

THE PERFORMANCE OF AUTHENTICITY: NEOLIBERALISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF BLACK IDENTITY IN JUSTIN SIMIEN'S *DEAR WHITE PEOPLE* (2014)

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Abstract

The research analyzes Justin Simien's 2014 film Dear White People using methods from critical race theory and neoliberal critique. The analysis focuses on how this movie explores racial identity development in today's American society within an elite university environment dominated by white students. Through its depiction of multiple Black identity displays this paper demonstrates Simien's complex examination of both simplified racial stereotypes and the 21st-century personal branding requirement which controls contemporary identity expression. This research examines Dear White People using detailed textual evaluations of significant moments and character transformations to reveal how the film contests fixed ideas about Blackness together with its examination of racial identity trading in neoliberal capitalist systems. This study contributes fresh perspectives to academic debates about representation themes alongside authenticity investigations and identity politics within modern American motion pictures.

Keywords: *Dear White People*, Critical Race Theory, Neoliberalism, Racial Identity, Black Identity

1. Introduction

Dear White People (2014), by director Justin Simien, entered the public sphere while America faced critical racial discourse. *Dear White People* arrived at theatres in 2014 while Ferguson tensions rose and Black Lives Matter captured public attention about systemic racism. The movie combined social commentary with sarcastic humour to critique racial tensions in institutions of higher learning. *Dear White People* depicts four Black students' experiences at Winchester University, an Ivy League institution, through the portrayals of Sam White (Tessa Thompson), Lionel Higgins (Tyler James Williams), Troy Fairbanks (Brandon P. Bell), and Coco Connors (Teyonah Parris), who face racial identity challenges among majority white students.

Critical pundits praised the film because it delivered an uncompromising study of modern racial dynamics alongside its multiple authentic Black characters who could not be simplified. The analysis of *Dear White People* stands out because it explores the authentic expressions of racial identification that exist alongside performative racial actions. Through his multifaceted representation, Simien displays the diverse dimensions of the American Black experience together with warnings about how neoliberal forces determine and limit self-identification strategies.

The research examines *Dear White People*'s portrayal and deconstruction of black identity formation while neoliberal economics dominates society through individual responsibility and market-centric solution systems and identity commodification. Through an analysis of *Dear White People*'s storytelling elements alongside character progressions and visual components, this

research reveals how Simien constructs racial authenticity against performative and neoliberal subjectivity mechanics in his work.

1.2 Research Problem

Dear White People explores the important conflict that emerges when Black people must balance real personal identification with designed identity showmanship inside predominantly white institutional zones. It shows characters engaged in perpetual self-identification contests with exterior pressure from white and black communities. Isola Huff uses neoliberal reasoning to create marketable personal brands, but these approaches clarify social progress while encouraging identity commodification to improve economic standing.

Previous scholarship scrutinized racial representation within modern cinema alongside neoliberalism's impact on identity construction individually, but their combined influence on Black American cinema lacks substantial academic exploration. To fulfil this research need, the research evaluates *Dear White People*'s portrayal of identity performance dynamics and authenticity inside the framework of neoliberal subjectivity.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What elements in *Dear White People* demonstrate the many ways Black individuals construct their identities within modern America?
2. How the neoliberal market demand for personal brand identity development affects racial self-representation?
3. How the *Dear White People* characters demonstrate approaches to balance their true self-representation with controlled identity acts.

1.4 Significance

This research generates knowledge which extends across film studies as well as critical race theory and cultural studies fields. Through analyzing neoliberalism's influence alongside racial identity formation in contemporary cinema this study deepens our comprehension of economic and political paradigms that operate on cultural production and representation. This analytical work presents generalizable lessons which benefit educational leadership alongside institutional policymakers and cultural critics who focus on diversity along with institutional racism within education and beyond.

