012, plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor
[179] Willett, Cynthia, and Julie Willett. *On Humor: Or, How Feminists, Animals and Other Social Misfits Use Belly Laughs to Talk Truth to Power*.
[180] Lewis, Tim. "Chewing Gum's Michaela Coel: 'I Enjoy Making People Uncomfortable'." *The Observer*, Guardian News and Media, 8 Jan. 2017, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/jan/08/michaela-cole-enjoy-making-people-uncomfortable-chewing-gum-season-two.
[181] Morreall, John. "Philosophy of Humor."
[182] Willett, Cynthia, and Julie Willett.

and also emphasizes the social nature of humor. People bond over their shared ridicule of someone in control and can mock them without causing real harm. It is an interesting way to undermine authority, and gain autonomy without overtly threatening the norms, people, and systems that are in power. *Chewing Gum* corresponds to the Willetts' version of superiority theory as Tracey ridicules those who seek to manipulate her or those who look down on her and her friends. It not only creates a bond between Tracey and the other characters but between Tracey and the audience. It is a sympathetic approach which shows that, although Tracey is in a vulnerable position, she is strong and able to fight back in her way. Lastly, this show is incredibly authentic to Coel's experience, as she writes from her heart and crafts every episode and every joke. Tracey is her alter-ego, and writing a successful sitcom alone is no small feat. The episodes analyzed in this chapter are "Possession," "Replacements," and "Just Need Some Company," they exemplify Coel's unique take on situation comedies and demonstrate how many issues have yet to fully be explored in this genre.

"Possession"

"Possession" is the third episode of the first season, and follows Tracey as she attends a recruitment day to sell "Winsley Cosmetics" at a department store to jump-start her career. Tracey discovers this opportunity through Meisha, an acquaintance from high school, who takes Tracey under her wing but quickly realizes she is not fit for the job. "Possession" explores the intersection of class and race. Meisha is the character that has "made it," as in, escaped poverty and found a job that pays well, compared to Tracey who works at the local corner shop. Coel has said in interviews that while both seasons heavily analyzed classism, she felt she was able to explore both race and class more openly in the second season.[183] Coel argues that in many of her experiences, class is even more defining and isolating than race. Speaking about her experience at Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where she was the first black woman to attend in five years, she says, "I wondered whether it wasn't race but class that made me feel like a complete

[183] Kaplan, Ilana. "'Chewing Gum': Meet the Mastermind Behind Netflix's Sex-Obsessed Britcom." *Rolling Stone*

outsider […] I'd been the 'only black girl' so many times, but it had never felt quite like this: I'd never been the only working-class one."[184]

The episode highlights the differences between how strangers treat Meisha and Tracey. Visual differences between the two are the initial marker of difference; Meisha has perfectly coiffed, dyed hair, light skin, and is dressed in professional work attire; Tracey has her hair in two braids, dark skin, and is wearing colorful, child-like clothing, and a white cap. The outfit matures Meisha and contrasts her look with Tracey's, who seems to have remained in the same place, literally and figuratively, since they knew each other in high school. Meisha is also a few years younger than Tracey, which makes Tracey seem even more naïve and behind her peers. When Tracey visits the department store for the recruitment, she is dressed colorfully, while Meisha and the other employees are in all black. Their accents are also different, placing Tracey in a certain upbringing, while Meisha, although she seemingly had the same upbringing, has modified her accent to sound more posh. When Tracey tries to sell the perfume, she can't properly pronounce the French written on the bottle, "Ennemïs Haïront, Eau du parfum," and spews random words to the customers. Meisha watches, horrified, and tells Tracey she'll let her know about the job. Tracey, relentless and oblivious, shows up the next day to check in with Meisha, who tells her she hasn't made it to the next round.

Tracey seems unaware of how awful she is at sales but is excited about the prospect of "going places," and embarking on a real career. Thus, when Meisha rejects her, Tracey sneaks a look at the camera, and says, "Thank you so much for your offer, really, but I'm going to have to decline. I'm sorry, I'm just looking for something a bit more…good luck though, and thank you." As Meisha walks away, Tracey is visibly upset but had managed to flip the entire conversation and avoid feelings of rejection. She often alters reality in this way, creating her own narrative, as a means of comforting herself and establishing a sense of control. This behavior also functions as a protection mechanism so Tracey doesn't get hurt, and the show can remain upbeat and optimistic. There are times throughout *Chewing Gum* when Tracey appears to be living in a disconnected reality, where she has unique experiences from the other characters. The way she changes the conversation with Meisha exudes confidence even while receiving

[184] Coel, Michaela. "Adele's Tribute to Beyoncé Was a Frank Admission of Privilege." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 17 Feb. 2017, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/17/adele-beyonce-grammys-entertainment-race-class.

heartbreaking news but also shows a level of delusion in Tracey's character. Tracey's ability to change a situation to her benefit can be examined through the psychological defense mechanism of denial, defined as "blocking external events from awareness. If some situation is just too much to handle, the person just refuses to experience it."[185] In a Freudian context, it is blocking out what may be harmful to the ego. Thus, it is both a defense and a coping mechanism.[186] Tracey is aware of what is happening to her but refuses to allow Meisha to control the narrative. It is her way of maintaining dignity and pride and remaining strong in front of someone who took a chance on her. The way in which Tracey modifies her world and forces the audience to take up a new perspective aligns with Coel's goals for the audience: "[If she] can make someone view this sexed-up, spiritually confused, public-housing-living woman's experiences with different eyes, then she's done her job."[187] Tracey's altered-reality is the way Coel wants the audience to challenge themselves to think differently and look at the world from a new perspective—in this case, one about a working-class black woman.

