

Research Article

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Diversity, Identity, Oppression: The Construction of “Blackness” in *Dear White People*

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Abstract: In the series *Dear White People* (DWP), students at the fictional University of Winchester struggle for racial justice. We analyze how the series treats “race” and racism and how this relates to contemporary debates in the United States. While the series presents an imaginary environment, we recognize strong similarities to actual student life and students grappling with various experiences of oppression including sexual violence. We draw on theories of identity formation (Margalit and Raz; Vondermaßen; Young) and intersectionality (Crenshaw; Collins) to uncover how the series portrays and complicates “Blackness” as an identity-forming experience and as an experience shaped by converging forms of structural discrimination. While we highlight the merit of combining two theoretical approaches (one of identity formation and one of oppression), we note that especially intersectionality helped uncover a major blind spot of the series. Although Black women are at the center of the series and the struggle for racial equality at Winchester, their particular experiences of violence are marginalized in seasons 1–3. This tendency to overlook the experiences of Black women reflects the larger debate around race, racism, and movements for social justice.

Keywords: blackness, diversity, intersectionality, identity, experience, identity-forming groups, black feminism, racism, race, America

1 Introduction

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal (...) unless you're loud and Black and possess an opinion, then all you get is a bullet.

– Reggie Green in *Dear White People*, Season 1, Episode 6

At the fictional University of Winchester, which strongly resembles the structure of real-life American college, Black (and White) students struggle for racial justice.¹ They confront social and personal

¹ The series is a satire of student life. Therefore, it uses satirical exaggerations as a style that lifts the spirits of viewers' during their engagement with dramatic (and at times traumatic) real world grievances. Yet, we believe that it portrays real-world issues of Black students in a predominantly White space (not just at college but in American society) in a serious way.

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challenges, mostly around the question what it means to be Black at a predominantly White American college. The series then unpacks how Blackness can (or cannot) be an identity-forming experience and how intersectional experiences shape the students’ struggles: What does it mean to be a Black woman and in love with a White man? What does it mean to be homosexual and Black? How does solidarity work between Black and White women when a Black man is accused of abusing a White woman? Identity and belonging, solidarity, alliance, but also crossing “borders” are at the core of these questions.

In this article, we analyze how the series *Dear White People* (in the following: DWP) treats “race” and racism and how this relates to contemporary debates around race and racism in America. We draw on theories of group and identity formation² to show how the series constructs Blackness as an identity-forming experience for Black people in the United States. Experiences of structural racism such as police brutality are based on being perceived as Black. However, Blackness is not the only, and not necessarily the hegemonic source of self for those who either place themselves in the group or are ascribed belonging to the group. Using Blackness as an example, the series then complicates “racial identity” by showcasing the diversity of Black experiences, which is often denied to people of color in public representation.³ Furthermore, we draw on the Black feminist concept intersectionality to uncover how the series highlights multiple converging experiences of oppression.⁴ The combination of different experiences, such as being Black, female, and homosexual, leads to the characters’ very own realities. Racism is not the only source of oppression and discrimination that characters in DWP experience. Sexism, classism, and homophobia equally affect the characters’ experiences and opportunities for well-being.

Following our analysis, we argue that DWP takes up, mirrors, and spurs the contemporary debate around race and racism in America. On the one hand, it deconstructs stereotypes that White people hold of Black people by complicating Blackness and its potential to shape identity. The series further shows how racism is embedded in the structures of institutions such as those of higher education. This is reflective of larger societal efforts to raise awareness of *structural racism* in America.⁵ On the other hand, the series has a blind spot when it comes to Black women’s experiences of racism and sexism, which often materialize in extreme violence. While the series generally illustrates diversity and different facets of oppressive experiences in the Black community, it misses the opportunity to debate (and foreground) the police brutality and sexual abuse that Black women face in particular. This blind spot is reflective of the larger conversation around racism and oppression, where Black (trans) women remain mostly invisible.⁶

