



INTERROGATING IDENTITY IN THE FILM *DEAR WHITE PEOPLE*:  
AN EXAMINATION OF AFROCENTRISM AND EUROCENTRISM

A Thesis

Presented to the faculty of the Department of Communication Studies  
California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of  
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Communication Studies

by

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SPRING  
2017

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ABSTRACT  
of  
INTERROGATING IDENTITY IN THE FILM *DEAR WHITE PEOPLE*:  
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by  
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This thesis looks at the representation of African American identity in the film *Dear White People* (2014). I specifically analyze the main protagonists to understand how African American identity is being developed in *Dear White People* using the Nigrescence model developed by Cross (1971; 1991). Furthermore, I looked at how Afrocentric and Eurocentric characteristics are reflected in the narrative development of the main characters using the narrative paradigm. In addition to the narrative paradigm, standpoint theory was employed as an additional lens to determine in what ways the characters were able to achieve a standpoint and confront hegemony or not in their storyline. Given this notion, my final research question looked at the implications for perceptions about African American principles and values when films about African Americans reflect Afrocentrism or Eurocentrism.

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## DEDICATION

When I think about the process of educating myself and obtaining a Masters' degree, I reflect on why I am doing what I am doing and whom I am doing it for. My "why" is for my daughter, *Damya Amirah Smith*. I pray that when she gets an opportunity to read this that she understands the value of an education as an African American in this country. I pray that she, like me, chooses to use education as a liberation tool for not only herself but for others as well. Education has opened my eyes to the glory and the possibilities of the world and has afforded me several opportunities that I could not have imagined. *MyMy*, Daddy loves you and hope that I can be a shining example of no matter where you come from, if you put your mind to it, you can do it.

Finally I dedicate this piece to those that went before me. I love you all and will see you in due time. Rest in Power:

*Essie Lee Lattier, Henry Dunn, Willie Mae Addison, Creneal "Pop" Addison,  
Bertha Smith, Cynthia "Toy" Smith, Nelson "Dada" Lattier Jr., Percy  
Sanderson.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first want to give an honor to the Creator who made me. The one who has walked me through the storms; the one who has never left me even when I have forsaken him. As I am reminded in Deuteronomy 31:6 “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” These words have always stuck with me and I am thankful for those who exposed me to my faith early in my life.

*Danielle*, I want to say thank you for being the best mother in the world to our daughter. Although I may not tell you this often, I am extremely proud of the accomplishments you have made in your life and the sacrifices you made to support me in my educational endeavors. God could not have sent a better partner for me to stand alongside. I look forward to building a strong foundation with you in the coming years.

*Christine Miller*, Dr. Miller, you have been a joy to not only work with but I appreciate each and every conversation that we have had about my life journey. I can remember hearing horror stories about you from other Communication Studies students, I thought to myself, “Is she really that hard of a professor?” After taking a class with you, I can concur that you are a firm professor (in a nice way though), but as I have told you on multiple occasions, I love it! As an African American male in academia, I never want people to feel sorry for me or feel as though they are obligated to be nice to me or do nice things for me for fear of being called a racist. With that said, I strive to do my best at anything I do, so I gravitate to those who are willing to call out my flaws, particularly



when it is regarding my academics. I never want a conference to accept my research paper just because they need to fill their “Black student/scholar quota”. I never want a professor to give me an A- even though I really deserved a B+. I prefer tough love because in the end it only benefits me in the long run and Dr. Miller you have given that to me throughout this process. Your feedback throughout this process is second to none and I appreciate everything you have done for me. I look forward to working with you in the near future.

*Michele Foss-Snowden*, Dr. Foss, we have a long history. I was first introduced to Communication Studies through your husband BJ. From that point he introduced me to you and I must say I am glad he did. Like Dr. Miller, you have been critical of my writing and research in a good way that has only strengthen me to become “better” at what I do. I appreciate the long talks we had over the years about a plethora of topics, the rides to my car after class, and you just being who you are and what you represent in our department. I will never forget that day in the elevator when I saw you and you said, “Congratulations!” When you said this, I had no clue what you were congratulating me for. At the time, I had just had MyMy so I thought you were saying congratulations on the baby. As the elevator doors were getting ready to close, you said, “You got into the program”. As soon as you said those words, the doors closed, it was like a scene in a movie. You should have seen the look on my face as I stood there in disbelief. I remember walking to class like, “oh my God, what have you blessed me with?” Of course, I had no idea what graduate school would be like nor would I know if I was going

to be able to excel in the program. As we can see now, I was able to get through the program and will be graduating with a 3.88 grade point average. Again, thank you Dr. Foss for everything, I appreciate you and your family for supporting me during my time at Sacramento State.

*Carmen Stitt*, Dr. Stitt, I am not sure if you know this or not but you are the one who got me interested in using *Dear White People* as an artifact for a rhetorical study. I remember that day in your office when you displayed the trailer of this film and I thought to myself, “this is it”. I appreciate everything you have done for me. We have class together in COMS 55 and 183 and I have enjoyed every bit of it. Thank you for everything you have done for me during my undergraduate and graduate years.

*Andrew Stoner*, Dr. Stoner, I appreciate our long conversation in your office when you first got to Sacramento State. We talked about a lot! I thank you for serving on my committee even though you were brand new to the academy. I love your feedback on the drafts of this project and just so you know I am inspired by your work ethic to write books. I hope one day to have the energy to write like you write. I think you are an amazing person and look forward to working with you in the future hopefully.

*Mark Stoner*, Dr. Stoner, unfortunately you did not get to serve on my committee because you decided to retire right when I needed you the most (☺). However, I was still able to succeed and you stayed around to help and mentor me throughout the graduate program. Out of anyone that I have acknowledged thus far, I appreciate you the most because you literally have been with me since I was a young sophomore, still unsure of

myself and I told you that I wanted to be a Communication Studies professor. Of course you looked surprised and seemed to have a little doubt but I think I am on my way to reaching that goal. I would not have been on this path had it not been for your instructional skills. You are truly a guru at instructional communication. In any class that I have had with you, I can really say that I learned something. Many of the skills you taught me I use in my current career, particularly when it comes to designing trainings, advising, or anything that has to do with instruction. I am glad I have your cell phone number and I promise to stay in contact with you throughout the years. Thank you so much for your dedication to teaching and learning, your service to me has been invaluable and I hope I can become just a fraction as good as you are as an instructor and a mentor.

Lastly, I must acknowledge my mother, Diedra “Lady” McMiller, my family and the brothers of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. Mom, you already know how I feel about you so no need to reiterate it here. I just want to tell you that I thank you and love you for everything you have done for me. To my dear family, I thank you all for supporting not only me but each other. The fidelity we show to each other is remarkable. When there is a birthday party we show up. When there is tragedy in the family, we show up. When there is a camping trip, graduation, New Years’ party, Thanksgiving, Christmas, we show up. We may not be the model family but we got one thing and that is love for one another. You guys are my backbone and when no else is there for me I know I can count on my

family to be there for me. Thank you all and I look forward to the future growth of our family.

To the brothers of Kappa Alpha Psi, I just want to say thank you for grooming me into the man I am today. In particular, I want to thank Edward Sanders, Robert “BJ” Snowden, Kenneth “Lynn” Greer, the Iota Beta chapter and all other brothers that I have come into contact with. You brothers have showed me that it is possible for an African American man to be “cool” but also be educated at the same time. While this may be an abstract idea for some, knowing how to manage your identity as an educated African American man is something that can be difficult. Understanding your environment and knowing how to navigate it can be a daunting task. So to Kappa Alpha Psi, thank you!

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Statement of Problem**

For over a century, there have been films written, directed, and produced by African Americans that have highlighted the struggles and successes of members of the African American community. However, many films in this genre have been criticized for their lack of connectivity to Africans in Africa, along with an understanding of that culture (Hall, 2001; Staples & Jones, 1985; hooks, 1996). In other words, several films made by African Americans have adopted a Eurocentric perspective and a western viewpoint when narrating the African American experience, as opposed to an Afrocentric perspective grounded in an orientation to African people and their experiences.

Perhaps this is to be expected. After all, it may be natural to assume that films developed by westerners for western markets would adopt western perspectives. Indeed, it's impossible *not* to adopt a cultural perspective, whether very subtly or quite blatantly, in any narrative endeavor. However, some have critiqued the assumption that a western cultural perspective is appropriate in storytelling about people of other cultures. Such critiques challenge the supposition that, for instance, narratives of the African American experience should feature Eurocentric rather than Afrocentric points of view (Shohat & Stam, 2014).

This type of critique becomes even more profound when the subject matter of the narrative features either an implicit or explicit examination of cultural issues in a



particular community. In other words, to say that all narratives adopt a cultural perspective is to acknowledge that all storytelling is positioned, that is, the story is told from a particular point of view. But some narratives go farther, offering a self-reflexive examination of that point of view while the story is being told.

One form of narrative that does this particularly well is film. Movies that feature characters and plot lines which delve into issues such as identity politics are able to tell an entertaining story while at the same time raising issues that prompt the audience to question the assumptions about identity and culture that are embedded in the story.

In the African American film genre, films such as *Dear White People* specifically focus on the topics of identity, race, race relations, along with other facets of the African American community. These elements warrant analysis, so this thesis will examine the cultural perspective adopted in *Dear White People*. In particular, the analysis will probe how this film incorporates or fails to incorporate an Afrocentric (versus Eurocentric) perspective when describing African American culture.

More specifically, films of this genre typically generate certain plot expectations from their audiences, and those plot expectations often conform to Eurocentric views of the African American experience. Given this notion, and given that commentators such as Molefi Asante believe social change is possible when cultural artifacts challenge Eurocentrism, a critic can explore how these types of films should develop throughout the audience's experience with them, and therefore probe how such films can reposition African Americans as subjects, or agents of change, rather than as objects without agency. A critic of contemporary films might ask, for example, what happens if *Dear*

*White People* does not conclude as expected, how might the audience respond? Does the film's plot align with a fact-based African American experience? Or does the film's plot connect with a typical Eurocentric depiction of African American life? Does the film's plot ignore Afrocentric elements in the character's development? These kinds of questions permit an investigative approach into how African American films incorporate Afrocentrism within their storylines, using one case study as vehicle for inquiry. If African Americans are truly to be liberated as Asante and others advocate, it is imperative that their narratives on screen draw upon the tenets of Afrocentrism for the purposes of resisting the hegemonic dominance of the oppressor, and to maintain an intimate association with their ancestry. A brief summary of the case study to be examined will lay the groundwork for how the inquiry into these issues will proceed.

### **Synopsis of *Dear White People***

*Dear White People* (2014) is a film written, directed and produced by Justin Simien. This film is primarily focused on depicting increasing racial tensions at a prominent Ivy League institution, Winchester University, predominantly from the standpoint of four African American students. This multi-protagonist motion picture pays close attention to the experiences of Samantha "Sam" White, a mixed race film production major, Troy Fairbanks, the son of the institution's dean, Colandrea "Coco" Conners, an African American student who struggles with embracing her African American identity, and Lionel Higgins, a gay African American student.

*Dear White People* reaches its climax when a popular "black-face" -themed party is hosted and celebrated by the main characters' white counterparts, which leads to the

African American students crashing the party, culminating in an all-out brawl. *Dear White People* explores racial identity overall while at the same time narrating monologic stories about the main characters' own distinctive paths in a humorous manner. Despite the comedic tone, *Dear White People* points to multiple serious issues in America, including racism and cultural appropriation. The presence of themes related to race, identity, privilege and power link closely with the concerns of Afrocentricity, to be discussed in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

### **Afrocentrism**

Molefi Kete Asante, in his 1980 book *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, appears to be one of the first scholars, if not the first scholar to develop the concept of Afrocentricity. According to an article by Asante (2009a), "Afrocentricity is a paradigm based on the idea that African people should re-assert a sense of agency in order to achieve sanity" (para. 1). Agency refers to the ability to transform or create social change (Bajaj, 2009). It is the "belief in one's present or future ability to improve individual social mobility and transform elements of one's society" (Bajaj, 2009, p. 550). Agency is critical for people of African descent across various parts of the globe to be truly liberated.

Although the term "Afrocentric" existed prior to Asante's elaboration of the concept, he is credited with its development into a theoretical framework that looks at the "centrality and agency of the African person within a historical and cultural context" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 93). Asante (2009a) describes Afrocentricity as "a revolutionary shift in thinking proposed as a *constructural* adjustment to black

disorientation, decenteredness, and lack of agency” (para. 3). By “constructural adjustment”, Asante proposes the replacement of structures that relegate African Americans to exterior positions, strip them of self-determination, and generate ambiguity about power relationships.

Due to the complexity of the Afrocentric idea, Asante (2009b) provides for clarity five distinguishing characteristics of Afrocentricity:

1. an intense interest in psychological location as determined by symbols, motifs, rituals, and signs.
2. a commitment to finding the subject-place of Africans in any social, political, economic, or religious phenomenon with implications for questions of sex, gender, and class.
3. a defense of African cultural elements as historically valid in the context of art, music, and literature.
4. a celebration of centeredness and agency and a commitment to lexical refinement that eliminates pejoratives about Africans or other people.
5. a powerful imperative from historical sources to revise the collective text of African people.

These defining characteristics provide a clearer framework for understanding Asante’s Afrocentricity. To elaborate, the first characteristic states that one must have an abiding concern with placing all African culture in the center. This can be done in multiple ways such as using African symbols in one’s home, dress, participating in African rituals, etc.

as a way of psychologically placing Africa in the center of one's life. Moreover, this means not competing with others about right and wrong, or correct and incorrect. This involves recognition of African success, symbols, motifs, rituals, and signs without assessing them on the basis of Eurocentric values.

The second characteristic states that an Afrocentrist orientation must be adopted, which requires the ability to critique hegemonic domination on the basis of race, sex, gender, religion and class. Hegemonic domination describes how states (or an entity) use cultural institutions to maintain power over specific cultural groups (Gramsci, 1971). It is a form of social control and supremacy by a governing body in society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The third characteristic explains that one is obligated to defend Afrocentric culture. Such a defense should be rooted in historical understandings of the uniqueness of African music, art, literature, and other cultural artifacts.

Finally, the last two characteristics focus on the reflective process of African culture. The fourth characteristic maintains that Africans within the diaspora (people of African descent across the world) must work together to restore a strong sense of identity and embrace their own cultural contributions, artifacts, and values instead of others. The final component is focused on individuals being able to understand and appreciate their collective history and where they stand in world history (i.e. re-centering). That is, to change the way they speak about African people by acknowledging their contributions to world history.

Asante also offered guidelines for determining if discourse is Afrocentric in nature. Asante (1987) affirms that seven fundamental assets make up Afrocentric discourse:

1. Afrocentric discourse celebrates its heritage and style.
2. Afrocentric discourse appreciates the language modes of others.
3. Afrocentric discourse attempts to bring about balance and harmony while focusing on reconciliation.
4. Afrocentric discourse contributes intellectually to the world's history as a viable and distinct component of multiple realities.
5. Afrocentric discourse promotes community while celebrating diversity.
6. Afrocentric discourse respects pluralism and opposes Western imperialism.
7. Afrocentric discourse reflects traditional communication and stylistic features of Black culture.

Taken together, these characteristics help frame the paradigm of Afrocentricity and provide the starting points for examining cultural artifacts to assess the ways in which they reflect an Afrocentric orientation. Thus, this thesis will analyze *Dear White People* based on these characteristics observed within the characters in the film, along with the philosophical assumptions that Asante posits. But Afrocentrism is only half of the equation to be calculated in this analysis. The other half is the paradigm of Eurocentrism, and *Dear White People* will be evaluated along that cultural dimension as

well. Therefore, the next section will discuss the differences between Afrocentric and Eurocentric orientations.

### **Eurocentrism vs. Afrocentrism**

In order to understand how *Dear White People* portrays Eurocentric or Afrocentric values, I will first explain the two concepts. Similar to Afrocentrism, Eurocentrism focuses on European people and their descendants across the diaspora. European culture is so embedded in western civilization that it can almost go unnoticed (Shohat & Stam, 2014). The notion of Eurocentrism was first introduced by Samir Amin, in his book titled *Eurocentrism* in 1989. In this book, Amin rejects the idea of Europe being the center of world history. Amin makes critical arguments about the nature of human existence from multiple perspectives including the historical, ideological, economic, and political. Since Amin's landmark tome, multiple scholars have examined the differences between Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism.

Mazama (1998) contends that Eurocentrism alleges a sense of inherent European superiority. This implies that others, typically communities of color, are inferior. Mazama (1998) claims that Europeans have generated a world where the European experience is universal and superior compared to minorities. She uses the example of how European discourse is assumed to be value-free and factual. Verharen (1995) posits that Afrocentrism is dedicated to validating multiple perspectives of the world, while Eurocentrism focuses on a singular view of human existence. He goes on to state that Afrocentrism is a philosophy of inclusion rather than exclusion because it instructs people to place their own cultural values at the center (Verharen, 1995). Hunn (2004) and

Schiele (1994) both conclude that Eurocentrism inspires the observation that humans are fundamentally competitive and individualistic, with an emphasis on domination.

Furthermore, Daniels (2012) examined the differences between Eurocentric and Afrocentric decision-making in organizations. She found that Eurocentric groups were more inclined to make rational and political decisions by employing a tactical use of emotional appeals. Afrocentric groups utilized holistic models of decision making. Eurocentric organizations employ political models in order to satisfy leadership, while Afrocentric organizations display sentiments more freely with leadership, having a less calculated objective than their counterparts (Daniels, 2012). Daniel's provides a concept map to better illustrate key differences between Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism adopted from Warfield-Coppock (1995):

**Table I. Conceptual Framework for Organizations**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Afrocentric</b>	<b>Eurocentric</b>
Organizational style/philosophy	Support/care for the group	Large profits
Management	Communal team oriented	Hierarchy
Leadership	Selected by the people	Appointed succession
Power/authority	Council/spread	In the hierarchy
Decision making	Collaborative	Individualistic
Staff relations	Familial/interdependent	Person to object
Work orientation	Sense of excellence	Quantitative output
Productivity	Cooperative teams	Competitive

Note: Adapted from "Toward a Theory of Afrocentric Organizations," by N. Warfield-Coppock, 1995, *Journal of Black Psychology*, 21(1), p. 34.

Determining the specific characteristics of Eurocentrism is important to this study because it provides a general framework for analyzing *Dear White People*. While Asante



has provided several key features that describe Afrocentrism, limited scholarship has been devoted to the definitive components of Eurocentrism. However, the characteristics provided in each of these studies above will assist this thesis while analyzing *Dear White People*. In order to know how Eurocentric narratives may function in African American films, I will first discuss the Narrative Paradigm to explain how narratives in general function.