In later scenes another employee, Josh, approaches Tracey and extends an invitation to a company party later that evening. He states that getting a job is all about "who you know," and "they were always going to hire the boss's daughter's friend." This sentiment rings true in many job searches, and Tracey doesn't have any connections. She has burned her last hope with Meisha and sadly states, "Yeah I don't know anyone." At this moment, the audience feels nothing but pity for Tracey who had placed so much hope and excitement into this new found dream, the prospect of having a "high-end career." It is clear that Tracey's differences from Meisha and her inability to conform to certain standards and norms placed her in a situation where she would never get the job. Exploiting this vulnerability, Josh insists that she buy cocaine to bring to the party, and that the evening will act as "stepping stones" to a future career at Winsley Cosmetics. It is a shocking demand, given Tracey's naiveté, but Josh has made these assumptions based on Tracey's blackness. From the audience perspective, Tracey as a drug dealer is satirical. She has never done drugs in her life and is just barely beginning to explore the world outside her sheltered family. To Josh, Tracey fits his loose profile of a dealer, whether

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[185] McLeod, Saul. "Defense Mechanisms." *Simply Psychology*, 2009, www.simplypsychology.org/defense-mechanisms.html.
[186] Carey, Benedict. "Denial - Psychology - Mental Health and Behavior." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 20 Nov. 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/11/20/health/research/20deni.html.
[187] Kaplan, Ilana. "'Chewing Gum': Meet the Mastermind Behind Netflix's Sex-Obsessed Britcom." *Rolling Stone*

based on race, class, her erratic behavior, or all of the above. Josh demonstrates little regard for the severity of drug dealing saying nonchalantly, "My old dealer got arrested, or murdered, or something." This interaction is not a request but an expectation, and seems to be another opportunity for Tracey to get into an exclusive career. Coel writes that she hopes the show illustrates, "the breadth of circumstances a woman of color can end up in."[188]

"Possession," focuses a lot on subverting expectations and the idea that people are not their stereotypes. As Tracey and Candice go to Noah, the estate's drug dealer, they set rules: don't look him in the eye, get in and out as quickly as possible. They swap stories about how Noah has attacked a man for leaving a delivery menu in his doorway, but, when they meet him, he's a charming old man who serves banoffee pudding and wears glasses. Tracey's not the idea of a drug mule, and Noah isn't the idea of a drug dealer. But somehow, they still ended up in this situation. Noah's character challenges the audience to defy the stereotypes and biases Josh had just prescribed to Tracey. It demonstrates that all people are vulnerable to stigmatizing others and shaping opinions based on appearance and rumors. Tracey is guilty of this as well when she asks Meisha at the party, after accidentally taking drugs, "I brought Josh the cocaine, isn't that how you got the job as well?" Tracey is persistent and demonstrates that she would go to great lengths to make a better life for herself. Meisha replies, "People like us need to be twice as alert, opportunities are never going to be handed to us." She doesn't specify exactly who the "like us," group is, but it could be based on class, ethnicity, race, gender, or all of the above. Meisha exposes a simple truth: that she had to work harder and change herself before she was given a chance at Winsley Cosmetics. Meisha acknowledges the judgement and stereotyping she automatically gets for speaking and looking differently. Tracey, very high at this point, makes an impassioned speech, "You don't know me, you just think you do. It's *pathetic*, the way you judge me," and it becomes a moment where she can reclaim the narrative and be in control of a situation until the perspective changes and the audience sees Tracey speaking gibberish on stage because she is too high to function. The drugs are what gave Tracey the confidence to speak, but they are also what is preventing her from being heard.

