



universität
wien

MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

“#SayTheirNames: Analysis of Socio-political
Commentary in *Empire* and *Dear White People*“

verfasst von / submitted by

Barbara Katharina Reschenhofer, BA

angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien, 2018 / Vienna, 2018

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme code as it appears on
the student record sheet:

A 066 844

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme as it appears on
the student record sheet:

Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Betreut von / Supervisor:

Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Alexandra Ganser-Blumenau

Table of Contents

1. <u>Introduction</u>	1
1.1. <u>Context and Theory</u>	1
1.2. <u>Plot Synopsis</u>	4
2. <u>Problematic Whiteness in Empire and Dear White People</u>	5
2.1. <u>The Restaurant Scene – Hakeem Triggers White Fragility</u>	5
2.2. <u>Kelsey - Assimilation to Whiteness as a Threat to Blackness</u>	11
2.3. <u>White Guilt and the White Savior Complex</u>	16
2.3.1. <u>Selfish White Guilt</u>	16
2.3.2. <u>Gabe as a Crusoean White Savior in Dear White People</u>	18
2.3.3. <u>The Significance of Beards in Dear White People</u>	22
2.3.4. <u>Angry White Men in Dear White People</u>	25
3. <u>Censorship and Mass Incarceration</u>	32
3.1. <u>Lucious Under Public Scrutiny</u>	32
3.2. <u>Incarcerating Black Womanhood: Sandra Bland and Cookie</u>	38
4. <u>Intersectionality: Race and Class</u>	44
4.1. <u>The Lyon Family - Wealthy Subordinates</u>	44
4.2. <u>Veiled Frontiers: Lucious vs. Rhonda</u>	50
4.3. <u>Colorism: Anika vs. Cookie</u>	53
4.4. <u>Don Lemon – Assimilating to Internalized Racism?</u>	57
5. <u>Identity Constructs of Blackness on Television</u>	61
5.1. <u>Cultivation Theory</u>	61
5.2. <u>“Brothers” and Collective Identities</u>	63

5.3. <u>The Significance of Hair and Names</u>	66
5.4. <u>Homophobia in the Black Community</u>	69
6. <u>Conclusion</u>	78
7. <u>Bibliography</u>	80
8. <u>Index</u>	86
9. <u>Abstract</u>	87
10. <u>Zusammenfassung</u>	88

1. Introduction

1.1. Context and Theory

Public outrage about cases of police brutality in contemporary U.S. America, specifically triggered by events from 2012 to 2017, is no longer limited to civil protests or social media platforms. With FOX's television show *Empire* piloting in 2015, socio-political commentary has reached new dimensions as fictional characters chime in on contemporary issues such as police brutality and systematic racism. From the very first episode onwards, the series' plot is endowed with references to fatalities of police violence, allusions to civil rights protests, as well as frequent mentions of public figures who are linked to the debate about institutional racism in real-life U.S.A. In 2017, Netflix began streaming their original show *Dear White People*, based on the 2014 film of the same title. Similar to *Empire*'s, *Dear White People*'s plot is politically charged, as it topicalizes U.S. society's problem with racism and white privilege. Although the overt and superficial political commentary in the two shows is arguably easy to detect, various, more subtle facets of their story-telling techniques and socio-political criticism merit a closer reading. This thesis aims to provide a detailed analysis of selected scenes which are deemed particularly significant to the discussion about racism in contemporary U.S. America. The interpretation of verbal as well as audiovisual elements in *Empire* and *Dear White People* within a postcolonial context, bearing elements such as intersectionality in mind, contributes to the existing work conducted on the analysis of socio-political content in U.S. American television series. Because U.S. society was particularly stirred by an increase in reports on police brutality toward people of color between the years of 2012 and 2017, this timeframe poses a highly relevant temporal context for the analysis of the primary texts, which both piloted in said period. Furthermore, conducting an analysis within a relatively near timespan to the two shows' first years of airing provides a contemporary understanding of the topics emphasized in the respective plotlines.

For an analysis of the socio-political commentary in the two texts, their verbal as well as audio-visual features are interpreted, using selected theories from research areas, including critical whiteness studies, gender studies and race studies. The commentary on real-life individuals and events from contemporary U.S. America in the series' fictional

plotlines poses a major point of interest since it entails the blurring of fact and fiction. More specifically, allusions to real-life cases of police violence toward people of color from 2012 to 2017 are identified as such within the primary texts and analyzed in context, using appropriate supporting theory. In conducting such an analysis, the following research question is answered: How are verbal and audio-visual elements in *Empire* and *Dear White People* used to comment on social phenomena and events linked to racism in contemporary U.S. America?

The secondary literature which this thesis draws upon stems from various research areas. Firstly, three concepts from the field of critical whiteness studies are investigated in depth and used to analyze verbal as well as audiovisual commentary in the primary texts. The three notions include Robin DiAngelo's definition of white fragility (55), Shelby Steele's approach to white guilt (1990: 506) and the white savior complex, as defined by Teju Cole (340) and Rolf Straubhaar (384). Applying these three concepts to selected white characters from *Empire* and *Dear White People* illustrates in how far their perceptions of their own whiteness trigger certain behaviors. Furthermore, this thesis investigates how these three social phenomena are essentially conveyed to an audience in overt as well as covert ways.

Secondly, the intersectionality of race, class and gender will be explored to illustrate the significance of such demographic relations for the different characters' life experiences. bell hooks' work on race and class, particularly her concept of the "black bourgeoisie" (2000: 91), will be used to interpret black and white attitudes toward one another as well as toward individuals from their own communities and members of different social classes. The intersectionality of race and gender will be investigated in terms of Kimberlé Crenshaw's work when discussing specific instances of police violence toward women of color (1252). To acknowledge further aspects of race- and class-related tensions between selected characters, the issue of colorism is broached and analyzed according to Angela R. Dixon and Edward E. Telles' definitions (406).

Thirdly, the portrayal of blackness on television is discussed before concluding the thesis' major findings. Overlaps in the primary texts as well as the two series' individual representations of black experiences are analyzed in the context of previous work regarding stereotypes and other identity constructs, used in the entertainment industry.

Taking into consideration, on one hand, selected media commentary on the two shows as well as scholarly work conducted on black visibility on television, on the other, the representation of people of color in *Empire* and *Dear White People* is evaluated. Potentially problematic aspects, such as stereotyping, as well as more progressive developments, such as the diversification of black experiences, are both considered in the assessment. On the basis of Gerbner and Gross' cultivation theory (1974) and Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory on potential hazards of racist and classist stereotypes (1993), the impact of representation on television is discussed, thereby evaluating the two primary texts' potential impact in shaping their audience's perceptions of race, class, and contemporary affairs, such as police brutality and mass incarceration.

This thesis is structured according to several research areas and themes, wherein every chapter or subchapter encompasses both theoretical as well as analytical segments. Each respective scene under analysis is first introduced in terms of its significance to the topic of problematic whiteness, institutional racism, intersectionality, or stereotypes of black identities. Thereafter, a suitable approach by one of the selected scholars is applied to the analysis of said scene to interpret it in an appropriate context. The definitions of important concepts are first briefly explained before being used to analyze verbal as well as audiovisual features in the respective scenes. Verbal features are interpreted for their semantics and in the context, manner, mood and tonality they are uttered in. Audiovisual elements accompanying such verbal features include the characters' clothing, body language or facial expressions and are analyzed in equal detail. The observations made for each scene under consideration are then interpreted, using relevant secondary literature. In no way are the screenplay writers', producers' or directors' intentions considered for this analysis. To avoid any cases of intentional fallacy, potential creator-intentions behind the plots' denouements or speculations thereof are disregarded.

This thesis refers to people of color as "black", and "dark-skinned" or "light-skinned" in certain contexts. White people are referred to as "white". To avoid assuming false information about an individual's heritage, categorizations such as "African-American" or "Afro-American" are avoided, unless the theoretical context in a part of analysis specifically uses and calls for this terminology. The term "race" is used as a demographic

category, despite it being a mere social construct, due to the impact this categorization still has on contemporary U.S. society.

1.2. Plot Synopsis

Before initiating the analysis, a brief overview of the primary texts' protagonists and plotlines is provided. In *Empire*, the main characters include Lucious Lyon, a successful entrepreneur and business-owner in the music industry, and his family, mainly consisting of his wife, Cookie, and his sons, André, Jamal, and Hakeem. The family are a wealthy, black family living in the United States of the 21st century. Because of the prevailing problem of racism in society, each protagonist is faced with their individual intersectional struggle. Lucious is angry at the inherently racist system and unleashes his anger in violent ways, causing run-ins with the authorities. Cookie battles intersectional discrimination as a woman of color, who additionally has a prison sentence on her criminal record for being involved with drug- and gang-crimes in her past. André, the oldest son, has studied at an elite university and secretly battles mental health issues and the effects of emotional scarring by his father, who rejects André's interracial marriage and disavows his bi-polar disorder. Jamal, the second-oldest son, is a talented singer who suffers from his father's severe homophobia, since Jamal is openly homosexual. The youngest son, Hakeem, is a rather entitled young man who also works as an artist in his father's company but deals with the aftermath of having an absent mother throughout the major part of his childhood and adolescence, as she spent several years in prison.

The protagonists in *Dear White People* are students at the fictional elite college, Winchester, and live on campus, where a recent "blackface party" has caused a massive scandal. The series revolves around the impact of the highly racist party, hosted by white students, and in how far the diverse characters' attitudes and relationships change, as the ubiquitous topic of racism is discussed amongst the students. Sam White is a bi-racial female student and host of the radio show "Dear White People", wherein she spreads awareness about racism and white privilege. When her secret relationship to a white male student, Gabe, is discovered by her black peers, they feel betrayed by her interracial love affair. Sam's black friends, such as Al, Joelle, Kelsey and Reggie represent a diverse crowd of students of color. Gabe and other white characters, such as Kurt and Addison, represent different shades of white self-perception. Gabe, for instance, is highly committed to his

activism for racial equality, whereas Addison is a slightly less politically-correct white character and Kurt, finally, is a very provocative, problematic and entitled white male, who frequently mocks concepts, such as white privilege or cultural appropriation.

Both television series occasionally break the fourth wall and merge fact and fiction. They do so primarily by mentioning names of real-life victims of race-related tragedies or events, which occurred in contemporary U.S. America and are also tied to the discussion about race and civil rights. In *Empire* and *Dear White People*, for instance, victims of police brutality, such as Trayvon Martin or Sandra Bland, are either mentioned by name or alluded to overtly. Especially *Empire* is rich in allusions to real-life contemporary U.S. society, as it features cameos of public figures in selected episodes to evoke a feeling of realness and authenticity to its audience.

2. Problematic Whiteness in *Empire* and *Dear White People*

2.1. The Restaurant Scene – Hakeem Triggers White Fragility

Through the rise of social media platforms, cases of police brutality in the U.S. have been made more public in the 2010s. Footage from police officers' body cameras has been uploaded onto social media platforms such as Facebook or Youtube, oftentimes exposing exaggerated violence on behalf of police staff toward people of color. The ability to witness a person dying at the hands of the U.S. police on a computer screen has triggered a politically charged discussion within and about American society and power imbalances. In *Empire*, topics such as police brutality, institutionalized racism as well as everyday micro-aggressions and critical whiteness are broached already in some of the very first episodes.

Hakeem, the youngest son of the protagonist family, is seen having drinks with his friends at an upper-scale restaurant in the second episode, for example. The young friend group, which consists of mostly non-white individuals, starts to disturb other guests of the restaurant by talking loudly and fooling around in vulgar manners. The irritated restaurant guests are predominantly white middle to upper class citizens who, at first glance, mark a stark contrast to Hakeem and his friends. Although Hakeem, being the son of a successful and wealthy owner of a music company, grew up in a financially stable home with luxuries

and other amenities, he was also raised in an inherently racist society and knows what it means to be treated unjustly. This scene under consideration illustrates Hakeem's frustration with the U.S.' status quo and shows how police brutality poses a threat to people of color of all socio-economic backgrounds. Linked to the topic of police brutality, the characters in question also talk about then-president Obama and thus mirror a part of U.S. society's thoughts on the political leader.

Hakeem's resentment for the internally racist society is unleashed in form of a spontaneous speech which he holds in the upscale restaurant, addressing the predominantly white guests. When he and his friends start talking about then-president Barack Obama being a "sell-out" (S01/E02), the adolescents attract more attention. Noticing the people around him, laughing condescendingly or staring at him in shock, Hakeem turns his playful conversation with his friends into a loud rant, addressing the white, privileged guests around him directly: "What? Y'all got a problem with some black boys in your fine establishment? I got enough money to buy this bitch and everybody in it" (S01/E02). By overtly confronting the conservative-looking crowd, Hakeem breaks their comfort zone and asks uncomfortable questions. He is indirectly suggesting that the white restaurant guests have a problem with non-white adolescents dining at an upscale location. The rhetorical question about the guests being fazed by the presence of young black men suggests that the whites prefer a segregated dining culture, in which the privileged stay amongst themselves. By then bragging about his financial situation, Hakeem immediately flips the power dynamics and exerts himself as someone of a higher status due to his wealth. Not only is he asking uncomfortable questions and therefore exposing potentially bigoted thoughts of those around him, Hakeem also refuses to be belittled by the white peoples' laughs and stares as he claims to be rich enough to "buy [...] everybody in [the restaurant]" (S01/E02). Hakeem's speech ushers the stereotypically prude and conservative group of white restaurant guests into unknown territory, as they are now confronted with an issue which is usually evaded.

Avoiding topics surrounding racism is a symptom of white fragility (DiAngelo 54), which is a concept played with in this specific scene. Robin DiAngelo defines white fragility as "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (54). In order to avoid feeling their own white fragility being

tampered with, the traditional conservative whites therefore stay away from topics surrounding racism, their own contributions to a racist society, as well as the black community themselves. According to DiAngelo, white people have become so accustomed to an “insulated environment of racial privilege” (55) that they feel entitled to being comfortable in their exclusive bubble at all times. Hakeem is aware of their problematic white fragility and challenges it directly. He goes on to address the whites directly with “all you white people that voted for the first black president [...]” (S01/E02) and then accuses them of having voted for then-president Obama for selfish reasons: “[...] to make you feel good about not being racist [...]” (S01/E02). By acknowledging a seemingly liberal and ally-esque political move, only to then instantly question the motive behind it, Hakeem leaves no space or time for the whites to defend themselves by scrambling for excuses.

The semantics of Hakeem’s words are strengthened by the deliberate choice of vocabulary he uses. As explained by DiAngelo, white people lack experience as well as communication skills regarding a fair discussion about race and racism. The generic terms used to maintain the white comfort zone when discussing issues of race include “‘urban’ [or] ‘disadvantaged’” (DiAngelo 55) when discussing black communities, rather than leading a discussion about “‘white’ [or] ‘privileged’” (55) communities. DiAngelo argues that this form of “racially coded language” (55) creates the illusion of racism solely being the problem of the black community and therefore not pertaining to white people at all (55). In his restaurant rant, Hakeem, so to say, shines the uncomfortable spotlight of privilege onto the white people by clearly addressing them as “you white people” (S01/E02). By marking them as “you”, he moreover draws a metaphorical line between them as a form of “the Other” (Bhaba 74) and those whom Hakeem feels he belongs with. Furthermore, explicitly referring to them as “white” is something white people are not used to since their worldview presupposes whiteness being the default skin color, as criticized by Wang: “Whiteness has become the default race in our society” (Wang 12). DiAngelo’s explanation as to why white people feel entitled to a non-confrontational position in society can also be explained by applying Bhaba’s concept of “othering” (74). According to Bhaba, the Other is defined as “the necessary negation of a primordial identity” (74), which, in essence, means that the Other entails the sum of traits which those who commit othering disavow in their own identities (74). Therefore, it can be concluded that white people living

in a racially bigoted society have internalized the presumption that black people are essentially the Other.

Now that Hakeem has, however, flipped the perspective of the narrative, the white people listening to his speech are left uneasy and irritated. They are now explicitly designated whites and positioned as the Other, albeit only for a brief moment, as they listen to a young black man expose potential flaws in their worldview. Hakeem disillusiones the white people by saying “[...] the joke's on y'all, 'cause Barack Obama ain't nothing but a sellout” (S01/E02), thereby nullifying the alleged attempt to not seem racist by voting for the first black president. Hakeem assumes a position of authority over the white people who quietly listen to his rant by firstly, speaking fearlessly and unapologetically and secondly, speaking on a subject which he has gained first-hand experience with as opposed to the white people, who have not experienced racial discrimination toward them. However, the presupposition that U.S. society does indeed have an inherent problem with racism appears to be shared by Hakeem and the white guests, since not one white person speaks up or interrupts Hakeem to object. Their silence suggests that they are aware of the problem but prefer to stay silent (S01/E02).

The divide between Hakeem and his friends and the predominantly white people at the restaurant is emphasized via visual elements, such as the characters' clothing, their posture, facial expressions and actions. Firstly, the most apparent difference is the style of clothing. Whilst Hakeem and some of his friends have on casual and playful outfits, such as white t-shirts and studded black leather jackets, the white restaurant guests can be seen wearing suits, ties, formal dresses and collared shirts. Hakeem's leather jacket has the word “wealth” spelled out across its back, implying Hakeem's fortunate financial situation. This overt display of wealth stands in stark contrast to the supposedly similarly wealthy, white restaurant guests, who display their financial situation in different, perhaps more subtle ways. Secondly, the posture and body language of the two parties under considerations are strikingly different. Hakeem and his friends demonstrate a rather laid-back and relaxed attitude, even when ranting about political and civil rights issues. Hakeem, for example, oftentimes can be seen opening his arms wide and making large gestures, as he drunkenly walks across the restaurant. He and his friends also throw back their heads into their necks frequently, as they adopt a rather comfortable seating position

at the restaurant's bar. One of Hakeem's friends can be seen sitting on a bar stool, beer bottle in hand, legs spread wide, as he is talking to Hakeem. Thirdly, the characters' actions differ in terms of how expressive they are and what they are trying to convey. In this particular scene, Hakeem is very intoxicated and misbehaves at the restaurant, as he, for example, urinates onto the dining hall's floor, whilst a friend of his captures the moment on his mobile phone. Witnessing this vulgar act of Hakeem's, many of the restaurant guests display their outrage by throwing their cloth napkins onto the table, shoving their tea cups away from them in disgust or simply gasping in shock. Whilst some actively stand up to leave, most of the white guests remain seated and, albeit involuntarily, listen to Hakeem rant about racism, Obama, and pretentious white ally-ship.

Hakeem's speech is recorded by one of his friends using a mobile phone, which symbolizes the public gaze of social media the young man is exposed to. Because the friend who is filming Hakeem is the only Caucasian-looking person in the friend group, this scene captures another gaze the young man of color is observed by, namely a type of white gaze. Not only are the majority of restaurant guests white, the male who is recording the controversial scene is, too. In the restaurant-scene, the series' audience's perspective jumps from the regular camera to the mobile phone's perspective. The viewers of *Empire* therefore briefly become spectators who witness Hakeem's rant via social media on their phones. Hakeem is fully aware of the mobile phone capturing his rant as he occasionally directly speaks into the lens, addressing a wider audience in addition to the restaurant guests.

When Hakeem's speech is briefly interrupted by police sirens wailing in the distance, he ironically comments, "So the po-po coming to shoot me now?" (Hakeem, S01/E02). This scene can be read as highly ambiguous, as it illustrates on one side, the level of passion and frustration of a person of color discussing racism yet, on the other, also the numbness people of color feel, regarding the frequency of police shootings in contemporary U.S. America. The fact that Hakeem demonstrates aggressive and vulgar behavior in public on one hand shows how untouchable he feels due to his wealth, but utterances like "So the [police] coming to shoot me now?" (Hakeem, S01/E02) also demonstrate how numb the many incidents of police brutality toward black people have made him. Hakeem and his friends are confronted with news of police officers shooting people of color so frequently

that they merely joke and laugh about Hakeem himself becoming one of the victims. Thus, Hakeem is presented as a broken young man, angry at the system, which he does not feel protected by, despite his fame and fortune. The restaurant scene ends with police sirens still wailing in the background, Hakeem and his friends still laughing about the underlying tragedy of a racist system and the screen abruptly turning black when Hakeem throws back his head into his neck as he sits on a bar stool. Although the young man leans back and lets his head fall back behind his neck to rest after a presumably exhausting rant, this exhausted pose also mirrors the somewhat lifeless, faceless posture of a black man who physically collapses during an altercation with the police.

This specific episode aired in the beginning of 2015 after a year of stark media coverage of police brutality and illustrates how negatively the U.S. police's reputation has developed in black communities. Cases such as those of Tamir Rice, Tanisha Anderson, Kajieme Powell, Eric Garner, Michael Brown and many others have caused public outrage and vocal criticism of police training and a severe lack of effective de-escalation techniques in the year of 2014 (Townes, Petrohilos 1+). Because of video footage of the shootings having been uploaded onto social media platforms for everyone to see, evidence for instances of exaggerated police gun violence could now be used by the bereaved of the victims to defend their late loved ones. Whilst some cases of exaggerated violence are clearer than others, the abundance of video footage nevertheless raises questions of police training, alternative weapons of defense as well as the individual officers' competence (The Young Turks via Youtube). With the numerous victims of police gun violence in mind, Hakeem's rhetorical question becomes even more macabre. As soon as he hears the police sirens, Hakeem immediately connects the sound to a potentially fatal threat, rather than feeling secure or at least unnerved by the thought of an authority approaching, who is supposedly in charge of the people's safety and well-being. Kristian Williams even refers to the American police force as "Enemies in Blue" (11), not only due to such as the aforementioned fatal operations but also because of the "everyday violence of policing" (Williams 11). Therefore, the American police has taken on a new, more threatening and feared image in the black public eye rather than a trustworthy and safety-ensuring one, as suggested by the restaurant-scene in *Empire*. By instantly connecting the sound of police vehicles to shots being fired at him, Hakeem's image of the police represents an entire community's perception of the authorities.

2.2. Kelsey – Assimilation to Whiteness as a Threat to Blackness

Not only in *Empire* but also in *Dear White People* do the characters mention the former U.S. president with a hint of criticism in their undertone. In the fifth episode, members of Winchester College's student unions for men and women of color gather to discuss current events linked to racism on campus. Previously, a predominantly white, male group of students hosted a "blackface party", which encouraged white students to dress up as prominent black celebrities or political figures, as they sung along to popular hip-hop tracks and engaged in stereotypically "black" activities. Frustrated about the overt readiness of many white students to engage in racist activities on campus, the black students express their upset. Particularly one character, Kelsey, who is repeatedly mocked by her fellow black peers throughout the season, speaks up. The young black woman is a rather one-dimensional character in the first season of the series who socializes with almost exclusively upper-class white peers and thus has adapted to their language, style of clothing and mentality.