### **Narrative Paradigm**

In 1984, Walter Fisher wrote a seminal article titled, “Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument”. In it, he argued that human beings since the beginning of time have utilized storytelling as a method to understand the world. Fisher (1984) outlined a few basic assumptions about his paradigm. The first is the idea that humans are storytellers. Second, people make sense of a specific situation based on “good reason” or logic. Third, good reasons are generated by history, biography, culture, and character. Fourth, the probability (coherence) and fidelity of a narrative are vital to determining the rationality of a story as argument. Finally, stories are judged to be true based on the assumption that stories are reoccurring throughout life, meaning that the experience is likely to happen again. That is, “... [the] narrative paradigm assumes that the world is a set of stories through which we create and re-create our lives...” (Hobart, 2013, p. 90). In sum, this concept assumes that all human communication is based on some form of storytelling and can be seen as truthful if the story ‘hangs together’ based on logic or is rational.

While Fisher's conceptual framework was highly praised, it did not go without criticism. Opt (2009) disputed the idea that specific stories can be thought of as more superior than other stories based upon the adherence of the story's coherence and fidelity. Opt's argument focused on discerning what made one person's understanding of a given narrative more advanced than another. She claimed that this line of inquiry rejected the notion of interpretation, thus devaluing other's understanding of a story or sequence of events. That is to say that one person's experience with a narrative may be interpreted differently than another person even though both parties experienced the same story. This exposes one of the weaknesses of simply relying on one particular interpretation of a story. She explains that each person's standpoint may affect their interpretation of a story's coherence and fidelity.

This is why an additional analytical lens for this thesis is critical: standpoint theory may be able to go beyond simply identifying the existence of Afrocentric and Eurocentric values in the stories told by uncovering the power relationships embedded within those stories. Also standpoint theory may allow for a more comprehensive interpretation of the stories told in *Dear White People*. In particular, I will be able to determine the reliability of the narratives being portrayed based on an Afrocentric interpretation of the narrative's coherence and fidelity. Merging an examination of the narratives, then, with an examination of the standpoints from which those narratives are told, can expose the hegemony embedded in *Dear White People* that this thesis is examining.

## **Standpoint Theory**

Standpoint theory primarily began with the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher, who studied the various standpoints among slaves and masters (Hegel, 1807/1977). In his book, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel focused on the master/slave dialectic. What Hegel found was that, subconsciously, the oppressed slave could be in a state of freedom through the recognition of his own agency. That is to say that a slave could liberate himself or herself subconsciously, if he or she developed agency. Hegel's inquiry provided valuable insight to the understanding that oppression and injustice are better studied and grasped from the perspective of the slave rather than the master. In other words, standpoint focuses on the marginalized perspective, specifically how marginalized people use their position to challenge hegemony, rather than the mainstream perspective. Since Hegel's contribution, standpoint theory became a prominent theoretical framework within the Communication Studies discipline.

Standpoint theory maintains that a perspective is realized when a person identifies and challenges social standards and power dynamics that support the subordination or subjugation of specific groups of people (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). In essence, standpoint theory states that the world is perceived differently depending on the social location of the individual (Allen, 1998). This phenomenon can be based on several factors but some of the prevalent artifacts examined are the standpoints of individuals based on race, class, gender, etc. (Wood, 2005). For instance, an African American will more than likely have a different perspective of society than a European American due to the societal privileges that European Americans have in the United States. However, how that African

American uses his or her perspective to challenge hegemony determines their ability to achieve a standpoint or not.

John (2011) applied standpoint theory to Nella Larsen's novels to demonstrate the possible advantages of standpoint theory in understanding literature. The most prominent contribution of this study was John's critique on contemporary standpoint theorists' application of the theory. She explains that standpoint theory is not just examining a person's view of the world. John (2011) says, "a standpoint is earned and achieved by intellectual reflection on and political engagement with one's own position in society in relation to others' positions" (p. 96). According to John (2011), many scholars have failed to explain the process of achieving a standpoint. In her view, a standpoint is achieved both at the individual and collective levels. In other words, to comprehend one's social position, one must be able to determine their personal location in relation to others in the social order (John, 2011). Given John's explanation of standpoint theory application, this study will incorporate her description of standpoint theory to accomplish its overall objective. Along with standpoint theory, a brief discussion is warranted on how identity is developed and how it shapes one's standpoint.

When utilizing standpoint theory in any study, it is important to consider how identity plays a factor in a person's standpoint. In the case of African Americans, when discussing an Afrocentric identity, it is important to understand how an Afrocentric identity develops in one's life. According to Miller (2002), identity is defined by a person's ability to understand and consent to their self and place in society. In this case, Afrocentric identity is shaped by an African American's ability to recognize and accept

that they identify as Afrocentric. In addition, an Afrocentric identity is also shaped by understanding where that identity places oneself in society's social order. With that said, a prominent theory that has been heavily utilized to analyze the Afrocentric development of African American identity is Cross's Nigrescence Model (1971, 1991).

### **Nigrescence**

Cross in 1971 first introduced the Nigrescence framework and later expounded on this idea in 1991. According to Cross (1991), Nigrescence is "a re-socializing experience; it seeks to transform a preexisting identity into one that is Afrocentric" (p.190). Cross (1971; 1991) lays out five stages that describe African American identity development:

- Stage 1: *Pre-encounter*: This phase describes a person's initial identity. In this stage one may not be aware of the social and political implications of being African American.
- Stage 2: *Encounter*: In this phase, an individual has an experience that compels him or her to change or raise his or her racial consciousness. For instance, a person may have been called a racial slur. In this example, the person now becomes aware of the social implications of race.
- Stage 3: *Immersion/Emersion*: This stage describes when someone battles with proving that they are African American by challenging white supremacy. This can be signified by a person purposely immersing themselves into African American culture and their actions begin to reflect Afrocentric characteristics, which results in immersion into the culture.

- Stage 4: *Internalization*: Describes a person's comfort level with being African American and their ability to socialize with other non-African American communities while still maintaining an Afrocentric identity.
- Stage 5: *Internalization-Commitment*: A person is fully engaged with their new identity and is committed to being a social change agent by engaging in activities that promote social equality and political justice.

Given Cross' explanation of an Afrocentric identity development process for African Americans, this study will employ this concept to determine how an Afrocentric identity for African Americans is developed in *Dear White People*. This leads to the overall objective of this thesis.

### **Objective of the study**

As a set of guiding precepts, I aim to answer three critical questions: 1) How does African American identity develop in *Dear White People*? This question will be answered by applying Cross' (1971; 1991) Nigrescence model to the main characters of *Dear White People* and verifying what stage each of the main characters are at and determining their potential growth throughout *Dear White People*. 2) In what ways do the main characters in the movie *Dear White People* reflect Afrocentrism and/or Eurocentrism in their development? This question will be answered by examining the narratives of the four main characters in *Dear White People* and determining whether, and in what ways, their narratives are reflective of Afrocentrism or Eurocentrism. 3) What are the implications for perceptions of African American beliefs and values when Afrocentric and/or Eurocentric themes are developed in a film featuring African

American narratives? This question will be answered by understanding how the main characters' success or failure in achieving a standpoint could impact an audience's perception about African American culture.

### **Rationale**

This thesis brings together two bodies of research that are closely aligned: film and rhetorical studies. Combining these two areas of study will provide a rich analysis for *Dear White People*. Both areas allow the critic to explore how audiences use genres to make sense of the world; such genres rely on tropes, familiar character situations, and predictable arguments, which make genres stable and therefore more likely to constrain audience responses. For film studies, rhetoric offers the opportunity to provide insight into the way arguments are organized by means of tropes. For rhetorical studies, exploring film genres offers the opportunity to examine how hegemonic ideals are endorsed and made conventional.

Furthermore, the film to be critiqued in this thesis has not been examined from an Afrocentric perspective, nor have African American films in general. Applying an Afrocentric perspective to this case study is intended to expand the research on the topic, as well as to address the need for more Afrocentric studies in both film and rhetorical studies. In doing so, it will help fill this gap and offer implications for expanding Afrocentric research in film studies. In sum, this thesis will examine the Afrocentricity incorporated in *Dear White People*, for the purposes of bringing forth greater knowledge in the fields of African American filmmaking, Afrocentricity, African American identity

and African American rhetoric. The next chapter will begin by reviewing the literature in the research areas relevant to this thesis.

### **Chapter summary**

In this chapter, a sketch of the thesis was provided along with the concrete objectives for the study. The overall purpose of critiquing *Dear White People* is to interrogate African American identity mainly from an Afrocentric perspective but also to determine the embedded Eurocentric characteristics in the artifact to expose possible hegemonic control rooted in *Dear White People*. Answering this inquiry provides an opportunity for a much needed discussion of African American films. Do African American films actually portray African American values and characteristics? Or are African American films still subject to European dominance and thus have difficulty projecting their own narratives from their particular standpoint? If films historically have been a source for society to understand other cultures, it is vital for films that are about African Americans to reflect Afrocentric characteristics. In the next chapter I will review the literature relevant to this thesis.



## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND CRITICAL APPROACH

#### **Nigrescence**

African American identity has been a phenomenon that has been adequately studied over the last fifty years. As mentioned, Nigrescence is a theoretical framework developed by Cross (1971; 1991) that focuses on the identity development of African Americans. Cross' model signifies a potential transformative process for an African American, one that will go from a negative self-perception towards a more affirmative self-image. Gooden (2014) completed an auto-ethnography to examine both his professional and social identity as a successful African American professor using the Nigrescence model. In this article Gooden explains his personal narrative in growing into the final stage of Cross' framework (Internalized-Commitment) with the assistance of others who helped raise his racial consciousness. Gooden describes the liberating sentiment he felt when he reached the final stage and discusses how he has become a social change agent on social justice issues for other people who may experience different forms of oppression.

In this article, Gooden explains that in the beginning of his childhood, he did not experience any racism from the white friends he had. Therefore, he believed that many of the experiences that his family and African American friends would discuss with him were misguided or false accusations against white people. He believed that many of his African American friends were not working as hard as he was to be successful in school. From this point Gooden talks about his experience in college and being introduced to

African American culture through his classes and experiences at a historically Black college. He also explains that once he became more racially conscious, he was more aware of the social implications that came with being African American. With this new found consciousness he quickly learned that not all African Americans have had the educational support to encourage their path to success. This caused Gooden to be more sympathetic and supportive of the African American struggle. In sum, Gooden found that by having a strong support system he was able to reach the final stage of Nigrescence. This study aids this thesis by increasing the understanding how African American narratives can function with Nigrescence as a theoretical framework. Since auto-ethnography features personal narratives, and since films such as *Dear White People* develop a character's personal narrative, knowing Gooden's journey to reaching the final stage of Cross' framework may be useful when analyzing the main characters in *Dear White People*.

Bailey-Fakhoury (2014) conducted a study that utilized Cross's framework but specifically focused on the attitudes that occur within the Internalization phase. Using focus groups to identify approaches suburban African American mothers in Detroit, Michigan use to advance an affirmative racial identity in their daughters attending a predominantly White school. She found that the mothers in her study used (1) presence, (2) imaging and (3) code-switching as three strategies found in the Mother-work concept by Patricia Hill-Collins (1994). *Presence* is defined as the intense cognizance of one's visual appearance and how appearance plays a factor in mothers' affirmation of their daughters. Additionally, presence means continuing to show visibility at school functions

and interacting with school teachers and administrators for the benefit of their daughters. *Imaging* involves mothers teaching their daughters how to embrace their Afrocentric heritage through exposure to African American role models and other Afrocentric objects. The final strategy is *Code-switching* which assisted the daughters in navigating various cultural environments. This article assists this study by providing key themes that possibly contribute to the positive racial identity attitude of the main protagonists in *Dear White People*.

Dowden, Gunby, Warren and Boston (2014) conducted a phenomenological study that focused on African American male invisibility and employed Cross' framework. Invisibility is defined in their study as the desire for justice in an unjust world for many African Americans. In other words, many African American men do not feel a sense of belonging to the mainstream society, which leads to "feelings of anger, frustration, inferiority and alienation" (Dowden et. al, 2014, p. 58) which in turn leads to a state of invisibility. Their study aimed to answer two research questions: (1) How do African-American males cope with invisibility experiences? And (2) What role do counselors play in assisting African-American males to cope with invisibility experiences? Through the semi-structured interviews of seven African American males, they found that self-affirmation and self-awareness were key themes as coping strategies in overcoming invisibility, and also useful for effective counseling. This study's implications aid this thesis with probing how the characters in *Dear White People* may be able ultimately to reach the final stage of the Nigrescence model.

Szymanski and Lewis (2015) also utilized Cross' theoretical model in the psychological realm by examining three forms of race-related stress in collegiate African Americans. The goal of their study was to determine predictors for Afrocentric activism. Szymanski and Lewis (2015) define race-related stress as personal encounters an individual may experience that involve some form of racism in three different dimensions: cultural, institutional, and individual. Cultural stress refers to stress that is caused by the belittling of one's culture. Institutional stress is stress that comes about due to policies and practices of an entity or organization in which one may participate. Finally, individual stress denotes stress that is dealt on an interpersonal level. The results of their study found that the Immersion-Emersion, Internalization and Internalization-Commitment phases of Cross' framework were positive predictors of African American activism. This study informs the development of this thesis because Szymanski and Lewis' (2015) work demonstrates the importance of racial identity in relation to race-related stress. Stress levels tend to fluctuate based on which stage an individual inhabits in Cross' framework. Furthermore, Szymanski and Lewis (2015) establish that Cross' work can forecast activism in young African Americans. These authors document that as African Americans move up in the Nigrescence model; they tend to become more of an activist and can transition into social change agents. This study therefore provides more depth of understanding to the factors that lead to Afrocentric activism.

Despite these studies that have used Cross' framework Nigrescence, one glaring omission is the lack of studies that have utilized Nigrescence in analyzing mediated texts. Media and its impact have been studied for years. Many scholars have concluded that

media has a major effect on our society and influence over our culture (Perse & Lambe, 2016). This thesis attempts to fill this gap in the literature on African American identity development by examining the medium of film.

Film has a major impact on how society views and begins to understand other cultures, which is why it has been of interest to academia. Much of the knowledge that people have about other cultures does not come from personal interaction. This information is typically gained through interaction with film. Leonard (2006) states, “Whether we like it or not, the cinema is the place where an increasing number of people encounter a world of otherness, of ethical systems and personal and social mythologies that transcend the everyday” (p. xii). As a case in point, people often draw conclusions about African Americans based on the narratives portrayed in film.

However, many of these films tend to adopt a Eurocentric view of African Americans. For instance, in the early 1970s, there were a series of films created where African Americans were portrayed in a variety of roles that perpetuated white stereotypes about African Americans (Howard, 2008). Films such as the ones produced during the Blaxploitation era of the 1960s are examples of narratives about African Americans which adopted a Eurocentric point of view of African American beliefs and values. Also, in the 1990s, despite an increase of African American writers and producers, many of *Dear White People*'s focused on crime, gang violence, and drug use of the African American community (Guerrero, 2012). For this reason, African American narratives have been portrayed from a Eurocentric point of view for a number of years and have

lacked a much-needed Afrocentric perspective that can generate agency in African American people. In the subsequent paragraphs, these topics will be explored.

### **Afrocentrism in artistic artifacts**

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Afrocentricity was developed by Asante (1980) who provided specific guidelines for determining the presence of Afrocentricity in an artifact. Afrocentrism is an important position that locates African standards at the focal point of any analysis that includes African culture and behavior (Asante, 1980). This thesis focuses on applying Asante's Afrocentric theory to contemporary film. It is critical for films that are about African Americans to reflect an Afrocentric perspective because it helps individuals in that community to develop a sense of agency. Using Eurocentric standards to understand African Americans is problematic, especially in a mass medium such as film. Unfortunately, there was an absence of studies that combine both film and the Afrocentric paradigm were discovered during this search of the literature. However, the Afrocentric paradigm has been applied by many scholars in different contexts that demonstrate how Afrocentrism can create agency for African Americans. The following studies provide themes that may be useful throughout the analysis of *Dear White People*.

Tyree and Krishnasamy (2010) investigated the presence of Afrocentrism in the *Boondocks* comic strip by cartoonist Aaron McGruder. The authors analyzed a total of 164 comic strips from March, 2003 to November, 2004. A textual analysis was used to determine if the comic strip's content embodied significant concepts of Afrocentrism. They were able to determine that McGruder's *Boondocks* comic strips advocated for resistance, liberation, peace and harmony, all themes consistent with Afrocentrism. In

addition, the authors found that McGruder was in fact placing African Americans in the center of the narrative by describing the experiences of the main characters in his comic strip. These researchers were able to determine the presence of Afrocentrism in the comic strip *Boondocks* by unmasking some of the key concepts of Afrocentricity that can create agency for African Americans: resistance, liberation, peace and harmony. In sum, this study implies that by resisting European supremacy and placing African American culture and values at the center, liberation, peace and harmony for the African American can be achieved. This notion agrees with Asante idea that Afrocentric discourse can lead to African American freedom and agency (Asante, 1980).

Bates, Lawrence, and Cervenka (2008) also examined Afrocentrism in the editorial cartooning by George H. Ben Johnson from 1917-1920 for the *Richmond Planet*, a newspaper in Richmond, Virginia developed by thirteen former slaves in 1884. These researchers determined that Johnson's use of political cartooning provided a political voice for African Americans, illustrated African American consciousness, and validated their historical experiences. Furthermore, these editorial cartoons depicted African heritage with pride and resiliency and not images of weakness or barbarism. These political cartoons were examples of public resistance and rejection of the mainstream images of African American identity in the United States (Hutton, 1993). These factors contributed to the authors' conclusion that Johnson's editorial cartoons challenged European supremacy, providing agency for African Americans. This study adds to this thesis by demonstrating how resistance and an Afrocentric identity can function within characters.

Both Tyree and Krishnasamy's (2010) and Bates, Lawrence, and Cervenka's (2008) studies serve as examples of how Afrocentrism has been applied in cartooning, revealing themes of resistance, harmony, liberty, and peace. These findings may be useful for the analysis of this thesis by demonstrating how the characters in a cartoon can feature Afrocentric values and behaviors. In other words, by focusing on characters in their studies and determining how Afrocentric characteristics functioned in each of the narratives, these studies foster an understanding of how Afrocentric characteristics may be present in the characters depicted in a film as well.

Afrocentrism has also been applied to other mass communication media such as radio. Morant Williams (2011) conducted a study examining the Afrocentric language characteristics of the *Michael Baisden Radio Show*, a nationally syndicated African American radio show that consisted of entertainment, music, and dialogue. Her study specifically focused on language use between the callers and the radio show and how the language used provided agency for the callers of the show. The major characteristics this study interrogated were the following: (a) vernacular patterns, (b) the use of humor, (c) empathetic understanding, and (d) community harmony. The results of this study found that with the presence of Afrocentric language use, callers to the show were beginning to develop a sense of agency.