"Possession" looks at upward mobility and the way Tracey is limited by her background. It is one of the few episodes of the first season where the audience gets to see her outside the bubble of Tower Hamlets, interacting with other people but never changing who she is. Tracey is

[188] Ibid.

adamant about preserving her image, sometimes to the point of delusion, but subverts all norms and expectations for the protagonist of a show. Coel's goal with Tracey was to create a character "who is vulnerable, who has a naiveté about her, who is lovable – and is not just a sexual vixen, a crackhead or a criminal. We don't get that a lot in Britain. I wanted to fill that space."[189]

"Replacements"

This episode is the second in the second season and follows Tracey as she attempts to mend her relationship with her mother, Joy (Shola Adewusi), and move back home. Joy asks her to hand out 1,000 fliers for her church Joy Ministries, heal someone through prayer, and speak in tongues. Tracey's personal goal is to accomplish her mom's tasks so she can move back and replace her old boyfriend, Connor (Robert Lonsdale). "Replacements" is about Tracey trying to find new ways to live but falling back into her old antics and realizing her life in Tower Hamlets might not be so bad. This episode introduces all of the different characters that live in her building. Like many shows, *Chewing Gum* runs the risk of not developing supporting characters enough. However, "Replacements," gives the audience a sense of Ola (Olisa Odele), Tracey's gay best friend. Ola is flamboyant, eccentric, and sassy. His homosexuality isn't hidden, and it is juxtaposed against Joy's faith at times throughout the episode. His character is inspired by Coel's experience in drama school where she grappled with her church's views on homosexuality and her new LGBTQ+ friends.[190] Ola's character represents an ongoing struggle Tracey has, balancing church and discovering the world around her. Earlier in the season, there is one other gay character, Ronald (John Macmillan). He is Tracey's ex-boyfriend and a devout Christian. In contrast to Ola who is confident and empowered, Ronald is with difficulty trying to come to terms with his own sexuality. This can be contrasted with Ola who is confident and empowered. Ola adds a new dynamic; described as a "Nigerian diva, quadruple threat: singer, dancer, fashion icon and full time 'bad bitch.'"[191] The show focuses a lot on Tracey's personal journey through sexuality, and although the audience doesn't see Ola date anyone, seeing alternative

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[189] Kaplan, Ilana. "'Chewing Gum': Meet the Mastermind Behind Netflix's Sex-Obsessed Britcom."
[190] Gilbert, Gerard. "Chewing Gum's Michaela Coel Interview: 'My Mum Used to Shave My Pubes'." *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 9 Jan. 2017, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/chewing-gum-michaela-coel-interview-tracey-gordon-andover-estate-beyonce-a7517861.html.
[191] "Interview with Olisa Odele for Chewing Gum." *Channel 4 Press*, 14 Dec. 2016, www.channel4.com/info/press/news/interview-with-olisa-odele-for-chewing-gum2.

representations of black men is empowering and crucial. Homosexuality is still not fully accepted in black communities (although this lack of acceptance is not an issue unique to Black Brits or African-Americans).

Catherine Squires researches "how dominant media stories [pit and rank] one marginalized group (blacks) against another (LGBTQ) by highlighting the anti-gay epithets made by black male celebrities [that] reduced all gays to being white males and all blacks (especially black males) to being straight and homophobic."[192] The hierarchy of minority groups are perpetuated and ingrained through modern media representations, and the groups are always seen separately. For example, they are divided into black *or* gay, never black *and* gay. Faith Cheltenham of BiNet USA said, "I know there's a lot of black LGBT activists who are really angry that we keep on having the conversation about black homophobia. And I'm like, at the same time, black homophobia has not gone away. So it's a very careful balance of understanding that."[193] Some argue that the deeply ingrained homophobia in African-American communities are rooted in religion, "The center of the black community is the black church, and that changes everything. […] You'll lose your family. You'll lose your culture. You'll lose your community, because usually, you are ejected,"[194] said Larry Duplechan, author of *Blackbird.* This perspective makes Ola an even more interesting character, as the audience sees and understands him through Tracey's eyes, as she grapples with her faith and family.

Nonetheless, Ola is so confident in his skin and seems not to be bothered by the difficulties of being a gay black man. Even when Ola dances in a sparkly gold halter top, Joy and Cynthia (Susan Wokoma) stare in confusion and shock, but say nothing judgmental, though they are extremely religious. The disappointment and horrified looks on their face are directed at Tracey, who has clearly been lying about the ability to heal people through prayer. Ola is completely comfortable on the estate and is not made to feel different or inferior by the other residents. In comparison, Ronald struggles to accept his homosexuality until the end of the first season. He almost marries Cynthia, Tracey's sister, before embracing his true self and running off with his lover. Ronald's character begins to evolve, becoming less uptight and

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[192] Lacy, Michael G., and Kent A. Ono. *Critical Rhetorics of Race*. New York University Press, 2011.
[193] Reynolds, Daniel. "Why Can't We Talk About Homophobia in the Black Community?" *Advocate*, 26 May 2015, www.advocate.com/politics/2015/05/26/why-cant-we-talk-about-homophobia-black-community.
[194] Ibid.

condescending, and finding an inclusive church, though it is no longer a black church. This journey and the depiction of a church that accepts people for who they are show the range of issues *Chewing Gum* touches throughout the episodes. It strives to show not just one depiction of what church life can be but the many possibilities that are as varied as the characters.