According to film scholarship, the research demonstrates *Dear White People*'s position as a pioneering film that disrupts established methods of representing racial concerns in American cinema. Through its depiction of the diverse array of Black experiences, the film delivers an essential addition to modern Black cinematic works.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Contemporary Black Cinema and Representation

The investigation of Black representation in American cinema has reached new heights since Donald Bogle (2001) presented his initial analysis of Hollywood stereotypes in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. A newer approach within modern scholarship emphasizes dissecting multiple layers of representation appearing in both commercial and self-funded Black film productions.

Mask (2012) examines the progression of Black movies from the early twentieth century to the "New Black Cinema" period of the 1990s until the present day by showing how filmmakers have managed the dual demands of artistic freedom and market success. Through his research Gillespie

(2016) studies modern Black filmmakers as they confront Hollywood limitations during their attempt to depict realistic portrayals of Black experiences. The scholars underscore how independent cinema creates space for detailed representations of Black identity, which contextualize Simien's work.

According to Hooks (1996), visual representations serve as essential locations to validate or challenge dominant racial narratives in Black cinema. The "oppositional gaze" definition developed by Hooks enables us to examine Dear White People's approach toward modifying established depictions of Black racial identity. Wallace (2004) investigates how directors now use different cinematic devices to develop detailed and stereotype-challenging Black character depictions based on Hooks's academic foundation.

Guerrero's (2012) research tracks Black identity representations in post-civil rights era movies by showing how "problem film" imagery was supplanted by emerging diverse and multifaceted portrayals of Black experiences. Guerrero's analysis of the establishment of Black independent cinema throughout the 1980s and 1990s helps understand Simien's methods in Dear White People.

2.2 Neoliberalism and Identity Formation

Multiple researchers from various disciplines study how neoliberal policies affect the way people develop their identities. In his 2015 publication, Brown examines how neoliberal rationality changes democratic institutions and subjectivity while making market values relevant to every domain of human existence, including identity formation. Dear White People's characters understand identity development through Brown's examination of neoliberalism and its human capital transformations.

Harvey (2005) illustrates through historical analysis how neoliberalism emerged as both an economic theory and political initiative to drive social transformation and cultural production since the 1970s. Through his analysis, Harvey provides an important understanding of Winchester University as an institution which implements and promotes neoliberal values centred on competition and individual responsibility.

Racial formation theory, established by Omi and Winant (2014), demonstrates how social mechanisms and political events continue to modify racial meaning and classification. Neoliberalism's exclusive consideration of individual duty rather than framework analysis drives it to restructure race-related concepts while marginalizing structural analysis.

In their direct analysis of race and neoliberalism, Roberts and Mahtani (2010) show how discourses of neoliberalism "racialize" social issues by shifting blame from systematic factors toward individual choices. Their study helps identify how characters in Dear White People handle neoliberal understandings of race and achievement.

2.3 Performance, Authenticity, and Racial Identity

Research on authentic racial identity versus performative racial expression continues to be studied extensively among various scholars. Butler's influential theory about gender performativity (1990) serves as a foundation for Johnson (2003), who explores how racial identity performs in diverse cultural settings. Through his theory about "appropriating Blackness," Johnson's analysis shows how Dear White People characters handle their racial identity while spending time in mostly white settings.

The film's Black characters use respectability and accommodationism strategies to survive white institutions, as explained by Kawai's analysis of "model minority" discourse targeting Asian

Americans. Harris (2014) studies how educational settings shape Black identity development by analyzing the practices of "acting white", which Kimiko and Troy experience first-hand at Rivers. According to Robinson (2014), claims of American post-racialism conceal the existence of unremitting structural racial inequalities in contemporary culture. Her analysis positions *Dear White People* in relation to wider discussions about race, which emerged during the Obama presidency.

Jackson (2005) delivers a theoretical analysis showing how "real Blackness" becomes a marketable commodity within American popular culture through his examination of its consumption and commercialization. Jackson's research offers a theoretical examination of ways film characters use Blackness through performance as they seek advantages in social situations.