One of the most profound examples of agency in this research was the empathy that many callers felt regarding the "Jena 6" court case. Jena 6 involved six African American teens in Jena, Louisiana who were convicted in the 2006 assault of Justin Barker, a white student at the local Jena High School. The teens were originally going to



be tried as adults. However, some believed that due to several protests, the charges were reduced. Morant Williams (2011) claimed that “It is through Black radio that the power of the spoken word rallied protesters from all over the country on the behalf of the Jena 6” (p.276). This research validates how Afrocentric discourse, while in the context of radio, can liberate African Americans. It informs this thesis by demonstrating how the power of language can affect people’s agency, particularly African Americans. In the context of this study, Williams’ (2011) article shows how the dialect and word choice of the characters in *Dear White People* potentially can function not only to liberate them, but also can have an impact on others as well.

In the political realm, Stewart (2011) studied five random pre-presidential speeches of Barack Obama to reveal whether his oratory aligned with the themes and the concepts of Afrocentrism. Despite Obama’s diverse racial background, the author found that Obama’s rhetoric was indeed Afrocentric in that Obama used language that is “collective and humanistic” (Stewart, 2011, p. 276). That is, his word choices celebrate multiple cultures and embrace numerous realities. In addition, Stewart found that Obama’s rhetorical strategies rejected many of the ideals Western culture imposes on the world. This study is an example of Afrocentrism being applied in the context of public address. In these particular speeches Obama’s Afrocentric rhetoric demonstrates his own agency because despite his goal of being President of a western country, his oratory rejected western philosophy that reinforces hegemony (Artz & Murphy, 2000). This study provides a level of understanding about how characters can assert their own agency despite being in conflict with Eurocentric hegemonic dominance.

Another example of Afrocentricity being applied in a public address context is Walker and Greene's (2006) examination of four of Jesse Jackson's speeches. These scholars examined Jackson's rhetoric after his presidential campaigns in 1984 and 1988. They also found Jackson's discourse to be Afrocentric due to his ability to speak from his perspective of human rights as an African American man. Jackson's speeches progressively focused on the injustices to all people who do not benefit from hegemonic dominance. Moreover, they found that Jackson's messages promoted unity and empathy amongst all people of different backgrounds. In brief, Stewart's (2011) and Walker and Greene's (2006) studies both disclose important themes of Afrocentricity in the realm of public address which are unity and harmony among people of all backgrounds. These concepts assist this study's comprehension of Afrocentrism in the context of public address, which is beneficial to the overall goal of this thesis. These studies contribute to this study by providing some level of understanding of how Afrocentrism can be identified in the language of others and how such language can function to uplift a community.

Understanding how Afrocentrism has manifest in public address and political cartooning is one piece of the analytical puzzle that informs this thesis. Another piece is an assessment of films featuring African American characters. After all, before it can be established that a film departs from or remains consistent with a Eurocentric perspective, an accounting of the norms of the film's genre is necessary. The next section, then, explores typical depictions of African American characters in United States' cinema.

### **Misrepresentations of African American in films**

Misrepresentations have plagued African Americans in films since the early 1900s. The first major film featuring African American characters was *Birth of a Nation* (1915), a silent film drama by D. W. Griffith that portrays African Americans in a negative manner, using white actors to play exaggerated black character roles (Guerrero, 2012). Subsequently and over time, African Americans were depicted as a risk to the social order or as no threat at all (Yearwood, 1982). However, this phenomenon rose to all-time heights in the 1970s during what was known as the “Blaxploitation era” (Guerrero, 2012). Blaxploitation films were movies featuring narratives about the lives and experiences of African Americans that occurred roughly between 1969 and 1974 (Guerrero, 2012). According to Guerrero (2012), the Blaxploitation era developed from the combination of four key political and economic advances: “the 1969-1971 film industry recession, mounting pressure for more multi-dimensional black cinematic representations, the ‘post-Watts’ rise in black racial pride and militancy, and the sizable untapped financial potential of the black urban audience” (Symmons, 2015, p. 284). Films such as “*Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Shaft* (1971), *Super Fly* (1972), *Blacula* (1972) and *Coffy* (1973)...[were] widely condemned for their sensational content and glamorization of racist stereotypes” (Symmons, 2015, p. 278).

Many civil rights and community groups, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Coalition against Blaxploitation (CAB) and more, formed to protest against these films (Symmons, 2015). Many of the film’s during this era portrayed

African American men as hyper masculine, displaying their sexual prowess as a means of obtaining freedom and initiation into manhood (Bausch, 2013). More generally beyond the Blaxploitation era, a landmark review of the historical implications of African American representation in film was offered by Donald Bogle, who wrote *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. The book reflects on the historical and social connection of African Americans and Hollywood. It focuses on specific careers of some of the most notable African American actors throughout American film history and looks at the chronological changes in the portrayals of African Americans in film, citing the new depictions and reoccurring illustrations. Bogle (2001) contends that “all character types [were] used for the same effect: to entertain by stressing Negro inferiority. Fun was poked at the American Negro by presenting him as either a nitwit or a childlike lackey” (p. 4). The characteristics were at an all-time high during the Blaxploitation era, but they existed at other times as well.

Given the demeaning representations of African American narratives in film, the conceptual framework of Afrocentrism can be an antidote and provide inspiration for African Americans. Asante’s concept provides the agency needed for African Americans to be truly free and liberated. This is why it is vital for African American films to reflect an Afrocentric perspective. The narrative paradigm provides an additional lens for analyzing the legitimacy of the African American experience on film.

### **Narrative Paradigm and Afrocentrism**

The narrative paradigm, as mentioned earlier, assumes that all communication is a form of storytelling and relies on “probability” (whether a story is coherent and hangs

together) and “fidelity” (whether a story rings true to life) to decide the reliability of an account (Stoner & Perkins, 2005). Given this notion, Cummings and Latta (2010) considered the narratives of African American women who are ministers and studied their personal motivation and inspiration for answering the Divine call to ministry. Their research aimed at answering four critical questions that focused on the similarities of the “call to ministry” stories from each of the African American women ministers involved in the study. Using Afrocentrism and the narrative paradigm as guides to a thorough analysis, the authors’ discovered several themes throughout participant interviews. Below are the emergent themes:

1. an inner yearning or urging toward ministry
2. encountering the Holy Spirit
3. being reluctant or feeling unworthy of the call
4. passionately searching or desiring to satisfy a hunger or thirst to serve a community

The authors concluded by reemphasizing the importance of using Afrocentrism to analyze the African American narrative qualities in each interview. This study found that Afrocentrism provided the participants involved in the study a voice and a sense of agency, validating their personal narratives for the purposes of liberty and freedom. This study informs the thesis by illustrating how identification of narrative themes can reveal either an Afrocentric or a Eurocentric orientation. In the context of *Dear White People*, this study assists the ability to identify how Afrocentric or Eurocentric themes are functioning in the narratives of the characters in *Dear White People*.

### **Narrative Paradigm and television/film**

While not studied from an Afrocentric perspective, African American narratives in television and film has also been considered. For example, Glenn and Spieldenner (2013) conducted a study looking into the “down low” phenomenon depicted in popular television shows. The “down low” is a popular phrase that refers to seemingly heterosexual African American men secretly being homosexual in the context of a heterosexual relationship. This study examined two television shows in particular, *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* and *Girlfriends*, investigating African American women partnered with African American men who were depicted in each show’s narrative as on the “down low”. The analysis yielded three key themes: “(1) Black (Homo) Sexuality: A Threat to Success and Class Achievement, (2) In Love and Trouble: Disruptions of Family and Romantic Safe Spaces, and (3) Silence and Secrecy: Lack of African American Male Voice and the Taboo of Airing ‘Dirty Laundry’” (Glenn & Spieldenner. 2013, p. 407).

To paraphrase, the authors determined that these shows displayed a narrative that 1) the “down low” phenomenon was a threat to the normalcy and achievements of African Americans, 2) the “down low” has a negative impact on African American relationships and puts African American women in a state of distrust of African American men, and finally, 3) the silencing the African American men about their sexuality remains problematic and speaks to African American men’s fear of being out of favor with friends and family. Glenn and Spieldenner (2013) claim that “instead of fostering awareness and conversations about sexuality and HIV, these narratives support

closure of discourse and denial of different sexualities in Black communities” (p. 412).

This implies that the narratives in the television shows limit the conversation on African American sexuality and sexual health. To extend these findings to the topic of this thesis, they can be said to promote Eurocentrism rather than extend agency in the way that an Afrocentric narrative would, so the study is instructive regarding how to classify themes in film narratives.

More specifically, Glenn and Spieldenner (2013) determined that these shows depicted a narrative that illustrated African American men “as villains who masqueraded as good, upstanding men that duped their wives” (p. 412). This strengthens the notion that these television depictions of African American men that are on the “down low” should remain silent about their sexuality. This silencing is an example of how hegemony can persist. The continued portrayal of African American homosexuality as a threat to achieving rising social mobility and having stable romantic affairs for African Americans is problematic. In spite of this study not specifically incorporating Afrocentrism or the narrative paradigm, this research serves as an example of how stories about African Americans in media can be detrimental to the community depending on how the narratives are framed, i.e., if they are framed with an Afrocentric or Eurocentric orientation.

### **Standpoint Theory and Afrocentrism**

As previously mentioned, standpoint theory is concerned with valuing the perspective of an individual based upon his or her viewpoint both socially and politically, confirming the multi-epistemological perspective of all cultures, genders and social

classes in relation to how those perspectives challenges hegemonic discourse (Hegel, 1807/1977; Allen, 1998; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009; John, 2011). As John (2011) claimed, achieving a standpoint operates on multiple levels, the individual and the collective. This means that in order to achieve a standpoint one has to be able to recognize her or his own standpoint in relation to other people, particularly the dominant culture. To go further, John (2011) believes that standpoints fluctuate, in that a person's standpoint changes because oppression changes and is presented in multiple facets. Therefore one's standpoint constantly is achieved over and over again, depending on the various forms of oppression faced. Furthermore, John (2011) claims that once an individual realizes his or her own standpoint that person may become part of a group-based resistance of the dominant group. In the case of this study, since this film features multiple protagonists, one of the characters may be able to achieve a standpoint and decide to join one or more other characters in an effort to confront hegemony. In this way, standpoints are fluid and contextual.

Another context in which Afrocentrism and standpoint theory have been merged in the literature is to study beauty. Patton (2006) examined the influence of the Eurocentric perspective of beauty placed upon African American women. Using both Afrocentric theory and Standpoint theory, Patton challenged the European hegemonic standard of beauty by proposing a different perspective of beauty for African American women through Afrocentricity. Standpoint theory is applied by Patton to make the argument that the standard of beauty should not be based on Eurocentric criteria but should be based on a multi-cultural standard of beauty. Patton contends that African



American women who judge their beauty solely by European standards fail to develop agency for themselves and thus can never achieve liberation.

Patton (2006) believes that basing African American beauty on a Eurocentric standard “cause[s] self-esteem and psychological damage to [all] women and [especially] to African American women” (p.46). She continues by claiming that “[this occurrence will] continue to pass on our (American) sexist and racist ways to generations of young people” (p. 46). She determines that “through liberation and challenging the systems of domination that exist in regard to body image, hair, and race, a re-centering of marginalized beauty can begin” (p. 45). This article is an example of how Afrocentrism and standpoint theory have been utilized in tandem to challenge hegemonic dominance of Eurocentric values. This study informs this thesis by highlighting how an alternative perspective can potentially be liberating for African Americans. The purpose of this thesis is to offer an alternative perspective on the narratives of African American culture in film, and Patton’s work illustrates how to conduct such an analysis.

Standpoint theory and Afrocentrism have also been combined as a set of theoretical lenses by other scholars. Gatua, Patton, and Brown (2010) focused on the Feminist International Radio Endeavour (FIRE), a women’s community radio station beginning in 1991. These scholars examined the mission statement of FIRE to determine FIRE’s position in empowering marginalized women in underdeveloped countries. Their findings pointed out that radio was a source for women to build knowledge, a sense of community, and national and global awareness. The authors note that the FIRE radio station’s efforts affirmed standpoint theory because the organization “focuses on issues

paramount to women from developing countries who are more marginalized, socio-economically disadvantaged, and illiterate” (p. 175). In essence, the FIRE organization told stories from the point of view of their listeners, instead of a narrative from the dominant culture. The information received functioned to liberate and to promote a sense of agency in the disenfranchised women who listened to the radio channel. Along with Patton’s article, this study aids the analysis of this thesis by explaining the potential benefits of telling the stories of marginalized people from their standpoint rather than from the dominant groups’ perspective. Just as these authors did, this thesis is interested in understanding the perspective of the main characters in this film from the African American standpoint and not from the Eurocentric point of view.

The previous studies serve as illustrations of how standpoint theory can be utilized as a theoretical framework. They help underscore the presence of hegemonic forces which can play a role in artifacts such as films that narrate the lived experiences of African Americans when told from a Eurocentric perspective. These studies are presented here as an indication of how standpoint theory has been utilized in cultural studies.

Despite limited studies that examine Afrocentrism and film, the literature does reveal key themes that emerge from looking at Afrocentrism and other art forms. The literature shows that Afrocentrism in the context of comic strips/editorial cartoons, radio, and public address all demonstrate the following themes: unity, harmony, resistance, liberty, Afrocentric vernacular patterns, humor, empathetic understanding and peace. These themes will be important in analyzing *Dear White People*. Doing so is an attempt to narrow the gap in the literature on the topic of Afrocentrism and film.

As has been established, African Americans have been misrepresented in film for several decades, since the inception of film and television. That is, the narrative of African American culture in mass media has been distorted due to the hegemonic dominance that exists in western culture. As a result of this phenomenon, Afrocentrism attempts to restore (or build) agency within the African American community by validating narratives from their particular standpoint. In order to understand how Afrocentrism functions in film, the next section will focus on the specific means by which *Dear White People* will be critiqued.

### **Critical Approach**

The overall purpose of this study is to determine in what ways Afrocentricity is incorporated within *Dear White People*. This section will focus on the specific critical approach used in this study to answer the following research questions previously stated:

- 1) How does African American identity develop in *Dear White People*?
- 2) In what ways do the main characters in the movie *Dear White People* reflect Afrocentrism and/or Eurocentrism in their development?
- 3) What are the implications for perceptions of African American beliefs and values when Afrocentric and/or Eurocentric themes are developed in films featuring African American narratives?

The present study incorporates a qualitative approach to analyzing the data. Within this branch of research, thematic analysis is one of the most common systematic approaches to discourse analysis (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011) and will be utilized in this study in order to frame responses to the research questions posed.

## **Thematic Analysis**

A thematic analysis is a qualitative approach that permits a scholar to advance his or her own meanings from the patterns identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Stone (1997) claims that thematic analysis in film is guided by interpretive judgments made by the researcher, so one cannot rely on numerical measurements to determine themes. Thus, this approach allows the researcher to capture the intricacies of meaning within the analysis. In this section I will define what the themes are and how they can be identified within *Dear White People*.

In her study Mehring (1990) describes a theme in motion pictures as “that which the screenwriter has in their head and heart that they want to get into the head and heart of the viewer. What they (screenwriter) want to communicate on a cognitive, but especially, on an affective level” (p. 221). She goes on to claim that themes are what hold plots together and allow a film effectively to communicate with its audience (Mehring, 1990). The themes displayed in films often evoke many emotions. Films can influence us to take sides on important social issues, evoke fear about society, inspire us, motivate us, or teach us something about the world in which we live (Mehring, 1990). Additionally, themes can also make statements about culture, specifically, cultural values, customs, beliefs, etc. Indeed, themes play a pivotal role in how messages are transported to an audience. Therefore, it is important to be able to recognize themes.

Mehring (1990) offers three distinct suggestions for identifying themes in a film.

(1) A theme arises when the central character changes and a solution to a problem is offered. In other words, one can observe a completion and harmony by the main

character. By viewing the leading character's struggles, transformation, or progress, the audience can begin to comprehend *Dear White People's* message and values. (2) A change in a given plot can similarly indicate a theme. Spectators observe a specific circumstance prior to the change, in the midst of the change, and after a setting change. The audience is typically aware of what previously has happened and the reasons why events transpired in a particular manner. Thus, a theme is also recognized when a change in the plot has occurred. (3) Finally, the sentiment of achievement, completion, or closure achieved by the main protagonist demonstrates a theme. This occurs once the audience has a full understanding of the central character, his or her engagements throughout *Dear White People*, or a philosophical notion that *Dear White People* is attempting to deliver. Closure in *Dear White People* provides the opportunity for the audience to reflect on the journey of the main character, as well as what the journey has communicated to the character throughout *Dear White People*. In sum, the sense of completion in the plot of a film can be identified as a theme. Mehring's suggestions for identifying themes offer guidance to critics in the interpretive enterprise.

In order to understand how Afrocentric and Eurocentric features are incorporated in *Dear White People*, I will analyze the plot lines and the main characters in *Dear White People*, in accordance with Mehring's suggestions along with describing the characters Afrocentric development using the Nigrescence model. This will uncover the Afrocentrism and/or the Eurocentrism infused in the character portrayals. Furthermore, the narrative paradigm and standpoint theory will be incorporated as guiding frameworks. The film chosen for this analysis was available via Digital Video Disc (DVD), which

allowed me to view *Dear White People* carefully and repeatedly, which in turn assisted my ability to understand and interpret the data. This supported the ability to observe recurring themes in *Dear White People*. Fisher (1985) suggests that a method of analyzing films is to determine the themes, behaviors and values of the characters (narrators) as storytellers. Fisher believes that this approach assists the ability for one to determine how coherence and fidelity helps the audience make a decision to accept or reject the story.

*Dear White People* was chosen mainly because it was produced within a contemporary period and represents a key segment within the African American community: college students. Given the current social climate in the country and the increase of student activism regarding social justice issues at various colleges and universities across the country, *Dear White People* provides an opportunity to investigate the intersection of student activism and identity. In the case of this study, African American student activism is important because it potentially shapes the future of the African American community. Many of these college students become our leaders in the community, socially and politically. Lastly, *Dear White People* explores important topics relevant to Afrocentrism: identity, culture, politics, power and privilege.

Furthermore, films that are produced and written by African Americans should have an Afrocentric orientation in order to resist hegemony and to aid the liberation of African Americans. As Merritt (2008) puts it, African American filmmakers should not use the traditional Hollywood narrative of African American life which mostly presents the negative side of African American culture, but focus more on African American

relationships, situations and experiences that represent a more comprehensive picture of the African American culture. In essence, African American filmmakers should examine the relationships, situations and experiences of African Americans in relation to the dominant society to demonstrate the resistance that occurs routinely for many African Americans. *Dear White People* provides an opportunity to investigate whether a contemporary film narrative depicts Afrocentrism or Eurocentrism. Insight into this matter may help build the case that African Americans are being misrepresented in film as proponents of the status quo and lack the ability to resist white domination.

### **Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I explained how the development of African American identity has been studied since Cross (1971) introduced the Nigrescence model. In addition, I discussed the importance and impact films have on society's views and beliefs about culture, especially when that culture is not mainstream. In the United States many films throughout history adopt a Eurocentric perspective of other cultures (Howard, 2008). An example of this can be seen during the Blaxploitation era in the 1960s where many African American actors played roles that perpetuated Eurocentric stereotypes about the African American community. This is why Afrocentric characteristics are needed in film when portraying the lives, beliefs and values of the African American community.