The most absurd part of "Replacements" is Tracey's experience with Ash (Johnathan Bailey), a man with a fetish for African women. It deals with race more pointedly than any other episode in the series. Although this specific event has never happened to Coel, she says, "being fetishized because of my skin? I've definitely encountered that wall of people."[195] The episode is beyond cringe-worthy as Tracey dresses up in faux-tribal costume and learns how to handle being fetishized. Ash approaches Tracey as she hands out fliers for Joy's church, and the two go on a date to a jazz show. Ash begins asking microaggressive questions, "Where are you from? No, where are you from-from? No, where did you *come* from?" To which Tracey responds, "Royal London Hospital Whitechapel." Ash's interrogation of Tracey is incredibly problematic, and *Chewing Gum* forces the audience to confront how uncomfortable and weird these type of actions are. Deeply rooted in Ash's questioning of Tracey's birthplace and heritage is the idea of excluding someone and reminding them that they are different. His fascination with her background seeks to reduce her to a place and allows him to make assumptions about her based on that stated place. It is the kind of interaction that can often go unnoticed by the one doing the questioning, not realizing that their interrogation is offensive: not causing much immediate harm, but adding to and reinforcing the exclusion of people and a hierarchy of races. This exchange is overdramatized, which draws attention to it—however, Tracey's oblivious response adds to the collective ridicule of Ash. Tracey's face expresses concern for Ash, worrying that he is dumb, rather than concern that he is drawing attention to her difference.

Coel said in an interview with *The Fader*, "I was born here. I've been a victim of racial abuse, of racial attacks, of people stereotyping me. I know many other black British people who have been a victim of those things."[196] Drawing attention to it through humor allows the ridiculousness to be exposed while touching on deeply troubling experiences many people of

[195] Kaplan, Ilana. "'Chewing Gum': Meet the Mastermind Behind Netflix's Sex-Obsessed Britcom."
[196] Myers, Owen. "Michaela Coel Is Doing Whatever The Hell She Wants." *The Fader*

color go through regularly. When Tracey and Ash begin hooking up, he starts making aggressive comments about her alterity, "You want this white dick, you naughty little black bitch?" Tracey looks confused, but doesn't say anything until he almost calls her the N-word, "yeah, you've been a bad little ni—." Back to her senses, Tracey glances at the camera in shock, then back to Ash to berate him for his inappropriate behavior. He responds that he got carried away and didn't know what he was saying because this is his "first black girl experience." Tracey turns directly to the camera and asks, "What's wrong with this guy, man?"

Using humor in this scene highlights how crazy and ridiculous the conversation is. Ash saying that it's his "first black girl experience," involves many levels of fetishizing and exoticism of Tracey and of the black female body. There is a long history of examining and othering black female bodies, a significant historical example being Saartjie "Sarah" Baartman, a woman from the Khoikhoi people of South Africa. She was nicknamed the Hottentot Venus[197] (goddess of fertility) and "was paraded around 'freak shows' in London and Paris, with crowds invited to look at her large buttocks,"[198] and other "extreme" features. When she died at the age of 26, a naturalist, "made a plaster cast of her body before dissecting it [and] preserved her skeleton and pickled her brain and genitals, placing them in jars displayed at Paris's Museum of Man."[199] This is an early public example where it was seen as normal to look, examine, and generalize the bodies of races deemed inferior or inhuman. It was a way to naturalize the differences, rooting them in science, while practicing a form of extreme reductionism—categorizing a race by its parts. There was no "black is beautiful," movement in the 1880's when Baartman was toured. The message rung clear: Black is Other. Years of this kind of othering and fetishization has led interactions like Tracey and Ash's to be normalized. Coel writes, "I think it's important to create an awareness that sometimes we are fetishized by people. It creates a dialogue."[200]

Not only does Ash fetishize Tracey's skin color, but he emphasizes the black versus white dichotomy, simply by repeatedly contrasting the colors. While a colonial power dynamic

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[197] Note that Hottentot is now considered a derogatory term for the Khoikhoi people.
[198] Parkinson, Justin. "The Significance of Sarah Baartman." *BBC News*, BBC, 7 Jan. 2016, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35240987.
[199] Ibid.
[200] Myers, Owen. "Michaela Coel Is Doing Whatever The Hell She Wants." *The Fader*

may be sexually enticing to some, it is a word that comes with years of violent history. Those comments, coupled with Ash's almost slip of the N-word shows that he sees Tracey only for her skin color. She is a body for him to live out a sick fantasy, and he devalues her through his words. In the same way that groups have reclaimed words like "nasty woman," or "bad hombre," there has been a similar push to reclaim the n-word. Reclaiming words involve flipping their meaning and defining them within a new context. In Audre Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," she writes about how the white patriarchal systems that are in place continues to keep women, especially women of color, down.[201] Working within the framework of the patriarchy cannot fully dismantle it and allow for equal rights for all. The same applies for linguistic reclamation. Having a white male use the word in a sexual situation is the exact opposite of taking it out of context and puts it back where it began, at the center of racialized discourse used to oppress one group while elevating another.