Kelsey's rather naïve outlook on the socio-political situation of contemporary U.S.A. triggers an Obama-critical comment from one of the male black protagonists, Reggie. When Kelsey expresses her disbelief about events such as the "blackface party" or ongoing racism on college campuses still occurring in present day, Reggie sarcastically remarks, "Yeah, I thought Obama fixed all that" (S01/E05). Unlike Reggie who is not surprised about the existing problem with institutional racism, Kelsey responds with a straight face, "I know!" (S01/E05), clearly oblivious to Reggie's sarcasm and political criticism. Reggie's misunderstood comment entails an entire narrative about former U.S. president Obama being a disappointment to the black community, under the guise of being a beacon of hope to the entire world for a more united and equal America. The fact that Kelsey and Reggie connote Obama so differently is representative of their different experiences and levels of racism-awareness. To emphasize this inherent difference visually, Kelsey is standing opposite of Joelle, Al and Reggie. The latter three form a line as they are standing next to one another, talking to Kelsey, who has nobody beside her apart from her small breed of dog, which she calls Sorbet and lovingly carries on her arm. Not only the physical stance marks an imaginary line between the three activist friends and Kelsey, also their fashion reflects their values and lifestyles. Reggie has on a sweater with an ethnic print, Joelle is wearing a minimalistic denim jacket and Al's outfit is subdued in its colors and

cuts. Kelsey's sweater is bedazzled with floral prints and sequins which catch parts of the sunlight which is let in through the bright window behind her. Joelle, Reggie and Al are, unlike Kelsey, not illuminated by a bright background but are standing in front of a darker, wooden backdrop which suggests their more serious stance on the omnipresent topic of racism on campus.

Reggie's comment not only criticizes Obama, it also suggests that societal change in terms of civil rights cannot merely be implemented by one politician alone. Reggie knows that the deep-rooted issue of racism in U.S. society has too great of a history for it to disappear by electing a black president. As the "blackface party", held by white students on Winchester's campus, makes evident, institutional racism will continue to exist so long as the individual people in America refuse to educate themselves on the severity of the issue. Such a form of ignorance can be observed in Kelsey's character, who, although being educated on civil rights issues to a certain extent, nevertheless shares a common form of naivete with the white community when it comes to implementing change in society. By genuinely believing that Obama would have "fixed all [the racism]" (Reggie, S01/E05) by being elected as president of the United States, Kelsey shows how little she knows about institutionalized racism and how much she focuses on superficialities.

In a way, Kelsey from *Dear White People* and the white restaurant-goers in *Empire* can be compared to one another in terms of their ignorance about racism in America. As Hakeem overtly criticizes in his speech, the white community is alleged to only have voted for Obama to quench their white guilt (*Empire* S01/E02). Although Kelsey cannot feel white guilt, as she is black and therefore has no communal history of oppressing an entirely people tied to her race, she apparently believes Obama's victory to be sufficiently powerful to immediately abolish all racial inequalities in the country, only to be surprised that it is not. Most likely, this mindset is shared by the white community which Hakeem criticizes in *Empire*. Kelsey therefore acts as a foil to the white community, by illustrating a rather ignorant mindset, shaped by superficial concerns for civil rights issues. Since Kelsey, student at an elite college, repeatedly is presented as a black woman whose friend group predominantly consists of white, upper-class students, she also represents the more fortunate and financially comfortable minority within the black community, who cannot sympathize with those who are more directly challenged by intersectional discrimination,

in terms of both race and class biases. This type of classist adoption of a distanced view by a more privileged person of color onto a less fortunate black community is described by hooks as an “allegiance to [...] class interests” (2000: 96). hooks argues that a shared agenda in a certain social rank will be prioritized more than “racial solidarity” (2000: 96). For example, the “black bourgeoisie” (hooks 2000: 91) will be more interested in securing socially valuable ties with white people of the same status, than losing face in their upscale society by using their voice to address racial inequality in all social ranks. In Kelsey’s case, however, there is clearly no such agenda to be ascribed to the young woman. She is portrayed as a rather ignorant, unaware student who does in fact want to participate in debates about racism but lacks fundamental knowledge of critical topics for her to be taken seriously by her peers. Instead of consciously detaching herself from the black community in order to secure her own social status and allegiance with her white peers, Kelsey has fallen victim to an exaggerated assimilation to a stereotypically white ignorance, which hinders her from developing the desire to educate herself on issues which affect her black peers.

In *Dear White People*, Kelsey is not only portrayed as naïve due to her utterances, her outward appearance also features stereotypically conservative styles of clothing to underline her overall quite satirical character. Not only does Kelsey dress conservatively, but certain accessories to her outfit, as well as her linguistic jargon, are reminiscent of the white “valley girl” stereotype. In the first episode, various subgroups of Winchester College’s black community meet to discuss current events, including the racist “blackface party”, which was hosted by white students who either do not believe in political correctness and thus aim to provoke and cause outrage or are ignorant to the highly racist history of minstrel shows. Whilst the majority of black students present at the gathering discuss the severity of the recent incident of racism on campus, Kelsey speaks up to add, “Ya, guys, you know what this is? This is racism” (S01/E01). Another student, Reggie, sarcastically remarks, “What a revelation, Kelsey [...]” (S01/E01). Kelsey’s superficial perception of the severity of the issue at hand as well as her oblivion to the fact that she is declaring nothing new by exposing a “blackface party” as an act of racism demonstrates her naivete. She also appears to have lived a quite sheltered life, as is evident from her comment: “I just thought that this kind of thing only happened in the Fifties or in BuzzFeed articles” (S01/E01). By connecting the “blackface party” to the bygone era of the 20th

century or a virtual, online platform for pop-culture-related articles, Kelsey clearly is not aware of the grave levels of racism still persisting in 21st century U.S. America and views the recent “blackface party” at her college as a stand-alone event to evoke fresh feelings of not feeling “safe anymore” (Kelsey, S01/E01). Kelsey complains about racist events with a pout on her face, which further illustrates that she does not take the matter as seriously as her fellow students of color, who meet such incidents with anger or frustration rather than a juvenile pout.

Audio-visual elements which portray Kelsey as a black woman who imitates stereotypically white as well as conservative, upper-class traits include her outfit, the type of beverage she is holding, as well as her language and intonation. Firstly, Kelsey’s outfit is almost satirical in its cliché-fulfilling appearance. She has on a white turtle neck sweater with a five-layered pearl necklace draped around her well-covered chest. Over the turtle neck top, she is wearing a mustard-colored cardigan, which appears to be wool, crocheted in a way that almost makes it look like an old-fashioned tweed jacket. In the front, the mustard cardigan is covered in gem stones, which add an air of decadence to her overall look. Cuffed around her wrist is a three-layered pearl bracelet. The neutral color scheme, conservative cuts as well as abundance of pearls mirror Kelsey’s suggested upper-class background and conservative attitude. Secondly, the beverage she is holding in one hand is a subtle, yet consciously placed prop to further hint at Kelsey’s stereotypical character. As she discusses racism on campus with her peers, Kelsey holds a to-go cup in her hand. The disposable cups are commonly associated with so-called “valley girls” who frequent large chain coffee houses. Though Kelsey appears to not be drinking coffee, but tea, as the string of a teabag hanging from the portable cup suggests, her beverage nevertheless adds a notion of a stereotypical “posh” college student to her persona. Thirdly, and most strikingly, Kelsey’s language use and vocabulary clearly portray her as a black version of the white “valley girl” stereotype. For example, when her peers voice their frustration about the racism coming from the white community, she interrupts: “Just to play dev’s, all my white friends are talking about it [the controversial blackface party]” (S01/E01). The abbreviation of the idiom “to play the devil’s advocate” is an example for Kelsey’s casual register. Shortening words, such as “devil’s” to “dev’s”, is very frequently done by stereotypical “valley girls”. Moreover, her vowel pronunciation is very typical of the valley-girl-esque accent, which is predominantly associated with California natives. As explained

by Villarreal, the features of “CVS [California Vowel Shift] involve mid and high back vowels fronting, mid and high front short vowels lowering and retracting, and a nasal split” (58). The nasal split and fronting of certain vowels are particularly noticeable in Kelsey’s speech when she pronounces the casual synonym for “Yes” as “Ya” (S01/E01) rather than “Yeah”. Additionally, Kelsey’s intonation at times heightens toward the ending of her utterances, which is a linguistic phenomenon known as “upspeak” and typical for the “valley girl” manner of speaking. These three audio-visual details to Kelsey’s character may be overlooked as insignificant when noticed separately, but in combination, they solidify the assumption that Kelsey is a rather one-dimensional character who has assimilated to white stereotypes and, due to their sheltered upbringing, cannot relate to the threat of racism to the same extent as their less sheltered peers.

Kelsey’s disunion from the black community on campus is accentuated whenever she interacts with other people of color. When Kelsey mentions that “all [her] white friends” (S01/E01) are discussing the events on campus, Reggie cynically corrects her by saying, “So all your friends?” (S01/E01, emphasis added). Her white peers appear to have influenced Kelsey’s perception of various forms of activism, as she warns that “yelling at people who are already on our side, using hashtags and marches? Cathartic though it may be, it just makes us look angry” (S01/E01). A student retorts, “We are angry, Kelsey” (S01/E01, emphasis added) to remind Kelsey that protesting is not done in a way as to please those who watch, but to express frustration and demand change. Such interactions between Kelsey and her black peers clearly illustrate the disengagement she feels from the black community. Her friends are almost exclusively whites, whom she defends in front of her black peers. Behaving protective of a privileged majority can moreover seem like an act of betrayal to the black community. The fact that a woman of color who predominantly associates with whites is oblivious to the severity of racism and the deep-rootedness of the issue suggests that too high of a dosage of assimilation to an allegedly “white” mindset can become dangerous to the progression of black rights activism.

2.3. White Guilt and the White Savior Complex

2.3.1. Selfish White Guilt

Aside from white fragility and privilege, another aspect of whiteness is depicted as problematic in the texts under consideration. The concept of white guilt is also indirectly broached in *Empire* and *Dear White People*. Shelby Steele defines white guilt as something which may indicate positive sensitivity to existing inequalities but which is also often tried to be overcome in a highly counterproductive manner (1990: 502). In the afore-mentioned restaurant-scene, Hakeem's accusations toward the whites can be analyzed by applying Steele's definition of white guilt to them. Closely connected to the theoretical framework of white guilt, a further concept, namely Straubhaar's "White Saviour Complex" (384), can be used to analyze Gabe's behavior in *Dear White People*. Whilst Hakeem exposes sanctimonious deeds motivated by guilt as superficial pseudo-remedies in *Empire*, Gabe fits descriptions of the typical white savior in *Dear White People* as he may be overcompensating for his white guilt. Both concepts are therefore dealt with in the two primary texts, albeit one being more overtly broached than the other.

Shelby Steele's approach to white guilt is applicable to Hakeem's rant about whites voting for a black president for the false reasons. Steele explains, "[It] is not to say that guilt is never the right motive for doing good works or showing concern, only that it is a very dangerous one because of its tendency to draw us into self-preoccupation and escapism" (1990: 502). As Hakeem alleges, white people voted for former president Obama "to [...] feel good about not being racist" (S01/E02), implying rather selfish motives. He exposes their guilt and voting behaviors as a form of escapism from their conscience. As Steele warns, guilt can shift one's focus from working for a greater cause away to a more ego-centric "self-preoccupation" (Steele 1990: 502). Furthermore, the "escapism" (1990: 502), Steele mentions is also mocked and exposed by Hakeem when he says, "[...] the joke's on y'all" (S01/E02). As Steele explains, escapism in the case of white guilt is tied to the notion of white individuals committing a benevolent act, only to escape uncomfortable situations and preserve their innocence which lets them avoid confrontation: "[...] whites tend to only see their own need for quick redemption" (1990: 503). One of the main problems with white guilt is therefore its lack of a genuine and long-term concern and commitment to helping the actual cause at stake. Individuals seek to avoid deep contact with the

underlying issue by either buying their way out with donations or acting in other superficial ways that are supposed to promise a “quick fix” (Steele 1990: 502-504).

Another problematic aspect of white guilt is how it makes the white community deliberately blind to serious issues in society, as they focus on their own emotions of guilt and worry rather than sympathizing with the black community’s scramble for equality. Similar to phrases such as “I am colorblind, I do not see race”, redemptions solicited from white guilt generally may come from good intentions but have negative effects on the battle against racism. As Stafford explains in *The Guardian*, “[b]y professing not to see race, you’re just ignoring racism, not solving it” (Stafford 1+). Steele also uses the concept of white’s alleged blindness to racial issues as an example for problematic and misinformed mindsets:

“Guilt that preoccupies people with their own innocence blinds them to those who make them feel guilty. This, of course, is not racism, and yet it has the same effect as racism since it makes blacks something of a separate species for whom normal standards and values do not automatically apply” (1990: 503).

Whilst one can argue that a white individual’s intention may be benevolent, if the results from their white guilt-induced actions have similarly negative impacts on the black community as racism itself, the intentions are in vain, since the only person benefitting from them is the white person themselves. This is precisely what Hakeem confronts the white restaurant guests with, as he calls Obama a “sell-out” (S01/E02). The choice of terminology suggests that the former president proved to be a disappointment to the black community, if not to say a traitor. Just like Steele’s definition of selfish white guilt results in drawbacks for the black community, the white voters elected someone who, according to Hakeem, betrayed his community.

Steele specifically discerns between a strictly selfish type of white guilt and another more genuine, still slightly self-preoccupied guilt which moves white people to redeem themselves as a people. The former is equated to “self-importance” (Steele 1990: 506) and “has no humility, and it asks for an unreasonable, egotistical innocence” (1990: 506). Steele even compares the self-absorbed type of white guilt to a sort of “moral colonialism” (1990: 506). The way in which a white person would morally colonize a black person, according to Steele, entails a continuous emphasis and re-telling of a version of black

identity which reduces the black community to the same historical narrative of being victims, rather than prevailing survivors. He says that the white person who is obsessed with their own guilt tends to focus on the suffering of people of color throughout history and emphasizes their alleged dependency on whites in past and present, thus reminding them of the abuse their ancestors endured (Steele 1990: 506). As long as whites continue to foreground these weakening traits in their perception of the black community, rather than acknowledging the other, more complex factors about them, neither the “black or white” (Steele 1990: 506) will benefit from the egocentric guilt complex (Steele 1990: 506).

A theme, similar to Steele’s concept of “moral colonialism” (1990: 506), is also controversially discussed in *Dear White People*, pertaining to the topic of interracial relationships. The show’s female protagonist, Sam White, is a very vocal activist for black empowerment on her college’s campus and frequently discusses race-related topics on her student radio show. Being known for her passion and enthusiasm for socio-political activism, it comes as a shock to her predominantly black friends that Sam has been hiding her white love interest, Gabe, from everyone. Her best friend, Joelle, meets Sam’s revelation with confusion, since Sam has made a name for herself in promoting black unity and even black men as a group of underestimated romantic partners for specifically black females on campus. Joelle says that she would not consider letting “a white man colonize [her] body” (S01/E05) and that she did not think Sam would do so, either. Joelle thereby suggests that Gabe represents a white colonial oppressor in his relationship with Sam.

2.3.2. Gabe as a Crusoean White Savior in *Dear White People*

The fact that Joelle views Gabe and Sam’s secret relationship as a white man’s colonization of Sam’s body illustrates how suspicious she and her like-minded friends are of Gabe’s motives. Although Gabe is a character with an arguably in-tact moral compass, his interest in Sam can nevertheless be analyzed in terms of his apparently inherent white guilt (Steele 1990: 502), as well as the traits of the typical white savior (Straubhaar 384). The “White Saviour Complex” (Straubhaar 384) explores the self-perception of whites as being the only capable saviors of minorities (Straubhaar 384). Because Gabe continuously makes an effort to help elevate the black community on campus and be a supportive ally who does not expect any gratitude in exchange, his ally-ship appears to be rooted in a genuine desire to improve the socio-political

situation of the black community on campus. However, Gabe is not entirely an altruist by nature who by coincidence falls in love with Sam White, but, as implied by Joelle, who alludes to him being a “white savior” (S01/E05), he may also fetishize Sam as a type of personal passion project to mitigate his white guilt and broadcast his open-mindedness to the public. When he engages in a romantic relationship with Sam, the latter’s friends allege her and Gabe’s relationship to perpetuate the idea of the “white savior” (Joelle, S01/E05). Just as Sam may be the one to idolize her white significant other as a savior figure, Gabe himself may be guilty of viewing himself as Sam’s savior. Joelle specifically states that she is tired of the narrative claiming that “black men aren’t good enough” (S01/E05) and that black women “need a white savior” (S01/E05). In theory, Rolf Straubhaar describes the white savior complex as a privilege, owned, but not often acknowledged, by Westerners who believe to be the only ones able to help marginalized minority groups: “[...] this privilege often exhibits itself as a sense that we as Westerners have the unique power to uplift, edify and strengthen: what I here refer to as the White Saviour complex” (384). This complex not only exists in the sphere of interracial dating, but also in international businesses, non-governmental profit organizations as well as other subject areas, where the West claims a sense of moral superiority. For the analysis of Gabe and Sam’s relationship however, Straubhaar’s definitions and terminologies are equally applicable due to Gabe’s stark participation in anti-racism activism. He represents the white Westerner who feels obliged to redeem himself.

Being a very vocal black-rights activist, Sam is aware of the questionable reputation her relationship with a white man may bestow upon her. The juxtaposition of, on one hand, Sam’s passion for black solidarity and her love for Gabe on the other is illustrated in the first episode. At a black student gathering, Sam raises her voice to remind her peers of the social injustice people of color are faced with. Just in this moment, her peers learn of Sam and Gabe’s secret love affair by being notified about a social media post, uploaded by Gabe. While her colleagues are checking their phones, Sam is unaware of the news they learn in just that moment as she reminds them that “in the real world, kids are getting shot by cops for being black. Voter rights are still being suppressed. Our criminal justice system continues to propagate a new Jim Crow. This isn’t about a college magazine, this is about a movement! We’re surrounded by the future leaders of this country and we finally got their ears so what do we want to say?” (S01/ E01). As Sam’s speech intensifies, her peers’ attention fades. Their faces form smirks, and some raise their eyebrows at the hypocrisy of the situation at hand. The fact that her hidden

interracial relationship was just revealed online stands as a contrast to what Sam has been preaching. She is suddenly viewed as non-transparent and disingenuous, and her words now appear hollow. In the following scene, Sam's isolation from the black community is illustrated visually when her close friends stand together, gossiping about Sam's new scandal. The camera captures Sam, standing in an empty hallway with none of her friends standing behind her. This signals the solitude Sam feels as she is symbolically shunned for being romantically involved with a white man. Figuratively and literally, no one is standing behind her.

When the camera angle changes to Sam's point of view, five of her friends are lined up, opposite of her. They are, so to say, embodying a frontier of black solidarity, which Sam has betrayed. To illustrate the disappointment which Sam's closest friend, Joelle, feels, the camera zooms in on the two women's faces. First, Sam's face is shown as her eyes fixate on Joelle's, waiting for a response. A close-up of Joelle's face shows how hurt she is, as she subtly shakes her head whilst looking her best friend straight in the eyes. With little to say, the friend group leaves the scene, leaving only Sam and Joelle behind to talk. The former explains how frustrated she is about the fact that her best had a secret white boyfriend only to turn around and preach "about how we can't give up on our men" (S01/ E01). She then reminds Sam of an article she wrote, advising girls "not to fall in love with [their] oppressor" (S01/ E01), called "A Black Girl's Guide to Love at Winchester". Revealing this fact about Sam emphasizes the hypocrisy in her actions even more.

The author Teju Cole has been increasingly vocal about the oppressive notion behind the problematic white savior complex, as he frequently shares opinionated articles on the matter. Although Cole specifically criticizes the "White Savior Industrial Complex" (340), his arguments can be applied to the white savior complex in not only industrial, but interpersonal situations as well. For example, Cole argues that to the white savior "[t]he world is nothing but a problem to be solved with enthusiasm" (340). Thereby, Cole emphasizes the exaggerated enthusiasm which Westerners often bring to the table when they partake in events linked to social justice issues. The sensationalism of the event of helping in and of itself is what allegedly attracts the white saviors, rather than a selfless desire to help those who have been battling social injustice. Cole furthermore criticizes that the white savior complex is not concerned with implementing justice, but instead it "is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege" (Cole 340). This emotional journey, which primarily benefits the white individual,

attempting to save a minority, is something Gabe embarks on on Winchester's campus in *Dear White People*.

A specific pattern of habits which Cole ascribes to the white savior can be paralleled to Gabe's actions in *Dear White People*. "[...] The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening", says Cole (340). The author clearly criticizes the hypocrisy and self-importance within the white savior figure, as he emphasizes the white savior's support for unjust actions against minorities only to then embrace praise for allegedly selflessly helping said minorities (340). Although one cannot definitely characterize Gabe as a prototypical, un-reflected white savior, certain traits and actions of his can be analyzed and interpreted in regard to the behavioral pattern of a white savior as described by Cole. To understand in how far Gabe's actions overlap with Cole's traits ascribed to a white savior (340), his role in the series' subplots must be remembered. At a campus-party, a police officer pulls a gun on a student of color, leaving the latter deeply traumatized. In episode six, students of Winchester wonder who called the police and ultimately caused the traumatizing event for Reggie, who was confronted with a loaded firearm. Later it is revealed that Gabe was the caller who informed the police about the heated college party and therefore simultaneously partially responsible for Reggie's traumatic experience with the armed campus police.

Throughout the first season, Gabe is portrayed as a dedicated ally to the black community as well as an activist for social justice issues, thus presupposing his awareness about police brutality as well as the publicized cases of black men being shot by police officers in contemporary U.S.A. Nevertheless, he calls the police to mediate a highly tense situation on campus and is shocked to find the arriving police officer immediately question Reggie and target him as the alleged culprit. Gabe even voices his outrage and asks the police officers, "Why the fuck do you guys have guns?" (S01/E05). This particular question once again illustrates Gabe's socio-political values, as he implicitly criticizes the campus police for being armed. This outrage at the system stands in stark contrast to Gabe's first instinct to call the campus police when he fears the tension between Addison and Reggie becoming potentially violent. This contradiction correlates to the hypocrisy exposed by Cole when he claims that the white savior cosigns "brutal policies" (Cole 340). By calling the police, Gabe actively seeks out authorities, of which he himself is skeptical due to their association with racial prejudice,

to mediate an interracial fight at a party. Although Gabe may stand out as a white altruist in a predominantly ignorant white society, actions such as calling the police to mitigate between Reggie and Addison show that he is not free of problematic privilege and committing lapses of judgement.

2.3.3. The Significance of Beards in Dear White People

In *Dear White People*, the majority of white men are very confident, if not entitled, and their male and class privilege continuously shines through. For example, Kurt, a white male, demonstrates his level of entitlement in the third episode when he nonchalantly asks Troy, the college dean's son, to support him in the student president elections as if it were a simple favor amongst peers. Another example for a high degree of white egocentrism is a wealthy, white donor of Winchester College who considers terminating his donations to the institution due to recent scandals, such as the "blackface party". He is more worried about being associated with the negative press Winchester College might be getting than helping to solve the issue of racism on campus. He prioritizes his reputation before anything else, as he himself remarks with a smirk, "[...] I do enjoy bragging" (white money donor, S01/E09). Addison, another white male, is similarly worried about his image, albeit in a slightly more social sense. In the fifth episode, he refuses to see Reggie's point in an argument about racism and defensively insists on not being a racist, instead of listening to what his black friend has to say about the matter. Before analyzing the similarities amongst white, male characters further, it is important to note one striking visual feature. Kurt, the white donor and Addison, as well as many other white male characters, all have one major trait in common: They do not have visible beards and they are rather fair-haired.