Several studies have used Afrocentrism as a guiding framework to demonstrate the potential power that Afrocentric scholarly works can uncover for the African American community. Many of these studies uncovered essential themes of Afrocentrism embedded in various discourse on a multitude of topics related to the African American

community, such as resistance, agency, harmony, and liberation. These themes are vital to this study and will be evoked when analyzing *Dear White People*.

The final section of this chapter addressed the critical approach that will be used in this thesis. As mentioned, the goal of this analysis is to determine in what ways *Dear White People* reflects an Afrocentric or Eurocentric perspective. In order to understand this, I have to determine how an Afrocentric identity develops, along with determining in what ways Afrocentric or Eurocentric characteristics play out in the main characters. Given these first two inquiries, I aim to examine the resulting implications of such phenomenon. With that said, a thematic analysis will be employed, similar to other studies that have used Afrocentrism as a framework. In so doing, this study may be able to shed some light on the intersections of student activism and identity.



### Chapter 3

#### ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I will address the first two research questions presented earlier. The first research question focused on examining how African American identity is developed in *Dear White People*. In order to answer this inquiry, I will be utilizing Cross' theoretical framework, Nigrescence. As previously explained, Nigrescence has five phases that an African American can experience on the path toward Afrocentrism. An analysis of the main characters in *Dear White People* will determine the ways in which the Afrocentric identity of the main characters develops, particularly by identifying the stages of the characters as they progress in the Nigrescence model during *Dear White People's* narrative.

Additionally, this chapter will also examine in what ways *Dear White People* reflects an Afrocentric or Eurocentric orientation when describing African American culture. This second research question will be answered by utilizing the theories previously mentioned above as a guide for the analysis. To review briefly, Afrocentrism is a framework developed by Asante (1980) as a theory that encourages people of African descent to be change agents. According to Asante, this is done through psychologically placing a person of African descent at the center of their own history as opposed to seeing themselves as inferior to other cultures, particularly European or Western culture.

Along with Afrocentrism, the narrative paradigm is also incorporated in this thesis as a guide to assist the comprehension of this film's narrative development. The narrative paradigm is a framework that assumes that human beings are storytellers and that communication is effective if a story is rational based on its coherence and fidelity. That is, the audience assesses the narrative's ability to make structural sense and whether or not the narrative matches their experiences and beliefs in real life. Moreover, this study also incorporates standpoint theory as an additional lens to understand how the characters in *Dear White People* challenge hegemony.

Standpoint theory is concerned with how an individual's perspective of the world is shaped by authority and how an individual uses his or her perspective to confront hegemony. In other words, standpoint theory examines how a person socially constructs a world view based on his or her specific vantage point and whether that person uses that standpoint to confront the status quo. For instance, this perspective would probe how an African American woman's view of the world may be different than a white woman's view of the world. More specifically, standpoint theorists are concerned with how that African American woman or white woman interacts with the world to oppose white domination; this is what determines if individuals achieve a standpoint or not. Thus, the difference between these two individuals' reaction can affect each one's ability to achieve a standpoint because the white woman may not see the need to challenge hegemony the same way as the African American woman might. Given this brief review of the research

questions and concepts that will be utilized in this study, the analysis will begin by introducing each of the main characters and analyzing their development in the narrative.

### **Samantha White**

Samantha “Sam” White is a mixed race student activist who is majoring in Film Production and hosts an on-campus radio show entitled *Dear White People*. She also has self-published a book called Ebony and Ivy that is circulated across campus. Sam uses these platforms to criticize white people for racial bias, micro-aggressions, and other racial offenses that occur on campus and abroad. This continuous commentary causes a rift between the African American and white students on campus. In addition to Sam’s radio show and novel, she wins Head of the House for Armstrong-Parker, a historically predominantly African American residence, defeating her ex-boyfriend, Troy Fairbanks, which increases tension on campus because Troy is the incumbent and more popular on campus than Sam.

The way Sam’s character is depicted in the narrative, she appears to be in the Immersion-Emersion phase of Cross’ framework. Many of Sam’s actions reflect someone that, according to Cross (1971; 1991), is ready to accept her new Afrocentric identity by engaging in meaningful actions in a quest for social justice. Despite these efforts, in this phase the Afrocentric person also becomes anti-white. From the audience’s first introduction to Sam, she is portrayed as someone who is devoted to eliminating all forms of oppression but does not appear to be sure how to go about it. Much of Sam’s rhetoric

seems too radical for the white students at Winchester, so Sam is seen as a controversial figure at the academy. Parham (1989) notes that individuals in this phase typically seek out student groups or communities that are exclusively African American. This is displayed in Sam's involvement as the Black Student Union President on campus.

Cross (1991) also adds that individuals in this phase become more rational about their actions in regards to racial identity and confronting hegemonic dominance. An example of this is when Sam gets a phone call from her mother about her father's declining health and begins to rethink some of her tactics as an activist. The first instance of this is when Reggie asks Sam when they (the Black Student Union) are going to hold a protest rally. Sam responds to Reggie that she is no longer interested in organizing the rally because doing so would violate policies and jeopardize her position as Head of House at the Armstrong-Parker residence. This surprises Reggie, and perhaps the audience, because Sam is not depicted as someone who follows protocol. However, as later revealed in *Dear White People*, Sam begins to alter her approach to challenging hegemony by not being as vocal about the racism and micro-aggressions she faces but by showing the oppressors exactly how they are by videotaping their actions and showing it to them. The second example occurs when Lionel asks Sam for help in stopping the "blackface" party hosted by Pastiche, and Sam tells Lionel that she is not interested in helping him. Again, Sam's behavior demonstrates the Immersion-Emersion phase of Nigrescence, where an individual begins to think more critically about how to eliminate

all forms of oppression. Instead of doing what she normally would do which is to be vocal about social justice issues, which arguably garnered her little success, she decides to show up to the party with her camera to record the white students behaving in a racist and offensive manner at the “blackface” party. This tactic proved to be more influential in her quest to eliminate hegemony as indicated when she displayed in her film class that was largely attended by white students who applauded her efforts. This shift in activism tactics demonstrated what Cross (1991) mentioned about individuals in the Immersion-emersion phase who begin to rethink their strategies towards activism.

In sum, Sam maintains a position in the Immersion-emersion phase. While she is working towards moving to the final stage of Nigrescence, Sam seems to struggle with internalizing her Afrocentric beliefs and attitudes. Cross (1991) explains that an individual is prepared to move into the Internalization phase once they begin to be secure in their own skin as an African American. As a mixed race African American, Sam secretly struggles with being completely comfortable with an Afrocentric identity. This is possibly the reason why she hides the fact that she has a relationship with Gabe, a white student, and why she pretends to want to date Reggie, an African American student. Furthermore, she makes note of her struggle when towards the end of *Dear White People* she apologizes to Gabe and talks about growing up with a white father and how she had to deal with people questioning her identity.

Sam's activism is also connected to Szymanski and Lewis' (2015) study in multiple ways. As Szymanski and Lewis (2015) pointed out, there are three major levels of stress that leads to Afrocentric activism, cultural, institutional and individual. Culturally, Sam experience with micro-aggressions and other forms of discrimination and oppression from white people clearly serves as motivation for her activism. This also leads to the institutional stress Sam faces, when the President of Winchester threatens to expel her from the university because of her radical antics and opposition to a Randomization of Housing Act. These experiences align with the idea that African Americans who have more familiarity with cultural and institutional stress may look for collective efforts as a means to deal with white dominance (Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). In this case, Sam's Afrocentric activism is a response to the stress that she deals with in *Dear White People* at the cultural and institutional level. The stress that Sam faces in *Dear White People* is why much of her discourse appears to be anti-white and Afrocentric, which occurs within the Immersion-Emersion level of the Nigrescence model (Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). Now that the racial identity development of Sam has been discussed, the next section will focus on Troy Fairbanks.

### **Troy Fairbanks**

Troy Fairbanks is the son of the Dean of Students at Winchester University, majoring in Political Science, and the incumbent for Head of the Armstrong-Parker house. Troy privately aspires to be a comedian but his father, Walter Fairbanks, pressures

him into being a lawyer and running for public office. Troy deals with the pressure from his father to be successful and not to be negatively stereotyped by white people. This means that Troy's father wants him to be educated and respectable rather than a thug or criminal, which is how some whites tend to label African Americans. Troy tries to live up to father's expectations and believes that the best way to do that is to amass power and form political relationships.

Given Troy's actions in *Dear White People*, Troy is located in the Pre-encounter phase of the Nigrescence model. In this phase, the individual is reluctant to accept any social implications that come with being African American. Typically people in this stage see the world from a post-racial perspective and are resistant to any notion that threatens this standpoint. In this film, Troy's character tends to reflect this portion of the Nigrescence model. For instance, in the dining hall, Troy tells the other residents of the Armstrong-Parker house that he does not think racism is a major factor in American society anymore because of his experience. He says, "I really don't see the issue. Never had one; never ran into any lynch mobs". This example demonstrates Troy's belief in a post-racist society wherein his race does not impact his outlook on the world. Instead, Troy puts more emphasis on his other identities such as being the son of Dean Fairbanks, a student leader, and a future public official. This is why many of Sam's antics, grounded in challenging racial identities, make little sense to Troy, because he does not view race as a major issue in society.

Furthermore, Troy's racial positioning is further explained in his approach to raising his own political capital even if it means forming disingenuous relationships with people who are oppressive to his culture. Troy dates Sofia Fletcher primarily because his father tells him to, possibly to become more popular on campus. Sofia is the daughter of Winchester's President, and therefore an intimate relationship with her may allow Troy to gain more prominence on campus. In addition to dating Sofia, Troy attempts to be close friends with Kurt Fletcher (Sofia's brother), to gain membership into Kurt's satire club, Pastiche. Pastiche is one of the most prominent student groups on campus and since Troy secretly wants to become a comedian, he attempts to be best friends with Kurt and other members of Pastiche. These examples demonstrate Troy's yearning for political capital and his ability to form relationships with others, particularly Kurt, despite their behavior being oppressive towards African Americans. Cross (1991) addresses this kind of behavior when he says that individuals in this stage see personal social progress as something that is of free will. This includes taking initiative and having personal impetus to achieve at the highest level. Troy believes that people can accomplish anything they want if they are willing to strive for it, and race is not a factor in someone's ability to achieve success.

In sum, Troy maintains a position in the Pre-encounter phase throughout *Dear White People*. While Troy acknowledges that he is African American, he does not allow for his race to play a factor in his quest for upward mobility. Troy sees individual success



as a matter based in drive and initiative, not in ethnicity. This is why Troy appears to be dumbfounded by Sam's activism on campus. He feels Sam's actions are irrational and joins Kurt, his father and others, who believe Sam's outlook on race is misguided.

Troy's actions are also represented by themes found in Bailey-Fakhoury's (2014) article, particularly themes of presence and code-switching. Consistent with Bailey-Fakhoury's (2014) presence theme, Troy understands that the image you project affects how people treat you. This is why Troy always appears to be well dressed and groomed. Presence is very apparent in Troy's character development in the narrative. Troy seems to be aware that maintaining a certain image is important to get to where his father wants him in life. This may explain why Troy smokes in the bathroom and writes jokes. He is very consciously aware that he must maintain a clean image. Finally, *Code-switching* allows Troy to navigate the various cultural environments during his experience at Winchester. This is why, despite his clean image, he changes his lexicon depending on his audience. For example, when he speaks to the Armstrong-Parker residents he uses different language and diction than when talking to members of the Pastiche group during "Game Night". When talking to the Armstrong-Parker residents, Troy speaks in a style that is reflective of the Afrocentric tradition, however when he is addressing his white audience, he tends to modulate his Afrocentric communication style and talk in a manner that is appealing to his white audience. Now that Troy's racial identity has been discussed, Coco is the next main character whose identity will be analyzed.

### **Coco Conners**

Colandrea “Coco” Conners is from Chicago, Illinois and an economics major who hopes to be a reality television star. Coco is extremely intelligent and ambitious, and is characterized as a woman who desperately wants to assimilate with the wealthy white students and prefers not to be stereotyped as the typical African American. This is apparent when she discusses with the reality television producer, Helmet that she would prefer to live in the Bechet house, where all the wealthy white students stay instead of the Armstrong-Parker house, a predominantly African American residence. Moreover, Coco creates a video blog that is the antithesis of Sam’s radio show, *Dear White People*, by critiquing Sam’s actions and explaining to her viewers that Sam’s activism is misguided. Finally, Coco notices that Helmet needs a controversial figure for his reality television show in order for it to be picked up by the network. Since Coco knows reality television thrives on conflict, she begins to harangue against Sam’s activism in order to gain favor with Pastiche, which will then lead to her landing a role with Helmet. Coco consistently wants to distance herself from her African American heritage and like Troy, does not want race to impact her life experience.

Based on Coco’s characterization throughout *Dear White People*, she is in the Pre-encounter phase. According to Cross (1991), in this stage there are three different attitudes that are manifest: low-salience, social stigma and anti-black attitudes. Coco’s actions are reflective of an anti-black attitude. This means that Coco believes being

African American is negative, white culture is positive, and African Americans are their own worst enemy. Such a view “blames the victim” for any race problem (Cross, 1991). This claim is supported by Coco’s interactions with many of the other African American students, particularly Sam. Coco also expresses her displeasure with being associated with African American culture when speaking privately with Troy after the two have sex. Lastly, Coco’s interaction with members of Pastiche about Sam’s activism on campus and Coco’s desire not to live in the Armstrong-Parker residence demonstrates her anti-black attitude.

Overall Coco, like Troy, remains in the Pre-encounter phase of the Nigrescence model throughout *Dear White People*. However, unlike Troy, Coco has an anti-black attitude in this stage. Throughout *Dear White People* she is depicted as resistant toward being associated with African American culture because of its attendant negative connotations. Also, Coco’s desire to become a reality television star provides inspiration for her to become a controversial figure by openly criticizing Sam’s Afrocentric activism, furthering her anti-black persona.

Coco’s behavior also connects with Bailey-Fakhoury’s (2014) study in a similar fashion as Troy. Coco definitely understands that presence and imaging are everything in order to get to where she wants to in life, which is to be famous. This may be the reason why she wears her hair straight, wears blue contact lenses and behaves in an upper-class manner. These features are representative of a Eurocentric definition of beauty and its

characteristics (Patton, 2006). This also explains why Coco was so resistant towards Helmet in the beginning when he wanted to cast someone who would act in a stereotypical fashion. Coco more than likely believed that Helmet was looking for an African American who did not act in a stereotypical manner. This is most likely why she attempted to maintain a positive presence and image upon her initial meeting with him. However, Helmet wanted the stereotypical African American for his reality television series, much to Coco's surprise.

Furthermore, Coco also engaged in code switching multiple times in *Dear White People*. The first instance of this is when she was talking to Helmet but presented a different tone when Helmet asked about her upbringing in Chicago. The second example arises when she is recording her video blog and addressing the audience about her time at Winchester. In the video she begins by telling her audience that she is going to have to "get real black on you", signaling that her communication style will be reflective of a stereotypical African American woman. Coco explains how she is offended that a white girl asked her about her hair. She also criticizes white people for other micro aggressions. Furthermore, at the Pastiche "Game Night" Coco code switches when talking with the members of Pastiche once she notices that her video blog about Sam's radio show has caught the eye of not only Pastiche but also Helmet. Finally, after "Game Night", Coco is seen in bed with Troy where she reveals her issues to Troy about being associated with African American culture. These illustrations demonstrate how Coco engaged in code-

switching throughout *Dear White People* in order to accomplish her dream of being famous. With Coco's racial development explained, this study moves to examining the final main character to be analyzed, Lionel.

### **Lionel Higgins**

Lionel Higgins is portrayed as a nerdy, gay African American journalist who is an outcast among the African American community as well as other communities at Winchester. Students from the African American community criticize him for not being "black enough", while the white students insult him for being gay. Lionel does not appear enthusiastically to embrace his African American identity, which leads to him being isolated. Despite Lionel's portrayal early in *Dear White People*, unlike the other characters he has a breakthrough where he appears to move up in the Nigrescence model, demonstrating growth.

Looking carefully at Lionel's character, he begins in the Pre-encounter stage but towards the end of *Dear White People* he moves into the Encounter phase. As previously mentioned, the Pre-encounter includes three distinct attitudes: low-salience, social stigma and anti-black (Cross, 1991). Along with these attitudes, Cross (1991) also adds five characteristics that can occur in the Pre-encounter phase: miseducation, race image anxiety, assimilation-integration and value structure and orientation. Lionel's character begins within the low-salience stage in that he recognizes and accepts the fact that he is African American. However, he gives more credence to his other identities as a

homosexual and a writer. To illustrate, Lionel does not appear to be interested in joining the Black Student Union or being a part of the African American community at Winchester, most likely due to his fear of being judged for being gay. Lionel makes note of this during his interaction with Dean Fairbanks after a dispute with Kurt. When Dean Fairbanks offers him a room at the Armstrong-Parker residence, Lionel quickly tells Dean Fairbanks that he would not fit well into the Armstrong-Parker house because of his past experiences with African Americans.

Despite Lionel's initial position in stage one of the Nigrescence model, Lionel moves into the Encounter stage after he gets to the "blackface" party and notices the offensive gestures by the attendees at the party. In the Encounter stage, the individual begins to realize the importance of race in the context of white supremacy based on a negative or positive life event (Cross, 1991). In this stage the person may feel some kind of guilt from previously held beliefs about African American culture. This is reflected when Lionel becomes aware of the Pastiche party and begins to realize that he needs the African American community to put a stop to the party. Lionel seeks help from Sam and the other members of the Black Student Union. This is what Cross (1991) calls an awakening of racial consciousness. With the aid of the Black Student Union and others, Lionel is successful in his attempt to shut down Kurt's party. From this point on Lionel is shown as becoming entrenched in the African American community. This occurrence demonstrates growth in one of the main characters in *Dear White People*. Unlike Sam,

Troy or Coco, Lionel's progression in the Nigrescence model displays how an African American can move from one stage to another based on their experiences.

Lionel's racial identity development can also be linked to Dowden's et. al (2014) study in a multitude of ways. As those authors point out, one of the ways in which African American males can restore or maintain self-worth is to affirm themselves in a society that looks down upon them. At Winchester, Lionel is portrayed as an outcast, and in order to affirm himself he begins to have a connection with his culture. This is seen when he and Troy talk at the Donor's banquet and when he leads the Black Student Union in stopping the Pastiche "blackface" party. As Dowden et. al (2014) mention in their study, having contact and communication with other African Americans is key in self-affirmation. Furthermore, Lionel started to become more self-aware of his Afrocentric identity once he learned that George, the student newspaper editor, was just using him to get information for a story on Sam. In Dowden's et. al (2014) study, the authors point out that self-awareness is key to racial identity development. When Lionel understood the social implications of the color of his skin, he became more aware of the biases that he had experienced and made a commitment to confront white dominance.