The n-word derives from definitions translating to the color black; thus, the etymology of the word is rooted in racism and attempts at Othering. It can be a daunting word to reclaim. However in recent years, some argue that through hip-hop culture, there has been a differentiation between ending the word in "er," and "a." This difference has been heavily discussed, "it's subtle, but crucial: it drains the original word of (almost) all of its power, while setting up a new home for it in black culture, one that whites cannot access.[202] Entailed within this idea of reclaiming a word and modifying it to take back power is the creation of an in-group of certain people that can use a word because of the way they look and an out-group of people who absolutely cannot for the same reason. "Saying n*gga and being able to do so without fear of backlash is like being part of an exclusive club. Other people want to be a part of this club and they can't […] even in your state of oppression, you've still got something the people of higher status don't," writes Nia Ashari Harris for *Affinity*.[203] This is the only encounter with the n-word on *Chewing Gum*, and it is used in the most racist and condescending way, compared to

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[201] Lorde, Audre. *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*. 1979
[202] Beaumont-Thomas, Ben. "Slut, White Power Logos, the N-Word – Can Everything Be Reclaimed?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 12 May 2015, www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2015/may/12/slut-white-power-logos-n-word-reclaimed.
[203] Harris, Nia Ashari. "How Black People Are Reclaiming The N-Word and Embracing Their Heritage." *Affinity Magazine*, 23 Feb. 2017, affinitymagazine.us/2017/02/23/on-reclaiming-the-n-word-and-embracing-black-heritage/.

characters in *Dear White People* using it as a term of endearment.

Unfortunately for Tracey, her interactions with Ash are far from over. In the next few scenes, Tracey must crash at Ash's while she attempts to get back in the good graces of her mother. The scene opens with Tracey barefoot, in an African-print bikini, necklaces, and bangles, wearing body paint and carrying a straw broom. This is a jolting change from Tracey's usual colorful, childish clothing. Ash tells her if she does this every day she can stay as long as she wants, and then asks, "Are you comfortable?" A laughable attempt at ensuring Tracey is a willing participant in his fantasies. The episode takes a turn when two children run in with their black mother, "Dad, I'm trying to find a reason to respect you here, but I can't," says one child. Ash and Tracey are horrified as a child hands Tracey a blanket to cover herself and Ash's ex-wife says, "[He said] never been with a black girl before? Glad to see that's still working for you Ashley." When Tracey is interrupted by her best friend Candice (Danielle Walters) calling through an intercom, a pep talk helps her gain the confidence to flip the situation. She snaps her fingers at Ash: "The black thing is NOT cool […] five minutes ago you were telling me you're gonna destroy me, […] go be in a remake of *Roots* man!" It is a total flip of Tracey's behavior, from a desperate, subservient girl looking for housing to an empowered woman who stands up for herself.

Ash rationalizes his behavior, saying that he is a "campaigner for ethnic minority power [and he] went to Kenya and The Gambia for my gap year and [he] loves jazz!" Ash renames his fetish, "positive discrimination," a term that is a pure contradiction. He attempts to legitimize his behavior time after time and implies that his work for people of color, as well as his love for Africa, allows him to have a free pass to say things that are offensive and reductionist. This notion plays into the common film trope of the white savior. Throughout Hollywood history, when films have been made about African-Americans, there has often been a white character that comes and fixes the situation, saves the black characters, and is the hero.[204] Films such as *The Blind Side, Django Unchained,* and *The Help* all follow a white savior narrative. Ash's racist psyche believes he is pulling Tracey into his pristine world. The mise-en-scene also reflects Ash's whiteness, a bright, modern apartment with white couches, floors, and table. The blanket

[204] Hughey, Matthew W. *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption*. Temple Univ. Press, 2014.

Tracey puts on is white, and the entire scene is contrasted with Tracey's skin color and faux-tribal outfit. She looks even more out of place but symbolically adds color as she storms out of the apartment, pouring wine and jam over Ash's sofa. The stain reminds audiences that the world of whiteness is a façade based on powerful, historical institutions and can be dismantled. Tracey's statement, "you are the weirdest white boy I've ever met," sums up "Replacements" and how Coel can make a complex situation seem simple. The episode truly showcases Tracey's life at home, a safe bubble in comparison to the world she is trying to explore, where encounters with strange men are not hard to find. She tries to balance her two lives and exposes the flaws and intricacies of both.