3. Theoretical Framework

An interdisciplinary analysis of *Dear White People* relies on critical race theory, performance studies, and critiques of neoliberal subjectivity to understand Black identity formation.

3.1 Research Methodology

This study combines qualitative methods by conducting a textual analysis of *Dear White People* and contextual investigations into its creation and reception. It adopts a qualitative approach because it enables researchers to explore the film's complete narrative, characters, and visual elements through thematic analysis. The research approach focuses on interpreting meaning and discovering patterns in film production through a detailed textual and critical examination of *Dear White People*.

Critical discourse analysis serves as the primary framework for examining how language and visuals construct, reinforce, or challenge specific social ideologies regarding power dynamics. The investigation of how *Dear White People* portrays and evaluates racial interaction and identity-building works best within contexts shaped by neoliberalism.

3.2 Interpretive Framework

A hermeneutic method guides data interpretation because it understands both the researcher's perspectives and the contextual meanings within texts. This investigation seeks to build a theoretically grounded analysis that helps explain contemporary cinema's approaches to racial identity alongside neoliberalism through its exploration of *Dear White People*.

The analysis applies an intersectional framework to show how different components of identity, such as race, together with gender, sexuality, and economic status, create intricate patterns. When implementing this analysis method, researchers can steer clear of stereotypical interpretations that treat "Black identity" as one uniform block but instead explore its multiple definitions.

3.3 Critical Race Theory

Through Critical Race Theory we can examine how *Dear White People* portrays structural racism together with its influence on personal identity perception. The legal scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, and Richard Delgado developed CRT, which demonstrates how racism operates as a structural system embedded inside American institutions and higher education. This examination draws concepts from CRT, which include:

- **Racial microaggressions:** Several examples appear throughout the film that show unintentional discriminatory behaviours which create a hostile environment for Black students.

- **Interest convergence:** Bell's (1980) theory demonstrates how institutions handle racial disputes in the film by prioritizing image boosting rather than completing meaningful changes.
- **Intersectionality:** Through her framework, Crenshaw (1991) demonstrates how characters move through different simultaneous aspects of self that combine race with gender, sexuality, and social class.
- **Storytelling as counter-narrative:** CRT promotes marginalized groups to narrate their own experiences because their truth challenges narrative dominance, which appears in Sam's show alongside Lionel's journalistic work.

3.4 Performance Theory

Through theories of performativity from scholars Butler (1990) and Goffman (1959), this research investigates how Dear White People characters perform multiple racial identities depending on their specific situations. Key concepts include:

- **Identity performativity:** People attain their identities through continuous performance and norm-following, which demonstrates that identities are not born within individuals.
- **Code-switching:** Social contexts drive characters, including Troy and Coco, to change their presentation of self through behaviour and speech patterns.
- **Passing and covering:** Individuals use strategies to hide pieces of their identity while trying to gain entry into preferred dominant groups.
- **Strategic essentialism:** The temporary use of essentialist positions for political gain explains Sam's radio character according to Spivak's (1988) theory.

3.5 Neoliberal Critique

The analysis uses a critique of neoliberalism to examine how market thinking affects character development throughout the film. The analysis relies on intellectual contributions from Brown (2015), Harvey (2005) and additional authors through three primary concepts.

- **Homo economicus:** In Brown's framework, the neoliberal subject treats everything from identity to life's domains as human capital assets they can grow and use for their competitive gain.
- **Entrepreneurial self:** Under the neoliberal doctrine, one functions as a business entity by consistently investing in and promoting personal capabilities through marketing strategies.
- **Personal branding:** Personal branding emerges through strategic development and promotion techniques, which generate marketable personas demonstrated by campus self-presentation of characters.
- **Commodification of difference:** We refer to this process as the transformation of ethnic and cultural characteristics into business opportunities under multicultural capitalism.