The initial inquiry of determining how African American identity develops in *Dear White People*, has been answered by utilizing the Nigrescence model to interrogate the main characters, the second research question will be addressed by analyzing the Afrocentric and Eurocentric characteristics of the main characters as they are portrayed in

*Dear White People*. The analysis will then look at the coherence and fidelity of each of the characters' narrative development, followed by an analysis of each character's ability to achieve a standpoint throughout *Dear White People*.

### **Character analysis of *Dear White People***

In order to understand what Afrocentric and Eurocentric characteristics are being featured within this film, a character analysis will be provided in this section. Properly analyzing the characters and determining which features they exhibit will answer this study's second research question. Also, by analyzing the characters, the overall message of *Dear White People* can be better understood in terms of understanding Simien's purpose in creating *Dear White People*. With that said, this section will first begin by analyzing the main characters from an Afrocentric and Eurocentric perspective. From this point, the main characters' narratives will be surveyed using the narrative paradigm and standpoint theory beginning with Samantha "Sam" White.

#### **Samantha White.**

***Sam's narrative based on Afrocentrism/Eurocentrism.*** At first glance, Sam appears to adopt an Afrocentric persona. An example of this can be observed in the opening scene when Sam is sitting in an African-style chair, with a dashiki-style dress on, with African décor in the background. This occurrence aligns with Asante's notion of the African descendant having a keen concern for psychologically being in the presence of Africa by surrounding herself with African symbols, motifs, rituals, and signs. According



to Asante (2009b), signs and symbols keep societies or peoples together, no matter how far apart they are either physically or psychologically. The image of Sam in a room filled with multiple African decorations symbolizes her allegiance to Africa and maintaining its presence in the center of her own narrative. This demonstrates her desire to stay connected to Africa despite being in America.

Sam continues telegraphing her Afrocentric persona utilizing her radio show on campus and her self-published book as a means to challenge hegemony. Through these channels of communication, Sam openly criticizes her white counterparts for their continued oppression of her people. As Asante (2009b) asserts, Afrocentrists must condemn any form of discrimination that occurs on the basis of race, sex, gender, and class. Furthermore, Sam's campaign speech to be named Head of House seems to be Afrocentric in nature. Her platform is to fight against the Randomization of Housing Act, stating that this policy is being instituted on the basis of fear and control by President Fletcher, and that the policy is unfair because many members of social classes (i.e. sports affiliations, majors, etc.) get to live in a residence grouped together except for African American students. By Sam using her voice to condemn the white students and administrators on campus for their discrimination against her people, she is demonstrating Afrocentric characteristics. As one can conclude, Sam's behavior throughout *Dear White People* is reflected as Afrocentric. The next character that will be analyzed from an Afrocentric and Eurocentric perspective will be Troy Fairbanks.

**Troy Fairbanks.**

*Troy's narrative based on Afrocentrism/Eurocentrism.* As mentioned earlier, Troy deals with the pressure from his father to be successful. With this responsibility, Troy finds himself in a difficult position to challenge the dominant culture. It can be argued that Troy believes that in order to become as successful as his father wants him to be, he must follow his father's direct orders and make political moves that will result in more prominence, even if that means becoming a proponent of white culture. Troy's desire to gain power is first illustrated by dating the university President's daughter, Sofia Fletcher, a white girl, and by holding the leadership position at the Armstrong-Parker house. In addition, he tries to establish a friendship with Kurt Fletcher so he can secure a spot on his staff for the humor magazine *Pastiche*. These acts demonstrate Troy's desire to become successful even if it means forming relationships with people for inauthentic reasons.

These acts go against Afrocentrism in several ways. For instance, Troy appears to be in a relationship with Sofia only for political reasons and not because he truly loves her. Troy makes reference to this, telling his friend Coco that his father wanted him to be with Sofia for political gain and as part of an ongoing feud between his father and Kurt's father. *Dear White People* does not explore this topic any further, however the act of having an intimate relationship with someone for political reasons is quite noteworthy, and inconsistent with Afrocentrism because it demonstrates hegemonic characteristics.

In addition, Troy is shown repeatedly in *Dear White People* hiding his true identity from Sofia and others. Troy tends to only show what he perceives as his “public” face rather than his true self when he is in public. This is displayed in *Dear White People* when Troy hides in the bathroom to smoke marijuana and write jokes. In another instance, Troy is caught by Lionel watching the science fiction series *Star Trek*, so he quickly changes the channel when he discovers Lionel has noticed. Similarly, as mentioned, Troy attempts to become friends with Kurt in hopes of becoming a staff member for Pastiche, Winchsester’s popular humor magazine. These kinds of behaviors contradict the tenets of Afrocentrism. Afrocentricity is based on embracing cultural identity and simply being one’s authentic self. Concealing personal hobbies, emotions, values and beliefs which make up one’s identity runs counter to authenticity (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Hecht, Jackson & Ribeau, 2003; Hecht, Jackson & Pitts, 2005). Instead of Troy embracing his true identity, he puts on a public face that is more in line with Eurocentrism.

During several instances in *Dear White People* Troy appears to defend the hegemonic dominance of Eurocentrism. The first instance occurs when Troy notices that Sam is running against him for Head of the Armstrong-Parker House. He says to Sofia, “Babe, I can’t let Sam and her wannabe Black Panthers take the house...the house needs me, look who I am”. This statement is Eurocentric in that it denotes a sense of superiority or entitlement by Troy. In other words, Troy believes that Sam does not deserve to run

against him because inherently he is the better candidate by virtue of who he is rather than what he has done or said.

Another example occurs when Troy defends Kurt's actions against Sam in the Armstrong-Parker cafeteria. Kurt explains to the African American students that he has a more difficult life experience than them due to federal policies like Affirmative Action. Kurt's basic argument is that educated whites have it tougher than African Americans because of discrimination against whites. Sam, as Head of the House, tells Kurt that he must leave the cafeteria because he does not actually live in the house. In the midst of their argument Troy tells Sam that she should leave Kurt alone. In this scenario, Troy is defending the ideals of hegemony by standing up for Kurt's actions. That is, by Troy trying to protect Kurt against Sam's order, he is defending Kurt's whiteness based on Kurt's apparent belief that he can eat wherever he would like due to his privilege as the son of the institution's president. Asante (2009b) talks about this in his article saying, "you can be black and serve hegemonic interests against blacks". Given Asante's assertion, Troy is acting as an agent for perpetuating hegemonic domination for his white counterpart, Kurt, by not confronting him about his divisive commentary towards Sam and African American culture.

Furthermore, during "Game Night" for the Pastiche group, Troy is sitting at a card table playing with the white staff members of Pastiche. In this instance, Troy appears to be modulating his Afrocentric identity in front of his white audience. In other words,

Troy seems to be using his Afrocentric personality to gain favor from the staff members of Pastiche. He jokes with the members about race, explaining how African Americans get certain privileges and white people get certain other privileges, which he considers to be fair. In this circumstance, Troy is using his Afrocentric identity only when he thinks he can gain an advantage (i.e. join the Pastiche staff) instead of just being authentic at all times. This behavior resembles Eurocentrism in that Troy's conduct is only being performed to gain power and personal gratification, as Schiele (1994) explains in his article. The next section will focus on Colondrea "Coco" Conners, the third main protagonist in *Dear White People*.

#### **Coco Conners.**

*Coco's narrative based on Afrocentrism/Eurocentrism.* Coco is a girl who does not want to be associated with any negative stereotypes of African Americans. To this end, Coco repeatedly challenges others who want to pigeonhole her into one category and is represented as someone who consistently attempts to deny some parts of her cultural heritage and tries to not act in the stereotypical manner of an African American woman, meaning confrontational, angry, harboring a negative attitude, etc. (Harris-Perry, 2011). She is denied by the producer of the reality show because she does not act like the stereotypical African American woman. In the scene where Coco is speaking with the producer Helmet, he asks Coco where she is from. Coco replies that she is from Chicago, specifically Hyde Park which is an urban area on the south side of Chicago, Illinois.

Helmet chuckles and says, “you know what they say? You can take a girl out the ‘hood but you can’t take the ‘hood out of the girl”. This upsets Coco, who replies, “there is nothing ‘hood about me!” This interaction is an example of Coco’s desire to be disassociated with the African American community, most likely due to the fact that many African Americans are stereotypically linked with living in communities of lower socioeconomic status and behaving in an unfavorable manner (Wilson, 2012). Thus, they are perceived to be poor, uneducated, and/or act “ghetto”, which carries a negative connotation.

Additionally, Coco is upset because she has been placed in the Armstrong-Parker house. She explains to Sofia that she would rather be in the Bechet house, a residence where mostly wealthy white students stay. In one of the opening scenes she shows the producer her YouTube channel blog, expressing her disappointment with her placement in the Armstrong-Parker house. She calls her housing assignment a “four year prison sentence”. Such examples are typical, as Coco denies her Afrocentric identity throughout *Dear White People*.

Also, Coco is jealous of Sam’s growing popularity, not only with the Armstrong-Parker residents but most importantly, with Helmet, the reality television producer. This sign of competitiveness or sense of entitlement closely aligns with Eurocentrism. In one of the scenes in *Dear White People*, Coco observes that Sam’s YouTube channel has more subscribers and views than Coco’s YouTube channel. This infuriates Coco, and she

begins to publicly ridicule Sam's activism, perhaps to gain the attention of the producer. This act is Eurocentric in that it promotes conflict and fragmentation within the African American community on campus, which goes against Afrocentrism (Schiele, 1994).

Toward the end of *Dear White People*, Coco seeks to become a part of Kurt Fletcher's Pastiche staff to garner more social capital. She is granted a position on his staff and bargains with Kurt to emcee the annual Halloween party. Reluctantly, Kurt agrees to allow Coco to emcee the party, but Coco has a turning point where she begins to recognize that her behavior allows others to appropriate her Afrocentric identity. Despite wearing a blonde wig to the party, Coco notices a white girl trying to act like her and talk like her. This is where Coco begins to realize how the very people she aspires to be like only want to exploit her for her cultural identity. As a result, Coco tells Kurt that she can no longer be part of his staff and she snatches her blonde wig off. This instance signals Coco's realization that maybe she should embrace her Afrocentric identity, which is one of Asante's mandates for people of African descent. Asante says African people must "return to a strong sense of cultural identity" (Asante, 2009b). The final character that I will analyze is Lionel Higgins.

### **Lionel Higgins.**

*Lionel's narrative based on Afrocentrism/Eurocentrism.* Lionel is an interesting character because he finds himself in an awkward position. While Lionel is African American, he does not immerse himself into the culture, possibly due to his nerdy

personality and homosexuality. In addition to alienating himself from the African American community, he also isolates himself from other social communities on campus. Lionel is presented as someone who would rather not participate in the fight for social justice and who would much rather stay to himself. However, Lionel does find himself positioned to become part of a culture: the journalist culture. He has the opportunity to write for Winchester's most prestigious newspaper, *The Bugle*. In order to work for *The Bugle*, Lionel agrees to live in the Armstrong-Parker residence to spy on Sam in order to produce a significant story about racial issues on campus.

Taking on this challenge positions Lionel against Afrocentrism. As the audience discovers later in *Dear White People*, Lionel is being used for his talents to boost the resume of *The Bugle*'s main editor so he can enhance his own career opportunities. In this instance, Lionel is a pawn who spies on someone in his own racial community just to curry favor with an editor seeking political gain. Another example of eschewing Afrocentrism occurs when Lionel meets with Dean Fairbanks to discuss his housing assignment. The Dean offers Lionel an opportunity to stay in the Armstrong-Parker house, and Lionel responds by telling him that "Black kids were the worst part of high school". This statement is a signal that Lionel is uncomfortable being amongst his own kind. It can be interpreted as Lionel's desire not to be psychologically or physically in touch with his ancestors. In essence, Lionel renouncing his community in fact denies his Afrocentric identity. Instead of embracing his cultural identity by surrounding himself



with his community, he chooses to ignore or avoid it, which goes against Afrocentric principles. Asante (2009b) encourages people of African descent to be involved in their community in a holistic way since this is the only way to aid the persistence of Afrocentric ideology.

Despite Lionel's original desire to not associate with the African American community at Winchester, he does have a turning point towards the end of *Dear White People*. Lionel is invited to the Halloween party where he quickly learns that the "blackface" theme of the party is extremely racist. At this point Lionel seeks Sam's help in stopping the party. Sam initially refuses Lionel's requests, which causes him to go the Black Student Union for help. This occurrence displays Lionel's attempt to defend "African cultural elements as historically valid in the context of art, music, and literature" (Asante, 2009b). Ultimately, this exhibits an Afrocentric identity because he reaches out to his community to protect his culture. Now that the Afrocentric and Eurocentric characteristics have been discussed, I now move to analyzing the main characters utilizing the narrative paradigm.

Before diving directly into the character analysis from the narrative paradigm perspective, a brief discussion is warranted regarding the types of characters (round vs. flat) that can be presented in any narrative. Addressing this issue will provide of level of understanding about how the characters in *Dear White People*, are developing throughout the narrative.

E.M. Forster (1927) is credited with making the distinction between “round” and “flat” characters in his book, Aspects of the Novel. The difference between a “round” and “flat” character is that round characters change depending upon the course of events in a narrative, while flat characters remain consistent throughout the narrative regardless of the course of events (Pickrel, 1988). When utilizing the narrative paradigm to analyze characters in film, it is important to keep in mind that flat characters will remain the same throughout the film, so their representations are arguably less convincing and truthful because these kinds of characters behave in a more stereotypical fashion. For example, narratives that feature African American males acting as criminals or being hypersexual highlights stereotypical behaviors and thus the narratives are less believable because audiences understand that people are multi-dimensional rather than uni-dimensional.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, round characters in narratives are more believable because, like real life scenarios, their behavior or thoughts change based on their experiences. For instance, Bruce Wayne witnessed his parents being murdered at a young age. This tragedy caused Wayne to become Batman and fight against evil. This is not to say that people become superheroes after tragic events, but this example speaks to how life-changing events can impact a person’s behavior or purpose in life and therefore make the character more nuanced. Hence, a narrative can be more or less coherent based on whether flat or round characters are presented in the story.

Essentially, this means that flat characters' storylines are typically familiar to any given audience, but there is a potential threat that such structural coherence can be less believable because the characters are portrayed in a stereotypical fashion (Culpeper, 2014; McCulloch, Belcher, Hardin & Hardin, 2003). In other words, the audience would expect for certain kinds of behaviors to exist in specific characters, which might make the story uninteresting for most people. For instance, life is not lived in a linear fashion, people are dynamic. There are circumstances that happen to us that affect our behavior, attitude and beliefs. So, we expect the characters in any narrative to behave in a similar manner (Forster, 1927). This is what makes a story believable or not. If a character is presented as flat early on in a film and a life-changing event happens to him or her, we would expect that that character to change in some way. If no change occurs to that character, it is less likely that the audience will believe in the truthfulness of the narrative. This is why round characters are more believable because they are dynamic and can change based on the course of events that they experience, which is more representative of a real life scenario (Miesen, 2004). Therefore, when using the narrative paradigm to analyze the characters, this study will focus on the coherence and fidelity of the main characters' storyline based on the characters' development throughout *Dear White People* (i.e. whether they are flat or round characters).

**Sam's story arc based on the narrative paradigm.**

*Narrative Coherence.* As previously stated, within Fisher's (1984; 1985) narrative paradigm, narrative probability is a key feature in determining the effectiveness of any account. Narrative probability looks at the structure or coherence of a story. In the case of Sam's narrative in *Dear White People*, her story makes sense structurally. To demonstrate, Sam is portrayed as an activist who uses several communication media to stand up for what she believes in. Her story begins with her addressing white people about racism and other forms of oppression. Therefore, it makes sense that she would run for Head of the Armstrong-Parker House because of the position's potential power to make the very changes for which she is fighting. From this point Sam begins to assert her authority within the residence, most notably when she kicks Kurt Fletcher (the University President's son) out of the cafeteria. In this instance, Sam's uses her authority as Head of the House to stand in the face of the opposition, which adheres to the typical storyline of an activist (Hooker, 2016).

Furthermore, Sam's character does experience a turning point during *Dear White People* that seems to affect her perspective on race relations. There is a scene wherein Sam is preparing to lead a protest with members of the Black Student Union when she receives a phone call from her mother regarding her father's health. This causes Sam to pause, and she frantically runs away from the protest toward her dorm to be alone to deal with the grief of her father's declining health. In this scenario Sam appears to be in the

process of changing her outlook on race relations, possibly due to the fact that her father is white (which is implied towards to the end of *Dear White People*). This shift in her outlook on race demonstrates the coherence of her narrative in that she is faced with the reality that she is mixed race. That is, despite her portrayal as someone who is not in favor of white people, Sam seems to recognize that her activism should not conflict with her values of loving all people based on the content of their character and not the color of their skin. In other words, she loves her father despite him being a white man, and she now appears to understand that she can be an activist against white domination without being the stereotypical “angry” African American who despises white people with no rationale for this hatred.

Structurally, this development makes sense because the decline of her white father’s health seems to cause her to have sympathy for white people, which is not how she is portrayed in the beginning of *Dear White People*. Sam appears to understand that all people should be respected and loved because that is a fundamental characteristic of a human rights activist (Guinn, 2016). This means that Sam’s activism against white domination is not about how white people treat African Americans but how white domination (or any other form of hegemonic domination for that matter) affects all people, which is a human rights issue not just an African American issue. That means that racism, homophobia, and all forms of oppression should be condemned no matter who it is against and no matter by whom it is perpetrated. Thus, Sam’s reaction to her

circumstance conforms to what the audience considers to be a coherent narrative of a human right activist.

Furthermore, Sam's story hangs together with the addition of a surprising development: the audience discovers she secretly has an intimate relationship with Gabe, a white male. This is quite noteworthy because Sam is portrayed as extremely Afrocentric, so the audience might be led to believe that interracial dating would be contradictory to the beliefs of Afrocentrism. McPhail (1996) addresses this phenomenon by stating that the Afrocentric agenda rejects the notion of African Americans involved in interracial dating. While this claim is debatable in terms of Asante's definition of Afrocentrism, knowledge of McPhail's assertion is important to a comprehensive understanding of Sam's character as an Afrocentrist. Even though Asante does not expressly talk about interracial dating, spectators might be more likely to believe that someone who claims to be Afrocentric would be opposed to interracial dating because Afrocentrists seek to preserve the purity and centrality of African heritage.

Sam's relationship with Gabe demonstrates her roundedness as a character. It displays that she is not constrained by the stereotypical (i.e. flat) portrayal of Afrocentrists which alleges that they are against other cultures (Jackson, 2003). This sentiment is often expressed by people who believe that if you are pro-African American culture, then you are against other cultures; this is simply not true (Powell, 1991; Jackson, 2003). In fact, many studies have shown that Afrocentrists are pro-human rights

(Asante, 2011; Schiele, 1994b; Jackson, 2003; Powell, 1991). Therefore, it is likely that *Dear White People*'s audience believes Sam's relationship with Gabe presents a contradiction in her storyline as an Afrocentric activist.