This shared marker of appearance becomes even more obvious when juxtaposing it with Gabe's dark, wavy hair and dense, dark beard. Throughout the series, Gabe not only differs from other white, male characters in terms of his humble persona and political activism, he also stands out from the white crowd, appearance-wise. His untamed aesthetic almost becomes satirically Crusoean when remembering how he can be viewed as a white savior, according to Straubhaar's (384) and Cole's (340) definitions. In episode seven, Gabe's thoughts and feelings about being a "white face in a mostly black part of an overwhelmingly white place" (narrator, S01/E07) are explored, as this episode primarily focuses on his perspectives

on what has been happening on campus. In one scene, Gabe is jokingly called “Hipster 8 Mile” (AI, S01/E07) by one of his non-white friends, AI. This nickname clearly refers to his hipster-like appearance, which commonly entails a full beard, retro-style clothing and wearing of neutral, earthy-tone colors. The name also refers to 8 Mile, a movie starring Marshall Mathers who has become the most well-known white rapper of contemporary times. The comparison of Gabe to a white man who is famous for making rap music suggests that the young student is overtly immersing himself in black culture, or perhaps even appropriating it to a certain extent. The omniscient narrator of the series also mentions that Gabe is majoring in film studies and tends to view his life as an artistic “Godard film in color” (S01/E07). This statement is visually underlined with images of Gabe holding a soul-music record or wearing a so-called “beanie” hat, which is typically associated with the liberal, afore-mentioned hipster subculture. This direct and indirect characterization of Gabe proves him to be someone who tends to be preoccupied with life’s aesthetics and fitting in with his own ideals.

The visual manifestation of Gabe’s lifestyle in his clothing and grooming is tied to his urge to display his political beliefs freely and openly. He looks stereotypically liberal in contrast to Kurt or similar characters who are almost caricatures of “preppy” white college students who wear their fair hair in an effortlessly combed-back wave. Although Gabe is arguably more liberally oriented than Kurt or even Addison, he nevertheless has flaws of his own. Whilst Kurt, for example, is overtly vocal about his disregard for pro-black activism, Gabe commits problematic acts unintentionally and thus, more covertly. Some of Gabe’s lapses in judgement include calling the campus police to control a fight between Reggie and Addison, thus acting like a white savior per Cole’s definition (340). Gabe strives to be an educated and visible ally to the black community and participates in student-marches or protests pertaining to civil rights issues. He is therefore rather rebellious and desires to contribute to enforcing a change in society. This level of rebellion is once again visually underlined in his thick beard and loose, curly hair. In contrast, Kurt cannot be viewed as a rebellious, but in fact, conformist character. He approves of the status quo, since it caters to his personal class- and race-based privileges. This mindset is also conveyed through his clean-shaven chin, always carefully combed back hair and proud, upright posture which exudes an air of arrogance and contentment with himself and contemporary society. The contrast between white, clean-shaven characters whose hairstyles are extremely short in comparison to Gabe’s alternative look is too striking to go unnoticed.

Like Kurt, Addison also has blonde hair, styled in a similarly groomed manner. In the fifth episode, he utters the n-word, when singing along to a rap-song, which Reggie and Joelle scold him for. Addison complains that Reggie tries to police his ways of expression in his own home, “Come on man, I’ve been good to you. You’re at a party at my house, drinking my booze and now you attack me?” (Addison, S01/E05). Here, Addison clearly censors Reggie and attempts to legitimize it by reminding Reggie that he is a guest on his property and therefore has to follow his rules. When Reggie notices the passive-aggressive undertone in Addison’s voice, he uses the master-slave narrative to sarcastically comment, “Oh, I sorry massa [master]. We [Reggie and Joelle] didn’t mean to ruin your fun, now” (S01/E05). Reggie implies that making Addison aware of his potentially internalized racism equates to disrupting his fragile comfort zone, safeguarded by white privilege. Reggie is indirectly labelling Addison as a privileged white man who tries to silence people of color whilst remaining completely unaware of the racist power structures at hand. This ties in with DiAngelo’s concept of white fragility (54) and how white people who are taken out of their comfort zone become highly defensive and upset about any allegations tied to them being racist. In this scene, the two frontiers, Reggie’s and Addison’s, are portrayed with an extreme visual emphasis on race. Addison and Kurt, two white, blonde males are standing opposite of Reggie and his black friends.

A metaphorical line between the white students’ and black student’s is suggested, which later on becomes even more palpable when two campus police officers enter the scene and stand on the covertly designated “white” side. The officer in focus is white, blonde, and has no visible beard, just like Kurt and Addison. As the scene progresses, he takes Addison’s and Kurt’s position, standing opposite of Reggie, and threatens him with a gun as he demands to see Reggie’s college identification card. The police officer has, so to say, taken the white students’ place and represents an escalated form of prejudice and the irrational white fear of anything non-white. The highly symbolic scene which features the white officer directing his firearm toward a black student illustrates the imbalanced power dynamics existing in contemporary U.S. America. Because Winchester College can be seen as a mirror-cosmos to the United States of the 2010s, the campus police represent the police community, operating outside of the fictional campus. The other party guests become spectators who encircle Reggie and the police officer, watching the scene play out. More and more white students in the crowd are seen lifting their mobile phones to record the hostile situation. Just like the police officer is pointing a gun at Reggie, the white students are directing their phones’ camera lenses at him.

They are almost expecting a tragedy to unravel which they make sure to capture on their devices – be it to show Reggie’s victimization and expose police violence or for blatant sensationalism at a black student’s cost. By threatening a black student with a firearm, the campus police officer represents the real-life officers who have drawn guns on unarmed people of color in contemporary U.S.A. The campus police moreover solely demand to see Reggie’s I.D., not Addison’s, which suggests the police’s racial bias. This form of racial profiling is heavily commented on in this particular scene, as the police officers are physically standing on Addison and Kurt’s side of the room but opposite to Reggie’s.

2.4. Angry White Men in Dear White People

In *Dear White People*, the controversial topic of so-called “reverse racism” is touched on in the first episode. In a scene where Sam White is preparing her daily radio show on Winchester College’s campus, the owner of the radio station enters the booth and explains that her show, “Dear White People”, must be kept off the air until the aftermath of the recent “blackface party”, hosted by white students, has subsided. He tells Sam that he does not want her show to be broadcasted so long as he is receiving complaints about “reverse racism” from their student audience. Because Sam is so vocal about racism and white privilege, predominantly white listeners feel attacked by her content. Her attempts to spread awareness about bigotry appear to trigger responses of disagreement and complaint rather than understanding and compassion.

When Sam hears the radio station owner use the term “reverse racism”, she immediately forces her way into the radio station’s booth and goes live on air, ignoring the protesting from the radio station’s owner. She begins her speech on the radio by saying,

“Dear white people [...] I get that being reduced to a race-based generalization is a new and devastating experience to some of you. But here’s the difference. My jokes don’t incarcerate your youths to alarming rates. Or make it unsafe for you to walk around your own neighborhoods. But yours do. When you mock or belittle us, you enforce an existing system [...]” (S01/E01).

Here, Sam ridicules those who have issued complaints about her show, as she cynically calls a white person’s confrontation with a racial issue “a new and devastating experience” (Sam White, S01/E01). Especially the usage of the term “new” states that any form of generalization

about white people is not something that has been historically instrumentalized to discriminate against them. She then continues to specifically distinguish between racism against people of color and prejudice against white people. This difference is explained by Yuya Kiuchi in similar words:

“Whites may, in other words, potentially have their feelings hurt by racial epithets, but those hurt feelings do not change the fact that their whiteness affords them an immense amount of privilege and a significant advantage over people of color in America” (2016: 306).

Kiuchi then names examples for the effect of racism on minority communities, “[...] less income, less wealth, lower property-values, shorter life expectancy, and less access to health care than whites, and significantly larger prison sentences, incidents of police harassment and brutality than whites [...]” (2016: 306). Just like Yuya Kiuchi, Sam White lists real-life examples from U.S. society in an attempt to educate her audience.

When Sam stresses the difference between racism and so-called “reverse racism”, she names victims of police brutality to confront her viewers with the harsh reality for many people of color in contemporary U.S. America. Sam admits to having anonymously sent out invitations to the white students’ “blackface party” in order to investigate how many students would effectively attend such a racist gathering and engage in racist activities. She legitimizes her action by declaring, “Before this party, a POC on campus couldn’t even think the word ‘racism’ without being accused of crying wolf. But just like it took a Sandra Bland, a Trayvon Martin, and a Philando Castile to wake some folks up, this party is what it took to wake this campus up” (S01/E01). Mentioning three people of color who died after or during an altercation with the police in real-life U.S.A. and comparing the gravity of their deaths to the gravity of the blackface party once again illustrates how the fictional Winchester College campus is a micro cosmos which mirrors contemporary U.S. society. Sam elevates Martin, Bland and Castile to a martyr-like status by explaining how their deaths triggered a demand for change in society by spreading awareness about the prevalence of racism in 21st century America. This scene once again breaks the boundaries of fact and fiction, as real-life victims of exaggerated police violence are named by a fictional character on a television show. Sam politically comments on the status quo in contemporary U.S.A. by remembering those whose deaths were related to incidents involving the police. By using such tragic cases as examples to explain the reality of racism juxtaposed to the trivial complaints about alleged “reverse racism”, Sam not only

criticizes the racial profiling done by U.S. police, she is also criticizing those who believe in “reverse racism”. Reminding her listeners of Bland, Martin and Castile may heighten their sensitivities to the matter, since real individuals lost their lives to a form of discrimination which is being claimed on less serious grounds, by another community.

In episode three of *Dear White People*, “reverse racism” is topicalized regarding freedom of speech and equal social rights, rather than in terms of a political and systematic oppression of one people by another. On college campus, Kurt, host of the “blackface party”, initiates a conversation with Troy, a black, male student and son of the college dean. Because Troy has a highly influential father, Kurt asks for his support in the run toward becoming student president, despite his racist scandals. When Troy meets Kurt with skepticism, Kurt begins to complain about white students, such as himself, not being granted the right to express themselves as bluntly as black students allegedly are. Kurt specifically mentions Sam, since he believes that she has more freedom to voice her opinions about racism than Kurt does himself. He even semi-humorously assures Troy that if he were to throw a “whiteface party” (S01/E03), Kurt would defend him for it. The fact that Kurt compares the situation of white students hosting a “blackface party” to a hypothetical scenario, where a black student hosts a “whiteface party” is highly problematic. Kurt’s ability to view the hypothetical situation as equal and comparable to the de facto situation shows his lack of understanding of U.S.’s history and racist culture, including minstrelsy, Jim Crow laws, and of course, slavery. To him, supposed “reverse racism” is an equally unjust reality for whites as racism is to people of color.

Kurt’s mindset and desire to provoke his peers on campus by using shocking tactics, i.e. hosting a “blackface party”, provides sufficient ground for a reading of his character in a race- and class-based context. Kurt attends a renowned college and is portrayed as a rather sheltered, confident young man. He lives his life in contemporary U.S.A. with white and class privilege but appears to lack an understanding of the two. Sam’s radio-activism and her audience’s appreciation for it irk Kurt, since he feels as though he cannot discuss racism and prejudice from a white standpoint with similar dedication and emotional charge. On multiple occasions, Kurt proves that he is indeed familiar with terminology used in race-related discussions, which shows that he frequently joins in on such conversations. However, he does not engage in them to uplift the black community and instead, merely disregards their concerns as laughable. In the fifth episode, for example, Kurt involves himself in an argument between Addison, a white

student, and Reggie, a black student, who are arguing about the use of the n-word. When Kurt sees how Reggie explains to Addison how the latter should avoid pronouncing the n-word aloud, even when singing along to a song, and suggests for Addison to replace the racial slur with quiet humming, Kurt immediately steps in. He uses commonly known arguments from the black community about white privilege to sarcastically disempower Reggie's stance: "You [Reggie] don't want him [Addison] to use his white privilege to rewrite black art" (Kurt, S01/E05). The notion of white, privileged people rewriting black culture or appropriating it is exploited by Kurt to support his own viewpoint. He argues that not pronouncing the n-word would equate a drastic change to black music, made by a white person, and therefore create a much more problematic scenario. As Kurt is commenting on the situation, he is doing so in a very cynical manner and with a slight smirk on his face. He can also be seen patting Addison on the shoulder, as he comes to support him in the verbal fight with Reggie. This act of patting another white male on the shoulder is an expression of solidarity and, in this situation, problematic, as it visually demonstrates which side Kurt is on. This visualization of a "white bond", from which Reggie appears to be excluded in this particular moment, symbolizes a very exclusionary notion (S01/E05). Thus, the visual elements strongly underline Kurt's characterization as a cynical white male who is not aware of his own privilege, but, in fact, denies owning it all together. He readily supports other white males whenever a debate about racism arises, only to reiterate his own viewpoints and provoke those who disagree with them.

The discussion concerning "reverse racism" in *Dear White People* can be analyzed with the help of concepts by Fred L. Pincus and John K. Wilson. Pincus explains that the perpetuation of "reverse racism" is linked to the lack of understanding of programs, such as affirmative action (68). Wilson describes the phenomenon of alleged reverse discrimination felt by members of privileged social groups in colleges, universities and similar facilities of higher education (88-90). Both concepts can be applied to explain the motivation behind characters like Kurt. Pincus' concept was published in 2003, whilst Wilson's dates back to 1996. Despite a turn of a century separating the two publications, the underlying criticism of "reverse racism" remains very similar and highly relevant to the analysis of *Dear White People*, which was first released on Netflix in 2017.

In order to understand the problematic nature of the idea of "reverse racism", it is necessary to examine the underlying assumptions existing in said discourse. Pincus lists various

presuppositions which are unanimously accepted by those who believe to be disadvantaged by “reverse racism”, one of which is that “[t]he negative impact of affirmative action on whites is equivalent to the illegal discrimination [toward] people of color and women for centuries” (79). The viewpoint which equates the benefits of affirmative action brings to minority groups to the systemic discrimination against minorities throughout history is flawed in the sense that it disregards the latter being the reason for the former’s call into existence. If the century-long oppression of non-whites or non-males did not exist, affirmative action would not, either. Those who reject the idea behind affirmative action fail to understand that it is a form of support to ensure equality and balance, whereas negative discrimination causes inequality and imbalance in society. Viewing affirmative action and negative discrimination against a people as one and the same is referred to as the “‘there is only one kind of discrimination’” (79) - argument by Pincus (79).

Apart from equating affirmative action with historic, systemic oppression, Pincus criticizes another inherent thought process of those who reject affirmative action, namely that “whites are innocent of any wrongdoing” (68). White privilege is often denied by those who oppose affirmative action because they refuse to see the advantages white people have reaped from the oppression of people of color throughout the past centuries (Pincus 68). Under the guise of perpetuating an individualistic and fair perspective on people of different ethnicities, predominantly white opponents of affirmative action insist on their innocence, according to Pincus (68). Because they themselves, in the 20th or 21st century, did not personally impose laws of segregation or racial oppression, they feel unjustly criticized for owning a privilege, which they disavow (Pincus 68). This mindset is evident in Kurt from *Dear White People*, since he cannot seem to discern bigoted acts of racism from the exertion of freedom of expression.

Pincus exposes what he calls the “innocence argument” (68) as the refusal to see one’s privilege. He explains that “[a]lthough whites may not have discriminated themselves, they are the beneficiaries of past discrimination” (68). Disavowing one’s privilege can stem from internal ignorance and, when considering the matter in connection to DiAngelo’s concept of white fragility (54-55), from a sense of insecurity. When analyzing the white characters in *Dear White People*, Kurt appears to be particularly fragile in debates concerning racism, although he disguises his fragility with provocative aggression and by ridiculing his opponents’ opinions. His defense mechanism is more aggressive, as he tends to overstep boundaries of political

correctness and social sensitivity for the sake of having his opinion be heard. Unlike the white restaurants guests who are made to feel uncomfortable about their privilege by Hakeem in *Empire*, Kurt does not avoid the controversial topic, but actively engages in it. Although the behaviors of the rather passive white people from *Empire*'s restaurant scene and Kurt's from *Dear White People* differ, they are nevertheless both variations of symptoms of white fragility, as defined by DiAngelo (54-55).

Kurt's opinion on "reverse racism" and his criticism of Sam's radio show "Dear White People" is shared by other students at Winchester College. Other voices who disagree with Sam's activism are, unlike Kurt's, predominantly anonymous. For example, in the first episode, Sam accepts live callers to talk to on air. One of the students calling her during the show tells her, "[...] your show is offensive and entirely divisive. We need to come together in times like this" (male caller, S01/E01). Although the ethnicity of the caller is not disclosed, Sam confidently guesses, "Are you a white male?" (S01/E01), to which the caller answers, "Why? Race is a social construct" (S01/E01). Sam then retorts, "I'll take that as a 'yes'" (S01/E01). This short dialogue illustrates the type of criticism Sam is faced with by her fellow students. As she is taking her live calls, she raises her eyebrows, rolls her eyes or smirks at the callers' comments, which implies that comments like the afore-mentioned one are quite repetitive to Sam and represent a mindset which she deals with on a daily basis.

The brief dialogue between Sam and the male caller who does not disclose his ethnicity is rich in commentary to the debate around racism. A closer reading of the scene can be conducted, using DiAngelo's concept of white fragility (54-55) and Teju Cole's "White Industrial Savior Complex" (340). The presumably white male caller who refers to her radio show as "offensive and [...] divisive" (S01/E01) consciously chooses his words to portray Sam's content as negative and hate-mongering. According to the caller, it is Sam who is causing a divide in society, rather than the systemic racism she frequently criticizes. On air, Sam educates her white listeners and voices her personal opinion on socio-political subjects in a quite confrontational manner, hence the form of address, "Dear White People" (Sam White, S01/E01). This straight-forward style irritates white callers, such as the one under consideration, as it threatens their comfort zone or "environment of racial privilege" (DiAngelo 55). Distressed by feeling generalized on the radio, the caller tries to distract from his hurt feelings by Sam's overt criticism and shifts the attention to Sam, calling her show "divisive". Using this precise term appears to be a

conscious strategy to defeat Sam with her own arguments. Since the female protagonist is known for her anti-racism activism, the caller intends to undermine her intentions by implying that she is perpetuating the very notion she fights against. Sam, however, is not fazed by the caller's tactics and identifies him as a white male on account of his fragility on the matter. When she asks him about his ethnicity, he deflects by claiming that the color of his skin should not matter in this context, or at all for that matter. Again, the caller is using the notion that race is a socially constructed concept to defeat Sam's stance, as it shows that he is somewhat educated on the topic and is aware of racial categories being an invention to compartmentalize society. However, once again, the caller is using liberal phrasings to support rather problematic viewpoints. By refusing to disclose his ethnicity, he is not only hiding behind the armor of anonymity, but he is also perpetuating the idea of a post-racial society, which contemporary U.S. America has not yet become.

Because racism is still such a grave problem in the 21st century, one cannot view U.S. America in a post-racial context. Although benevolent notions may argue in favor of becoming "colorblind" to racial differences, good intentions alone cannot solve the problems of contemporary U.S. society (Cole 340-341). Refusing to see diversity would simultaneously mean the inability to identify racial injustice and prevalent inequality as existing problems. It is therefore important to discern between the fact that race has been exposed as a social construct and the fact that said construct has caused severe injustice in the past, which moreover still impacts people's livelihoods in contemporary times. Ian Haney Lopez notes that race is "entirely social" (73) and that it is "nothing more than what society and law say it is" (73). Therefore, race is an outdated construct which must be perceived as a category, established in the past, but nevertheless still as powerful in contemporary society and thus important to consider when regarding socio-political problems, such as institutional racism.

In this way, conservatives who oppose affirmative action and liberals who support colorblindness in a racial sense perpetuate the same problematic mindset. Whilst the former reject positive discrimination, the latter generalize various forms of discrimination, both calling for very individualistic forms of freedom. As David B. Wilkins et al. state,

"Those who oppose taking race into account, for example, when awarding benefits or designing educational curricula, point to the fact that our political institutions rest on principles of individual

freedom and equality that expressly deny the moral or political significance of ascriptive characteristics such as race” (3).

The benevolent, yet flawed, intentions of those who aim for a figuratively “colorblind” society are commonly also used by the rather conservative opponents of affirmative action to disguise their desire to maintain their exclusive privilege as a rational, altruistic endeavor. Viewing members of a society as individuals without shared traits or shared disadvantages would invalidate their struggles with intersectional discrimination and bigotry, thereby maintaining the imbalanced status quo. Individuals like the anonymous caller in *Dear White People* therefore subconsciously hinder positive change being implemented by suggesting alternative, more passive ways of ensuring equality. By assuming that his approach to solving the problem of racism were more effective than Sam’s activism, the presumably white caller is acting according to the expected behaviors of a stereotypical white savior. As Cole states, “there is much more to do doing good work than ‘making a difference’” (340-345). Even though the caller is clearly motivated by his own idea of implementing vital changes in society, he fails to consider the potential harm he is committing by essentially trying to silence Sam White’s activism. Cole discusses this silencing of marginalized voices as follows: “Marginalized voices in America have fewer and fewer avenues to speak plainly about what they suffer [...]” (Cole 340-345). He also highlights the hypocrisy in societal discourse which views the topicalization of white privilege as “provocative” (Cole 340-345), whereas discussions around other topics are more directly addressed and not mitigated or met with skepticism (340-345). Therefore, this particular scene, featuring Sam and the anonymous caller, can not only be understood as a demonstration of white fragility on behalf of the caller, but also as an instance of a typical white savior silencing a woman of color.

3. Censorship and Mass Incarceration

3.1. Lucious Under Public Scrutiny

In *Empire*’s second episode, Lucious is interviewed on live national television about the correlation of real-life assault crimes and the violence promoted in hip-hop songs, such as the ones produced by Lucious himself. The reporter asks Lucious, “Do you think that the misogyny and celebration of gang warfare, that’s so prevalent in hip-hop music, is healthy for our

nation's youth?" (S01/E02), to which Lucious answers that "anything that expresses the First Amendment is healthy for our country" (S01/E02). By referring to the United States' Bill of Rights, Lucious cleverly portrays himself as a patriotic citizen of the U.S.A, trying to touch common ground with any skeptical white viewers. Lucious is consciously speaking in a manner which lets the white audience perceive him as a harmless American citizen who shares their beliefs and values. Before the interview, Lucious tells Cookie about his thoroughly thought-through phrases and justifies his performativity, which she criticizes as inauthentic. "Cookie, I got to go on white TV and try and talk in a way that don't frighten these folks to death" (S01/E02), Lucious explains. The white community's fear and distrust, which Lucious is aware of, is illustrated in the same episode by a group of angry white protesters. Because one of the artists, signed by Lucious' music company, was involved in a shooting, a number of white, predominantly female, protesters walk the streets, equipped with megaphones to voice their anger. The women chant, "What this man is doing is wrong" (S01/E02), implying that Lucious is cultivating criminality by letting young artists glorify violence in their music. Visual elements featured in the scene, including the conservative attire, megaphones, and well-structured organization of the angry mob come across as almost satirical since it corresponds to the over-generalizing stereotype of the hysterical, white, middle-aged housewife who is skeptical of anything non-white.