This research bridges three theoretical approaches to study how Dear White People shows and interprets the sophisticated relationships between racial identities and performative aspects and neoliberal economic demands in present-day America.

4. Textual Analysis

4.1. Narrative Structure and Multiple Perspectives

Through its chapter organization, Dear White People illustrates different Black experiences and positions without subscribing to one dominant authentic interpretation of the Black experience. Winchester University's racial navigators Sam, Lionel, Troy, and Coco receive individual section focus as the film analyzes how they handle their racial identities. The narrative structure acts both

as a dialectical critique of simplistic Blackness definitions and demonstrates that no single personality contains the complete Black experience.

From the start of the movie, the audience learns about Pastiche's controversial "blackface party" through news reports before the narrative moves backwards to show how this incident developed. The framing device positions racial conflict at the story's core so the film can investigate each character's deeper motivations separate from their response to the single racial incident.

Film scholar Zeba Blay (2014) highlights *Dear White People's* most impressive aspect as the refusal of the story to present its figures as one-dimensional caricatures (p. 42). Through multiple focusing characters, Simien builds a complete narrative that shows the varied ways Black people deal with racial issues when they work in majority-white environments.

4.2 Sam White: Strategic Essentialism, Sam White and her Politics of Resistance

Host Sam White of the campus radio show "Dear White People" first presents a simple Black resistance and authenticity platform when she interacts with the radio audience. Through her radio character, Sam White provides direct assessments of white privilege alongside the sneaky ways racism shows itself. She says "White people: you need exactly two friends of any racial group who are not black to prove yourselves non-racists." (Simien, 2014, 0:05:12). Tyrone from your pot delivery service does not qualify as a real "black friend" (Simien, 2014, 0:05:12). Through this profound display of Black political radicalism she earns a dual reputation on campus which attracts both appreciations from African American students while earning disfavour from white university officials.

Throughout the film, viewers discover that Sam's militant identity is based on deliberate construction. While alone, she plays Taylor Swift songs, which leads to her extreme embarrassment when members of her Black community spot her. She says defensively to Reggie, "I like Taylor Swift." "So what?" (Simien, 2014, 0:38:24). During this scene, viewers see Sam perform Black authenticity in public while hiding her private preferences, revealing that her militant image may function as a strategic tool.

The dual storylines of Sam's interracial romance with Gabe while hiding her bi-racial status serve to layer complexities onto her character further. In response to her Black colleague Reggie's accusations of hypocrisy, Sam states, "I do not see why I cannot be critical of a culture and still be a part of it" (Simien, 2014, 1:17:08). The film challenges essentialist views of authenticity by demonstrating that racial identities actually consist of mixed elements rather than remaining pure and coherent.

The approach Sam uses to identify with her ethnicity fits within Spivak's (1988) framework of strategic essentialism, which describes how certain political aims require short-term acceptance of essentialist beliefs. Through her radio program, Sam presents an idealized militant representation of Blackness for university political objectives while simultaneously revealing the boundaries of such radical positions in private conversations. Gabe learns that "my show is a release valve," according to Sam. Knowing that you speak truth to those who control [sic] power says it all. (Simien, 2014, 0:54:12).

Throughout the movie, Sam's strategic approach receives no complete endorsement or dismissal. Through this storyline, the film showcases Sam as a multifaceted character who fights to unite her individual needs with her political obligations across a campus atmosphere where Black students face a binary option between blending in or standing out. According to Hall (1996), "identity

emerges through a constant process of 'becoming' and 'being'" (p. 225), while Sam's story illustrates this ongoing development rather than presenting one unchanging authentic identity.

4.3 Lionel Higgins: Intersectionality and Outsider Status

Through his role, Lionel Higgins shows how intersectional identities face complex marginalization, while Sam's strategic essentialism stands as a distinctive identity approach. Lionel walks through several interconnected dimensions of marginalization because he feels at home in neither Black nor white groups. At the start of the film he shares his perspective: The film's main character declares "I am neither Black nor White" (Simien, 2014, 0:22:45).