Equally important to Sam's character development, she has a moment that is inconsistent with her previous portrayal but demonstrates the multi-dimensional, dynamic nature of her character. Towards the end of *Dear White People*, Lionel approaches Sam to ask for her help to stop the "blackface" party hosted by Kurt and his friends, but Sam responds that she is tired of "being everyone's angry Black chick". This response is very different than the audience's initial introduction to Sam's character, but displays her growth. That is, Sam's knowledge of her father's declining health causes her to change her outlook on how she can address racial issues differently. This interaction seems inconsistent with someone who is portrayed as a stereotypical Afrocentric activist early on in *Dear White People*, showing instead the nuance of her character. While this reaction may cause some confusion in the audience about African American values and beliefs, it does show that African Americans have the ability to be open-minded about new ideas and approaches to social justice. Now that the coherence of Sam's narrative has been discussed, the narrative fidelity will be examined in the next section.

***Narrative Fidelity.*** Given the coherence of Sam's narrative, the next necessary step is to assess the second concept of Fisher's narrative paradigm, narrative fidelity, which is concerned with determining the truthfulness of a story or character. While the

criterion of fidelity is complex, Stoner and Perkins (2005) provide some clarity by urging the critic to look at the arguments embedded within the text to determine whether or not the arguments made exemplify good values. For the purposes of this study, the criterion for “good” values will be based on Afrocentrism.

Sam’s narrative parallels the Afrocentrism criteria posited by Asante for the following reasons. First, *Dear White People*’s major argument is that Sam is an Afrocentric activist. This can be noted by the African decorations at the beginning of *Dear White People* as well as Sam’s actions and commentary throughout the film. As previously mentioned, Sam continuously challenges hegemony through her run for the Head of house, her argument with Kurt in the Armstrong-Parker dining hall, her radio show, and more. This portrayal is important to the development of Afrocentrism in that it communicates, through film, the importance of challenging hegemony and not accepting the status quo. Sam’s actions in *Dear White People* demonstrate good morals in that people should not be dominated or controlled by other people based on Afrocentrism.

Also important to narrative fidelity is Sam’s portrayal as an Afrocentric activist criticizing white dominance while at the same time realizing that the goal of Afrocentrism is not for African Americans to hate white people. Afrocentrism is a critique of hegemony and does not encourage discrimination of any kind towards anyone (Asante, 2009b). There are times in *Dear White People* when an audience may be under the impression that Sam hates white people. Indeed, Sam struggles with embracing her



partially white (i.e., mixed race) identity in the beginning of *Dear White People*, and thus may appear hateful of white people. However, Sam's character arc, which shifts from extremely critical of white people to softening toward them (possibly due to her white father's illness), demonstrates "good reasons" and appeal to the highest standard of human existence, particularly from an Afrocentric perspective. This also illustrates her roundedness as a character in that she does not remain extremely critical of white people throughout the entire film. Like most people, her attitude and behavior changes given certain situations that she experiences. Essentially, the audience response to her character would be to consider embracing their own complex identity because it is how true liberation and psychological freedom are achieved. This dynamic, multi-dimensional characterization of an Afrocentrist is what makes Sam's narrative trustworthy.

Since Afrocentrism is about embracing identity to achieve liberation and harmony, Sam's character development closely aligns with the values of Asante's theory. Despite Sam softening her activism toward the midpoint of *Dear White People*, Sam's character remains consistent with the identity of a true Afrocentric activist. Thus, the logical progression of Sam's persona is to appear trustworthy, which provides a rationale for the audience to take some action to embrace their own identity based on their experience with Sam's character. While Sam's reactions in *Dear White People* seem to be coherent and consistent with Afrocentric values, examining her experience from her

standpoint may provide even more clarity for understanding how Afrocentrism may be functioning in her character.

**Sam's story arc based on standpoint theory.** Standpoint theory is a concept that looks into the perspective of an individual, particularly focusing on how that person's perspective of the world may differ from others. Additionally, standpoint theory looks at how an individual's social position challenges hegemony (Hegel, 1807/1977; Allen, 1998; Wood, 2005; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). For instance, a homosexual African American woman may share some of the same experiences of other women in general, but the intersections of her identity will cause her overall experience, socially and politically, to be different than a woman who is not homosexual or not African American. In essence, the world is not viewed in the same way by everyone; marginalized groups' experiences will differ from groups with more social and political capital.

In the case of Sam, as a mixed race woman, she has an interesting perspective on the world, which makes her experience unique in *Dear White People*. According to Davenport (2016), historically, African Americans that are mixed race have been essential in the progression of the political agenda of the African American community. This is due to the fact that a mixed race person is likely to share a collective political identity with their African American heritage, believing that what happens to the individual has implications for the entire race (Davenport, 2016). This is in contrast to the European side of a mixed race person. According to Davenport (2016), "...Whites as a

group ...are much less likely to experience intolerance or injustice. By virtue of their majority status and social position, Whites are typically afforded the ability to not think of themselves in terms of race at all” (p.55). This means that whites do not see themselves as one group of people, they are more individualistic. Thus, mixed race people are more likely to work against injustices for their African American side than their white side. In the case of Sam, she unquestionably appears to be the leader of the African American students’ political agenda at Winchester. This is seen in her interactions with members of the Black Student Union, her running for Head of the Armstrong-Parker House, her radio show, etc. These behaviors are indeed Afrocentric in that she challenges hegemony by critiquing white supremacy regardless of context. Therefore, Sam demonstrates a unique ability to develop a standpoint because she confronts the status quo through her actions.

However, on the other end of the spectrum, according to Davenport (2016), many mixed race people tend to side with their minority identity (i.e. their African American heritage) more than their white side; many also seem to struggle with embracing their whiteness. This is important to note because in *Dear White People*, Sam chooses to fight for social justice concerns for her African American identity.

Given Sam’s standpoint as a mixed race woman, she definitely has moments in *Dear White People* where she appears to face difficulties embracing her white identity. For example, her secret relationship with Gabe: despite Sam’s portrayal as an Afrocentric

revolutionary, she hides the fact that she is in love with Gabe, a white student. Gabe also confronts Sam about her true identity, pointing out in particular that Sam loves stereotypical “white stuff”, like popular bands, films, etc. In this scene Gabe encourages Sam to be her true self and to stop being co-opted by members of the Black Student Union into someone she is not. The potential fear of not being accepted by the Black Student Union due to embracing her whiteness is contradictory to Asante’s beliefs. Afrocentrism is a concept that encourages one to accept one’s own identity and use it as a basis for judgment (Asante, 2007).

Despite these challenges, many would be quick to assume that Sam is not able to achieve a standpoint because she does not openly embrace her whiteness. However these difficulties that Sam faces in embracing her whiteness reveal a round character. In other words, this portrayal of Sam represents a more realistic characterization of someone who is mixed race, according to Davenport (2016). Sam’s roundedness as character shows her as a character capable of transformation, and demonstrates her growth as an individual in this film. Similar to a real life experience, Sam’s growth as an individual does not change or take away her activism as previously displayed in film. It is completely plausible for someone to evolve, still be an activist, and challenge hegemony, thus achieving a standpoint.

In sum, Sam’s struggle with her own racial identity is problematic but should not be seen as an inability to achieve a standpoint. After hearing the news from her mother

about the health condition of her white father, Sam seems to begin to soften her criticism of white people and change some of her tactics on challenging the status quo. For example, Lionel asks for Sam's help to stop the "blackface" party and Sam denies him, stating that she is tired of being the angry Afrocentric activist for everyone. This demonstrates a transition in Sam's approach to her activism. Instead of jumping at the chance to stop the "blackface" party, Sam uses a different method to confront white domination. She ends up showing up at the Pastiche party and uses her camera to show others at Winchester about the racism on their campus. This situation displays how Sam used another mechanism for challenging white domination. Sam's character development calls attention to the politics of mixed race women who depict an Afrocentric persona.

Understanding Sam's character is vital to improving race relations. As a mixed race woman, Sam is believed to have more access to economic and social mobility than her monoracial African American counterparts (Rockquemore, Brunnsma, Feagin, 2008). Many members of the African American community believe that embracing a multiracial perspective diminishes the African American standpoint (Rockquemore, Brunnsma, Feagin, 2008). This sentiment is commonplace when looking at how America defines race as a whole. Mixed race people alter the very definition of race in America. Thus, they can influence other people to redefine their own definition of race (Omi & Winant, 1994). Sam's identity and characterization in *Dear White People* presents a unique opportunity for conversation about African American/Afrocentric activism. That is how

multi-racial people (particularly white/African American people) can accept their whiteness and still confront hegemony. The ability to have access to white culture is afforded to those who are of mixed race, so it is important that such people use their access to address topics of racism, discrimination, and all other forms of oppression to challenge hegemony. By contrast, Sam's characterization is drastically different from Troy Fairbanks, the second main character I will analyze.

**Troy's story arc based on the narrative paradigm.**

*Narrative Coherence.* Troy's character is structured as depicting a popular, promising collegiate man who appears to be polished and on a path to success. Troy's narrative takes an interesting twist when he is seen in the bathroom smoking marijuana and writing jokes. This scene deviates from the initial view the audience has of Troy because they first see him dressed in business-casual attire, well spoken, and the incumbent Head of the Armstrong-Parker House; he appears to be a leader and someone who is successful.

According to Howlett, Pine, Orakcioglu and Fletcher (2013), dress can heavily influence people's impression of someone. They go on to claim that appearance communicates personality traits to others. The scene of him smoking in the bathroom demonstrates the complexity of Troy's character. This makes his storyline worth paying attention to. In other words, this scene may cause the audience to question, why might Troy be hiding his drug use and writing jokes in the bathroom? A flat representation of

Troy's character would have never shown him smoking marijuana, a recreational activity that is not favorable among mainstream society (Napper, Hummer, Chithambo, & LaBrie 2015) because it does not cohere to the stereotypical image of a guy like Troy. As Troy's story develops, the audience learns that the reason Troy smokes in the bathroom and write jokes is because he is pressured to maintain a certain image based on his father's expectations. This experience is more realistic and makes his narrative more believable because many people tend to reveal (or not reveal) certain aspects of their lives depending on the audience (Reid, 2015). In the case of Troy, since his father plays such a prominent role at Winchester as the Dean of Students, the only place he can go to preserve his public image is in the bathroom where no one will be aware of his drug use and his hobby of writing jokes.

At this point, Troy makes his run for re-election to lead the Armstrong-Parker house, but loses to Sam. This situation is remarkable because even Sam did not believe she could win the election due to Troy's popularity with the residents of Armstrong-Parker. Troy's loss demonstrates character development that is dynamic and multi-dimensional. Troy appears to be a beloved member of the Armstrong-Parker house, while Sam is presented as a revolutionary anarchist with a small following, but not enough support to gain favor from the masses. A stereotypical flow to Troy's story would have him winning the election due to his established popularity among the African American students, his status as the incumbent, and Sam's unpopular, anti-establishment persona.

However, toward the end of *Dear White People*, it is revealed that a friend of Sam's hacked into the system to allow Sam to win the election, making Troy the actual winner of the election and Head of the Armstrong-Parker house. Again, given Troy's characterization earlier in *Dear White People*, this situation makes his loss in the election more believable because he had all the odds in his favor to win.

The next scene opens with Troy and his father discussing Troy's loss to Sam in the Armstrong-Parker election. In this scene, the audience is exposed to some of the reasons Troy is the way he is. In this scene it is alluded to that Troy is dating Sofia to satisfy his father and for political reasons. In addition, many of Troy's leadership yearnings, career goals, and his overall façade are all motivated by his father's high expectations. This scene can be seen as the anchor to much of Troy's character arc in that it describes the background for Troy's characteristics. Thus, this scene explains some of the motives behind Troy's behavior throughout *Dear White People*.

Despite the guarded and managed persona Troy presents early in the movie, at about the midpoint of *Dear White People* he begins to reveal his true self. After having sex with Coco, Troy breaks up with Sofia. This series of events shows a logical progression of Troy's character in that in the beginning of *Dear White People* Troy attempts to hide his identity for fear of not meeting his father's expectations. Early in *Dear White People*, Troy's initial interaction with Coco did not appear to be one where the audience was put on notice of their attraction for each other. In fact, Coco even tells



Sofia that she is “not into Black guys”. Secondly, Troy and Sofia are seen as a happy couple who are very supportive of each other. However, Troy’s break up with Sofia demonstrates the beginning of his transition toward accepting his identity and not being compartmentalized by his father’s expectations of who he should be.

Lastly, the final act by Troy that shows his growth as a character is the scene where he stands up to his father. In this scene, Troy warns his father about the “blackface” party happening at the Pastiche house. Much to his father’s dismay, Troy interrupts his conversation with a potential university donor to explain the potential damage a party of this nature could do to the campus climate. This incident makes sense of Troy’s character development. Originally, Troy’s relationship with his father featured Troy as fearful of failing to meet his father’s expectations, and therefore behaving in a manner that is not representative of his true self. There are multiple scenes where Troy seems to be fearful of his father and follows direct orders from his father about who he is supposed to be. By contrast, this scene shows Troy’s growth as a person who is now comfortable with being who he is, regardless of the fact that his identity and career goals may not be exactly what his father had in mind.

***Narrative Fidelity.*** As noted earlier, Troy has many facets to his character and his narrative is worthy of attention. As the son of the institution’s Dean of Students, Troy is afforded many more privileges than his counterparts in *Dear White People*. For example, it can be argued that Troy’s popularity is due to who his father is. Additionally, Troy’s

mere presence at the donor's event, an event that seems to be attended by only Winchester's administration and donors rather than by students, demonstrates some of Troy's privileges that do not extend to other students. It is apparent in *Dear White People* that Troy's path to success has already been crafted for him by his father, and his job is to simply follow the plan. As a result, Troy consistently curates his public appearance depending on the audience. There are several instances in *Dear White People* where Troy attempts to hide his true self or over exaggerate his African American persona for political gain, most notably gain in his relationships with Sofia and Kurt.

With that in mind, Troy's characterization is reliable because his actions result from trying to meet the expectations of his father. He does things to please his father such as dating Sofia, running for Head of the Armstrong-Parker house, majoring in political science, etc. Therefore, the fidelity of Troy's character demonstrates a real life example of a son willing to sacrifice his own happiness to appease his father. Given the nuanced nature of Troy's character, an examination of his ability to achieve a standpoint is warranted.

**Troy's narrative based on standpoint theory.** Troy's narrative deserves to be explored to see how it reflects his world view and his vantage point. Using standpoint theory as a guide, Troy's story provides valuable insights into an African American collegiate man who is privileged in many more ways than his counterparts. Socially and politically, Troy's world is filled with admiration from others for his handsome look,

elegance, and his natural leadership ability, which all contributes to his popularity. This social respect and admiration from his peers gives him a different perspective than someone such as Sam who does not enjoy this esteem from others. Troy's social location could make it difficult for him to stand in the face of hegemony and defend his culture, thus limiting his ability to achieve a standpoint. Troy's characteristics closely parallel Eurocentrism, because his individualism, his desire to gain social power, and his inherent superiority mark Troy as an agent for Eurocentric ideology. With all there is to gain for Troy, it may be challenging for him to see how he is lending a hand in the persistence of hegemony. Thus, Troy does not achieve a standpoint because he does not appear to recognize how his political and social capital can be used to abolish hegemonic dominance. Troy could have used his privilege to help combat white domination; instead, Troy uses his established capital as a means to increase his own power. Troy's story potentially forces the audience at least to examine themselves in regard to the notion of sacrificing oneself for political gains even if it oppresses one's own culture. These actions allow hegemony to persist and are not representative of Afrocentrism as Asante posits it. Therefore, Troy does not achieve a standpoint in *Dear White People*. Troy's characterization closely aligns with Coco's story, which I will discuss next.

**Coco's story arc based on the narrative paradigm.**

*Narrative Coherence.* Coco's storyline develops as an African American collegiate woman who seems not to want to be viewed as a stereotypical African

American, which causes her not to embrace her African American identity. When the audience is first introduced to Coco, she is meeting with Helmet, the producer for a reality television show. As mentioned, there is a scene where Coco and Helmet have a disagreement about her being “from the ‘hood”, and Coco’s response echoes the notion that she is uncomfortable with stereotypical labels that many people “from the ‘hood” receive. This situation makes Coco’s character dynamic and coherent because many African Americans who are from a tough neighborhood typically shy away from embracing their upbringing because of the negative connotations that come with this label (Anderson, 2000). In this example, Coco makes it clear to Helmet that she is not to be stereotyped. This also makes it clear to the audience that Coco is not a “flat” character and permits her characterization to be coherent because she is willing to correct anyone who wants to pigeonhole her into the stereotypical category of an African American woman.

Coco is introduced to Troy through Sofia, and she admits to Sofia that she thinks Troy is cute for “a Black dude”. In addition, during the Pastiche “Game Night” party, Coco tells Troy that she is “not even really into Black dudes...”. These two examples fit into the narrative of someone similar to Coco, an African American who refuses to be stereotypically labeled, in this case, including dating preferences. In essence, when Coco makes it known that she is not interested in dating African American men, she demonstrates the complexity of her character by rejecting the notion that African

American women only are interested in dating African American men. This renders Coco's character "round" and allows her story to cohere in that people who do not want to be stereotypically labeled will operate outside of cultural norms.

Along with Coco's complex character development, her storyline takes an interesting twist which seems to reveal her true persona. After the Pastiche "Game Night" party, Coco is seen in bed with Troy; this is contrary to the early presentation of her character where she claims not to be interested in dating African American men. In addition to sleeping with Troy, Coco and Troy smoke marijuana while Coco discusses her concern about her upbringing as an African American. Again, this is something that *Dear White People* seems to hide earlier in her narrative. This situation presents an interesting dynamic in the character development of Coco. The narrative presented to the audience prior to this point did not appear to foreshadow having sex with Troy (an African American), because she stated multiple times in *Dear White People* that she was not into "Black guys". Therefore, this scene demonstrates the roundness, or multidimensionality of Coco's character. The coherence of her character is demonstrated by her repeated efforts not to be labeled throughout *Dear White People*.

The final scene featuring Coco is at the Halloween "blackface" party hosted by Pastiche. In this scene, Coco is shown in a blonde weave, recording herself at the party for her video blog. Sam spots Coco with her camera and Coco, with an embarrassing look on her face, says to Sam:

What? Say it!...these people (white people) don't give a fuck about no Harriet motherfucking Tubman...they want to be like us, and they got to be for a night.

I'm not about to go out into the streets and protest a fucking Halloween party.

This statement shows the complex personality of Coco, because despite others who may have been incredibly offended by the “blackface” party, Coco was not upset by it. Again, this is an example of Coco’s refusal to align her actions with cultural norms. Given this refusal, Coco’s characterization makes sense structurally in that her actions and motives are consistent with someone who rejects being classified according to how a stereotypical African American woman would behave. Thus, her story is plausible because her character is round, not flat. What’s left is to determine whether her characterization is truthful and representative of a real-life scenario.