As he is interviewed about gang-violence and the negative impacts of hip-hop on younger generations by a white reporter, Lucious finds himself in a highly uncomfortable position. He is asked to comment on recent scandals, involving his most promising rap-artist as well as his son, Hakeem. Aware of the potential hostility of a largely white audience, Lucious tries to remain calm and continuously feigns a subtle smile. Whenever the reporter confronts him with a controversial topic, Lucious answers in a diplomatic and brief way, whilst keeping a smile on his face to appear optimistic and harmless. However, as soon as Lucious' broaches the topic of freedom of speech, the reporter interrupts him. For instance, when Lucious says, "They [young artists] need to have the freedom of speech-" (S01 / E02), the news reporter cuts him off mid-sentence, uttering, "Right. Yeah. You have mentioned that many times before" (S01/ E02). Just when Lucious tries to reiterate the importance of U.S. constitutional values, he is interrupted and told that he is repeating himself by the reporter, who thereby implies a flaw in his argumentation. This type of subtle censorship is done to deter the business-owner from appearing to benevolent and harmless on television. Not letting Lucious

finish speaking about freedom of speech is highly ironic, since interrupting him is a way of limiting his own freedom to say what he wishes to declare. Despite being interrupted and constantly challenged by the reporter, Lucious manages to remain somewhat calm and collected. However, as the conversation progresses, his controlled smile shifts into a nervous one, which is accompanied by quick twitches of the corners of Lucious' mouth. At one point in the interview, Lucious becomes clearly vexed by the repeated allegation that hip-hop promotes violence or drug-related crimes and he abandons the fake smile, now speaking with more expression and emotionality in his face which suggests his annoyance with the reporter. When Lucious talks about hip-hop and the narratives it entails, his mind is going through past experiences of his own, which he has processed by creating music. His thoughts are visually illustrated via short flashback scenes, which jump into his mind during the interview. Scenes of Cookie in prison, the two of them packaging drugs, and Lucious in his early adulthood are shown while Lucious explains, "Our music is more of a narration of an oppressed people" (S01 / E02). When he says this, Lucious squints his eyes together and one corner of his mouth is raised, showing his anger and frustration with having to defend the hip-hop genre and, in his mind, his own past. Not only his facial expression, also his body language reveals an abundance about Lucious' true feelings. When he says "our music", he draws a circle in the air with one finger, thereby illustrating that the black community, specifically those who rap, are an exclusive circle, which the reporter is not part of.

The second half of the interview-scene is musically accompanied by Lucious' son, Jamal, singing and playing the keyboard. Jamal is watching the interview on television when he suddenly begins to play the instrument and bursts into emotional singing. His music then remains the background-sound for the rest of the interview-scene. The convergence of Jamal's voice and Lucious' words adds another ironic element to the scene because the lyrics of the son's song repeat the phrase, "Tell the truth, tell the truth" (S01/ E02). Although Lucious catches himself revealing too much of his authentic emotionality at times, he generally stays aware of his gestures, facial expressions and words. Some of the lies and equivocations Lucious tells the interviewer include the claim that he tries to preach values, such as anti-violence or peace, to his sons, "I try to talk to my sons. I don't think they're listening to me" (S01/ E02). This is particularly ironic because he has been a quite violent father to his sons, as he, for example, threw Jamal into a garbage container for wearing feminine clothes, which was revealed in a previous flash-back scene. Remembering this physical and psychological

abuse, Jamal cries as he sings to his father being interviewed on television. Before the scene ends, Jamal sings, “Tell the truth” (S01/ E02) one last time, his lips quivering from the emotional pain. Finally, in the interview, Lucious adds, “Maybe it’s me that’s not listening to them [his sons]” (S01/ E02). By ending the scene with such a statement, it is inferred that Jamal’s lyrical pleas succeeded, since Lucious did in fact entertain a truthful idea. However, it is likely that Lucious solely added that last comment to appear like a caring father, who is not too proud to admit his own flaws to a skeptical audience.

On national television, Lucious is clearly aware of the white skepticism toward the aggressive black male stereotype and alters his language, accordingly. He chooses forms of expression in such a way that his white audience will not associate said stereotype with him. When the reporter confronts him with violent lyrics sung by himself in the beginnings of his career and questions his credibility, Lucious finds himself speaking his mind instead of uttering mitigated, rehearsed lines. Once he becomes obviously annoyed by the confrontational reporter, Lucious begins to speak with an increase in emotionality in his tone, before stopping himself abruptly, “You see, the Empire artists are telling the next generation that even though they live in a world where Trayvon Martin can get shot down like a dog without-“ (S01/E02). The last utterance before Lucious censors himself through sudden silence is particularly interesting because it mentions the name of a boy who was shot by U.S. police officers in real life.

The person Lucious mentions by name is Trayvon Martin, a young male who was rendered a suspicious threat by a police officer and eventually shot, despite having been unarmed. By stating that “we live in a world where Trayvon Martin can get shot down like a dog” (S01/E02), Lucious is making the issue of racism in U.S. society very real and tangible. He is using the name of a young individual who was unarmed when he was shot and whose case was made known worldwide, after the incident occurred. By using words such as “can” (S01/E02), Lucious is indirectly implying that police officers who shoot unarmed black people are able to do so with impunity. Gilbert and Ray identify this “over-policing [of people of color] in the twenty-first century” (S123) as “a continuation of sociohistorical, legalized, and structured ways that black males are criminalized” (S123). They state that ways of “criminalization of black males has a long history in the USA” (S130) and that this form of racialized policing “[...] can lead to death or incarceration” (S130). Lucious Lyon is highly aware of these two potential scenarios and fears for his family’s safety. After Hakeem’s restaurant-incident in episode two,

for example, Lucious scolds him for acting recklessly, “Do you know the world that we live in today? Do you have any idea what those cops could have done to your entitled ass?” (S01/E02). Here, Lucious is clearly telling Hakeem that he could have been arrested or even killed by the police, like Trayvon Martin or Eric Garner were. By referring to contemporary U.S.A. as “the world we live in today” (S01/E02), Lucious is highlighting the frequency of incidents of police brutality toward people of color in the 2010’s. This temporal reference also ties in with Gilbert and Ray’s statement that the criminalization of men of color remains a problem of the 21st century (S123).

In the first episode of the second season for example, the Lyons organize a large-scale music festival in light of Lucious’ recent arrest, after being accused of murdering Cookie’s cousin, Bunkie. Since Lucious is being, in public perception, unjustly held in jail, prominent rappers and singers agree to perform at the “#FreeLucious” (S02/ E01) event in order to spread awareness about mass incarceration of people of color in the U.S. Apart from the topic of racial profiling and the disproportional incarceration of people of color being a very real issue both in *Empire* as well as contemporary U.S. society, another aspect which contributes to the plot’s relevance to contemporary times in the States is the fact that well-recognized public figures are playing themselves in this particular episode. Celebrities with fashion-, religion- and media-related backgrounds attend the concert to protest the institutionalized racism in the shape of mass incarceration of black people in U.S. society.

Prominent figures featured in the second season’s first episode include André Leon Talley, Don Lemon and Reverend Al Sharpton. The three black males each represent different types of U.S. American, black, male identities as Talley comes from the world of fashion and design, Lemon is a CNN news anchor, and Sharpton is linked to faith and spirituality. Whilst the former has no further significance to the scene other than adding comic relief and the visibility of a real-life celebrity who has a cameo-appearance on the show, Don Lemon’s role carries significantly more value, as will be discussed in a later chapter. Supporting the concert for a generally good cause, Al Sharpton directly addresses the subject at hand in a brief conversation with Cookie, “I really loved [the concert]. Mass incarceration is such an important issue” (SE02 E01). When Cookie implicitly asks the reverend if he could help Lucious’ case, he declines. Before Cookie walks on to greet the next familiar face, the reverend explains, “Word on the street is, he [Lucious] ain’t right on this. I can’t get involved in nothing

wrong” (SE02 E01). Sharpton is implying that a minor part of the public is in fact aware of Lucious being rightfully detained. However, since Sharpton nevertheless attends the concert dedicated to demanding alleged justice of Lucious, this demonstrates how strong the unity in the black community is when faced with the issue of black incarceration. Not attending the concert would, in a way, equate to admitting that a prominent figure from the black community has been justly put in jail for murder, thus implying that the issue of mass imprisonment of black individuals is not as grave or serious. Therefore, although the reverend clarifies that he cannot support Lucious’ cause, he is sufficiently passionate about the problem of mass incarceration in general to be visible at a concert which supports a rightfully convicted murderer under the guise of demanding justice for an innocent black man.

Apart from celebrity cameo-appearances, the concert-scene uses lyrical as well as visual elements to issue political statements regarding racial profiling, police violence and mass incarceration. While Cookie makes her way through the crowd, the musical backdrop of black performers is clearly audible. On stage, an artist sings, “I got my hands in the air. Officer, don’t shoot. Told him I couldn’t breathe [...]” (S02 / E01). This line is particularly striking when read in context with real-life fatalities due to police violence in 2014. The “hands in the air” refer to Michael Brown’s case which ended in his demise, when he was shot by the police. The line “told him I couldn’t breathe” refers to Eric Garner’s macabre last words, before he was choked to death by two police officers who wrestled him to the ground in an attempt to arrest him (Capelouto 1+; Aymer 367). By alluding to such real and tangible tragedies, the concert-scene crosses the borders of fiction and touches on harsh realities. Nevertheless, the atmosphere is kept upbeat and empowering, as people of color in the crowd dance along to the political rap and consciously take in the performer’s words. In the very beginning of the concert-scene, the rap’s beat starts to play in the background, whilst the Statue of Liberty is being shown from various angles, adding a patriotic touch to the setting. Footage of the statue in combination with the introductory music starting to play sets the scene by clearly and unmistakably showing that the show is set in the U.S.A. The problem of systemic racism is thereby directly linked to the U.S. and its constitutional values, which, at times, appear contradictory. For instance, the Statue of Liberty, which is meant to symbolize freedom and righteousness, leads the audience into a scene, where an artist raps about the limited options for people of color in U.S. America, “It’s only two ways to go. It’s gon’ be freedom or jail”, he states in his rap (S02/ E01).

This juxtaposition of praised moral values and a problematic de-facto reality is also embodied by Cookie in this scene. As she wanders through the crowd of people who have come to attend the concert for an allegedly noble cause, her thoughts are not with the victims of mass incarceration or with Lucious, whose detainment is protested at the event. Instead, she is looking for prominent guests to speak to, privately. Her conversations are quite superficial and partially rooted in her sole interest for generating publicity for her family's company. With the fashion designer André Leon Talley, she exchanges but few words which merely consist of Talley ridiculing Cookie's designer-outfit from "last season" (S02/ E01). Such superficial topics suggest that privileged celebrities, such as Talley, solely attend the concert to remain relevant and visible in the public's eye, rather than for the sake of supporting fellow people of color, who live in less fortunate conditions. This ties in with hooks' concept of the "black bourgeoisie" (2000: 91), who lose their sensitivities to socio-economic concerns of the lower-class people of color. When Cookie sees Al Sharpton, she is excited to lure him into a discussion, only to lose interest in it as soon as he voices his true thoughts on Lucious' most recent scandal. Cookie's disappointment with Sharpton insisting on acting on his morality provides an insight to her calculating character. Her main motivation for hosting a concert to shed light on the prevalence of racism in contemporary U.S. society is not rooted in altruism or pure activism, but in a selfish agenda to save her company's reputation and net worth. Living comfortably as the ex-wife of a famous entrepreneur, Cookie seems to be very much detached from the daily struggles with which the black working class is faced. In this regard, Talley's superficial comments on Cookie's clothing and the latter's focus on using socio-political struggles for publicity are two examples for the "black bourgeoisie" (hooks 2000: 91) focusing on issues of their own, rather than communal ones.

3.2. Incarcerating Black Womanhood: Sandra Bland and Cookie

Not only the prominent occupation of minor roles with public figures but also the striking allusions to real-life events blur the boundaries of fact and fiction in *Empire*. In the fourth episode, for instance, Cookie references a specific event pertaining to police brutality and the incarceration of women of color in the United States from 2015. When she is unexpectedly arrested, multiple verbal as well as audiovisual features hint at the scene being an allusion to a controversial case of police violence in the U.S. from the mid-2010s. The case, which Cookie's

arrest is reminiscent of, is Sandra Bland's detention and death in police custody (Grim 1+). When Cookie is arrested by surprise, she is clearly upset and worried for her safety. To an audience which is familiar with the details surrounding Bland's case, the scene under consideration entails clear references to Bland's arrest and early passing. To showcase the parallels between Bland's and Cookie's arrest, a brief summary of the former's encounter with the police officer who took her into custody will be provided.

In July of 2015, a 28-year old woman of color called Sandra Bland was driving her car when a police officer pulled her over. Video footage as well as transcripts from the encounter between Bland and a police officer have been published on various social media platforms as well as online and printed news outlets. A transcript from the Huffington Post illustrates the interlocution as recorded via the camera and recording devices mounted in the police officer's car (Grim 1+). Surprised by the allegations of the police officer who ordered her to step outside her car for violating a law of traffic, Bland can be heard questioning the officer's motives and refusing to leave her vehicle. Claiming to know her rights to stay inside the automobile, Bland continuously declines the officer's order for her to leave her vehicle. Abruptly, the officer's tone gets rougher as he threatens to forcefully remove Bland from it. Bland announces that she is about to contact her lawyer, when the police officer threatens her further, "I'm going to yank you out of there" (Grim 1+). Bland resists and can hear the officer calling for support from another police unit via his mobile device. When Bland explains that, since she is not officially under arrest, the officer has no right to remove her from her vehicle, the officer reacts by arresting her, "You are under arrest" (Grim 1+). Shocked at the officer's executive action, Bland asks, "I'm under arrest? For what? For what? For what?" (Grim 1+).

The situation then becomes more violent when the police officer threatens to use a weapon against Bland. The officer threatens, "I will light you up! Get out! Now!" (Grim 1+). The article in the Huffington Post adds that, at this point, the officer is pointing a "stun gun" (Grim 1+) at Bland (Grim 1+). In shock and disbelief over the police officer's aggression as well as out of fear for being harmed by the officer's weapon, she exits her vehicle. As the police officer repeatedly yells orders at Bland, she says, "Right. [Y]eah, let's take this to court, let's do this" (Grim 1+). Sandra Bland's confidence in her righteous position in this encounter is remarkable and continuously underlined by her questioning the police officer's conduct. However, when the police officer threatens to use a weapon on her, Bland ceases to insist on her rights to stay

seated and obeys the angered officer's demands in order to avoid being harmed by his electric gun. Her displayed fear of a police officer's weapon ties in with Hill's accusation that the U.S. police does not primarily ensure the safety of black female citizens but, on the contrary, rather employ exaggerated actions to deal with such cases: "[Sandra Bland and other women] ultimately died because of a series of unnecessary actions by the State" (Hill 2016: 66). Because of the recent incidents of police violence against people of color preceding Bland's own arrest, Bland was most likely aware of the fatal outcome such a charged situation could mean for her livelihood and therefore ultimately gave in to the officer's threats.

As the police officer proceeds to handcuff Bland, she utters a phrase of desperation, frustration and anger which is of utmost importance for the analysis of Cookie's arrest in *Empire*. "Are you fucking kidding me? This is some bull...", Bland says (Grim 1+) as the officer locks her hands behind her back. In the scene of her arrest, Cookie expresses her dismay using similar vocabulary, "Aw man, that's some bull..." (SE02 E04). Though it may be coincidental, the overlapping vocabulary as well as other parallels regarding the situation, such as the arrestee being female and taken by surprise, add up to provide sufficient evidence to claim that the scene in *Empire* is most definitely based on Bland's encounter with the police. A coincidence would be rather unlikely, considering the abundance of similarities at hand. The fact that Cookie's character's script even contains the same colloquial, abbreviated term, namely "bull" (Cookie, SE02 E04), to refer to the unfairness and absurdity of their situations implies that the series comments on Sandra Bland's and Cookie's cases having been handled unjustly. As the scene of Cookie's arrest continues, more similarities can be identified.

Further such parallels between Sandra Bland's utterances and the script in *Empire* include further verbal as well as striking visual details. For instance, Cookie yells out, "Why are you arresting me?" (SE02 E04), when a white police officer is handcuffing her. Similarly, Bland herself repeatedly questions the police officer's reasons for ordering her to exit her vehicle and later on, arresting her (Grim 1+). A very telling parallel is also the fact that Cookie orders to the police unit to "get off of [her]" (SE02 E04), just as Bland requested for the police officer not to forcefully remove her from her vehicle (Grim 1+). Before being forced into the police car, Cookie screams, "Is somebody recording this?" (SE02 E04) which is both a reference to Sandra Bland who tried to record her encounter with the officer before being ordered to put away her mobile phone (Grim 1+), as well as a reference to the frequency of recordings of

instances of police brutality leaking to the public in 2015. Visual parallels between Bland's and Cookie's arrest encompass firstly, the fact that both females are wearing sunglasses in the video footage from their arrest and secondly, the notion of the women being either ordered to give up their mobile phone, in Bland's case, or the mobile device being forcefully removed from their hands, in Cookie's case. These audiovisual elements clearly make Cookie's scene of arrest an homage to Bland, though the latter carried on for a longer period of time and involved harsher language from the police officer in question.

The scene under consideration holds strong symbolic power, as it briefly captures the audience in a realm, where fact and fiction border on one another. Before the scene of Cookie's arrest closes with an abrupt black screen and the echoing sound of police car doors being shut, Cookie screams, "If I die in police custody, I did not commit suicide" (SE02 E04). This utterance is of major significance to the reality of contemporary socio-political affairs in the United States. It reminds particularly those viewers who follow cases of police brutality on the news or via social media of the on-going issues with police violence toward people of color. The afore-mentioned black screen, which closes the scene of Cookie's arrest, can also be interpreted as a moment of grievance for the death of Sandra Bland, who was no longer alive by the time the episode aired on television. This symbolic and visually powerful ending of the politically charged scene merges raw reality with scripted television, as the audience is torn from a fictive plot, albeit only for a brief moment, to remember Bland's case. Moreover, the scene blurs the boundaries between reality and television by scraping the surface of the fourth wall, since the fictitious Cookie Lyon demonstrates her awareness of a real-life tragedy. Because Cookie is knowledgeable of what happened to Bland, she takes the precaution of announcing to any potential pedestrians within earshot, or perhaps even the viewers behind the fourth wall, that, should she die, it will not have been her decision, "If I die in police custody, I did not commit suicide" (SE02 E04). This moreover conveys a controversial political opinion to the audience, as Cookie clearly believes that Bland's passing was not, as official reports allege (Payne 1+), a suicide but a non-transparent death of a woman of color behind bars.

The controversy regarding Sandra Bland's case involves multiple factors, including the transcript of her arrest as well as her mugshot, and poses the question of how and when exactly Bland passed away. Because Bland continuously insisted on being in the right

throughout her arrest and announced that she looked forward to settling the case in court, it appears as though she would have been confident in winning the case. Therefore, the motive for ending her own life out of desperation or fear of being sentenced to time in prison appears irrational, at first glance. However, Bland did state on a jail entrance form that she had been battling thoughts of suicide in the past, which makes the controversy more complex (Hill 2016: 65). When Bland's official mugshot was shown to the public, people became suspicious of the circumstances surrounding her alleged suicide in jail. For USA Today, Eversley writes that a "debate has erupted over whether Bland might actually be dead in the photo, and whether the potentially fabricated image is part of a cover-up for some harm that came her way" (Eversley 1+). It is alleged by some that Bland is not sitting down for her mugshot, but laying on the floor, hence her hair falling toward the background and her facial expression allegedly lacking natural tension. In order to silence these rumors, a video was released, showing Bland, wearing her convict-uniform, filling out forms before having her mugshot photographs taken (Cleary 1+). Despite the apparent proof of Bland being alive for her mugshot, the discussion around police brutality and hazardous encounters between police and people of color has reached new dimensions due to the controversy and obvious overt distrust toward the legal system.

Sandra Bland's case not only highlights the U.S.A.'s problem with police brutality and racial profiling, but it also sheds light on the circumstances of black women who are detained in jail after their arrests. Hill notes that in the month of Bland's alleged suicide, five black women also died while being detained in jail (2016: 66). The majority of black females dying in police custody in July of 2015 appear to have taken their lives already after a very short time in detention. Two of the jailed women, Ralkina Jones and Raynette Turner, died within only two days of police custody (Hill 2016:66). Amongst the youngest jailed women was eighteen-year-old Kindra Chapman who committed suicide after only two hours after being arrested for theft of a mobile phone (2016: 66). Hill suggests that the deaths of the afore-mentioned women occurred due to negligence by the police and jail authorities, since insufficient safety measures were taken to ensure the women's mental and physical well-being. According to Hill, the majority of all cases of female suicides in jail cells take place within the first four days of the women being detained in custody. Such statistics as well as Bland confirming her suicidal tendencies nevertheless did not prompt the officers in charge to increase their suicide watch intervals for Bland or any of the other late women (Hill 2016: 65).

Hill suggests that Bland's early death could have been avoided if the U.S. detainment laws were less classist and less racist. Since the woman was only kept in jail because she did not have the financial means to pay her bail, her suicide after three days of custody might have never occurred under different jail detainment laws and regulations. Hill claims that the bail regulations have, over time, become a punishment for the working class rather than a precaution to deter the detainees from fleeing (Hill 2016: 65). Resulting from these detainment laws, "83 percent of people currently in American jails remain there for no other reason than that they cannot afford to pay their bail" (Hill 2016: 65). Apart from the classist aspect of the problematic circumstances in U.S. jails, "Black womanhood" (Hill 2016: 66) is specifically targeted as well, according to Hill. The fact that the authorities neglected to supervise Bland with utmost diligence, considering her suicidal tendencies, demonstrates how women of color in jail are not met with appropriate care and understanding. It is presumed "that it is negligence and indifference, rather than malicious intent, that lead to [the women's] tragic deaths. While this may be true, it does not negate the fact that these women ultimately died because of a series of unnecessary actions by the State" (Hill 2016: 66). Hill decidedly refers to Bland as a "casualty of a [...] system that criminalizes [...] Black womanhood" (2016: 66). Hill's analysis of the U.S. criminal justice system not only containing racial, but also class-based bias ties in with the work of bell hooks' which is concerned with the correlation of social justice issues of race and class (2000: 90).

Not only the intersectionality of race and class, but also the intersectionality of race and gender plays a crucial role in the many struggles, women of color are burdened with, according to Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw explains that it is not sufficient to view a woman of color's struggles as partially caused by racism and partially caused by sexism, but that these struggles merge together to create a new, intersectional hardship of its own kind. She elaborates, "[...] women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women [...]" (1252). She emphasizes that "antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms" (1252). In Sandra Bland's case, the police officer did not personally know the woman he was arresting – he could only assume her race and gender, as he was a mere stranger to the woman of color. Therefore, these two visible traits were that of which the police officer was basing his judgement, instinctively. Bland herself even alleged that the police officer was acting out of sexist motivation, during the proceedings of her arrest, "'a female for a traffic ticket. Don't it

make you feel good, officer Encinia? You're a real man now'" (Sandra Bland's transcript quoted in Hill 2016: 63). By addressing the police officer with his last name, Bland is directly challenging him and breaking face-saving barriers between them. Furthermore, she is accusing him of abusing his power to feel like a "real" man, which presupposes the underlying notion that the officer may have a toxic understanding of masculinity, which entails the oppression of women. Because she accused the man who arrested her of abusing his patriarchal power, Bland's case has to be discussed in a not only class- and race-based analysis but also in a gender-based framework. Tying in with Hill's illustration of the dire conditions for a woman of color in U.S. police custody (2016:64), Crenshaw's emphasis on the intersectionality of race and sex and gender underlines the struggles women of color are faced with, specifically (1252).