Lionel's character serves as a counterargument against simplistic views of Black identity because his diverse preferences, unique personality, and ethnicity defy simple racial labelling. His unhappy experience in the Black student union, together with his initial refusal to handle "black issues" for campus publications, shows that identity labels can both limit and enable. Crenshaw (1991) shows in her intersectionality research that people with multiple marginalized identities encounter exclusion in single-axis identity political frameworks.

Lionel's story reaches its turning point during his visit to the Black student house, where students debate the casting questions between actors with light versus dark skin colour. As an outsider to the argument, Lionel watches white-black tensions emerge between students while keeping himself detached from their conflict. After Troy cuts his hair, Lionel stands at a threshold of embracing his place within Black identity by reshaping his ethnicity according to his own private choices.

Through his journalistic work, Lionel has discovered how to utilize his dual position between insider and outsider status to confront blackface racism at the party while developing stronger connections to all his cultural identities. His character suggests authenticity results less from following established stereotypes of Black identity than from fully understanding your specific background.

4.4 Troy Fairbanks: Respectability Politics and Institutional Power

As the university's dean of students son, Troy Fairbanks showcases how individuals deal with racial identity in predominantly white educational environments differently. Troy represents the ideology of respectability politics through his combination of good looks, wide popularity and moderate political stance. Respectability politics centres on individual success alongside norms acceptance and strategic self-presentation methods.

Troy's father supports this strategy by telling him that Montana finds that her Ivy League contacts will function as a lifelong support system. That is why you are here. He wants them to feel good about their involvement in the life of a poor black child from a poor community. Berlin's words reveal, "And when you are running the studio, or the network, you can decide what gets to be on TV" (Simien, 2014, 0:44:32). Through this advice, Troy's father fosters what Omi and Winant (2014) would describe as a neoliberal racial project that uses personal success and marketplace advancement instead of community activism or systemic change to measure racial progress.

The persona that Troy deliberately constructs as student body president, dutiful son, and potential humour writer aligns with the "entrepreneurial self" described by Brown (2015). For strategic effect he uses his human capital to intentionally construct an identity which brings maximum success within established institutions. His lingering charm together with his carefully picked interests along with his measured opinions are elements of his brand directed at drawing support from both white and Black communities.

Through the story, the psychological toll becomes apparent from adopting this strategy. The heavy pressure of expectation drives Troy to seek relief by smoking marijuana in bathroom spaces, which leads him to tell his girlfriend, "I do not even know if I want to be president. According to Simien (2014 at 0:57:18), Troy says "it is just what is expected of me.". It is just what is expected of me" (Simien, 2014, 0:57:18). The window destruction attack on his father's office during the blackface protest demonstrated the weaknesses of respectability when used to both express individual self and effect meaningful change.

4.5 Coco Conners: An individual's Successes through Cultural Assimilation and Strategic Appearance-based Approaches

Black identity formation through strategic assimilation and strategic appearance use forms the perspective of Colandrea "Coco" Conners. Through her straight weave and deliberate styling, Coco makes her stance clear against "faked authenticity" as she informs Sam, "You are not some revolutionary; you're Obama's love child." "You're Obama's love child" (Simien, 2014, 0:32:56). Racial identity through Coco's perspective illustrates the clearest example of neoliberal principles at work. She employs her appearance alongside speech and behaviour as capital investments designed to yield the highest possible social and professional outcomes. Through an informative video blog, she reveals her approach to interactions. The world exists outside your comfort zone, so I will not change my speech no matter what you think (Simien, 2014, 0:30:18).