***Narrative Fidelity.*** After careful analysis of Coco’s character, it can be concluded that her character is trustworthy and is representative of a real-life person. Much of Coco’s story has an overarching theme of an African American who does not want to be categorized stereotypically or judged based on her race. Throughout *Dear White People*, Coco consistently defies the odds in her interactions with other characters. Instead of being the feisty African American woman who embraces the negative connotations of being from a specific neighborhood, she chooses to confront any effort to label her the “ghetto African American who made it out of the ‘hood’”. Furthermore, while it still somewhat taboo to date outside of the race for many African Americans, Coco does not

allow herself to be dominated by that ideology (Yancey, 2009). This kind of behavior demonstrates to an audience that they do not have to meet certain cultural norms in order to be a part of a racial group. In fact, Coco's character should appeal to any audience in that people can defy the odds and be themselves regardless of how society has predetermined their life.

Throughout *Dear White People* Coco made it clear that she did not want to be associated with the negative stereotypes of her culture. As a result, Coco's behavior triggers interest in her individual perspective. In other words, the audience is left to wonder, why does Coco act in the manner she does? How might her viewpoint affect her behavior? Thus, the next section will address this dilemma utilizing standpoint theory.

**Coco's narrative based on standpoint theory.** Throughout *Dear White People*, Coco does, in fact achieve a standpoint. Coco's character as mentioned earlier is depicted as someone who does not embrace being compartmentalized and therefore her character is a true representation of someone who can achieve a standpoint and challenge hegemony. By not allowing the dominant culture to define who she is and has to be, Coco is, indeed, confronting hegemony. Since Coco fiercely combats being associated with any negative stereotypes of African Americans, she demonstrates how someone can challenge hegemony. In the opening of *Dear White People*, Coco rejects being labeled "from the 'hood'" in her conversation with the reality television producer. Not being categorized as a stereotype does show a strong sense of character Coco. For example, hegemony may

cause inferior groups to think less of themselves in a way that indirectly continues white supremacy. Members of that inferior group could decide not to accept certain labels given to them by the dominating group in order psychologically to liberate themselves. Coco certainly did not allow anyone to place her in a category. Thus, she was able to achieve a standpoint in that she refused to let herself to be classified as the stereotypical African American woman. While her characterization is nuanced and might go against some beliefs of the African American community, her ability to avoid categorization to any racial group demonstrates her ability to achieve a standpoint in an effort to confront hegemony. Now that we have thoroughly analyzed Coco's character, this thesis turns its attention to the final main protagonist, Lionel.

**Lionel's story arc based on the narrative paradigm.**

*Narrative Coherence.* Lionel's character development throughout *Dear White People* is flat and his character remains the same throughout most of the film. It is not until much later that he is shown as a round character. The audience's first encounter with Lionel depicts him as an undeclared major, trying to get into the Garmin residence where Kurt Fletcher lives. Despite Lionel being assigned to this residence, he is locked out of the home, possibly due to his identity as a homosexual. This situation reflects a flat characterization of Lionel's character development. That is, Lionel is an outsider to the larger student community and the way he is portrayed contributes to the perception that



his character is a nerdy, gay African American male who struggles to find his social place on campus because of the intersections of his identity.

In response to being locked out of the Garmin house by Kurt, Lionel meets with Dean Fairbanks to discuss the matter. During their conversation, Dean Fairbanks explains to Lionel that he should move into the Armstrong-Parker house to be around other African Americans because it would be a better fit. Lionel responds by stating that he does not like being around other African Americans due to his past experiences as well as his identity as a homosexual. The conversation between Lionel and Dean Fairbanks fits into a flat definition of Lionel's character. As someone who views himself as an outcast with the African American community, Lionel attempts to find any way to not be in the midst of other African Americans due to perceived homophobia from the community, even if that means dealing with Kurt's mistreatment of him.

In the subsequent scene, after Sam kicks Kurt and his friends out of the dining hall in the Armstrong-Parker residence, Sam also confrontationally asks Lionel to leave because he does not live in the residence. Again, this is a scene that confirms Lionel's identity as an outsider. Another instance of the lack of complexity of Lionel's character is when he tries to go to Garmin house to get some rest at two o'clock in the morning and he is met by two Pastiche staff members who explain that he cannot come into his own home because the "Game Night" party is invitation only. Again, this is an example that meets the audience's expectation of someone who is portrayed as an outcast.

Despite Lionel's flat characterization in the beginning of *Dear White People*, his narrative arc does begin to develop a bit of complexity to it. Lionel is confronted by members of the Black Student Union about his eventual move to the Armstrong-Parker house. In this scene, the Black Student Union members ask Lionel if he is just moving into the residence to get a story on Sam, or if he is trying to be a part of the community. Lionel discovers that the African American community is willing to accept him for who he is and that his anxiety over rejection by this community is misplaced. This is an example of the development of his character, which becomes increasingly round as *Dear White People* progresses. An audience could be led to believe that because Lionel is an outsider, he would not be accepted by anyone. However, much to the surprise of Lionel, he finds out that the African American community is willing to accept him. This presents a subtle change and shows Lionel as a more rounded character.

In the final scenes, Lionel's characterization takes an interesting turn. When Lionel arrives at the Pastiche's "blackface" themed Halloween party, he notices the white people are dressed up and appropriating the African American culture. As mentioned, Lionel then decides to ask Sam and others for help to put an end to the racially offensive party. This scenario represents some complexity in Lionel's character. At the beginning of *Dear White People*, he is portrayed as someone who is an outsider and who does not really have a group to which he belongs. This is partially due to Lionel's perception of others and his belief that people will not accept him for who he is. Therefore Lionel's

character remains flat until the climax of *Dear White People* when his character portrayal changes. Given Lionel character in this film, the next section will focus on the truthfulness of Lionel's portrayal.

***Narrative Fidelity.*** When Lionel is first introduced in *Dear White People*, his character is portrayed as an outsider or nerd. Lionel does not think that he fits in with the African American community based on his past experiences, and his identity as a nerdy homosexual makes it difficult for him to find any social group in which to belong. Consequently, Lionel tries to avoid, in every way possible, being associated with his cultural group. This action adheres to the narrative of an outcast, and therefore Lionel's characterization is presented as mostly flat in *Dear White People*.

Despite Lionel's character being flat early in *Dear White People*, he does have a moment later on that adds some dimensionality and renders his character more round. In *Dear White People's* final scene, Lionel is seen as the leader or driver to get all the African American students from the Black Student Union to go to the Pastiche "blackface" party. In this instance, Lionel seems to be a bit more nuanced in *Dear White People*. Once he arrives at the party he immediately seeks help from others to defend his ethnic culture. This serves as an example of the developing roundness of Lionel's character in that this course of action would not have been pursued if *Dear White People* insisted on maintaining its early portrayal of Lionel. So this shift in Lionel's behavior warrants further exploration into Lionel's potential ability to achieve a standpoint.

**Lionel's narrative based on standpoint theory.** Lionel's identity, as African American and queer, calls attention to his social location and how his location challenges or doesn't challenge hegemony. It is very apparent that Lionel dealt with internalized homophobia which may have affected his ability to achieve a standpoint in the beginning of *Dear White People*. When a queer person internalizes homophobia it leads to poor relationship quality (Poon, 2011). This is seen in Lionel's relationship with the other African American students. Instead of challenging his own assumption about homophobia in the African American community, Lionel allows himself not to participate in the struggle against white dominance until the end of *Dear White People*. This is problematic because in order to challenge Eurocentrism seriously, all participants in marginalized groups must play a role in deconstructing white domination over other groups. Despite Lionel's lack of agency in the beginning of *Dear White People*, he does achieve a standpoint by actually confronting hegemony at the very end of *Dear White People*.

Subsequently, Lionel does begin to make a shift in his actions and thus begins to achieve a standpoint during the final scenes of *Dear White People*. As mentioned, Lionel reaches out to Sam and others for help and leads the charge to stop the Pastiche party. This can be seen as Lionel's initial movement into developing a standpoint. In this action, Lionel challenges the dominant culture (Kurt and other white students) about their appropriation of African American identity, which was necessary to achieve a standpoint.

His movement from one end of the spectrum to the other is promising. Lionel's narrative is an example of how difficult it may be for someone to achieve a standpoint given the multitude of intersections of identity that one may possess. To identify as queer, African American, and male, consideration must be given to how each identity may affect one's social location and ability to achieve a standpoint.

### **Consideration of the narrative development of all main characters**

Overall, Simien's use of a multi-protagonist film allows the audience to explore notions of African American identity. In an effort to answer the first research question for this study, I analyzed the development of the racial identity of the main characters in *Dear White People* using Cross' (1971; 1991) Nigrescence model. Cross' framework is comprised on five stages that an African American can go through: 1) Pre-encounter, 2) Encounter, 3) Immersion-emersion, 4) Internalization, 5) Internalization-commitment.

After careful analysis, this study found that Sam was in the Immersion-emersion stage. While Sam is undoubtedly the most Afrocentric of all the main protagonists, she deals with the pressure from others, particularly members of the Black Student Union, to emerge as the revolutionary African American leader on campus. In addition, Sam also illustrates struggle with acceptance of mixed race identity by keeping her intimate relationship with Gabe a secret and not acknowledging her interest in non-Afrocentric elements such as music, other art forms, and culture. Lastly, Sam's rhetoric also is

sometimes representative of an anti-white perspective, which Cross (1991) posits as indicative of the Immersion-emersion phase of the Nigrescence model.

Moreover, Troy and Coco were found to be in the Pre-encounter stage, but from two different perspectives. Troy acknowledges his African American identity but he does not allow race to have a major impact on his worldview. Troy believes that the world is not as racist as it once was, so therefore he is not aware of the social implications of being African American. With this mindset, Troy does not allow his race to get in the way of his own personal ambitions. Coco, on the other hand, wants to disassociate herself from African American culture as much as possible. Because she wants to be famous, she adopts a Eurocentric persona, particularly in terms of communication, clothing and hair style, because she believes that this is the way to become assimilated into the dominant culture. Coco's behavior almost resembles an anti-black mentality that exists in some African Americans who are positioned in the Pre-encounter phase.

While Troy and Coco begin in the Pre-encounter phase and stay within it throughout *Dear White People*, Lionel eventually makes progress to the next phase. Like Troy and Coco, initially Lionel begins in the Pre-encounter phase in *Dear White People's* narrative arc. Lionel is portrayed as an outcast, and stays in this position for most of *Dear White People* due to fear of being judged or discriminated against because of his identity as a homosexual. Through the course of events, Lionel finds himself in a position at the Pastiche party that causes him to seek help from others to defend his culture and confront

white dominance. This course of action demonstrates Lionel's move into the Encounter phase of the Nigrescence model where he takes a stand to challenge hegemony.

In sum, the use of a multi-protagonist film provided the audience with multiple perspectives of African American identity. As demonstrated, African American identity occurs in many different stages. Some people, like Sam, are already at a point where they are committed to the Afrocentric agenda in liberating African Americans. Others, like Troy and Coco, are still in the midst of determining or embracing their identity. Additionally, some characters have experiences that cause them to move from one point to another in the Nigrescence model. This film illustrates how African American identity is fluid and cannot be essentialized into one typology.

In addition, to determining the racial identity development of the main characters, I also analyzed the narrative development of each as a mechanism for uncovering the Afrocentric and Eurocentric characteristics embedded in *Dear White People*. This issue was mainly discerned through analyzing the character's development from the perspective of Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism utilizing the narrative paradigm and standpoint theory. I discovered that many of the characters were dynamic, meaning that their characterizations changed during the course of *Dear White People*. Their characterizations were nuanced and multidimensional, not presented as the flat or stereotypical behaviors of the African American community, thus making the narrative more believable. Each character had experiences that altered their development. As a

result, Sam, Coco and Lionel were all able to achieve a standpoint and confront white dominance in different ways, while Troy never was able to reach the same feat.

Sam was probably the most aggressive of all the characters when it came to challenging hegemony. Her campus radio show, video blog, and self-published book offered her opportunities to openly criticize white people for unpleasant racial stereotyping, micro-aggressions, and overall oppressive behaviors towards her culture. These communication themes are Afrocentric in nature, thus showing Sam's ability to achieve a standpoint. Sam's commentary through multiple mass communication outlets positions her against all forms of oppression which includes "racism, classism... homophobia, patriarchy... and white racial domination" (Asante, 2003, p.2). Thus, Sam's uses her communication channels as a mechanism to broadcast her Afrocentric discourse of resistance towards white hegemonic dominance at Winchester, and these actions are reflective of an Afrocentric identity.

The next segment where Sam's Afrocentric characteristics are entrenched in *Dear White People* can be observed in Sam's run for Head of the Armstrong-Parker residence. Sam's motive for running for Head of the House is to fight the Randomization of Housing Act. Sam and members of the Black Student Union are against this policy because they believe it racially motivated. Sam's impetus to run is representative of Afrocentric philosophy because she tries to contest this policy, which she deems a way to



maintain control over the African American students. Her actions are reflective of an Afrocentric identity.

Also, Sam's ability to stand up to Kurt in the dining hall at the Armstrong-Parker house also characterizes Afrocentrism. In this scene, Sam kicks Kurt and his friends out of the dining hall despite Kurt being the Winchester president's son. Sam is indeed challenging white dominance by explaining to Kurt that he cannot eat in the Armstrong-Parker cafeteria because of his racist comments. Again, this instance exemplifies what Asante articulates about Afrocentrism, that is, people of African descent should condemn and challenge hegemonic ideologies in any circumstances. In this example, standing up to Kurt for his offensive commentary demonstrates Sam's Afrocentric qualities and her ability to achieve a standpoint.

Coco, unlike Sam, accomplished her standpoint in a different manner. While on the surface Coco appears to be someone who is a proponent of Eurocentrism, Coco actually does not allow society to define who she is. Much of Coco's issue is that she has been labeled due to the fact that she is African American, from Chicago (specifically Hyde Park), and her name is Colondrea, which she views as a ghetto name. Instead of embracing these labels and acting them out, Coco chooses not to accept these stereotypes, which indeed goes against hegemonic ideals.

The dominant group would have African Americans think of themselves as ghetto, barbaric and lucky to receive some of the benefits of being an American. This

mode of thinking would allow for the dominant group's oppression to persist. In other words, it would serve white dominance for African Americans to think like victims and to have low expectations for themselves--it would be a form of control. However, Coco represents quite the opposite. Coco believes that her background should not constrain her to acting as the typical African American. While some may disagree with her tactics in seeking a standpoint and label her some of her behaviors as inconsistent with Afrocentrism, Coco does, indeed, confront white dominance by not allowing herself to be pigeonholed by any group, not even the African American community.

Finally, Lionel demonstrates his Afrocentric identity and ability to achieve a standpoint during the Pastiche Halloween party when he seeks the aid of the other African Americans to help him put an end to the offensive party. This act is Afrocentric in nature. Instead of attending the party and simply observing the offensive gestures going on there, Lionel stands up for his people. This behavior is consistent with Afrocentrism because Asante's paradigm is features rebuking oppression in every form. Not only was this act Afrocentric, it demonstrates Lionel's ability to achieve a standpoint.

Lastly, Troy does not achieve a standpoint, most likely because he does not use race as a lens by which to view the world. While many would encourage this post-racial perspective, the reality is race plays an important factor in the make-up of our country. Some believe that in order to end racism the society must not engage in race-based discussions, which is Troy's modus operandi. However, in order to address race

problems, difficult conversations about the differences between and among cultures is important. Throughout *Dear White People*, Troy does his best to avoid race-based discussions, and he declines to challenge Kurt or anyone else who engages in oppressive behavior. Therefore, Troy does not achieve a standpoint in *Dear White People*.

Now that this research has exposed the characteristics of Afrocentric and Eurocentric narratives in *Dear White People* and demonstrated how *Dear White People* reflects Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism in its narrative development, the question becomes, what are the recurring themes in *Dear White People* and what are the implications of those themes? As Leonard (2006) mentioned, film is where mass audiences experience the world of otherness and gain their personal outlook on other cultures. Thus, people watching *Dear White People* will develop perceptions about African American culture. What is important to assess is the authenticity of the messages about African American culture in any particular film. In this case, it's vital to examine what the audience will believe about African American culture as they view the Afrocentric or Eurocentric themes present in *Dear White People*.

To begin, a careful Afrocentric analysis of this film reveals that viewers of *Dear White People* are likely to believe that African Americans are committed to challenging and resisting hegemony because of the Afrocentric themes and character traits developed. Furthermore, an audience is likely to believe that African Americans value community, true self-identity, their own culture, and condemning all forms of oppression and

discrimination. For instance, in *Dear White People* Sam's actions are representative of Afrocentric values in that she consistently defends her marginalized culture and constantly challenges hegemony through multiple forms of communication. Sam uses her radio show, book and social protest to show the audience that battling all forms of oppression and discrimination is what African Americans believe is the right thing to do, and it must be done in order to achieve liberation and happiness. In addition, Lionel's later interaction with members of the Black Student Union shows that African Americans are not homophobic and are willing to accept people for who they are. Finally, Lionel's leadership in stopping the offensive "blackface" party exhibits that African Americans will stop at nothing to defend their culture. Therefore, through the experiences of Sam, Lionel and *Dear White People's* overall narrative, an audience is likely to have faith that African Americans believe in resisting and challenging hegemony and condemning all forms of discrimination.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Eurocentric characteristics also exist within the characters of this film. Unfortunately, when Eurocentrism is infused within films such as, *Dear White People*, an audience can perceive that African Americans have similar values and beliefs as the dominant culture. That is, African Americans are innately competitive, individualistic, and believe superiority over others is natural. These features are evident through the audience's experiences with Troy, Coco and (partially) Lionel. Troy's inability to give up his leadership role to someone like Sam simply because of

who he is demonstrates Eurocentric ideology. Therefore, Troy's belief that he is the natural leader for head of house can persuade an audience that African Americans believe in ethnocentrism or that their race is superior to others and therefore makes them more fit to lead than others.

Furthermore, Coco's behavior throughout *Dear White People* implies to an audience that African Americans, especially collegiate African Americans, do not even want to be associated with their own culture. In fact, Coco's narrative may reinforce to an audience that African American culture is substandard and therefore African Americans ought to align their beliefs with the status quo (Eurocentrism) because it is the "right" way to live and think. Coco's narrative focuses on disassociating herself from African American culture as well as attempting to adopt Eurocentric cultural characteristics. This kind of narrative may cause confusion for audiences about African American ethics and beliefs.

Lastly, Lionel's narrative also can cause misunderstanding for an audience about African Americans' perspective on homosexuality. Up until the end of *Dear White People*, Lionel struggles to find a group to which he belongs socially. Naturally, he is afraid to socialize with other African Americans for fear that they will not accept him because of his sexual preference. Much to Lionel's surprise, the African American students are indeed accepting of him and want him to be part of the Black Student Union. Afrocentrism rejects the notion of discrimination of any sorts, so Lionel's

characterization earlier in *Dear White People* implies that African Americans are homophobic.