4. Intersectionality: Race and Class

4.1. The Lyon Family - Wealthy Subordinates

The intersectionality of race and class is an overt theme in *Empire*. The Lyon family is a particularly interesting case study for the analysis of the portrayal of classism and racism in 21st century U.S. America, due to the characters' complex backgrounds and rise to financial security. Although the Lyons live in wealth, they remain threatened by American society's systemic racism. Throughout the first season, the series illustrates instances of, on one hand, an abuse of power by Lucious Lyon, for example, as well as his existing ties to his past life in poverty and crime, on the other. In order to closely analyze this intersectional dynamic of classism which is tied to the characters' ethnicities, Daniel T. O'Hara's discussion of the meaning of class will be used as a theoretical framework (407). Once the appropriate definition for the protagonists' class situation is found, the theme of classism, racism and sexism in *Empire* can be further analyzed via bell hooks' (2000: 91+) and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's (1293+) work on intersectionality.

When O'Hara discusses and defines the term 'class', he does so in analogy to the American academy as his "site of class analysis" (O'Hara 407). The reasons why O'Hara's analysis of class in the framework of the American academy is so applicable to an analysis of the intersectionality of race and class in *Empire* are manifold. Firstly, the temporal and locational settings match, as both *Empire*'s plot setting as well as O'Hara's theoretical setting are based in contemporary U.S. America. Secondly, O'Hara explicitly claims that the American academy's environment "mirrors [...] the harsh economic truths operating at large" (407). Said economic

facts are referenced in *Empire* through themes such as class inequality, racial injustice as well as social hypocrisy, as will be discussed later. Thirdly, O'Hara specifically highlights and criticizes a tokenization of "celebrities of a few members of 'oppressed' or 'marginalized' groups" (407). O'Hara provides a distinct example of such token spokes-people of the academy representing the hypocrisy of the economy on a larger scale. He imagines how a liberal activist and scholar is interviewed about their inclusionary ideas, when, in reality, said scholar's workplace is highly class-divided and problematic, in terms of classism and educational privilege (O'Hara 408). This imagined scenario is meant to reveal the contradiction behind a scholar enjoying the exclusionary-by-nature privilege of education whilst discussing matters of inclusivity. O'Hara's scholar- example can be paralleled to the ambiguous function of Lucious Lyon in *Empire*, who regularly hosts events to raise awareness about police brutality but also produces musical and visual content to emulate stereotypically violent street life in American "ghettos". Though Lucious makes his opinions on certain social issues vocal in public, he does so from a position of power and celebrity status, which those of whom he speaks do not enjoy.

To analyze *Empire*'s characters according to O'Hara's class theory, the difference between class privilege and monetary wealth and power must first be established. Putting it into terms used by O'Hara, the difference between "dominant-class subjects" (309) and "subordinate-class subjects" (309) is explored and applied to the power dynamics in *Empire*. O'Hara argues that, in an ideology-dominated society, the dominant class will have an abundance of privileges over the subordinate class. The latter will scramble for any means of improving their own, individual living circumstances, whilst the former will take their privilege for granted and perpetuate their fellow privileged peers' notion of entitlement, disregarding any options to improve lifestyles for the subordinate-class subjects which may entail the dominant class losing a fraction of their status (O'Hara 309). O'Hara clarifies that subordinate wealth stands in relation to the lifestyles of the dominant classes, when he illustrates the difference between a public figure such as the American entrepreneur Donald Trump versus another public figure, namely Imelda Marcos, widow of the 10th president of the Republic of the Philippines. O'Hara emphasizes the difference in the global perception of the two individuals' level of fortune, as he illustrates how "Imelda Marcos' private shoe collection will be universally deplored as obscene in the face of Philippine poverty and starvation, while Donald Trump's private real-estate collection will be widely admired as a sign of entrepreneurial zeal, even in the face of

American poverty and [homelessness]” (O’Hara 309). Judging from Marcos’ social status, material possessions and speculated net worth, she may be regarded as someone who enjoys class privilege, but upon closer analysis, her presumed privileges stand in relation to those of a white, American entrepreneur who represents the dominant class and thus, also enjoys true class privilege on a global scale (O’Hara 309).

In *Empire*, Lucious Lyon and his family can therefore be regarded as very wealthy members of the subordinate class, rather than representatives of the dominant class. Especially Lucious and Cookie Lyon’s childhood and adulthood in poverty leave them affected by class inequality – a trait which does not apply to the dominant class who exclusively lives in sheltered environments and feels undeterredly entitled to their wealth and success, according to O’Hara (308-309). Lucious and Cookie furthermore fit O’Hara’s definition of the subordinate class due to their criminal histories. O’Hara explains how subordinate-class subjects tend to “express dissatisfaction [via] forms of ambition, violence and self-destruction (including crime)” (309). Since Lucious and Cookie were involved in drug dealing businesses as well as crimes which included murder and gang wars before they started their successful, money-generating company, they overlap with O’Hara’s subordinate-class subjects who resort to violence and crime because they are dissatisfied with their living circumstances.

In *Empire*, certain characters possess various traits which suggest them to be part of the subordinate rather than dominant class. This is done by primarily by playing with different stereotypes. In the first episode, for instance, Cookie Lyon is released from prison and returns to the company she started alongside her former husband. Cookie’s attire consists of many elements, which together form a quite stereotypical whole of what a woman of a lower social rank would be assumed to wear, according to prominent stereotypes. She is wearing a thigh-short leopard-print dress with a pompous white fur coat thrown over it. Her ears are embellished with very large, golden hoop earrings and her feet are strapped up in shiny high heel sandals, which force her to walk in tiny, quick steps due to their high and slender heel. The combination of her tight and high ponytail with the sharp heels, a very short animal-print dress and large hoop earrings, which are often associated with so-called “street style” fashion or hip-hop culture, almost parody the fashion of the stereotypical “black youth” sub-culture. Wearing her extraordinary outfit, Cookie struts through her son’s apartment and helps herself to a piece of chicken from his stove without asking for permission, which further underlines

her lack of manners and a certain attitude which is often linked to lower classes. The audience's visual awareness of Cookie's attention-grabbing attire is heightened when her son, Jamal, comments on her clothing, "What are you wearing?" (S01/E01). Cookie retorts by saying, "What I got locked up in" (S01/E01), which refers to her lifestyle from over a decade prior. The statement Cookie is thereby making illustrates the conditions she lived under, which are mirrored in her fashion. The stereotypical notions tied to certain clothing items or accessories were a reality for the mother of three, when she and Lucious lived a life of crime to survive in impoverished conditions. To Jamal, who lives a luxurious life and cannot relate to his mother's past struggles, Cookie's outfit is rather ridiculous, so he assures her that they would "change [her outfit] real quick" (S01/E01).

In O'Hara's terminology, Jamal would be considered a subordinate-class subject, just like his parents. Since he did not grow up in luxury but only came into this lifestyle in his early adolescence, he does not own *de facto* class privilege. He lives comfortably and has the means of artistic freedoms of expression, yet he does not own as much power as those in the dominant class. As Jamal makes apparent in his skepticism toward his mother's attire, which represents her former life in crime and poverty, he does not identify with this layer of society and wants to help his mother upgrade her appearance by changing her outfit. Jamal's underlying suggestion that Cookie needs to change her exterior to fit in with the rest of the Lyon family or their elevated social surroundings can be explained by O'Hara, "Signs of privileged class position – the right clothing, a good house, a luxury car, and so on – are just that: signs of power, but not the power itself" (417). This ties in with the difference between the dominant and the subordinate class, as previously explored, as those who hold power, such as Trump, do not equate to those who merely hold signs of said power, such as Imelda Marcos. However, by obtaining such "signs of power" (O'Hara 417), Jamal and his family can gain a higher social standing and, as individuals, distance themselves from socio-economic backgrounds they do not wish to be connected to on the basis of prejudice and preconceived ideas. Cookie's outfit in the first episode of *Empire* adds another layer to this discussion on "signs of power" (O'Hara 417), as she appears to be wearing disempowering signs, i.e. a style of fashion that takes away from her power potential rather than adds to it.

As someone who suffers from intersectional discrimination as a woman of color, Cookie Lyon embodies an interesting case study for the analysis of the challenges in a black woman's life

in *Empire*. The theory on intersectionality as defined by Crenshaw can be applied to Cookie to discuss the impact of her language, fashion, motivation and actions. Especially Cookie's problematic sense of humor and extraordinary choice of clothing, which even her son mocks, are presented as comic relief in *Empire*. Cookie is a bold character who does not appear to have a filter when it comes to ridiculing her son's Latino boyfriend or provoking the father of her children and his new girlfriend by using vulgar language. Her outfits, such as the aforementioned leopard-print dress and bold accessories, almost make her a satirized stereotype of a ghetto-esque woman of color. Crenshaw warns that "[t]hough racial humor may sometimes be intended to ridicule racism, the close relationship between the stereotypes and the prevailing images of marginalized people complicates this strategy" (1293). Although Cookie's overt stereotypization may be a technique to challenge problematic tropes and prejudices or even mock them by over-using them, they might simultaneously perpetuate the prevalence of such faulty constructs and harmful generalizations (1293). Such a commonly used and problematic stereotype is particularly hazardous in *Empire*, since it applies to the main female protagonist, who carries the responsibility of black, female representation.

Whilst the issue of racism is very overtly discussed in *Empire*, the interconnected issue of classism is merely hinted at by the characters' actions and words. The Lyon family is a highly complex example for the various types of intersectional discrimination, as well as the inherent problems of a class divide within society. Lucious and Cookie come from a past of poverty and crime, and only achieved wealth and recognition in society after living in dire conditions for long enough to have been shaped by them in their younger years. Although they are now living a life of luxury, they still feel the negative impact of racism through acts of white micro-aggressions on a regular basis. Now ascribed a high social standing in society, Cookie and Lucious have largely distanced themselves from the underprivileged majority of people of color in U.S. society. The connectivity of racism and a class-bias in *Empire* is best analyzed via bell hooks' framework, which not only focalizes the relationship between people of color and the white community in a racial sense, but just as much considers the socio-economic backgrounds of any individuals involved (hooks 2000: 5-8).

As established via O'Hara's class-based theory, although the Lyon family can be viewed as subordinate-class subjects who hold "signs of power" (O'Hara 417), they are not perceived as equals to the dominant class and therefore hold no real, substantial class privilege per sé

(O'Hara 309-409). Nevertheless, the Lyon family lives a fairly secure professional and home life which would suggest that they are not exposed to conflicts with the police or law enforcement to the same extent that lower class people of color are. In the first season however, both Cookie and Lucious are continuously either followed or questioned by the police and entangled in crime investigations. This may, at first glance, be tied to U.S. society's internalized racism which tends to victimize people of color more than white people. However, this claim is flawed in various regards. Lucious, for example, is not unjustly criminalized in *Empire*. He murders and heavily injures several people and commits numerous instances of fraud, justifying his run-ins with the police. Therefore, his arrests or interrogations cannot be viewed as solely race-class biased but rather as individual and unique cases of police investigation, non-representative of the de facto problem of mass incarceration of people of color. Secondly, Cookie Lyon, who appears to be continuously followed by the police, despite having fully completed her prison sentence, is not confronted by the authorities due to their suspicion of potential crimes of hers from the present. The reason behind the Federal Bureau of Investigation watching over her is in fact rooted in the past in "the streets" (Cookie S01/E01). She is regarded as a valuable witness in a major FBI case and therefore constantly contacted by the authorities and coerced into admitting to past crimes which help solve further cases which are connected to Cookie's criminal past. This makes Cookie a multi-dimensional character who remains caught between her lower-class past and her wealthy, subordinate-class life in the present.

Another aspect of the race-class bias is the divide within the black community itself, which has been evident for many decades, according to hooks (2000: 91). Particularly in the 1950s, a time of segregation and overt racism being weaved into U.S. American law, hooks points out that people of color who were in a more fortunate socio-economic position strived to be viewed as separate from those who lived in poverty and lower social spheres (hooks 2000: 91). Although many decades and successful civil rights movements lie between the fifties and contemporary U.S. American society, hooks' analysis of the past contributes a vital part to the understanding of existing power dynamics within the black community of contemporary U.S. society. People of color who managed to build stable lives for themselves in the racist society of the 1950s allegedly "enjoyed their role as mediators between the black masses and the white folk who were really in charge" (hooks 2000: 91). hooks also adds that a large part of the so-called "black bourgeoisie" (hooks 2000: 91) depended on other people of color to

remain in the lower classes of society in order for the former to pride themselves in being one of the very few who have achieved such accomplishments. This notion of the so-called “black bourgeoisie” (hooks 91) of the fifties can be found in *Empire*, whenever the Lyon family finds itself mediating between their largely black audience and the white-dominated mass media. For example, as previously discussed, Lucious alters his language once he speaks on live television and aims to please the predominantly white audience in episode two, “I got to go on white TV and try and talk in a way that don’t frighten these folks to death” (S01/E02). In this scene, he explains to Cookie that he must defend the reputation of so-called “black music” to white skeptics. However, he must do so in a very mitigated manner. This form of hedging and softening one’s languages ties in with hooks’ description of the “black bourgeoisie” (hooks 2000: 91) who mediate between black and white communities. Although the more fortunate members of the black community hold more power than the black working class, they also carry the burden of having to adopt white mannerisms in order to please the masses in a questionable society which rewards a such “assimilation”.

In his father’s mind, André Lyon matches hooks’ description of the “black bourgeoisie” (hooks 2000: 91) to a certain extent. Not only has André gained respect and admiration from his white peers by graduating from a respectable university, he has also found love and partnership in a white woman, Rhonda. Going back to O’Hara’s class theory, André’s university degree and structured lifestyle can be interpreted as “signs of power” (O’Hara 417), held by a subordinate-class subject, i.e. André. Lucious, however, knows that André’s “signs of power” (O’Hara 417) are merely symbolic but not substantial. From this knowledge, his frustration with the unjust system and André’s naiveté stems.

4.2. Veiled Frontiers: Lucious vs. Rhonda

Lucious moreover does not approve of André and Rhonda’s marriage, as he clearly indicates in the eighth episode, “The moment you brought that white woman into my house, I knew I could not trust you. I knew that you didn’t want to be part of my family” (S01/E08). By emphasizing Rhonda’s race, Lucious shows that the interraciality of his son’s relationship is the main reason for his disappointment. André then alleges that the true reason for his father not loving him is because he went to college to obtain a degree rather than working as an artist. Again, the notion of O’Hara’s “signs of power” (417) can be applied to analyze this

scene. André understands that Lucious does not value his “signs of power” (O’Hara 417) but would, perhaps, rather value signs of freedom of expression. By devoting his life to art rather than academia, André could express his supposed frustration with the system like his father, instead of co-signing it and working toward assimilation, which Lucious heavily criticizes. André claims that his desire to be accepted lead him to pursue an academic career, hoping it would result in a promising future at his father’s company. Angry and hurt, Lucious tells his son that the white community will never accept him as a person, “They will accept your money, Dré. But they will never accept your black ass. And I don’t give a damn how many white women you marry, they will never accept you” (S01/E08).

Lucious’ rejection of a white partner for his son may stem from his awareness of the historical divide between black and white women. By seeing his son choose a white partner, Lucious feels betrayed. André having a white wife entails potentially light-skinned children, who will not grow up to share Lucious’ distrust of white people, since they will have a white mother. Lucious’ disgust with the white community clearly is rooted in the decade-old oppression of people of color and therefore, procreating with the “enemy”, in a sense, makes André a traitor in his father’s eyes. Nancie Caraway explains that white women have historically been complicit in upholding the image of “white ‘ladyhood’” (90), which inherently portrayed black women as lesser than white ones. Although Lucious is by no means a feminist, he may disapprove of said white complacency, albeit not for the sake of showing solidarity to black women but for the sake of uplifting black people in general. By criticizing André for marrying a white woman, he is overtly showing his desire for a socially segregated society. In terms of business, Lucious has not been as opposed to interacting with whites. When it comes to expanding the family and perhaps even passing on family fortune to potentially half-white children, however, he becomes furious at the mere thought of it. This mentality becomes quite hypocritical when looking at Anika, his light-skinned girlfriend, who is the daughter of a white father herself. This inconsistency in Lucious’ thought process will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Apart from O’Hara’s work on class and the significance of “signs of power (O’Hara 417), Lucious’ talk with André can be analyzed through Du Bois’ theory on “double consciousness” (Itzigsohn, Brown 235-237). Although Du Bois’ work was conducted in the 20th century, underlying notions are still applicable in the 21st century, as the issue of structural racism in

U.S. America has not yet been overcome. By successfully finding overlaps between Lucious' mindset and Du Bois' work, an understanding of Lucious' refusal to accept André's path in life can be grasped. It is to be noted that Lucious' perpetuation of certain concepts does not mark them as inherently outdated or problematic, but rather that the link between Du Bois' work and Lucious' motivation emphasizes the family father's refusal to tolerate any underlying facets of white oppression so long as they do not benefit him in some business-related way or another.

Lucious attempts to convince André that the divide between black and white people is too inherent and strong to overcome, even after entering an interracial relationship. Du Bois' concept under consideration revolves around the central element of the veil, which symbolizes a distorted perception of people of color by white people (Itzigsohn, Brown 235-237). Itzigsohn and Brown define the veil as a fragment of the racialization of modernity: "The veil structures the lived experience, self-formation, and perception of the world for both racialized and racializing subjects. The invisibility of those [...] behind the veil means that there is no [...] mutual recognition or true communication between racializing and racialized subjects" (Lemert 1994 in Itzigsohn and Brown 237). Lucious is clearly aware of this veil existing for every member of a minority group, specifically black people, as he tells André that he will never reach a state of acceptance in the white community. Lucious believes that his own and his family's black experiences can never be understood or truly accepted by the white community due to an invisible barrier, which Du Bois refers to as the veil (Itzigsohn, Brown 235-237).

Itzigsohn and Brown elaborate on Du Bois' veil being a "one-way mirror" (235), which reflects the preconceived notions of black identities in white minds off from the surfaces of black bodies. Itzigsohn and Brown emphasize Du Bois' findings which claim that the veil is nearly impossible to penetrate, "Du Bois shows that no matter how clearly, articulately, or sincerely the people within the veil present themselves, the White world either does not hear, or completely misrecognizes what the people within the veil try to convey" (237). They furthermore compare "life behind the veil" (237) to a feeling of imprisonment and denied access to the "dominant world of Whites" (237) as equals (237). Having the power to distort the white community's view of the black community so starkly, Du Bois' veil does not appear to be able to be lifted, even by performing as members of the "black bourgeoisie" (hooks

2000: 91). Itzigsohn and Brown explain how no matter how much a minority may prove themselves to be worthy of recognition, they will ultimately never gain the full recognition which white people may obtain more easily through their white privilege. This ties in with Lucious' warning that André will never be accepted by the whites. Although he has worked hard to obtain an academic degree as well as a respectable position in his father's company, his father warns him that his efforts will never be sufficiently impressive to lift this veil of prejudice, so to say.

Next to the veil, Du Bois' concept of double consciousness hinges on the notions of "twoness" (Itzigsohn, Brown 233-237) and "second sight" (Itzigsohn, Brown 233-237). Twoness, as described by Du Bois, refers to the split of one's own self into several, different selves as "we may develop as many social selves as there are individuals that recognize us" (Itzigsohn, Brown 233). Second sight refers to the worldview which black individuals allegedly adapt to, as they can only look at themselves through the subjective truths of the other, dominant world (233). This "forces the Black subject [...] to contend with their constant dehumanization, but [it also allows them] to glance into the White world, creating the possibility of neutralizing the mirroring effects of the veil" (Itzigsohn, Brown 236). Lucious accuses André of attempting to do the latter in vain (S01/E08).

4.3. Colorism: Anika vs. Cookie

The fact that Lucious so vehemently rejects a white woman as his daughter in law becomes an interesting point of analysis, when taking a closer look at his own fiancée's, Anika Calhoun's, ethnicity and socio-economic background. Anika is a woman of color with parents of two different ethnic backgrounds. Her father is white, her mother black and both appear to come from quite privileged backgrounds, class-wise. When Anika meets Cookie, she immediately recognizes the mother of three as Lucious' former love interest and thus, as a potential competitor. She belittles and degrades Cookie and emphasizes the large socio-economic difference between them to clearly distance herself from Cookie as her superior.

In the third episode of season three, Anika tells Cookie that her father is a doctor, her mother is a debutante, and so was she herself, and alleges that Cookie would not even know what a debutante was, since she was merely a newly released felon (S01/E03). To this, Cookie

responds with her definition of a debutante being “a bougie hoe with a lot of money” (S01/E03). To show that she does not feel irked by Cookie’s words, Anika adds, “A hoe, who can slice your throat without even disturbing her pearls” (S01/E03). This dialogue illustrates Cookie’s disregard for outward displays of privilege or wealth, but also Anika’s surprising threat to become violent, despite performing as a rather composed and stereotypical “lady”. Nevertheless, her remarks suggest that she, unlike Cookie, would remain poised, even whilst physically assaulting her opponent. Anika condescendingly illustrates this difference because she wants to avoid sharing any similarities with Cookie out of fear it may down-scale her social status. Therefore, even in a belligerent setting, involving a physical fight between the two, Anika claims there would still be an inherent difference between the two of them.

The visual components of the scene where Anika talks down to Cookie underline the different worlds, the two women come from. Anika is wearing a silver dress with a v-shaped décolleté, which covers her shoulders and the upper part of her upper arms. Her earrings are large triangular stones, framed with smaller crystalline gems. Her hair is kept very short and styled in a way which is reminiscent of the 1920’s wave. Her lips are painted in red, contrasting to her lighter skin tone. Cookie on the other hand is wearing a green and black dress, which only slightly covers one of her shoulders. Her hair is long and open, styled in voluminous waves. Her shoes are covered in what looks like a sea of rhinestones and her evening clutch resembles a blue, furry box. At first glance, the two women may both be styled similarly extravagantly for the occasion of a big family dinner, but their appearances do differ significantly. Anika’s dress is more conservative than Cookie’s in the sense that her shoulders and upper arms are mostly covered, whereas the latter’s dress only hangs off from one of her shoulders and exposes the entirety of Cookie’s arms. Anika’s hair style is also rather retro-esque, whilst Cookie’s long waves are a popular style in contemporary times. The choice of hairdo for Anika in this scene is remarkable, as it is one of the most well-known hairstyles, associated with the era, starting at around 1920. This choice can be read in ambiguous ways, when considering the civil rights circumstances of the Twenties and the particularly problematic aspect of the lack of intersectionality in feminist movements, such as the Suffragists and Suffragettes.