As the film shows, Coco adopts what seems like assimilationist behaviour because she learned these habits as a result of her social experiences with class discrimination and being discriminated against based on skin colour. Coco tells Sam through her confrontation, "Not all of us can have rich daddies who pay our rent while we figure things out" (Simien, 2014, 0:32:42). During their conversation, Coco reveals that "light-skinned girls with names like Coco get their ass beat" (Simien, 2014, 1:26:05) in her childhood Chicago neighborhood. By clarifying her perspective on both individual and communal identity through real-life experiences, Coco shows that a simple portrayal of her as self-hating or opportunistic becomes implausible.

Coco strategically decides to join the blackface party to capture evidence of white students' racial bigotry as she strategically positions herself for a future reality TV show spot. Black women use "crooked room" political strategies for managing spaces where both racism and sexism create barriers, according to Harris-Perry (2011). Coco's choices in the film display her multidimensional response to restrictive options instead of portraying her as someone who accepts white standards.

4.6 Visual Aesthetics and Identity Performance

Through its visual execution, *Dear White People* illustrates how racial identity manifests during performance. Production design, cinematography, and costumes create visual elements that help the film investigate how people build and depict racial identities across diverse environments.

Through its visual language the film uses distinct approaches to mirror its characters' ways of performing their identities. Sam's scenes rely on high-contrast lighting techniques and dynamic camera movements to reproduce the visual signatures of the Black Power movement that appear in her spoken messages. When Troy appears in the scenes, a traditional yet neat cinematographic approach emerges because he has adapted his behaviour to match institutional protocols. In the observation-based camera work, Lionel creates viewer distance from social encounters, whereas Coco uses careful personal presentation to emphasize self-evaluation in her scenes.

The visual representation of identity performance heavily depends on the implementation of costume design. The way Sam chooses to wear her natural hair while adopting activist-style

clothing stands in direct contrast to Troy's preppy dress code and Lionel's minimalist wardrobe, but Coco represents a dual performance by combining glamorous wigs with fashionable attire to show different relationships to Black identity and dominant white culture. According to Hooks (1992), style serves as both an instrument for oppression and a tool for resistance, while the film showcases how personal style reveals identity performance through embodiment.

In the film's significant moments, the mirror functions as a critical visual theme that repeats. During Sam's radio preparation, as well as Lionel's haircut inspection before the party alongside Coco's pre-party makeup application, the reflective surfaces function as powerful symbols of personal transformation and public/private identity divergence. During these scenes, the film illustrates Du Bois' (1903/2007) concept of "double consciousness" by showing characters who "always look at one's self through the eyes of others" (p. 8).

4.7 Thematic Analysis

4.7.1 The Performance of Authenticity

Identity authenticity establishes itself as the central topic which analyzes racial identification in *Dear White People*. During the entire film the main figures fight to understand what represents genuine Black culture and how its genuine characteristics operate across diverse environments. The movie presents ongoing criticism of racial authenticity as an essential category by showing identity emerges through performative acts aimed at reaching understanding instead of being intrinsic to someone.

Sam addresses Coco's hair conflict directly when he accuses her of presenting inauthentic Blackness by wearing straightened hair. Coco asks, "What are you saying? Is natural hair now the current fashion trend?" That's good to know. According to Coco, "I thought we were supposed to be liberated" (Simien, 2014, 0:32:04). Through this conversation, we see how seemingly "genuine" Black expressions (such as natural hairstyles) get transformed into marketable trends that must conform to trendy requirements and social conventions.

The film complicates authentic expressions by uncovering Sam's biracial background and showing her connection with a white male teaching assistant. Sam defends herself from Reggie's accusations, stating, "I do not hate white people. Simien reveals this statement at 1:17:15, and the character says, "I hate the way white people see me." I hate the way white people see me" (Simien, 2014, 1:17:15). Prevalent in white-majority spaces is the essential distinction between structural racism criticism and individual white person hatred that Black people must navigate.

According to Jackson (2005), "Notions of authentic Blackness are constantly redefined to serve particular interests" in his analysis of racial authenticity in American culture (p. 12). The film demonstrates how Winchester's social circuits require students to employ authentic Blackness in specific ways, evident through Sam's militant style, Troy's model minority staging, and Coco's strategic white assimilation.