For our analysis, we draw on the first three seasons of the series *Dear White People*. At the time of writing, three seasons had been released to Netflix USA and our source, Netflix Germany. The fourth and final season of the show has not yet aired at the time of writing due to delays that are attributed to the Coronavirus pandemic.⁷ We are limited in our analysis by our own positionality, noting that neither of us is a member of the Black community or situated in the United States. Our analysis clearly represents a White perspective. As scholars of American Studies and Philosophy, who have spent time in the United States and at an American college, we are motivated to understand and contribute to debates around race and racism. Our own role as White scholars and individuals in a racist system motivates us to uncover our complicity and contribute to societal understanding of structural power differentials. Working with Black feminist concepts and postmodern/poststructuralist theories has improved our own understanding of power, which has inspired us to continue using them. While we are not situated in a US context, we note that German society and students are not ignorant of events in the United States. In 2020, simultaneously to Black Lives Matter protests in Minneapolis, people in Tübingen (where our university is located) protested the killing of George Floyd. Hence, while our positionality brings limitations, we nevertheless attempt to contribute to the debate out of relevancy for us, our peers, and students.

2 Margalit and Raz, “National Self-Determination;” and Vondermaßen, *Anerkennung der Anderen*.

3 Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*; and West, “Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel.”

4 Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins;” and Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*.

5 Crenshaw et al., *Critical Race Theory*; Clark et al., “Black Lives Matter.”

6 Ritchie, *Invisible No More*.

7 What’s on Netflix Writers, “‘Dear White People’.”

2 Identity formation and intersectionality

In our analysis of the series DWP, we utilize two conceptual frameworks to uncover the ethics and politics of the series with regard to “race” and racism: (1) identity formation via the theory of encompassing groups,⁸ and (2) the Black feminist concept intersectionality.⁹ Bringing together these two concepts is fruitful but also tricky. In the past, heated debates over the misuse of intersectionality as a theory of identity have led to particular attention to the correct application of the concept.¹⁰ It is thus important to clarify both theories individually as well as their relationship to each other. As we will outline, neither the theory of identity-forming groups nor the concept intersectionality defines Blackness or “race” as an identity.

In the case of identity-forming groups, Blackness and experiences made due to the externally ascribed or self-ascribed skin color of a person can – but do not have to – inform a person’s sense of belonging and identity. In the case of intersectionality, “race” is a system of oppression that operates *together* with other systems of oppression (gender, ability, sexuality, age) to produce the lived reality of those individuals positioned at the intersections. In intersectional accounts that link intersectional analyses to identity politics, Blackness or race primarily inform a person’s structural identity. Whereas the theory of encompassing groups helps explore the meaning of a group membership to a person’s *individual* sense of identity, intersectionality helps render visible the structural oppression that members of certain groups, i.e., *structural* identities, experience because of their membership in these groups.

2.1 Identity formation

We first introduce the theory of identity-forming groups or “encompassing groups.”¹¹ The focus on identity-forming groups should not imply that identity is composed solely of membership in groups. In fact, there are countless perspectives on identity formation in the humanities that differ substantially.¹² For instance, and this is also shown in DWP, intersubjective relationships have a significant influence on how people see themselves and others. One example is the relationship between activist Sam White, who has a Black mother and a White father and locates herself in the Black community, and her White boyfriend Gabe Mitchell. The relationship is important to both and makes Sam and Gabe rethink their positions and value systems. Their relationship is also a source of tension, especially for Sam, whose friends and community negotiate questions of belonging in the context of her choice of partner.

Even if not exclusively, scholars assume that people are always part of groups, and that such group membership shapes the formation and maintenance of one’s identity. For Iris Marion Young, “groups” are first and foremost arbitrary associations of individuals.¹³ (However, this arbitrariness exists only in the ahistorical analysis. For people in social groups, especially groups with a long history and great importance for the identity of their members, their own membership is not arbitrary.) Individuals can come together consciously, meaning that a conscious act of joining the group forms the basis of membership (association model).

⁸ Margalit and Raz, “National Self-Determination;” Vondermaßen, *Anerkennung der Anderen*; Vondermaßen, “Identitätsprägende Gruppen – Welches ‘Wir’ Streben Wir Eigentlich An;” another fruitful lens to analyze the construction of Blackness in DWP may be Wilkerson, *Caste*, which allows us to understand the American social structure as a caste system. In this caste system, one is born into a social group (African American, Latino, etc.); the group membership then determines one’s position in the larger social structure. We nevertheless follow the framework offered by Margalit and Raz as it has proved valuable to us in previous work.