"Just Need Some Company"

This episode lends itself to another ridiculous situation in which only Tracey could find herself. Loaded with musings on religion, sexuality, and appearance, "Just Need Some Company," continues *Chewing Gum's* spirit of addressing the taboo while using humor to unite the audience and foster understanding. In this episode Tracey's cousin, Boy Tracy (Johnathan Livingstone), who has previously expressed romantic interest in Tracey tricks her, Candice and Candice's boyfriend, Aaron (Kadiff Kirwan) into going to a sex club. Simultaneously, Joy receives a surprise visit from the church council to investigate Joy Ministries. Throughout the episode, Tracey is worried about the way she looks and, after coming off of her interaction with Ash, if she will ever find a normal boyfriend. Seeking comfort, she talks to her friends about her appearance to which they say, "You're beautiful, in a Whoopi Goldberg way." The comment, made out to be a compliment but coming as an insult, follows a series of ruminations on Tracey's look including; "I'm more a Jay-Z than a Beyoncé," ("Replacements" episode). Compared to Candice, Tracey has darker skin, more pronounced features, and natural hair. Sitting in a room of white women and Candice (who is mixed race), Tracey doesn't look like the rest of them. Her insecurities, as well as her friends' biases, are rooted in conventional, European beauty standards that date back to the time of colonization. Tracey looks different, more like someone from Africa than a white British woman. She is automatically put down for not changing her appearance to conform to the dominant standard of beauty. Tracey does not relax her hair, lighten her skin, or wear much makeup.

This scene sets the tone for the episode, which explores Tracey's insecurities about her appearance and alludes to movements like "Stay Unfair, Stay Beautiful," (India) and "Black is Beautiful," (US/global) which have aimed to subvert the idea that light skin is better. It also references the hair industry; there is "good hair" considered to be hair that is wavy or straight in texture, soft to the touch, can grow long, and requires minimal intervention by way of treatments or products to be considered beautiful."[205] In 2009, Chris Rock released a documentary *Good Hair* that examined the industry and women's sentiments on spending time in the salon and the exorbitant prices they pay for treatments. Many women have begun to embrace their natural hair because of the influence of celebrities, the cost of relaxing hair, and the damage and pain that occurs during the process. The hair relaxing industry has been steadily shrinking, with relaxers market declining in value 34% since 2009 (based on a 2014 study).[206] Keeping one's natural hair is not only more cost-effective and often less work, it is arguably a form of rebellion, a way in which women can subvert authority and expectations and make their own rules. During the late 1960's, Angela Davis, an activist, and Black Panther party member, wore her hair in a natural afro and is said to have started the natural hair movement.[207] No part of her body—even her hair, could be controlled, regulated, or discriminated against. Coel writes that "women are tired of 'presenting' themselves; we just want to be who we are. This is a show about a girl who has no filter. She didn't learn to put up the pretense of being an acceptable female"[208] and therefore, lives by personalized standards of beauty and life.

Avoiding these beauty pressures is a feat in itself, as it is clear that Tracey's friends conform to the standards set by the media. "Whoopi Goldberg beautiful" is a backhanded compliment. She is not thought of as traditionally beautiful yet has been wildly successful in Hollywood. In addition to her film and television fame, Goldberg is known for her dreadlocks, for wearing sneakers on the red carpet, and for her anti-glamor attitude. "I would read that in the paper all the time. 'What's with the face? What's with the hair? Why does she look like this?

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[205] "What Is Good Hair?" *Perception Institute*, perception.org/goodhair/whatisgoodhair/.
[206] Sidibe, Nana. "This Hair Trend Is Shaking up the Beauty Biz." *CNBC*, CNBC, 1 July 2015, www.cnbc.com/2015/07/01/african-americans-changing-hair-care-needs.html.
[207] Rudick, Dina. *Chemical-Free Black Hair Is Not Simply a Trend - The Boston Globe*. Boston Globe, 28 May 2014, www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/2014/05/28/chemical-free-black-hair-not-simply-trend/kLVdugv5MChUejSkDXoO3J/story.html.
[208] Nolfi, Joey. "How Chewing Gum Creator-Star Michaela Coel Is Crashing the Patriarchal Party." *EW.com*, Entertainment Weekly, 3 Apr. 2017, ew.com/tv/2017/04/03/chewing-gum-michaela-coel-crashing-patriarchal-party/.

Why doesn't she wear high heels? Why does she dress like a guy? Is she gay, is she straight? What the hell?' For years and years and years. I guess you were supposed to be a little more glamorous," said Goldberg.[209] The comment about Tracey doesn't focus on how Goldberg has come into her own and risen to success but emphasizes the fact that Goldberg is not considered beautiful and think she should be doing things differently. Coel writes, "those of us who are content creators must make room for those we know are less privileged than we are,"[210] echoing Goldberg's sentiments about changing the entertainment industry. This push resonates with fans of *Chewing Gum*. Robin Boylorn from the University of Alabama says: "dark-skinned women are being recognized as beautiful, too. Not in a way that seeks to diminish or discredit the beauty of other women, but beauty standards are being expanded to be more inclusive."[211]