### **Chapter summary**

In this chapter, all three research questions posed in this study have been answered. The first question concerned how African American identity was developed throughout *Dear White People*. Using the Nigrescence model, this question was answered by determining that Sam was in the Immersion-emersion phase, Troy and Coco were in the Pre-encounter phase and Lionel started in the Pre-encounter phase but had an experience that conveyed him to the Encounter phase.

The second line of inquiry in this study focused on how the Afrocentric and Eurocentric characteristics were embedded in *Dear White People*'s main characters. This question was answered using Asante's Afrocentric paradigm as well as analyzing the coherence and fidelity of the narratives of each main character so as to determine whether or not their actions allowed them to achieve a standpoint to challenge white dominance. It was determined that all of the character's actions were representative of real life scenarios, but only Sam, Coco and Lionel were able to achieve a standpoint. Troy, on the other hand, was not able to achieve a standpoint due to his lack of awareness and engagement with the social and political implications of being African American.

The final research question focused on audience perceptions when African American films adopt Afrocentric or Eurocentric themes, what might be the implications.

It was determined that when African American films portray Eurocentric themes, many may be led to believe that African American culture is subordinate to European culture. Also, Eurocentric themes embedded in African American films allow for the persistence of white hegemonic dominance. By contrast, when Afrocentric themes are incorporated into African American films, this illustrates that African Americans are able to achieve their goals on their own without the aid of white people. Such an approach also shows that African Americans have their own cultural references. Movies that portray Afrocentric themes challenge the status quo and demonstrate to the world the power and agency of African American people when they are completely free and liberated.

## Chapter 4

## DISCUSSION

This study began by considering how African American identity is developed in *Dear White People* to determine the Afrocentric and Eurocentric characteristics embedded in it via the actions of its characters. The rationale for this study was to expand Afrocentric research into the realm of film studies to determine how African American-based films can portray an authentic African American experience. Examining Afrocentrism allows for a critique of hegemonic ideals and provides a basis for understanding how film can be used as a medium for the preservation of the status quo. In order for African Americans to achieve liberation, freedom, and agency, movies about their beliefs, values and experiences must portray an Afrocentric ideology. This section will discuss the particular rhetorical choices by Simien to establish an African American narrative about identity. Making inferences about the particular rhetorical choices Simien made in this film can help to determine the overall significance of this film.

The first question that can be addressed is why Simien chose to make the movie in this particular manner? More specifically, why did he use a multi-protagonist approach to an African American film when he could have taken a more customary approach featuring a single character to provide commentary on African American identity? This question raises an important point about how multi-protagonist stories may affect an audience differently than a monologic narrative. The four characters in this film are all



very different and all have diverse narratives. These varied narratives allow the audience to observe multiple perspectives of the African American experience and how African American identity can function. This allows for the audience to get more than one representation of African American life. Therefore, telling the story of multiple characters in a single film may make *Dear White People* more believable because the audience has more of a comprehensive experience with African American identity and the community (Grishakova & Ryan, 2010).

In *Dear White People*, it was determined that Simien portrayed one character in the Immersion-emersion phase, while the other three were still in the Pre-encounter phase, with Lionel moving into the Encounter stage toward the very end of *Dear White People*. With this approach, Simien most likely wanted to show how collegiate African American identity is developed in multiple ways. Portraying Sam as the most developed of all in terms of her Afrocentric activism demonstrates one form of African American identity. In this portrayal, the audience is able to witness some of the challenges African Americans face in achieving liberation and agency when attending a predominantly white college institution. In Sam's case she consistently dealt with backlash from not only white students but also the institution's administration as well as some in the African American community. This exemplifies how trying to oppose the dominant culture can be difficult and also have negative consequences. Sam's activism almost leads to her

expulsion from the university. Sam's more extreme position within the Nigrescence model differs from the development of the other main characters.

Along with Sam's identity development, showing the other characters in the Pre-encounter phase illustrated how some African Americans are still trying to figure out elements of their identity in various ways. For example, Troy battles with being who he wants to be (a comedian) versus whom his father wants him to be (a politician). Troy's representation in the Pre-encounter phase shows the audience how other people such as parents can have a major impact on a person's identity. This could lead to negative consequences. As displayed in *Dear White People*, Troy's actions cause him not to become a change agent because he is so worried about gaining social and political capital that he is not willing to upset or disappoint anyone who might help him achieve personal success. Therefore, Troy signals that he is not sure who he wants to be and suffers the consequences of not developing a strong identity like Sam.

Troy demonstrates to the audience that even when an African American is trying to do all the right things, he or she can still struggle to understand and establish an identity. That is, one can attempt not to let race impact one's perspective of the world so as to be successful, but simultaneously not have a clear sense of ethnic identity. Often times, African Americans adopt this "post-racial" persona wherein they try to not to look at things from a racial perspective because they feel it will make life easier and less confrontational. However, as shown in Troy's narrative, this position only aids the

persistence of hegemony because one is not acting as an agent for change on social justice issues affecting marginalized communities.

As with Troy, Coco is also another character depicted by Simien in the Pre-encounter phase. Coco wants to be famous but is not quite sure how to accomplish it. She knows that acting in a stereotypical African American fashion is not going to get her where she wanted to be because that style is not favorable in the dominant culture's eyes. Therefore, she tries to assimilate with the white majority as a means to separate herself from other African Americans who may negatively impact her image. To this end, Coco demonstrates to the audience the difficulties of assimilating with white culture. No matter what Coco tries to do to disassociate herself with her cultural community (straighten her hair, don blue contact lens, etc.), she is always reminded that she is not white and will never be able to enjoy all the privileges of white culture. She receives these lessons not only from white people but also from the African American community.

Finally, Simien presents Lionel as starting out in the Pre-encounter phase, like Troy and Coco, but he is able to demonstrate to the audience that one can move into the Encounter phase of the Nigrescence model. Lionel's experience illustrates what many African Americans go through when their racial consciousness begins to be raised. They start seeing the inequalities and racism that exist culturally and institutionally and commence a journey to find their true identity (Cross, 1991). As Lionel witnesses the offensive "blackface" party, he develops a sense of guilt for not taking a stand for his

racial group in previous situations, which is similar to Cross' (1991) findings regarding Nigrescence. This causes him to seek help from the very people he tried to avoid earlier in *Dear White People*: the Black Student Association. In sum, Simien's use of multiple viewpoints of African American identity aids the audience's comprehension of the various stages through which African Americans can progress. In other words, not all African Americans are at a point where they are challenging the status quo, but movement among stages is possible.

This brings into question the fact that none of the characters were in the final two stages of the Nigrescence model (Internalization and Internalization-commitment). One of the issues with using college-aged characters is that there is an expectation that, in terms of identity, these characters are not going to be fully developed due their emergence into adulthood (Arnett, 2000). In this case, many of the main characters in this film have not had enough life experience to be at a point where they have internalized Afrocentrism and are committed to fighting to for social justice. While Simien could have included this kind of character in *Dear White People*, I think it would be difficult for an audience to accept this kind of premise because many African Americans prior to coming to college are not exposed to African American history and therefore are mis-educated about their own identity (Harrison Jr. Bimper Jr., Smith, & Logan, 2017). This is most likely why Sam stayed in the Immersion-emersion phase. Compared to her counterparts,

she was the most Afrocentric, however even she had difficulties being her true self in the public eye.

In order for someone to be in the Internalization and Internationalization-commitment phase of the Nigrescence model, that person would need to be secure in his or her racial identity while at the same time appreciative of other's cultural identity (Cross, 1991). In addition, in the Internalization-commitment stage the individual has to be fully committed to eliminating all forms of hegemony in addition to helping others develop their Afrocentric identity. In *Dear White People*, while Sam is the farthest in her Nigrescence development, she has not quite reached the last two levels of Cross' framework.

With this multi-protagonist approach to displaying African American identity, the next necessary question to address is the Afrocentric or Eurocentric personality within the four main characters. That is, why did Simien portray each of the characters in a particular fashion? Recall each of the main characters has a distinct personality, but many of their characteristics align either with Afrocentrism or Eurocentrism. Sam is the Afrocentric revolutionary and mixed race leader, while Troy is the handsome, well-groomed man, whose father outlines a successful career map for him to follow. Additionally, Coco is the upwardly mobile African American who consistently disassociates herself from her community, while Lionel is the gay, nerdy, loner who struggles to find his place at Winchester. Based on the analysis, Sam is the only character

that consistently represents Afrocentrism, while the other characters mainly display Eurocentric characteristics. One may wonder why Simien would only have only one character (Sam) consistently represents Afrocentrism, instead of having all characters possess an Afrocentric persona. This is done so that the audience can see the difference between Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism.

If all the characters in this film were Afrocentric, it may have been more difficult to see the difference between challenging and not challenging hegemony, and the consequences of choosing either path. For instance, Sam fought throughout *Dear White People* to resist hegemony but was consistently met with obstacles that threatened her livelihood and her academic standing at Winchester. Besides, making all the characters Afrocentric would have taken away from *Dear White People*'s ability to use a character such as Sam to demonstrate what resistance against Eurocentric domination looks like, and also showcases the behavior of those who contribute to hegemonic dominance. This rhetorical choice was made to assist *Dear White People*'s overall message in regards to defying the status quo.

Moreover, while Sam's actions validated Afrocentrism as a form of resistance, her counterparts exhibited Eurocentrism, which allows the audience to see how these actions contributed to the challenges of Lionel, but especially Troy and Coco. For instance, Coco's deeds throughout *Dear White People* end with her ultimately realizing that she is allowing herself to be used by the very people she strives to be like. In

addition, Lionel realizes that his fear of African American homophobia is a result of his own cognition and not reality. This realization gives him the courage to ask for help from the same people he feared in the beginning. These scenes cause the audience to consider the real-life consequences of not embracing one's identity.

The next point to address is the idea of the main characters being college-aged people. While this might not seem important, Simien's use of young adults to talk about African American identity compels the audience to rethink their assumptions about African American identity in general. Consider the fact that Winchester is described as an elite institution comprised of mostly of white people, which would make the university a predominantly white institution (PWI). Studies have shown that African American students have more difficulty succeeding at PWIs due to their inability to find a sense of belonging (Booker, 2016; Museus, Yi & Saelua, 2017). Arguably, this is due to their failure to develop a personal identity (Butler-Barnes, Varner, Williams & Sellers, 2016; Pope, 2000; Robinson, & Biran, 2006). Thus, Simien's use of collegiate-aged students allows him to explore identity more deeply than if he had used an older group whose identities were well established.

So because of their age, it is clear that all the main characters in this film struggled with identity. Despite Sam's persona aligning with Afrocentric characteristics, she, too, had trouble embracing her European identity. Still, Sam's Afrocentric portrayal demonstrated how an Afrocentric identity can equip African Americans with the ability

to be liberated and become change agents to fight against hegemony. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the other characters showed how Eurocentric characteristics can aid the persistence of hegemonic dominance. Therefore Simien challenges the audience to rethink their own racial identity and how that positions them in the world both politically and socially. He does this by using collegiate-aged adults who all have room to develop their identity so as to truly be liberated and have agency.

### **Chapter summary**

In this chapter, filmmaker Simien's rhetorical choices in *Dear White People* were discussed. Simien's use of a multi-protagonist approach gave the audience more of a comprehensive experience of African American culture and identity. In addition to explaining why some of Simien characters were in certain positions in the Nigrescence model, inferences were made about why certain Afrocentric or Eurocentric characteristics were present in *Dear White People*'s main characters. By providing the audience with more than one representation of African American identity, Simien better allows the audience to explore the nuances of African American culture, which could make them rethink their assumptions about culture and identity.



## Chapter 5

### CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to prompt more discussion on how film can serve as a vehicle for delivering hegemonic messages and therefore can potentially place marginalized communities in a state of hopelessness. While this study focused on how an Afrocentric identity challenges hegemony in the context of film, this study's contributes to the larger discussion on how hegemony impacts disenfranchised communities through film. Films can potentially shape an audiences' perception about the world of otherness. Given this notion, it is important that films about African American life are representative of the authentic experience. *Dear White People* focuses on four African American college-aged students who all struggle with identity. This is why an Afrocentric analysis was warranted. Afrocentrism is about identity, particularly for people of African descent. Asante argues that Africans across the diaspora must have a collective identity utilizing the continent of Africa as the center for the basis of their culture. This is why African American identity was explored first in this study.

African Americans have been dislocated from the continent of Africa and thus have never had the opportunity to maintain or create their own unique culture. Instead, many of them had to either assimilate or remain an outcast from mainstream society. Given this dilemma, many scholars like W.E.B DuBois, Molefi Asante, Marcus Garvey

and others have provided a basis for the African people in America to reclaim their African identity. That is where Cross' work comes in. The Nigrescence model provides a psychological framework for explaining the process for people of African descent to develop an Afrocentric identity and become social change agents. Hence, this is the reason why this study examined *Dear White People* from an Afrocentric perspective.

Afrocentrism provided a lens for this study to help identify what characteristics the main protagonists were employing throughout their character development. Along with Afrocentrism, the main characters were also examined to determine what Eurocentric qualities they were portraying in *Dear White People*. These tactics provided a basis for understanding how *Dear White People* reflected an authentic African American experience on screen.

Along with looking for Afrocentric and Eurocentric characteristics in the main characters, the study also incorporated Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm as a mechanism for understanding how *Dear White People* functioned as a narrative. In other words, the narrative paradigm assisted this study in identifying some of the key parts of *Dear White People*, most significantly the characters and their development. Understanding how characters develop in any narrative, either as flat or round representations, allows better comprehension of the narrative's coherence and fidelity. In addition, this study also incorporated standpoint theory to augment the narrative paradigm.

Standpoint theory was included in this study to go beyond the descriptive boundaries of narrative analysis and thus demonstrate how hegemony can persist in the lives of the characters in *Dear White People*. As John (2011) points out, everyone is innately born with a perspective or standpoint. This means, everyone has a social location in the order of society. The issue is how people use that social location to disrupt the persistence of hegemony. In this study it was discovered that despite Sam being mixed race and potentially benefitting from her whiteness, she chose to use her social location as a means of confronting white hegemonic dominance. Therefore, Sam was able to achieve a standpoint in this film.

To add to the discovery of Sam's ability to achieve a standpoint, this study also found that Lionel was also able to achieve a standpoint at the very end of *Dear White People* when he decided to take a lead role in ending the "blackface" party hosted by Kurt and other members of the Pastiche group. Surprisingly, Coco also achieves a standpoint despite reaching this feat in a different way than her peers. While Coco is portrayed as the African American woman who disassociates herself from African American culture, she still challenges hegemony because she does not allow anyone to pigeonhole her in any of the negative stereotypes of African American people. As seen in one of the very first scenes with Coco, she quickly dismisses Helmet's notion that because she is from Hyde Park in Chicago, Illinois, she is ghetto. While some might see this as Coco not being appreciative of her culture, an argument can be made that Coco

does not want to be associated with any negative stereotypes of African Americans. This interpretation demonstrates Coco's ability to achieve a standpoint.

Unfortunately, Troy is the only character who had difficulty achieving a standpoint in *Dear White People*. Despite telling his father about the "blackface" party, Troy consistently does his best to maintain a respectable and positive image for the purposes of pleasing his father and his white audience. Even at the very end of *Dear White People*, Troy tells Coco that he cannot be seen with her because he is now running for school president. This serves as an example of Troy trying to maintain a clean image in front of his white audience. In this film, Troy is portrayed as someone who acts as an agent for the persistence of white dominance.

Given the assessment of the characters' development throughout *Dear White People* provides a basis for understanding African American identity in film. Through its characters, this film demonstrates how Afrocentrism can assist in challenging hegemony. Afrocentric themes of resistance, unity, liberty and freedom were all found in the development of the main characters. Sam's ability to show resistance towards Winchester's institutional threats, and her resistance toward Kurt and other white people who attempted to marginalize her, were demonstrations of her character disrupting the status quo. Similarly, Lionel's ability to unify the members of the Black Student Union as well as other student cultural clubs to shut down Kurt's party displayed an extraordinary effort to contest hegemony. This experience also seemed to liberate Lionel as well.

Finally, Coco's desire to be free of any negative African American stereotypes also demonstrated how African American identity cannot be easily defined by any one person or group. Coco continuously denied others' attempts to define her as an African American woman, which shows the freedom that she has achieved, and aligns with Asante's goal of the Afrocentric paradigm.

Given the Afrocentric characteristics present in this film, this study also examined the implications for films that incorporated Afrocentric or Eurocentric themes. When Afrocentric themes are developed in African American films, African Americans can be perceived as social change agents and contributors to the shaping of any community of which they are a part. When Afrocentric themes are not present in African American films, the perception of African Americans can be negative in that an audience may be led to believe that African American cannot liberate themselves without the aid of others. In addition, Eurocentric characteristics placed upon African American narratives continue to reinforce white hegemonic dominance.

This study is limited in that only one film is considered. Extending the analysis to multiple films would provide a more comprehensive view of how Afrocentrism functions in African American film. Also, film interpretation is very subjective. Other scholars may come to different conclusions about the main characters' actions and commentary throughout *Dear White People*, but such is the nature of the rhetorical critical enterprise. Finally, analyzing *Dear White People*'s treatment of college-age students only covers one

segment of the population for the African American community. A more complete study could include African Americans from urban communities and other different backgrounds that are not in college. Such an effort would provide more understanding to how African American identity is constructed and functions in film.

This study demonstrates the need to look beyond the dominant message in any film in order to comprehend the hegemonic depictions of African American identity. Through this essay I have added to the research agenda of Afrocentric scholarship and the rhetorical function of Afrocentric identity in film. As scholars and activists, further discussion is needed on the role in which film plays in the representation of the identity for marginalized communities in order to expose hegemony and promote equality and basic human rights for all.

### **Future research**

Future studies should look at the genre of African American films and determine how the characters in those films reflect Afrocentric characteristics. Afrocentric studies of film are limited, and much more scholarship is warranted if we are to fully understand how film impacts not only African Americans but also how others think about African American culture. Doing so allows for a much deeper discussion of how white domination is still present in film. In other words, it is worth exploring the notion of an Eurocentrically-controlled film industry telling African American filmmakers how much

Afrocentrism they are willing to accept for public display in film. This idea still reinforces hegemonic control over marginalized populations.

Filmmakers such as Spike Lee have challenged hegemony and continue to do so to this very day. However, there is still a great need for more African American filmmakers like Lee and Simien to challenge the status quo. Displaying characters who adopt an Afrocentric persona demonstrates to African Americans that they can be change agents, their lives are valued, and their ideology, customs, and culture are part of the world's social fabric. The goal of Afrocentrism is to liberate people of African descent across the diaspora. Asante offers this paradigm as a means by which scholars can critique western imperialism and challenge white domination. This is why further Afrocentric studies on the African American film genre are needed. It is my hope that this study can be an impetus for more scholarship on the topic to be initiated.

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