Although a short, wavy haircut symbolized freedom and emancipation for the women, particularly in France, in the 1920s (Roberts 659-662), the era associated with it did not uplift women of color the same way it did white women (Marilley 159). In the years preceding the

1920s, the Suffragette movement had already committed exclusionary and offensive acts toward non-white and working-class women. What Marilley refers to as “suffragist nativism and racism” (202) entailed, for example, the perpetuation of stereotypes of Asian women (180) and a disregard for the political voices of African-American women (178). Marilley explains that the white feminists worried about “the loss of their white southern contingent more than the anger of African-American women” (178). Furthermore, the upper-class, white forerunners of the Suffragettes appropriated parts of the history of slavery to describe their own political struggle of the time: “[An] issue of protection for women united suffragists across region and ideology: prostitution, which white elite women labeled ‘white slavery’” (Marilley 202). Therefore, the early feminist movement can be regarded as highly problematic in terms of its lack of inclusivity and intersectionality and its refusal to give up certain political achievements in favor of fighting for a more diverse crowd of women. Because the Twenties and their preceding years did not stand for intersectional feminism, Anika’s hairstyle in *Empire* can be read as a symbol for her classist mindset, which shines through when she belittles Cookie for not knowing what a debutante is (S01/E03). Additionally, it must be noted that Anika is a rather light-skinned woman of color in comparison to Cookie, which is also of significance when considering the issue of colorism and Lucious’ disdain for white people.

The fact that Lucious desires to re-marry Anika, a light-skinned woman of color who has a white father, deems his rejection of interracial relationships, such as Rhonda and André’s, questionable and quite hypocritical. It furthermore provides further ground for analysis of the series in a colorist context. Dixon and Telles discern between various definitions of colorism, of which the following is most relevant to this analysis:

“Scholars of the West often trace light-skin color preferences, sometimes called colorism, to the origins of race and racism associated with European colonization, Western slavery, and white supremacy” (406).

Wilder and Caine argue that “maternal family members serve as the source of identity construction” (586) when it comes to questions of race and ethnicity, particularly in mixed-race women (586). This ties in with Anika’s overall self-identification as a woman of color. Cookie is never alleged to be of mixed descent and clearly identifies as a proud black woman. Anika and Cookie therefore, broadly speaking, are categorized within the same race. However, within this generalized group, differences in skin tones can gravely shape interpersonal

relationships within the black community in ways which can be observed in Anika and Cookie's interactions.

Anika definitely has a strong tie to the black community through Lucious', who does not like to socialize with white people outside of the business-sphere. However, since she is half-white and largely associates with whites in more privileged circles, she may also project negative perceptions of dark-skinned women onto Cookie, leading her to treat her poorly. Not only is Cookie darker-skinned than Anika, she also represents an entirely different social sphere. Obviously, the main trigger for Anika's on-going brawl with Cookie is the fact that the two women are attracted to the same man, however, subtle notions of colorism are evident since Anika and Cookie primarily ridicule one another with colorist insults. Therefore, Anika's condescending behaviors toward Cookie are rooted in classism, colorism as well as in their personal feud, i.e. the scramble for Lucious' attention.

Cookie repeatedly emphasizes Anika's lighter skin tone with cynical comments when talking to Lucious. For example, she refers to Anika as Lucious' "little Halle Berry" (S01/E01) in the very first episode. Such snide comments set the tone for an on-going competition between the two women throughout the first season. By using the possessive pronoun "your" (Cookie, S01/E01) as well as the term "little" (Cookie, S01/E01) in combination with the name of a famous light-skinned actress, Cookie strips Anika of independence and individuality. Calling Anika 'little' is a form of ridicule which suggests she is a naïve, mere play-thing for Lucious and no serious competition for Cookie. Moreover, alluding to Halle Berry infers that Anika is a minor copy of another light-skinned person and has no personality of her own to offer. The on-going bickering between Cookie and Anika is a form of social commentary which holds up a mirror to contemporary U.S. society, demonstrating how colorism is counteracting any attempts of uniting women in the black community.

When Cookie attacks Anika in a colorist way, she does so by drawing attention to her "white" traits in a negative light. For instance, in the second episode, Anika scolds Cookie for being rude to Lucious, to which Cookie replies, "No more rude than that anchorwoman-haircut [on top of] your head" (S01/E02). By calling Anika's hairstyle an "anchorwoman-haircut", Cookie is exposing Anika's appearance as inauthentic and performative. Furthermore, anchorwomen are predominantly and stereotypically white in major contemporary U.S. news programs (Poindexter et al 2003 quoted in Owens 9), which moreover gives Cookie's statement a colorist

touch. By claiming that Anika's "white" hair-style is offensive to her, a dark-skinned woman, Cookie is indirectly saying two things: Firstly, Anika's hair-style is a poor imitation of white women's hair and thus a failed attempt at emphasizing her white roots. Secondly, the fact that Anika is wearing a hairstyle predominantly worn by anchorwomen, who are stereotypically white, is offensive to the black community, since it perpetuates the idea that black women have to alter their natural hair to look more assimilated. To Cookie, an anchorwoman not only represents the white community but also a person in power who shapes public opinion. Inferring from Cookie's apparent attitudes toward anchorwomen, it can be inferred that she does not agree with the way people in the media portray people of color. Remaining on the topic of media and speakers on the news, another representative of mass media plays a minor, yet highly interesting role in *Empire*. In the second season, a prominent news anchor from real life plays himself on the fictional television series.

4.4. Don Lemon – Assimilating to Internalized Racism?

In the first episode of *Empire*'s second season, a brief interlocution between Cookie and a news reporter is shown, which appears to allude to two real-life-events between 2014 and 2015. In summary, Cookie and her assistant, Porsha, are making their way through a crowd at a Lyon-hosted concert when a news reporter stops them in hope of getting a chance to interview Cookie. When Porsha recognizes the reporter as someone who recently caused public outrage by making offensive comments about the 2014 protests in Ferguson (Selby 1+), she declines his request. Cookie is irritated by Porsha overreacting and tells the reporter, "Don, I'ma take care of you but I have to look for my artists, okay?" (SE02 E01). She then adds, "And you did good in Ferguson, brother" (SE02 E01).

In order to analyze this brief scene, one has to recognize the news reporter as a guest-star who is playing himself on *Empire*. CNN anchor, Don Lemon, is the man who is criticized by Porsha for what he "did out there in [Ferguson]" (Porsha, SE02 E01). Once again, the boundaries of fact and fiction are blurred when a man who was involved in medial outrage in real life plays himself in a fictional plot. In 2014, Lemon reported on the situation in Ferguson and its surrounding suburbs for the news channel CNN, when protesters took to the streets to revolt against a grand jury's decision not to penalize a white police officer for shooting the young, unarmed, black Michael Brown earlier that year (Selby 1+). As Lemon went on air to

narrate the scenes in Ferguson as they were unravelling, he described groups of people standing on cars and comments that “obviously there’s a smell of marijuana in the air as well” (Pollard via Youtube 2014). The word ‘obviously’ sparked mass outrage, as it suggests that protests led by predominantly black people would entail the consumption of consciousness-altering substances. Lemon’s utterance therefore generalizes an entire group of people as drug-users, negatively influencing his viewers’ perception of the protesters, who wanted to bring light to racial injustice.

Lemon’s “culturally insensitive” (Selby 1+) choice of words caused even greater disappointment throughout the black community, seeing as the news reporter himself is a black man. This notion of betrayal can be interpreted with the help of hooks’ concept of the “black bourgeoisie” (2000: 91). Reminiscing of the socio-political circumstances of the 1950s, hooks writes that “black folks with relative class power [...] enjoyed their role as mediators between the black masses and the white folks who were really in charge. They openly espoused contempt for less-privileged black folks [...]” (91). Despite hooks’ description of the divide between less and more fortunate black people dating back to the mid-20th century, Lemon’s, perhaps Freudian, slip demonstrates how the social gap between struggling people of color and better established black individuals is still noticeable in contemporary times. Being a news anchor, Lemon indeed fits hooks’ description of the mediator, as he literally presents news regarding black people to a largely white audience in a language they would be familiar with. Unlike the bourgeoisie people of color of the 1950s who “openly” (hooks 2000: 91) displayed their discontent with the lower class black majority (hooks 2000: 91), Lemon does not appear to have malicious intent or a discriminatory agenda when uttering the rather ignorant comment.

As Lemon comments on the scenes in Ferguson on live television, he appears to view the protesters with a cause from an external perspective. Although this may showcase his level of professionalism as a journalist, his spontaneous vocabulary suggests otherwise. Supposedly objective figures using subjective adverbs, such as “obviously”, have the power to shape an audience’s worldview. If Lemon states that it is obvious that a group of black protesters will be under the influence of marijuana, his viewers might internalize these stereotypical generalizations. The fact that he can distance himself from the protesters to such a large extent that such vocabulary comes naturally to him hints at the class divide in the black

community being directly tied to the issue of racism in U.S. America, as previously explained by hooks (90-95). Rather than focusing on the political agenda of the protesters, Lemon concentrates on them as a group of people whom the reporter usually would not interact with in everyday life, since he and them consort in two different socio-economic backgrounds. In a way, he is observing them as the Other from an outsider's perspective along with the viewers who are not on location with the protesters and who most likely also perceive the rioting groups as a form of the Other, a concept established by Bhaba (74). Lemon has adopted a biased gaze onto less fortunate people of color and casually reiterates stereotypes of blackness in a nonchalant way, therefore demonstrating an Othering process. Although Bhaba discusses the concept of the Other in terms of the white gaze onto minority groups in general, his theory can nevertheless be applied to Lemon's slip of the tongue because it shows a form of distancing oneself from a people and furthermore, generalizing them according to stereotypes (74).

In light of the outrage surrounding Lemon's judgmental vocabulary, hooks' words on assimilation as a strategy of survival in a bigoted world are of relevance. She explains how "[i]n large and small ways middle-class, upper-class, and wealthy black people can create lifestyles that enable them to minimize contact with harsh racism" (hooks 2000: 95). As a means of escaping the heavy weight of undiscerning racism, hooks names assimilation as a strategy of the more privileged black elite "to deflect harsh racism away from them and onto 'other' blacks" (95). Arguably, Don Lemon once more fits the description of the "black bourgeoisie" (hooks 2000: 91) as he represents the successful, assimilated black elite. Working for CNN, he earns a respectable living as an anchorman and has managed to become a recognized voice on U.S. television. Therefore, Lemon definitely possess a level of power and influence in U.S. American society, which discerns him from the less fortunate black community.

hooks moreover illustrates how the allegedly "assimilated" black minority may have internalized a level of class bias and therefore think of racism as an issue which the lower-class blacks are meant to be faced with, rather than a problem which impacts U.S. society as a whole (95). Considering the notion of assimilation, however, the fact that a black man's economic success in U.S. America appears to be equated to assimilating to a white-washed lifestyle is partially problematic in and of itself. By claiming that black members of the upper class would assimilate to the white community by fulfilling expectations of allegedly white careers, it is

implied that certain occupations and life choices were a distinct aspect of white identities. Although the assumption that black individuals who achieve a certain status or rank in society do so as an act of assimilation, thereby losing parts of their non-assimilated identity, may be problematic, hooks' underlying argument successfully exposes the issue of the black upper class feeling entitled to more social justice than lower-class black people. Whilst it goes without saying that the entirety of the black community has the right to feel entitled to social justice and fight for it, hooks reveals the class-specific phenomenon of more fortunate people of color being enraged when faced with discrimination and unfair treatment: "[...] class privilege does not mean that well-off blacks will not suffer racial assault, and it enrages them" (95). hooks' wording implies that it is not the assault based on racial discrimination alone that offends the more fortunate people of color, but the fact that they are assaulted despite their high social rank. This mindset is problematic in the sense that it views a high social status as a legitimate protection from acts of racism, when, in reality, people of color from any class should not have to suffer from discrimination. In Don Lemon's case, he does not appear to expect more social justice than less fortunate people of color, but he does view the latter from a classist perspective. Associating the consumption of marijuana with black people protesting on the streets is a mindset which could be assumed to be typically perpetuated by white-supremacist conservatives and, as hooks points out, shows that "[a]lliance to [...] class interests usually supersedes racial solidarity" (hooks 2000: 96).

Even if Lemon did not intend to harm the black community by perpetuating black stereotypes, he appears to have subconsciously assimilated to a harmful worldview that separates more fortunate blacks from lower-class blacks rather than uniting them despite their different economic backgrounds. This would tie in with hooks' claim that assimilation can be a helpful strategy of black upper-class citizens to avoid acts of racism committed against them, since Lemon's adaptation of subversively racist language choices positions him in a different category than the black protesters in the eye of the white gaze (hooks 2000: 90-96). The threat in Lemon's assimilation to subconscious prejudice is commented on in *Empire* by Porsha, who represents the black community which feels betrayed by a man of color perpetuating stereotypes of the lower-class black community.

Cookie, on the other hand, reassures Lemon by telling him he did in fact do a good job on reporting about the Ferguson protests. She also calls him "brother" which symbolizes a

communal bond between them and shows Lemon that he is still seen as a valuable member of the black community, despite his hazardous faux pas. Cookie's use of the term "brother" to reassure Lemon can be analyzed by applying John Ogbu's theory on "collective identity" (153) which explains how shared experiences between individuals can shape their communities (153). Cookie includes Lemon in her "collective identity" (153), as she recognizes him as a man of color who, just like her, has achieved a high social rank in U.S. society, by being a well-known news anchor. Cookie and Don Lemon are both minorities in a problematic and racist system. They also recognize one another's success stories, as they are both somewhat public figures and live comfortably due to their growing careers. This is another layer of the "collective identity" (Ogbu 153) between Cookie and Lemon which excludes people such as Porsha from their shared experiences. Although Porsha works for the successful Cookie Lyon, her position is merely that of an assistant and thus does not qualify her to be recognized as as successful as Cookie or Lemon. This point of analysis is interesting when going back to the scene under analysis, wherein Porsha criticizes Lemon, but Cookie does not. Porsha, who represents the less powerful black community, openly critiques the news anchor for slandering the black protesters and therefore misrepresenting the image of people of color who are dissatisfied with the political situation in contemporary U.S.A. Cookie, who holds a higher status of power in society than Porsha, prioritizes her positive relationship to the reputable news anchor and quite literally pats him on the back. Therefore, the "collective identity" (Ogbu 153) between Don Lemon and Cookie Lyon is not only one that revolves around their experiences as black individuals in contemporary U.S. America, it also encompasses their social status. Cookie and Lemon recognize one another as more fortunate people of color and respect one another for their personal success stories, thereby readily forgiving any faux pas they make for the sake of securing their benevolent relationship and elevated standing in society.

5. Identity Constructs of Blackness on Television

5.1. Cultivation Theory

In *Empire*, the main characters represent diverse individuals who struggle with different challenges or uphold opposing political beliefs, despite belonging to the same umbrella community. Both their similarities and differences are illustrated via verbal as well as visual

forms of expression. For example, a sense of unity within the black community in the United States is conveyed firstly, verbally through the usage of specific vocabulary and secondly, visually via other mannerisms which the audience can immediately identify as something exclusive to a certain community. Likewise, the very individual struggles of characters such as André Lyon, who is diagnosed with a bi-polar disorder, or Jamal Lyon, who faces physical as well as mental abuse for being homosexual, are highlighted in the series and clearly demonstrate how different certain shaping experiences can be for people of the same ethnicity. Both subtle as well as more overt forms of expression can be analysed through the framework of Gerbner and Gross' cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross 174-178).

Gerbner and Gross' cultivation theory presupposes that television content is the major influence of story-telling in U.S. America. Based on this premise, it is suggested that a high extent of exposure to television content will impact the audience in such a way that it will internalize what is displayed on the screen as a true representation of reality (Gerbner, Gross 1976 in Adams-Bass, Stevenson, Slaughter Kotzin 369). Adams-Bass, Stevenson and Slaughter Kotzin note that cultivation theory does not only consider the internalization of suggested truths about one group in society by another, it also highlights the fact that younger viewers are particularly prone to internalizing what is presented on television as accurate expectations of their own behavior in society (370). This ties in with Tukachinsky, Mastro and Yarchi's study about the effects of stereotypes existing about minority groups perpetuated in prime-time television. Tukachinsky, Mastro and Yarchi state that television series which feature "recurring characters" (539) provide grounds for the identification of the viewers with the fictional characters on screen. Following a character's development over the course of several episodes, or seasons even, reinforces a feeling of being directly connected to said character. A viewer's identification with a television series' protagonist can positively or negatively affect the viewer, depending on how said protagonist is portrayed (Tukachinsky, Mastro, Yarchi 539). This aligns with Kimberlé Crenshaw's statement that stereotypes can become harmful generalizations when mistaken for accurate representations of authentic identities (1293). Such parasocial connections, meaning the one-sided relationships between audience and fictional characters, are especially interesting to bear in mind, when analysing the very different character traits of protagonists who share the same race and gender, but struggle with different social phenomena and forms of discrimination, such as toxic masculinity or homophobia, for instance.

bell hooks explains that a fair representation of black complexity and diversity has not yet been implemented in contemporary television programs. She warns that the perpetuation of age-old, racist stereotypes contributes to upholding a white supremacist society and the development of internalized racism in the black community:

“Opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy. Those images may be constructed by white people who have not divested of racism, or by people of color/ black people who may see the world through the lens of white supremacy – internalized racism [...] Theorizing black experience in the United States is a difficult task. Socialized within white supremacist educational systems and by a racist mass media, many black people are convinced that our lives are not complex, and are therefore unworthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection” (2014: 1-2).

Understanding the significance of the way black characters are portrayed on the screen is highly important for the analysis of selected tropes in contemporary television. Themes ranging from homophobia in the black community as well as the notion of kinship and self-identification through names and hair-styles are analyzed in both primary texts, using an array of selected secondary literature, such as Ogbu’s concept of “collective identity” (153), for support.

5.2. “Brothers” and Collective Identities

Lucious Lyon represents another constructed facet of black identity, since he is a successful entrepreneur who, despite his fame and fortune, has to be weary of racism in 21st century U.S. America. Throughout the first season of *Empire*, Lucious demonstrates different behaviors, which he adopts, depending on the individuals he is dealing with in the present moment. When conversing with other black individuals, Lucious uses a slightly different register than when interacting with whites. The mannerisms and vocabulary Lucious uses when he finds himself in the company of fellow people of color can be analysed through the framework of John Ogbu’s concept of “collective identity” (153). On television, such shared mannerisms and familiar vocabulary can make fictional characters appeal more authentic to an audience who uses similar, if not identical, means of peer-to-peer communication.

In the third episode of season one, for example, Lucious Lyon is questioned by a police detective, who is also black. The detective greets Lucious and immediately adds that he is Lucious' "biggest fan" (S01/E03). This very personal piece of information is completely irrelevant and inappropriate in the serious and formal situation, as Lucious is about to be questioned regarding a murder case. Since the detective on duty cannot contain his appreciation for Lucious as an artist of celebrity status, two possible assumptions can be made from his utterance: Either the police detective is truly excited to meet a long-time idol of his and therefore disregards a necessary level of professional distance, or the detective is strategically using a more intimate segue into the conversation in order for Lucious to feel less alert and suspicious around an apparently benevolent person of authority.

Before discussing the more serious issue at hand, Lucious briefly responds to the police detective's unexpected expression of appreciation. He does so in a highly interesting manner, which encompasses both intimacy and of formal distance: "I appreciate that, bro. Have a seat, detective" (S01/E03), he says. This response can be divided into two parts of firstly, informal language and secondly, formal language. Lucious starts by verbally stating his appreciation for the police detective's expression of admiration for him and refers to him as his "bro" (S01/E03), short for "brother". This marker of kinship immediately establishes an extremely close and meaningful bond between the two men. Lucious is both acknowledging the detective's racial background and reminding him of the fact that they belong to the same minority group. In the second part of his response, Lucious demonstrates his awareness of the professional and authoritative distance between them both by calling his interlocutor "detective" (S01/E03).

The brief moment of fraternal familiarity is moreover emphasized with physical contact between the two men. When Lucious tells the detective that he appreciates the praise, the two shake hands. The handshake appears to come very naturally and does not look like a mere, stiff act of formality. The level of intimacy between Lucious and the detective increases, when the former seals the handshake as an act of appreciation by putting his other hand on top of the interlocked hands. By placing his hand on the detectives', which is already shaking Lucious' other hand, Lucious signals an ambiguous message. On one hand, covering the handshake with his second hand symbolizes a pact of trust which Lucious seals by holding one hand over their physical connection. He so to say recognizes this bond as such and, what is

more, adds emphasis to it with his extra gesture. The second meaning Lucious conveys is not as brotherly, however. By using his second hand to cover the already-existing handshake, he disturbs the power dynamic's equilibrium. The handshake, which was balanced out, is now uneven, since Lucious literally has the upper hand. He, so to say, dominates the physical connection between himself and the detective, albeit if only for an extremely short moment. This covert scramble for power in a tense situation shows how uneasy the detective makes Lucious feel and so, he must exert his dominance, subtly yet noticeably.

By belonging to the same minority and most likely having experienced the effects of racism in U.S. society first-hand, Lucious and the police detective acknowledge their "collective identity" (Ogbu 153) when they first meet. According to Ogbu, "[m]embers of a minority group construct their collective identity out of their collective historical experience" (153), which is the case for Lucious as well as the black police detective, since they are both challenged with U.S. society's internalized racism, rooted in the country's past. Another trait the police detective and Lucious have in common is their respectable position in society. Whilst the police detective has achieved an honourable position in society, Lucious has inspired countless fans and followers with his music and personal story of black struggles.

Although Lucious and the detective appear to be authoritative citizens of the United States of America in their own rights, their non-white appearance and the country's history with systematic racism have shaped the black individuals' perception of themselves and others. Therefore, the notion of sharing a "collective identity" (Ogbu 153) unites members of the black community in an abstract, non-tangible safe space. By referring to one another as "brothers", black males acknowledge their communal bond by constructing a feeling of family and kinship between them. Tony Laing uses Franklin's definition of brotherhood to refer to the phenomenon as "a community of men who are connected through common experiences, understandings, traditions, and identities that have shaped [behaviours] associated with interactions among males" (Franklin in Laing 173). Such shared experiences between Lucious and the police detective might range from micro-aggressions to racially motivated violence toward them, and the shared "understandings" (173), as phrased by Laing, might include presupposed, shared knowledge, such as that of the black community's struggles.

Particularly in a situation wherein a black male is confronted by the police, an awareness for the frequency of black male arrests in the United States is of the essence. In a 2013 article by

Bryan Warde, he states that it is irrefutably evident “that [...] in the USA, black men, particularly those from economically disadvantaged urban communities, are disproportionately represented at all levels of the criminal justice system” (461). Warde explains how methods used by the police, such as racial profiling or “targeting young black men” (464), are justified in urban settings. Reasons that allegedly justify such “criminal justice policies” (Warde 464) include society’s fear of gang wars, drug dealing and overall criminal energy (Warde 464). This tendency of U.S. police to be increasingly suspicious of black males in particular has lead Mauer to predict that one in three black males will face time in prison in their lifetime (88S). As a frame of reference, Mauer compares this statistic for black incarceration with an in relation lower number of one in seventeen white males who will be sentenced to time in prison (88S). Perhaps bearing these statistics in mind, the black police detective in *Empire*’s third episode immediately creates a more comfortable atmosphere for Lucious Lyon. Knowing just how tense and dangerous an encounter with the police can be for a black male, the black police detective may intend to show Lucious that he respects and admires him as an individual, rather than viewing him as one of many black, nameless suspects.