4.7.2 Neoliberalism and Identity as Brand

The movie *Dear White People* shows how neoliberalism changes the manner in which people construct their racial identities. Winchester University functions as a microcosm of neoliberal society, which turns identity into strategic capital through its marketing for competitive benefit. Every character develops their racial identity through deliberate self-identification, aiming to attract specific audiences and accomplish particular goals.

Through her radio show "Dear White People," Sam establishes her status as an authentic black resistance leader, which attracts supporters and increases her campus influence. Troy creates a

dignified Black achievement brand, which attracts support from Black and white audiences. Coco creates a brand image based on elite sophistication, which she believes can lead to media recognition. The least politically active Lionel creates a journalistic brand by using his status as an outside perspective.

According to Brown (2015), the neoliberal model shows how people transform into "human capital" through which they invest their self-components, including racial attributes, for market gains. According to Dean Fairbanks' guidance Troy would not have reached his current level of success if he maintained his speech patterns found on the HBO show 'The Wire. No. According to Simien (2014 at 0:44:19), these are the games we need to play if we want to progress. The counsel makes clear identity performance functions as strategic activity in a competitive environment instead of providing authentic self-expression.

The blackface party at the film's climax allows white students to exploit Black cultural stereotypes just for amusement alongside their assertions of post-racial immunity, except in how they trivialize Black identity. Dear White People uses a bold blackface party scene to demonstrate the extent of identity commercialization, which occurs alongside the less obvious manifestations among its Black characters. The result shows how neoliberal logic wraps around every racial conversation in current society.

4.7.3 Institutional Power and Individual Agency

Dear White People examines how institutional power intersects with individual agency when creating racial identities in society. The movie shows how Winchester University operates as an institution with structurally unequal practices, forcing Black students into particular housing arrangements while simultaneously choosing Academic programs that ignore non-Western viewpoints. Through traditional claims and meritocratic arguments, as well as colourblind ideology, these institutional systems create boundaries for Black students' choices while rejecting accountability.

The institution's randomized housing system functions to end the existence of the Black student house while demonstrating structural inequality. While administratively termed as an integration tool the lottery disrupts areas where Black students build communal bonds. Sam defends, "Black student union is not about self-segregation" in his meeting with administrators. According to Sam, the Black Student Union provides "a place for ourselves" (Simien, 2014, 0:18:45). The statement demonstrates how supposedly neutral policies can strengthen existing racial divisions by refusing to address the unique needs of minority populations.

Through storytelling, the film shows how its characters learn to exercise their agency by creating different methods to move within institutional frameworks while potentially challenging those systems. Through his radio show and protest activity, Sam actively challenges institutional racism. Through his investigative reporting, Lionel reveals hidden racism that conventional society prefers to ignore. The character of Troy uses institutional channels to pursue step-by-step change. Coco maintains a flexible approach when interacting with institutions to pursue plans she deems important.

The "matrix of domination" identified by Collins (2000) demonstrates that power operates through diverse, interconnected systems that demand distinct negotiation strategies from people based on their system-related positioning. Dear White People shows that successful resistance to institutional racism needs diverse methods that match the unique requirements of each setting and target outcome.

4.8. Critical Reception and Cultural Impact

When *Dear White People* debuted in 2014, it received mainly positive reviews that praised its thoughtful handling of racial matters and well-drawn characters. The film maintains a total of 91% positive reviews on the Rotten Tomatoes website, which many reviewers consider appropriate for today's racial issues and directorial boldness. Through his New York Times review, A.O. Scott (2014) described *Dear White People* as "a sharp and ambitious satire about the tenuous place of minorities in a world of white privilege."