Tracey is traditionally uncool and constantly feels the need to be validated by others, despite her outwardly confident attitude. In this episode, Boy Tracy tricks Tracey and her friends into going to a sex club. Tracey and Boy Tracy, both raised by religious parents, are exploring new worlds outside of religion and want to become more sexually experienced. Tracey gets a confidence boost when the bouncer deems her "buff" enough to enter. The sex club and the fact that Tracey is with Boy Tracy produces an awkward tension. No one approaches Tracey, and she feels unwanted until she realizes the club's rule is that men can't approach women. During times of unease and uncertainty, she talks to the audience more than usual. At the sex club, Tracey's narration becomes a stream of consciousness. Just as Tracey thinks about pairing up with someone, she sees Boy Tracy having sex with an Asian woman. This moment seems to sober Tracey, making her realize that no matter how desperate she is to lose her virginity, she wants to be desired and sought-after, not a partner of convenience. Tracey makes a grand speech in the same style as in "Possession" at the Winsley Cosmetics party, but this time she is clearheaded. Tracey unites the club-goers, exposing that everyone is a little self-conscious, just wants to be loved, and would prefer meaningful sex. This episode in the second season really shows how

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[209] Capretto, Lisa. "Whoopi Goldberg: I Was No One's Idea Of What A Movie Star Should Look Like." *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 28 May 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/28/whoopi-goldberg_n_5400913.html.

[210] Coel, Michaela. "Adele's Tribute to Beyoncé Was a Frank Admission of Privilege. I Salute It | Michaela Coel." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 17 Feb. 2017, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/17/adele-beyonce-grammys-entertainment-race-class.

[211] Nsiah-Buadi, Christabel. "In 'Chewing Gum,' Tracey Is The Quirkiest And Freest Character On TV." *NPR*, 24 Apr. 2017, www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/04/24/515228121/in-chewing-gum-tracy-is-the-quirkiest-and-freest-character-on-tv.

much Tracey has matured since the first season. She is still awkward but is much more in control of her actions, is confident speaking in front of a large group of people, and is starting to realize what she is willing to compromise (or not) to gain access to a life outside her family and church. The raunchy club turns into a dance party, but Boy Tracy continues to have sex. Up until this point, not much is known about his sex life, but the audience gets acquainted with Boy Tracy very quickly. Right as he is about to ejaculate, he panics, pushes off his partner, and jumps in the pool, although he cannot swim. *Chewing Gum* is not afraid to show gross, visceral moments, like Boy Tracy's semen floating to the top as Tracy jumps in to save him, and the party immediately dies. This interaction is one of the most uncomfortable of the entire two seasons and puts Tracey in unfamiliar sexual and familial territory. She has undergone a complete transformation from the beginning of the episode when she felt unwanted and was even a little sad that Boy Tracy was no longer interested in her. By the end of "Just Need Some Company," Tracey is confident in her decisions, goes back to needing space from Boy Tracy, and has a new appreciation for the familiarity and safety of her mother and sister.

The sex club scenes are juxtaposed against scenes of her mother, Joy, her brother, and their impending church audit. From hip-hop to church songs, it shows the stark contrast of the life Tracey has grown up living and the life she aspires to live. At Joy Ministries, the inspector from the church council comes to listen to her sermon and decide if they will allow Joy to continue preaching. Joy's congregation is only a handful of people, and she is biased towards other Africans and heterosexual couples but, it is clear that she genuinely cares about people. At the end of her sermon, the church council woman throws herself at Joy's feet and repeats after her, embracing the power of the lord. Excitedly, Joy asks, "Does this mean I can keep preaching?" "Oh no, I'm shutting this thing down," she replies, with complete seriousness. This interaction, and the sadness on Joy's face shows how invested she is in religion and her church as a force for good in the community. Although Joy's tactics of yelling at people and calling them sinners are harsh, the intentions behind her actions are pure and come from a place of good-will. The show does not fully explore Joy's character; the audience only sees her in the context of disciplining Tracey or doing church activities. This is the first time the audience is able to see what religion means to Joy and why Tracey was raised with such a strong religious background.

Chewing Gum's representation of religion is unique and interesting because of Coel's background with Christianity. She discovered the Church through a friend at the age of eighteen

and became extremely religious, bringing her family into the Church and preaching to others.[212] Coel says, "They did an altar call where they say, 'If you know Jesus is your lord and saviour, put your hand up.' And I shot my hand up! I ran to the front and broke down in tears. Proper breakdown! From that day on, I became a Christian. I was a very extreme Christian."[213] Part of her love of the Church was its ability to unlock her creativity and boost her confidence, "there's psalms that tell you things that nobody tells you – that you're fearfully and wonderfully made, that you're beautiful, that you have worth, basically."[214] The Bible helped Coel tap into her artistic side, and she eventually attended drama school and distanced herself from the Church. Coel doesn't showcase that side of the Church in *Chewing Gum*; rather, it is contextual information that allows the audience to understand why Tracey is a virgin and so sheltered, as well as allowing Joy and Cynthia to develop more fully as characters. Coel has discussed that since entering drama school, she had a difficult time reconciling the views of her Pentecostal church with the respect and admiration she holds for her gay friends. This comes out in "Replacements," but also in "Just Need Some Company," as the audience understands that, although Tracey wants to go and experience new things, she is rooted in her family and home life which is tied heavily to Christianity. Her religious family allows Coel to create another vessel for comedy: Tracey balancing religious expectations with her inherent curiosity. The situations are endless, and Coel takes every aspect, including Church, to an ironic extreme which exposes their shortcomings. Coel writes of *Chewing Gum*, "it was heavily inspired by certain aspects of experiences: extremism, family relations, practicing abstinence."[215]