5.3. The Significance of Hair and Names

In *Dear White People* and *Empire*, another theme which is often explored for comic relief revolves around the protagonists’ hair. Mostly, in scenes focusing on someone’s hair, a black female is commenting on another woman of color’s hairstyle. Such comments convey more than mere, subjective opinions on overt appearances. As Kiuchi states, “Historically, hair is of importance to all members of the Black [community], but more so to Black women” (2016: 325). She explains the history of black hair styles and their meaning for West African societies of the fifteenth century, for instance, as they expressed marital status, religious beliefs, social rank and other socio-cultural traits of a black woman (Kiuchi 2016: 325). Kiuchi notes that these societies “are the black bodies that filled slave ships [and] the same individuals that gave birth to the first generation of American-born Blacks” (2016: 325). Over the past decades, Kiuchi describes how Caucasian-looking hair has been perpetuated as more aesthetically pleasing, which resulted in the trend of women of color straightening their hair (2016: 326). However, people of color have also started to recognize this straight-hair bias as a “popular

racist societal opinion” (Kiuchi 2016: 326) and increasingly motivate one another to keep their hair natural and chemical-free (2016: 325-326). In the analysis of the symbolic value of hair in *Dear White People*, names are attributed equal significance since they convey similar, if not identical, connotations.

In *Dear White People*, the meaning of hair is introduced by a scene which shows how similar connotations to those which are linked to hair also exist for names. The first episode illustrates how tense relationships between two characters can become when fuelled by comments on their names and hairstyles. In a specific scene, where various unions of black students meet on campus, two former friends, Sam and Coco, verbally battle and try to humiliate each other in front of their peers. Sam introduces some of the students to the new campus journalist and when she mentions the student union Coco is in, called CORE, Coco introduces herself as “Coco, CORE’S new treasurer” (S01/E01). Sam immediately adds that ‘Coco’ is an abbreviation for the name Colandrea, “C-O-L-A-N-D-R-E-A. For accuracy” (Sam White, S01/E01). After spelling out Coco’s unabbreviated name, Sam laughs maliciously as she is aware that she is exposing Coco’s full first name which may hold negative connotations. Names similar to ‘Colandrea’ have been viewed as stereotypically “black” names in contemporary pop culture. Because of this widely known fact, Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan even conducted a field study to investigate whether employers discriminated against job applicants whose names sounded “black”. The study carries the title “Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal?” (Bertrand, Mullainathan 1991), which already mentions examples for white- versus black-sounding names. “Colandrea” would, similarly to “Lakisha”, be regarded as a non-white, and therefore unusual in a white-dominated society, name and more prone to discrimination (1991). Sam directly attacks Coco’s vulnerability, which is her name, by spelling it out letter for letter to emphasize its lengthiness and uncommonness. This malicious act of humiliation becomes even more severe when considering how generic Sam’s full name, Samantha White, sounds. The fact that her last name is “White” becomes almost ironic when analysing the manner in which Sam uses stereotypes against black individuals to tear down a fellow black female peer.

Coco’s preferred nickname and her full first name stand in direct opposition to one another. Whereas “Colandrea” is associated with a societally constructed race, “Coco” is short and perhaps almost endearing. Furthermore, “Coco” can also be connotated with the late French

fashion designer, Coco Chanel, who stands for elegance, luxury and thus, also for an image of the upper class. In a neo-colonial context, the juxtaposition of the French-connoted “Coco” and the African-American-connoted “Colandrea” can be read as even more striking, as France has a history of imperialism and colonizing African countries. By preferring the shortened form, Coco is rejecting her true name for reasons of embarrassment or fear of discrimination and uses a sort of nominal camouflage to hide certain parts of her identity and adopt other connotations which she feels suit her better. Indeed, Coco dresses rather fashion-consciously, as she is wearing a dress of an extravagant cut with a golden zipper running along its frontside. Her accessories are gold-toned and very attention-grabbing. Her necklace, for example is a large, golden statement piece and her wrist are cuffed in several thick, golden bangles. Her upper-class status is manifested in her decadent jewellery, which suggests that Coco tries her utmost to demonstrate her status, outwardly.

Coco’s outfit provides a stark contrast to Sam’s, which mainly consists of a black top, a camouflage jacket, destroyed denim jeans and silver jewellery. The silver accessories are less decadent than Coco’s, more geometric in shape and less intricate in design. The simplicity of Sam’s jewellery matches her casual attire, which has a rebellious air to it as well. Her destroyed jeans, for example, symbolize disruption, rage and protest as she is wearing them in the extravagant halls of the pristine, elite Winchester College. Her camouflage-patterned jacket too suggests a degree of belligerence or Sam’s readiness to fight the status quo. Unlike Coco, who is wearing her hair in open, loose waves, Sam is wearing her hair tightly braided on her head. When Sam mocks Coco’s name, Coco strikes back with a comment on Sam’s hair style, “Don’t do it, boo. Not with that mess atop your head, you like to pass off as ‘natural’” (Coco, S01/E01). Here, Coco is identifying and criticizing an alleged hypocrisy in Sam’s ideology and appearance. Sam carries herself as a grounded woman of color, who does not subscribe to fashion rules or standardized beauty norms. She wears little make-up and wears her presumably natural hair in braids. Coco however doubts that Sam’s hair is kept natural, which would imply that Sam is in fact subscribing to certain beauty standards which require her to change her hair to fit society’s expectations. Therefore, although Sam may appear to be quite different from Coco, the latter is alleging that Sam is quite guilty of the vices she criticizes in others (S01/E01).

The feud between Coco and Sam is rooted in the question of authenticity and a sort of pride to be part of the black community. Whilst Sam is a political activist who has anti-classist views, Coco values the prestige of her Ivy League education and readily associates with powerful decision-makers, such as the top donors of Winchester college. The major difference between the two women's core values is connected to their stances on classism, hierarchies, and individualism. Coco is more competitive than Sam in a career-oriented sense, whereas Sam focuses her passion on her radio show and other social engagements. Unlike Cookie and Anika from *Empire*, whose ongoing altercation is fuelled by their infatuation with the same man, Coco and Sam's bickering in *Dear White People* does not appear to be influenced by colorism. On the contrary, Sam, who is lighter-skinned, is more passionate about black rights than the darker-skinned Coco. Although the two students do provoke each other by commenting one another's hairstyles, their primary source for bickering are their opposing values regarding class.

5.4. Homophobia in the Black Community

Homophobia is an overt theme in *Empire* as well as in *Dear White People*, since the trope of homophobic black hypermasculinity is explored throughout the shows' respective first seasons. Whilst characters such as Lucious represent the homophobic black stereotype, characters such as Jamal from *Empire* or Lionel from *Dear White People* represent an intersectional minority of black homosexuals living in contemporary America. Jamal and Lionel not only face racial prejudice in U.S. society by being young, black men, they are also constantly ridiculed and discriminated against by their own family, mentors, or peers. An analysis of selected scenes in the two series will elaborate on how *Empire* features a greater level of black homophobia, whilst *Dear White People* merely hints at this being an inherent issue. Moreover, *Empire* is explained to be more graphic in its portrayal of instances of homophobia.

In order to conduct a queer reading of *Empire* and identify homophobic elements of the show as such, EL Kornegay's concept of "archetypal Otherness" (Kornegay 110) is applied as a theoretical framework. Kornegay argues that contemporary problems such as racism and homophobia go back to early colonialism (33). Therefore, a sort of postcolonial understanding of contemporary issues will set the tone for this analysis. However, instead of using the term

“postcolonial”, the term “neo-colonial” (Benshoff 253) will be chosen instead. In light of Harry Benshoff’s criticism of the former label, the latter appears more appropriate, since it does not imply a “moving past the colonial era” (Benshoff 253) but instead “suggests the ongoing and pervasive nature of colonialism via non-military means such as global corporate capitalism and/ or cultural imperialism” (253).

Kornegay suggests that black homophobia is rooted in the historic oppression of people of color and dates back to the era of colonialism, since anything deviating from the white norm used to be considered deviant and “grotesque” (Kornegay 33). Through the merging of two alienated groups, namely the black population as well as the homosexual community, a so-called “archetypal Other” (Kornegay 33) was created. According to Kornegay, “blackness seeks to overcome its otherness” (33) by adhering to standards prescribed by white supremacist ideals (33). However, when the otherness of homosexuality contributes to another layer of disapproval and rejection from a white-supremacist society to the already alienated blackness, “another more ‘normal’ pole to help it [overcome] its lack of a sexual ‘correctness’” (Kornegay 33) is required. Kornegay therefore diagnoses black homophobia as an existing fear in the black community of themselves being othered by the white community once more due to the non-heteronormative sexuality of some of their members, “[...] black homophobia expresses the fear of losing the ability to claim a normative identity and the frail stability that comes along with it” (33).

Kornegay’s theory on black homophobia can be expressed through an equation, whereby one element of otherness, namely blackness, added to another element of otherness, namely homosexuality, equals a sum of an unacceptable amount of otherness in the eyes of the white supremacist. By initially, solely representing one element of otherness which encompasses black appearance and culture and gradually reducing the amount of it, the black community has managed to gain a level of acceptance amongst white supremacists. This level of acceptance is referred to as “frail stability” (33) by Kornegay. By members of the black community coming out as gay or lesbian, the heterosexual black members worry they might lose “the ability to claim a normative identity” (Kornegay 33). Therefore, they view black homosexuality as a threat to their own well-being, i.e. a supposedly gradually improved image of theirs in a white supremacist society (33).

Kornegay warns that black homophobia will in no way help secure the fragile status of semi-accepted black people in a white-dominated society, but instead further perpetuate the myth that blackness is something abnormal (35): “Black homophobia sustains the subconscious belief of black abnormality, our 'archetypal otherness', and ensures that whiteness will remain a powerful hegemonic measure of normativity” (Kornegay 35). In order for the heterosexual black community to be liberated of white supremacy and oppression, the homosexual black community must be accepted by their non-homosexual peers. If heterosexual people of color do not have to fear being othered due to homosexual black individuals coming out as queer, they will not have to fear being othered due to being black, either (Kornegay 33-35).

In *Empire*, the black community's supposed problem with homophobia is immediately introduced within the first half of the pilot episode. Jamal is in conversation with his boyfriend Michael, talking about his father choosing one of the three sons to take over the successful company as his successor one day. Jamal remarks that Lucious “would never pick [him] anyway [due to] way too much homophobia in the black community” (S01/E01). Michael retorts that “it's 2015. There's football players coming out” (S01/E01) in an attempt to convince Jamal that the world is heading toward a more accepting future. The next scene is a flashback of Jamal's, as he thinks back to his childhood in poverty, before his family lived a life of fortune and fame. Although Michael tries to comfort him, Jamal's past, as illustrated by the flashback scene, shows that his emotional trauma is too severe to let him share his boyfriend's optimism.

The flashback scene takes place in a prison's visitors' area, where Jamal speaks to his incarcerated mother, Cookie. Young Jamal reports to his mother about schoolmates bullying him when Cookie says, “Listen to me, you're different [...] Mom knows. It's gonna make life hard for you sometimes but I want you to always remember I got you. You hear me?” (S01/E01). Cookie is clearly hinting at Jamal's deviation from the expectations of a heteronormative society which imposes conservative gender roles and heterosexuality onto its people. More importantly, she reassures Jamal that she will always support him no matter what and thereby takes a stand against the stereotypical trope of black homophobia. Unlike Jamal's father, Lucious, who later on proves to be truly homophobic, Cookie appears to be a supportive mother, regarding the acceptance of homosexuality in the black community.

When the flashback scene ends, Jamal is in a hurry to get dressed and hide Michael, who is semi-undressed, because Cookie appears at her son's door, unannounced. The first words Cookie utters to Jamal are "For a Queen, you do keep a messy place" (S01/E01). The term "Queen" (S01/E01) is meant to refer to Jamal's homosexuality and comes from an internally homophobic place since it undermines his masculinity and effeminates him, mockingly. Although Cookie was previously introduced as an accepting, supportive mother, she harbors residual aspects of homophobia under the guise of humor. The mother of three continues uttering internally homophobic remarks when Michael comes out from his place of hiding to greet her. Cookie smirks and tells Jamal that she "didn't know [Jamal] was dating a little Mexican. She's adorable" (S01/E01). By referring to Michael as a "little Mexican" (S01/E01) and by using the female pronoun, Cookie uses condescending language which most likely stems from her internalized homophobia and scarce experience with interacting with members of the queer community.

Although the usage of the female pronoun for cis-gendered gay males has been common in the queer community, the event of a straight individual doing so cannot be equated to the former scenario. Commonly referred to as "lavender linguistics" (Gill 1+), a certain language code within the queer community has evolved since the 1950s (Gill 1+). Lean and Boellstorff mention how prevalent the casual usage of language codes such as "queen" as well as other "effeminizing labels" (91) have been amongst gay men in the West. Language constructions only known to members of the queer community have been used to communicate in a secret register, established to prevent homophobic eavesdroppers from understanding LGBTQQA+ semantics, since decades. This construction of an own jargon within the specifically male homosexual community has provided the queer interlocutors with a linguistic safe space and to this day remains a crucial part of the history of the LGBTQQA+ community's history (Lean, Boellstorff 90-92). As all the more offensive can the utterance by Cookie be interpreted, since she does not use her language to create a safe space for the queer community, nor does she use it to empower them. On the contrary, Cookie expresses her own ignorance for the queer community's history by choosing her words rather carelessly. She is appropriating the queer community's register and doing so in an offensive context.

Cookie's former husband, Lucious, expresses his homophobia even more extremely than she does, in the first episode of *Empire*. A scene featuring Lucious and his son Jamal talking in an

office immediately reveals Lucious' opinion on the topic of homosexuality, "Your sexuality, son, that's a choice. You can choose to sleep with women if you want" (S01/E01). Lucious is trying to persuade Jamal to hide his alleged "choice" of sexuality from the public out of fear that his musical career may suffer from the public's alleged homophobia. Jamal cynically retorts, "Because a sissy can't sell records in the black community. I get it" (S01/E01). When Lucious points out that homophobia exists amongst white people as well, he reveals his monetary motivation for Jamal to deny his sexuality. He argues that even "[...] the white kids who make up 75% of [their] sales" (S01/E01) would not support a homosexual singer. Lucious worries about white homophobia mainly due to financial reasons but wants to keep his son's homosexuality hidden from the black community for at least the same reasons. The two men are clearly aware of severe feelings of homophobia existing particularly in the black community, which ties in with Kornegay's theory on the "archetypal Other" (33).

Kornegay's demonstrates how the fear of social exclusion can turn into hatred for fellow members of a minority group (33). Lucious' fear of his son representing the "archetypal Other" (33) does not solely result in the disapproval of gay lifestyles, but in a complete disavowal of homosexual identities. Lucious clearly believes that homosexuality is a choice and refuses to accept his son's true identity. When Jamal cynically refers to himself as a "sissy" (S01/E01), implying that this is what his father thinks of him, Lucious silences him, "you need to stop calling yourself that" (S01/E01). Lucious literally does not want to hear Jamal name-call himself, as the father is deluding himself into thinking that his son could potentially still chose to be with a woman. The combination of Lucious claiming that Jamal being gay were a conscious decision, and the way the father silences his son from saying aloud what Lucious himself fears the most provides evidence that Kornegay's fear of the "archetypal Other" (Kornegay 33) is not always expressed through anger but also through denial and disavowal by homophobic heterosexuals.

After Jamal refuses to let Lucious' deny his homosexuality further by saying "Well, that's what I am, dad" (S01/E01), a flashback scene to Jamal's early childhood starts to play. The camera shows young Jamal entering a party room with exclusively black guests present. He is wearing a headscarf and red high heel shoes. His arms are places on his hips and he is strutting toward the guests, who stare at the young boy in disgust, confusion and disappointment, which is illustrated by shaking heads and raised eyebrows. When Lucious discovers his young son

making such an effeminate appearance in front of his guests, he grabs the boy, yelling, “Are you out of your damn mind? Walking here, looking like a little bitch?” (S01/E01). Lucious instantly turns aggressive, using misogynistic slurs in a homophobic way to shame his son for expressing himself through a style of fashion which does not adhere to traditional gender norms. In the flashback scene, Cookie also makes an appearance, as she tries to stop Lucious from yelling at Jamal or punishing him. She represents a more loving and accepting version of a black parent who suspects their child to be gay. Although Cookie represents tolerance for homosexuality in the black community, the majority of black men and women shown in the flashback scene express their disapproval of a young boy dressing in feminine clothing. The many party guests who clearly alienate young Jamal with their disappointed expressions and head-shaking represent the homophobic part of the black community, whose judgements Lucious fears. Lucious’ anxiety of being alienated by his black peers paired with his conservative affinity to heteronormativity drive him to verbally and physically abuse his son, as indicated in another flashback scene where Lucious physically throws young Jamal, dressed up in feminine clothes, into a back-alley garbage can.

Cookie’s homophobia too continuously shines through, only on first glance on a much less intense and aggressive level. For instance, Cookie appears to try to instrumentalize Jamal’s sexuality for monetary gain when she discusses future career plans with her son. The mother wants to officially manage Jamal’s singing career and encourages him to focus on building a name for himself and even suggests branding and marketing Jamal’s sexuality for publicity. At first, Jamal hesitates to become a mainstream artist who engages in publicity stunts, and declines Cookie’s offer to guide him to the top of the mainstream music industry. Disappointed and annoyed by Jamal’s refusal, she murmurs, “Stupid sissy” (S01/E01). In this instance, Cookie consciously chooses to insult her son, using a homophobic slur rather than any generic term of offense, thus exposing her internalized homophobia. When Jamal decides to cooperate with Cookie after all, in order to prove to his father that he can succeed despite being alienated, the mother once more proves to view her son’s sexuality as a mere gimmick, rather than a genuine aspect of his identity: “[...] we’ll make the gay angle all about Lucious not accepting you, and the talent all about you. It’ll drive Lucious crazy” (S01/E01). It is apparent that Cookie’s major concerns are firstly, making a profitable spectacle of her son’s homosexuality and secondly, defeating Lucious in an unspoken competition. Instead of

thinking of Jamal's happiness and success, she ultimately wants to become a successful manager herself and in doing so, wishes to provoke and anger Lucious as a form of revenge.

Cookie's internalized homophobia becomes evident when applying Eribon's theory on the demasculinization of gay men to analyze her many uses of homophobic slurs. Referring to a man as the f-word, f*ggot, or "sissy" (Cookie, S01/E01) perpetuates the stigma of "not only the social 'inferiority' of women but also the stigmatization of homosexuals" (Eribon 65). The intention behind uttering a slur does not matter to its consequences, as it will ultimately convey derogatory meaning for one or more minorities in any case. Even if the person being insulted with a homophobic slur was not queer themselves, the derogatory term on its own still condemns homosexuality. Furthermore, a discriminatory insult does not only devalue certain identities, but it presupposes that merely being accused of being queer, for instance, is an allegation anyone should find outrageous (Eribon 65).

Moreover, the specific slur "sissy", used by Cookie to refer to her son, is particularly homophobic, problematic and poisonous to society for various reasons. As stated by Eribon, a homophobic slur will not only presuppose a shared understanding of the queer community being something negative, thereby reaffirming the homophobic presuppositions which already exist in society, it may also additionally target other minorities (Eribon 65). By using an effeminate slur, such as "sissy" (Cookie, S01/E01), the speaker not only deems someone who is homosexual, but also someone who is female or feminine as lesser than. The generalization occurring through such a specific slur, however, is additionally a major problem because it constructs a homogenous identity of homosexuals in and of itself as well. If feminine attributes or connotations are attached to gay men in a derogatory way, all homosexual males will immediately be considered less masculine and more feminine by society, which is a false assumption and ignorant generalization (Eribon 80). The problematic generalizations made by individuals who use slurs result in "homosexuality [being] filed under 'femininity' in the unconscious of our societies" (Eribon 80).

In the end of episode one, Cookie reveals her agenda to prove Lucious wrong in doubting Jamal but does so in an ambiguously problematic way. She tells her former husband, "I wanna show you a f*ggot really can run this company" (S01/E01, triggering slur censored), referring to Jamal and his potential to succeed in business and life. The ambivalence in Cookie's utterance is that it contains an overtly homophobic slur, but at the same time expresses her

support for Jamal. A third element in her utterance is her motivation, which appears to be fuelled by the will to prove Lucious, who heavily doubts Jamal, wrong. Whilst Cookie may be siding with her gay son and therefore taking a stand against homophobia and the prejudice of the public, she nevertheless refuses to cease using hateful terminology. On the contrary, Cookie appears to consciously use slurs, such as the f-word, in order to provoke Lucious. By clearly calling Jamal an insulting slur, Cookie is emphasizing Jamal's sexuality as something deviant in Lucious' mind. She is not portraying Jamal as an underestimated young man with promising potential, but rather as a hazard to Lucious' high position in his own company, and a weapon of provocation. As suggested by Cookie's wording, Jamal poses a threat of replacement to the heterosexual father who already fears his homosexual son destroying his heteronormative worldview. Therefore, instead of compelling Lucious to open his mind to a more progressive outlook on life, his wife is working in favour of his bigotry. Cookie is, so to say, feeding Lucious' preconceived ideas about a gay man being something evil, dangerous or threatening.

An interesting instance of intertextuality occurs in this episode when Jamal makes an allusion to an infamous female figure of American cultural and literary history. He asks Cookie whether she could "[...] stop with the publicity stunts, Mama Rose?" (S01/E02). In calling his mother "Mama Rose" (S01/E02), Jamal is indicating Cookie's ruthless ambition to turn her son into a successful public figure, branding his identity for profit. The story behind the name Mama Rose dates back to the early 20th century and is tied to a U.S. American actress and singer, who rose to fame not only through her talent but primarily through her callous methods of turning her daughters into stars in showbusiness (Lee 22). Apart from one parallel between Mama Rose and Cookie being the greed for earning money by employing their children in the showbusiness, another similarity is the women's relationship to the queer community. Just as Cookie, at times, appears to be somewhat supportive of Jamal and his sexuality, Mama Rose seems to have had genuine relationships and friendships in the queer community, especially after having met a majority of them when she unofficially opened the doors of her spacious apartment to local lesbians who wanted to meet in secrecy, without the police catching them (Quinn 143). Rose, however, did not graciously offer the same-sex couples a safe space to spend the night out of compassion, but to generate an income. She is said to have sold overpriced alcohol and dinners at the apartment on top of demanding ample fees of rent from those who stayed at her 10-room flat (Quinn 143). This notion of on one hand, realizing a

business idea to cater to a social minority group, yet on the other hand, exploiting their need for a safe space for money puts Mama Rose at a similar level of ambiguity in her benevolence toward the queer community, as is Cookie. What appears to discern Cookie from Mama Rose though is the fact that the latter allegedly turned out to be queer herself, as Quinn notes, “Rose was embarrassed of [stories of her past, courting male clients] around her lesbian friends [...] This was, without a doubt, the last sort of information the late-blooming lesbian wanted to see circulated about herself [...]” (199). Cookie is portrayed as a heterosexual woman in *Empire* and thus, does not embody a 21st century version of Mama Rose to the full extent.