Various critics disagreed about how the film's progression unfolded because its sense of organization seemed unclear to them as well as some of its central personalities being too simplified. Director Justin Simien's overprecision in *The New Yorker* created deficiencies in "*Dear White People*", according to Richard Brody (2014). The carefully mapped scenarios in "*Dear White People*" appear too perfectly planned so that they feel artificial. Several reviewers noted this problem with the movie's storytelling methodology: The movie balances showing various Black perspectives at a cost to its organized storytelling structure and full characterization development. The cultural impact of the production reached well beyond what critics had to say about it. The title, along with its promotional strategy, sparked extensive dialogues regarding racial connections among students and throughout wider American communities. Before watching the film, several right-wing commentators attacked it with prejudice because they thought its title rejected white people. In contrast, different right-wing observers applauded the direct exploration of racial conflicts in what they saw as a post-racial America.

The film *Dear White People* inspired new racial representations which later appeared throughout American media. The movie's achievement led Netflix to transform *Dear White People* into an award-winning series extension that deepened the original themes. Through its release, the film started a trend of content made by Black creators explicitly dealing with racial matters in the American media sphere of the mid-2010s, together with shows *Atlanta*, *Insecure* and *Black-ish*.

Dear White People arrived in theatres at a moment when racial injustice gained increased national visibility because of Black Lives Matter activism that started after Trayvon Martin's killing. During this time, *Dear White People* demonstrated how racism works in spaces that claim to be progressive while matching larger cultural discussions about systemic racism and white societal privileges.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of Justin Simien's *Dear White People* examines the complicated relationship between racial identity, performative scripts, and neoliberal forces in present-day USA society. The film presents an advanced critique of racial simplification while exposing identity commodification in neoliberal systems through its storytelling structure, including multiple characters and its satirical tone.

This study reveals multiple central discoveries:

Dear White People rejects racial essentialism by demonstrating that Black identity develops through various authentic ways. Within predominantly white institutional spaces that impose their own limitations, Sam, whose persona differs from Lionel, Troy, and Coco, demonstrates that Black authenticity cannot be defined by one stereotype. In this representation, racial identities take a shape that can change according to specific contexts. At the same time, people consciously work to create their racial self-representation rather than simply accepting what they were born with.

Through its storyline, the film demonstrates how neoliberal approaches influence individual identity creation because they promote the development of personal marketing brands from racial identification. Blackness serves as strategic capital for each character who optimizes its use in socially and institutionally competitive spaces. Modern culture conducts parallel yet conflicting actions which simultaneously glorify differences while turning them into marketable currency.

The film reveals how institutional systems meet individual personal choices to create racial experiences that lead to specific identity outcomes. It shows Winchester University acting as an institution with structural inequality, yet its students fight back through multiple resistance methods and accommodation techniques. Instead of reducing race to either victimhood or individual resistance narratives, the film demonstrates that racial identities emerge from the interplay between social networks and individual choices.

Throughout the film, viewers learn about the various forms of racial diversity within black communities and the ways they can work together. Through its portrayal of Black characters with differing perspectives on racial identity, *Dear White People* presents an argument that fighting racism effectively demands universal acceptance of minority experiences and the discovery of a shared battleground in opposition to oppression.

The research presents new insights that expand current literature investigations regarding race and representation in the context of contemporary American neoliberal culture. Research about *Dear White People*'s handling of diverse racial themes strengthens comprehension of how the film serves as both a mirror and a shaper for racial discussion.

Through films such as *Dear White People*, the American public can develop better ways to study racial justice matters and representation questions. Simien's work demonstrates the possibilities of complex racial understandings that transcend traditional stereotypes and reductionist market tactics for the twenty-first century through its depiction of diverse Black experiences.

The evolution of *Dear White People* themes from film to Netflix series demands exploration along with an examination of new critiques in *Bad Hair* (2020), which follow his work on racial authenticity and commodification. Further studies that compare *Dear White People* to other academically-themed films made by contemporary Black directors, such as Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* and Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman*, would demonstrate current filmmakers' attempts to challenge traditional depictions of race within American cinema.

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