Chewing Gum demonstrates what the modern situation comedy can achieve. Through a non-traditional platform, Coel is able to take viewers from a sex club to a church seamlessly and show colorful scenes like Boy Tracy ejaculating in the pool without hesitation. By mixing physical comedy with relief humor and superiority theory, she creates a world that draws in the

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[212] Hattenstone, Simon. "Filthy, Funny and Christian: the Many Sides of Chewing Gum's Michaela Coel." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 4 Oct. 2015, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/oct/04/michaela-coel-chewing-gum-e4-comedy-series-men-and-sex.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Gilbert, Gerard. "Chewing Gum's Michaela Coel Interview: 'My Mum Used to Shave My Pubes'." *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 9 Jan. 2017, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/chewing-gum-michaela-coel-interview-tracey-gordon-andover-estate-beyonce-a7517861.html.
[215] Kaplan, Ilana. "'Chewing Gum': Meet the Mastermind Behind Netflix's Sex-Obsessed Britcom."

audience, creating a sense of community within the humor. *Chewing Gum* takes Tracey's perspective and by exaggerating her circumstances and actions, exposes and ridicules flaws in our society. Not all comedies translate well from the UK to the US, but being released on Netflix has allowed the show to permeate new audiences who are looking for content that explores new cultures and weaves important themes throughout each episode.

Conclusion

The new wave of TV shows analyzed in this project represent the best and most exciting comedies by people of color on Netflix. By examining Justin Simien's *Dear White People* (2017), Aziz Anzari's *Master of None* (2015), and Michaela Cole's *Chewing Gum* (2016) through the work of theorists of critical race theory, Othering, and comedy theory, I demonstrate the various ways in which these shows explore a deeper level of the minority experience while maintaining a humorous and broadly appealing tone become apparent. Netflix is a propitious medium for these shows; the company has worked hard to procure diverse programming and appeal to their global and growing audience. *Dear White People, Master of None*, and *Chewing Gum* have a lot in common, aside from the obvious connection of being written by and starring minorities. They take the best part of a situation comedy, the idea of presenting issues in a humorous light, and weave in complex themes of race, gender, and representation. Each show has relatable characters, whether you identify with their race or not.

These shows are fitting for Netflix's platform and brand because, although they do discuss social issues in every episode, they have a mainstream appeal. This collection of shows does not get labeled as niche; rather, they are known to focus on issues that apply to all people, such as dating and family relationships, in addition to racially specific issues, like not seeing enough Indian people on TV, or having a gun pulled on a character at a party. It is important for our slowly progressing society to see popular media become more representative of the world because TV is a powerful medium for social change. Exposing large audiences, like the ones available through Netflix, to the daily struggles of people of color by using humor, creates a level of empathy that bridges gaps of understanding and creates a more cohesive society. This project aims to allow readers to look at popular Netflix original shows through a more scholarly point of view and understand the progressive implications of telling the stories of the minority experience. It is important to acknowledge that all of these shows are Netflix originals. While a large part of their content is older shows that are redistributed on Netflix, their original series are indicative of where the brand is heading and what motivates certain show choices.

The future of Netflix, and the entertainment industry as a whole, seems to be heading in the direction of more representation and increasingly dynamic stories about minorities. Netflix has reached a programming deal with Shonda Rhimes (*Scandal, How to Get Away with Murder*), renewed *Dear White People* for a third season, released *Jessica Jones*, about a female superhero,

and most recently has debuted *Altered Carbon*, a show that is hailed for its diversity both in front of and behind the camera. As Netflix continues to grow worldwide, it makes sense that they will continue their trajectory of providing more diverse programming. With Hollywood's eyes on diversity and Academy-Award winner Frances McDormand's nod to the inclusion rider, it seems that the American film and television industry, which is still the entertainment giant of the world, will move from making diversity a trend to making it the standard. Unfortunately, Netflix CEO Reed Hastings has said that the company will not be adding inclusion riders to their contracts, "We're not so big on doing everything through agreements, we're trying to do things creatively."[216] Despite this setback, Netflix shows about minorities are doing incredibly well and the entertainment industry is realizing that these shows and films are not only culturally significant and impactful but also a smart business decision. As an industry leader, Netflix demonstrates that creating original content starring people of color is profitable, and these people are wanted audiences. The current trajectory of sharing diverse, innovative and inclusive narratives gives hope that this moment will become the standard.

[216] Graham, Jefferson. "Netflix's Reed Hastings: No Interest in 'Inclusion Riders' for Diversity." *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 8 Mar. 2018, www.usatoday.com/story/tech/talkingtech/2018/03/06/netflixs-reed-hastings-no-interest-inclusion-riders-diversity/401606002/.

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