In *Dear White People*, black homophobia is also broached as one of the show’s many socio-political themes. The series is set on a fictional college campus, which mirrors contemporary U.S. society. The black community is represented by black students, who frequently gather at the Armstrong-Parker house, which is an unofficially designated housing dorm for students of color. In the show, this locality is abbreviated to as A.P. In the second episode, a gay student-journalist points out the prevalence of homophobia at the predominantly black dorm, when confronting Lionel, who is both black and gay, about why he does not mention the intersectionality of his identity in his writing. He asks: “Where are the intersections? [...] You’re not just a black man. You’re a gay black man. Homophobic incidents at A.P. are as common as they are among the Pastiche staff [mainly white, male writers of a highly problematic satirical student-newspaper]” (S01/ E02). Lionel’s writing-mentor is trying to raise his mentee’s awareness for his own labels to help him become a better writer. In a mere side comment, the mentor reveals that even he, a non-black man, is aware of the homophobia amongst black peers. Although scenes like this one do not criticize the alleged homophobia in contemporary U.S. America’s black community on the same level as *Empire* consistently does, it does showcase an underlying problem to the audience. Whilst *Empire* shows the traumatic effects homophobia can have on a black man of color by featuring an emotionally-scarred, gay protagonist, *Dear White People* treats the topic with less graphic emotionality and more objective observation on behalf of a less prominent side-character.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has illustrated how the series *Dear White People* and *Empire* employ various verbal and audio-visual strategies to comment on socio-political issues and events, pertaining to contemporary U.S. America. The analysis of selected scenes has shown how topics, such as police brutality or white privilege, are broached in overt as well as more subtle manners. Because the primary texts are both set in the mid- and late 2010s, their similar themes yet different approaches to socio-political commentary have been regarded as striking points of analysis. Although the two shows' genres and atmospheres differ, their messages relating to civil rights issues and social justice in 21st century U.S. society overlap in various ways.

The analysis has revealed that some of the major overlapping strategies of the series under consideration include the mentioning of real-life victims of police violence by name. Both *Dear White People* and *Empire* feature fictional characters who talk about non-fictional cases, such as Trayvon Martin's or Sandra Bland's, thereby breaking the barrier between fact and fiction. Other approaches to creating a relatable discourse in the two shows include the staging of scandalous tragedies on the basis of true events. Whereas *Empire*, for instance, recreates a specific incident of black female detainment, *Dear White People*'s plot revolves around the aftermath of a so-called "blackface party" in light of similar events being hosted at U.S. American colleges in the 21st century. A such blurring of reported facts and fictional plotlines makes the primary texts stand out in their socio-political commentary.

Other similarities as discovered throughout this thesis' analysis comprise the symbolic value of specific characters. Characters such as Kelsey and Don are criticized for their assimilation to white prejudice by their black peers. Lionel and Jamal are two black homosexual men who are repeatedly made aware of the homophobia in the black community. These and many other links between the two shows suggest that there is a greater narrative which the primary texts become part of due to their overt socio-political commentary.

This thesis has, however, also found a number of points in which the primary texts vary. The theme of colorism, for instance, is approached differently in *Dear White People* than it is in *Empire*. Whilst Sam overcompensates for her lighter skin by being an advocate for black rights and black empowerment, Anika represents the light-skinned woman of color who is privileged by a colorist community. Coco represents a determined woman of color, who prioritizes networking with the upper class over pro-black student-activism. Cookie, on the other hand,

represents a woman of color who is aware of the discrimination colorism entails for dark-skinned black women and therefore views women such as Anika as antagonists by default. The intersectionality of race, class and gender composes a large recurring theme in *Dear White People* and *Empire*, since the protagonists are complex characters who experience intersectional discrimination in different ways.

A major part of this thesis has entailed an emphasis on the field of critical whiteness, since this aspect of a race-related discourse has oftentimes been neglected due to the problematic tendency of racism to be regarded as an issue solely tied to blackness. In order to dismantle systematic racism and identify problematic behaviors of white characters, such as Gabe, on television, whiteness must be understood in various terms. This thesis has primarily focused on three social phenomena pertaining to whiteness, namely white guilt (Steele 1990: 506), white fragility (DiAngelo 55) and the white savior complex (Straubhaar 384, Cole 340), in order to illustrate in how far selected characters' actions correspond to the nature of these three concepts.

To understand the impact which socio-political commentary and various forms of representation on television can have on a television audience, Gerbner and Gross' cultivation theory (174) was used as a theoretical framework. To support the argument that certain stereotypes used in *Empire* for comic relief may be harmful, work by Crenshaw (1293) and a study by Tukachinsky, Mastro and Yarchi (539) was effectively consulted. The work of these and other scholars has illustrated how dangerous the perpetuation of generalizations based on gender, race and class can be.

During the finalization process of this thesis, the second season of *Dear White People* has aired, which provides further ground for a continuation of this thesis' analysis. The series' most recent episodes are particularly significant for the continuation of this thesis' research because one of them overly parodies the second series under analysis, namely *Empire*. As both television shows produce new content, the analysis of their socio-political commentary will become more profound and gain further intertextual relevance. The new interrelated elements will contribute to a greater understanding of the overall discourse which exists on and off the television screen, pertaining to contemporary civil rights issues in U.S. society.

Wordcount: 33938

7. Bibliography

Primary Texts

Dear White People. Dir. Justin Simien, Tina Mabry, Barry Jenkins, Steven Tsuchida, Nisha Ganatra, Charlie McDowell. Netflix, 2017.

Empire. Dir. Lee Daniels, Dee Rees, Craig Brewer, Danny Strong, Kevin Bray, Mario Van Peebles, Sylvain White, Sanaa Hamri, Paul McCrane, Michael Engler, Paris Barclay, Cherien Dabis, Millicent Shelton. Perf. Taraji P. Henson, Terrence Howard. FOX, 2015.

Other/ Mentioned Texts

8 Mile. Dir. Curtis Hanson. Perf. Marshall Mathers. Universal Pictures, 2002.

Lee, Gypsy Rose. Gypsy: A Memoir by Gypsy Rose Lee. Berkley: Frog Ltd, 1957, Print.

Secondary Literature

Adams-Bass, Valerie N; Stevenson, Howard C; Slaughter Kotzin, Diana. "Measuring the Meaning of Black Media Stereotypes and Their Relationship to the Racial Identity, Black History Knowledge, and Racial Socialization of African American Youth." *Journal of Black Studies* 45 (2014): 367-395.

Aymer, Samuel R. "'I can't breathe': A case study—Helping Black men cope with race-related trauma stemming from police killing and brutality." *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Benshoff, Harry. *Film and Television Analysis: An Introduction to Methods, Theories, and Approaches*. New York: Routledge, 2015. Print.

Bertrand, Marianne; Mullainathan, Sendhil. "Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination?" *The American Economic Review* 94 (2004): 991-1013.

Bhaba, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2012. Print.

Capelouto, Susanna. "Eric Garner: The Haunting Last Words of a Dying Man." CNN, 9 December 2014. Online. Last accessed 13 April 2018.

Caraway, Nancie. *Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and the Politics of American Feminism*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991. Print.

Cleary, Tom. "WATCH: New Video Shows Sandra Bland Being Booked Into Jail." Online Video. Heavy, 29 July 2015. Online. Last accessed 27 March 2018.

Cole, Teju. *Known and Strange Things*. London: Faber & Faber, 2016. Print.

- Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241-1299.
- DiAngelo, Robin. "White Fragility." *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 (2011): 54-70.
- Dixon, Angela R; Telles, Edward E. „Skin Color and Colorism: Global Research, Concepts, and Measurement“. *Annual Review of Sociology* 43 (2017): 405-425.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1897). "The Conservation of Races." *The American Negro Academy Occasional Papers* 2 (1897).
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd, 1965. Print.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *Dusk of Dawn*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2012. Print.
- Eribon, Didier. *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*. London: Duke University Press, 2004. Print.
- Eversley, Melanie. "Social Media Speculates Whether Is Dead In Mugshot." *USA Today* 24 July 2015. Online. Last accessed 01 March 2018.
- Franklin, A. J. *From Brotherhood to Manhood: How Black Men Rescue Their Relationships and Dreams from the Invisibility Syndrome*. Charlotte: John Wiley, 2004. Print.
- Gerbner, George; Gross, Larry. "Living with Television: The Violence Profile." *Journal of Communication* 26 (1976): 172-194. Print.
- Gilbert, Keon L; Ray, Rashawn. „Why Police Kill Black Males with Impunity." *Journal of Urban Health* 93 (2015): S122-S140.
- Gill, Liz. "Lavender Linguistics". *Guardian* 14 July 2003. Online. Last accessed 19.04.2018.
- Grim, Ryan. "The Transcript of Sandra Bland's Arrest is As Revealing As The Video." *Huffington Post* 22 July 2015. Online. Last accessed 01 March 2018.
- Hill, Marc Lamont. *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Where We Stand: Class Matters*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. New York: Routledge, 2014. Print.
- Itzigsohn, José; Brown, Karida. „Sociology and the Theory of Double Consciousness: W. E. B. Du Bois's Phenomenology of Racialized Subjectivity". *Hutchins Center for African and African American Research* 12 (2015): 231-248.
- Kiuchi, Yuya. *Race Still Matters: The Reality of African American Lives and the Myth of Postracial Society*. New York: Suny Press, 2016. Print.

- Kornegay, Jr. EL. "Queering Black Homophobia: Black Theology as a Sexual Discourse of Transformation." *Theology & Sexuality* 11 (2004): 29-51.
- Laing, Tony. "'Black Masculinities Expressed Through, and Constrained by, Brotherhood.'" *Journal of Men's Studies* 25 (2016): 168–197.
- Lean, William; Boellstorff, Tom. *Speaking in Queer Tongues: Globalization and Gay Language*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004. Print.
- Lemert, Charles. "A Classic from the Other Side of the Veil: Du Bois's Souls of Black Folk." *The Sociological Quarterly* 35 (1994): 383–396.
- Lopez, Ian Haney. *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*. New York: NYU Press, 2006. Print.
- Marilley, Suzanne M. *Woman Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820-1920*. London: Harvard University Press, 1996. Print.
- Mauer, Marc. 2011. "Addressing Racial Disparities in Incarceration." *The Prison Journal* 91 (2011): 87S-101S.
- O'Hara, Daniel T. "Class". *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Second Edition. Ed. Lentricchia, Frank; McLaughlin, Thomas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Print.
- Ogbu, John U. "Beyond Language: Ebonics, Proper English, and Identity in a Black-American Speech Community." *American Educational Research* 36 (1999): 147-184.
- Owens, Lynn C. "Race in the Television Newsroom: Do On-Air Personalities Reflect the Communities They Serve?" *Electronic News* 1 (2007): 7-29. Online.
- Payne, Ed. "Sandra Bland's Death Ruled Suicide; Jail Mate Says She Was Emotional." *CNN* 25 July 2015. Online. Last accessed 25 March 2018.
- Pincus, Fred L. *Reverse Discrimination: Dismantling the Myth*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003. Print.
- Poindexter, P., Smith, L., & Heider, D. "Race and ethnicity in local television news: Framing, story assignments, and source selections." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 47 (2003): 524–536.
- Pollard, Christopher. "Don Lemon, CNN: 'The Smell of Marijuana in the Air.'" [What Not To Say During a Riot] Online video. Youtube, 24 November 2014. Last accessed 20 April 2018.
- Quinn, Carolyn. *Mama Rose's Turn: The True Story of America's Most Notorious Stage Mother*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. Print.
- Roberts, Mary Louise. "Samson and Delilah Revisited: The Politics of Women's Fashion in 1920s France." *The American Historical Review* 98 (1993): 657-684. Print.
- Selby, Jenn. "CNN's Don Lemon Causes Outrage From Ferguson: 'Obviously, There's a Smell of Marijuana Here'". *Independent UK* 25 November 2014. Online. Last accessed 20 April 2018.

- Stafford, Zach. "When You Say You 'Don't See Race', You're Ignoring Racism, Not Helping to Solve It." *Guardian* 26 January 2015. Online. Last accessed 05.12.2017.
- Steele, Shelby. "White Guilt." *The American Scholar*. 59 (1990): 497-506. Print.
- Straubhaar, Rolf. "The Stark Reality of the 'White Saviour' Complex and the Need for Critical Consciousness: A Document Analysis of the Early Journals of a Freirean Educator." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 45 (2015): 381-400.
- The Young Turks. "Kajiem Powell Shooting Video Disturbs for So Many Reasons." Online Video. Youtube, 21 August 2014. Last accessed 19.04.2018.
- Townes, Carimah; Petrohilos, Dylan. "Who Police Killed in 2014". *Think Progress* 12 December 2014. Online. Last accessed 20 April 2018.
- Tukachinsky, Riva; Mastro, Dana; Yarchi, Moran. "The Effect of Prime Time Television Ethnic/Racial Stereotypes on Latino and Black Americans: A Longitudinal National Level Study." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 61 (2017): 538-556.
- Villarreal, Dan. "'Do I Sound Like a Valley Girl to You?' Perceptual Dialectology and Language Attitudes in California." *The American Dialect Society* 91 (2016): 55-76.
- Wang, Lu-in. *Discrimination by Default: How Racism Becomes Routine*. New York: NYU Press, 2006. Print.
- Warde, Bryan. "Black Male Disproportionality in the Criminal Justice Systems of the USA, Canada, and England: A Comparative Analysis of Incarceration." *Journal of African American Studies* 17 (2013): 461-479.
- Wilder, JeffriAnne; Caine, Colleen. "Teaching and Learning Color Consciousness in Black Families: Exploring Family Processes and Women's Experiences With Colorism." *Journal of Family Issues* 32 (2011): 577-604.
- Williams, Kristian. *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America*. New York: AK Press, 2015. Print.
- Wilkins, David B; Appiah, K Anthony; Gutmann, Amy. *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996. Print.
- Wilson, John K. "The Myth of Reverse Discrimination in Higher Education". *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 10 (1996): 88-93.

Related Literature

- CNN. "Does TV's 'Empire' Poorly Portray African...". Online Video. Youtube, 18 March 2015. Online. Last accessed 13 April 2018.
- Coleman, Robin R. Means. *Say It Loud!: African American Audiences, Media and Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Commander, M.J., Cochrane, R., Sashidaran, S.P., Akilu, F. and Wildsmith, E. "Mental Health Care for Asian, Black and White Patients with Non-Affective Psychoses: Pathways To

- the Psychiatric Hospital, In-Patient and After-Care." *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 32 (1999): 484–491.
- Glaude, Eddie S. "Pragmatism and Black Identity: An Alternative Approach." *Nepantla* 2 (2001): 295-316.
- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano (Ed.). *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. Print.
- Greenberg, B; Baptista-Fernandez, P. „Hispanic-Americans: The New Minority on Television." In B. Greenberg (Ed.). *Content Analyses of US TV Drama* (1980): 3–13.
- Greenberg, B; Mastro, D; Brand, J. "Minorities and the Mass Media: Television Into the 21st Century." In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds). *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research* (2002): 333–351.
- Harris-Perry, Melissa Victoria. *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America*. Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2013. Print.
- Hill, Jane H. *The Everyday Language of White Racism*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2008. Print.
- Jamieson, Dave. "Bill De Blasio Explains Why His Son Needs to Be Careful Around Cops." *Huffington Post* 07 December 2014. Online. Last accessed 01 March 2018.
- Kiuchi, Yuya. *Struggles for Equal Voice: The History of African American Media Democracy*. New York: Suny Press, 2012. Print.
- Lelliott, P.; Quirk, A. "What is Life Like on Acute Psychiatric Wards?" *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 17 (2004): 297–310.
- Lelliott, P., Audini B. and Duffett, R. "Survey of patients from an inner-London health authority in medium secure psychiatric care." *British Journal of Psychiatry* 178 (2001): 62- 66.
- Lewis, Marion T.D., *A Girl Named Sandy: The Life, Legacy & Death of Sandra Bland*. New York: Waterfall Press, 2017. Print.
- Martin, Tracy. *Rest in Power: The Enduring Life of Trayvon Martin*. New York: Spiegel & Grau. 2017, Print.
- McLean, C., Campbell, C. and Cornish, F. "Social Capital, Participation and the Perpetuation of Health Inequalities: Obstacles to African-Caribbean Participation in 'Partnerships' to Improve Mental Health." *Ethnicity & Health* 9 (2004): 313–335.
- Pack, Sam. "'I Hate White People!'—Subverting the Televisual Gaze." *Visual Anthropology* 21 (2008): 136-150.
- Parrott, Scott; Parrott, Caroline Titcomb. "U.S. Television's 'Mean World' for White Women: The Portrayal of Gender and Race on Fictional Crime Dramas". *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 73 (2015): 70–82. Online. Last accessed 02 April 2018.
- Rogers, Anne; Pilgrim, David. *A Sociology of Mental Health and Illness*. London: Open University Press, McGraw-Hill Education, 2014. Print.
- Simien, Justin. *Dear White People*. New York: Atria Books, 2014. Print.

- Steele, Shelby. *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006. Print.
- Sue, Derald Wing. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2010. Print.
- Sue, Derald Wing. *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2010. Print.
- Swaine, Jon; Laughland, Oliver; Lartey, Jamiles; McCarthy, Ciara. "Young Black Men Killed By US Police at Highest Rate in Year of 1,134 Deaths". *The Guardian* 31 December 2015. Online. Last accessed 20 April 2018.
- Tyree, T. "African American Stereotypes in Reality Television." *Howard Journal of Communications* 22 (2011): 394–413. Online. Last accessed 20 April 2018.
- Yancy, George; hooks, bell. "bell hooks: Buddhism, the Beats and Loving Blackness". *Opinionator – The New York Times Opinion Pages* 10 December 2015. Online. Last accessed 20 April 2018.
- Zook, Kristal Brent. *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television*. Cary: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.

8. Index

A Affirmative action 28, 29,31, 32 Appropriation 5	B Beards 22 Bi-racial 4	C Camera 5,9,20,24,39,73 Collective identity 61,63,65 Cultivation theory 3,61,62,79	D Double consciousness 51,53 Detained 37,42 Dark-skinned 3,56,57,69,79
E Eric Garner 10,36,37 Elite 4,12,55,59,68	F Feminism 43,55 Film 1,9,23,63 Fatalities 1,37	G Gun 10,21,24,25,39,40	H Hierarchies 69
I Ignorant 12,13,22,58,75	J	K	L Latino 48 Light-skinned 3,51, 55,56,69,78
M Michael Brown 10, 37,57 Micro-aggression 5,48,65 Mugshot 41,42	N	O Othering 7,59	P Performative 56 Performativity 33
Q	R	S Sandra Bland 5, 26, 27, 39, 40, 41,42,43,44,78 Shared experience 61, 65 Sexism 43,44 Suicide 41,42,43	T Trayvon Martin 5,25, 26,27,35,36,78 Tamir Rice 10 Training 10
U Upper class 5, 11, 12, 14, 55, 59, 60, 68, 78	V Veil 50,52,53	W Working class 38, 43, 50, 55	X
Y Youth 25, 33, 46	Z Zoom 20		

9. Abstract

In context of the wide-spread media coverage of police brutality toward people of color between 2012 and 2017, two contemporary television series, namely *Empire* and *Dear White People*, are analyzed in terms of their socio-political commentary on various themes pertaining to racism, critical whiteness and the representation of blackness on television. FOX's *Empire* and Netflix's *Dear White People*, which piloted in 2015 and 2017 respectively, both directly reference late victims of police violence and the U.S.A.'s legal system, such as Trayvon Martin and Sandra Bland, by mentioning their names or alluding to their individual stories in several episodes, which leads to a blurring of fact and fiction. Such and other story-telling strategies, including verbal and audio-visual elements, are analyzed in an endeavor to investigate how political commentary is interwoven into the two shows. A major point of interest encompasses the field of critical whiteness studies and therefore selected characters are studied to investigate in how far their behaviors correspond to traits linked to notions such as Steele's white guilt (506), DiAngelo's white fragility (55) and Cole's (340) and Straubhaar's (384) white savior complex. Another major segment is dedicated to the intersectionality of class, race and gender and in how far such demographic relations influence the behaviors and motivations of selected characters. The portrayal of blackness on television is discussed in terms of the following tropes and themes: homophobia, collective identities (Ogbu 153), names and hair-styles. Audio-visual elements, such as hair, fashion or body language, are interpreted in terms of their significance to the respective scene in context. This thesis reveals how minute details in certain scenes harbor an abundance of socio-political commentary and intertextual references, including allusions to real-life incidents of the incarceration of people of color as well as overt criticism of politicians and other public figures in order to remain relevant in light of contemporary discussion and events.

Keywords: critical whiteness studies, racism, colorism, blackness, television, police brutality

10. Zusammenfassung

Im Kontext der umfangreichen Berichterstattung in den Medien über Fälle von Polizeigewalt gegenüber schwarzen U.S. Bürgern zwischen 2012 und 2017 werden die beiden Fernsehserien *Empire* (FOX 2015) und *Dear White People* (Netflix 2017) bezüglich ihrer sozial-politischen Kommentierung verschiedener in Zusammenhang mit Rassismus stehenden Themen analysiert. Bei dieser Kommentierung werden in beiden Serien ähnliche Stilmittel, einschließlich verbaler sowie audio-visueller Elemente, verwendet. Weiters werden in beiden Serien durch Hinweise auf reale Ereignisse Realität und Fiktion vermischt, insbesondere durch die Nennung der Namen der Opfer tödlicher Polizeigewalt sowie eines diskriminierenden Justizsystems. Einen wesentlichen Teil dieser Arbeit macht die kritische Analyse des Weißseins aus, welche anhand ausgewählter Charaktere Bezüge zu den Konzepten *White Guilt* (Steele 506), *White Fragility* (DiAngelo 55) und *White Savior Complex* (Cole 340; Straubhaar 384) herstellt. Ein weiterer wichtiger Punkt ist die Intersektionalität von Geschlecht, Klasse und „Rasse“ bzw. ihr Einfluss auf die Motivationen und Handlungen der Protagonisten. Die Darstellung schwarzer Personen wird hinsichtlich folgender Themen, Symbole und Tropen analysiert: Homophobie, *Collective Identities* (Ogbu 153) und Namen sowie Frisuren. Audio-visuelle Elemente, sowie Kleidung, Frisuren und Gesichtsausdrücke der Figuren werden bezüglich ihrer Bedeutung für den Kontext der zugehörigen Szene interpretiert. Diese Arbeit enthüllt, wie ein hohes Maß an sozio-politischem Kommentar in ausgewählten Szenen der zwei Serien steckt. Auf Grund von Szenen, die an wahre Begebenheiten angelehnt sind, sowie der offen ausgesprochenen Kritik an Politikern und Menschen des öffentlichen Amerikanischen Lebens, zeigt diese Arbeit, welche Stilmittel *Empire* und *Dear White People* sich bedienen, um kontemporären gesellschaftlichen Themen gerecht zu werden.

Schlagwörter: Weißsein, Rassismus, Colorism, Schwarzsein, Fernsehen, Polizeigewalt