⁹ Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins;” and Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*.

¹⁰ Cooper, “Intersectionality;” Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*; and Dhamoon, “Considerations on Mainstreaming Intersectionality.”

¹¹ Margalit and Raz, “National Self-Determination;” Vondermaßen, *Anerkennung der Anderen*; and Vondermaßen, “Identitätsprägende Gruppen – Welches ‘Wir’ Streben Wir Eigentlich An.”

¹² Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*; Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*; and Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

¹³ Young, “Justice and the Politics of Difference.”

Yet, membership of a group can also be defined by an individual's features (e.g., skin color) or by a specific orientation such as preferences or desires (aggregate model). The assignment of a person to a group can even occur without one's knowledge and against one's will. "Sometimes a group comes to exist only because one group excludes and labels a category of persons, and those labelled come to understand themselves as group members only slowly, on the basis of their shared oppression."¹⁴

Following Young, this understanding of a group often implies a problematic assumption, namely that individuals who are already settled in their identities become part of a group. However, little attention is paid to the fact that individuals can also be changed by group membership. "Identities" and "groups" are not rigid, ahistorical constructs. There are complex interactions between the two, and the meaning of group memberships can vary significantly. Some group memberships might help define the core of one's personality, while others might only represent biographical side notes. In addition, identity does not derive from membership in *one* particular group. Rather, group memberships are to be understood adverbially and can open or close new ways of being and belonging.¹⁵

Young's understanding aligns with Margalit's, according to whom not every group membership is equally constitutive of an individual's identity. It is also not possible to infer the significance of group membership for an individual by simply being a member of this or that group or based on the significance of this group for other members of the group. At the same time, there is no set of groups that could be declared "identity-forming." However, criteria can be applied to a group and, if fulfilled, they increase the probability that membership will have an identity-forming effect.¹⁶ The criteria will prove helpful in our analysis in Section 3. In their original version, these criteria have a blind spot: they overlook identity-forming effects of external attributions, especially through those that have oppressive effects. In the following, we provide the criteria as we summarized them elsewhere,¹⁷ complemented by our own reflection on the effects that occur when the corresponding group is structurally oppressed:

Identity-forming effects of membership in a group are more likely if [...]	When oppression shapes the lived reality of a person, identity-forming effects can be amplified and provide [...]
1 Identity-forming groups provide a distinct lifestyle and inspire characteristic behavior in central areas of life.	A behavior that allows living a life (or simply survive) in oppression.
2 The groups form their own culture, which influences their members in important decisions about their lives.	A culture that is shaped by the attempt to remain able to live and speak despite oppression.
3 Membership is not regulated by rules but by mutual recognition.	A "regime of recognition." This means, "mutual" recognition can include a large power imbalance which can lead to people being assigned to and permanently located in a group against their will.
4 The members experience their membership as constitutive. If a member was forcibly removed from the group, this would alter their sense of self.	Relegation to a particular place in society on a daily basis which affects one's sense of self.
5 The idea of achievement is at most secondary to membership. Membership is therefore not withdrawn for a lack of performance.	A persistent (external) attribution to a group which cannot be overcome, not even through extraordinary performance.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵ Margalit, *Politik der Würde*, 173.

¹⁶ Ibid., 171ff.

¹⁷ Vondermaßen, *Anerkennung der Anderen*, 186f.

- 6 Shared symbols, rituals, and ceremonies create cohesion which, in turn, creates a sense of community that goes beyond close relationships. A sense of community based on the realization of shared oppression.

Group affiliations are, in our view, significant sources of the self. However, neither is a particular group membership alone identity-forming, nor is a subject the sum of group memberships alone. The meaning of a particular group membership for individuals can vary, both between individuals and over the course of an individual's life. However, there are criteria that increase the likelihood that a group membership is identity-shaping. We argue that experiences of oppression in turn make it more likely that these criteria apply to a group. In the case of oppressed groups, the formation of lifestyles, and the formation of characteristic behavior in central areas of life, a distinct culture, common symbols, and rituals are reactions and actions that on the one hand are intended to ensure survival. However, they are often also an expression of resistance and the goal of enabling a life worth living despite oppression. In order to fully appreciate the role of oppression in the lives of people (and the characters in DWP), we turn to the theory of intersectionality. Intersectionality sheds light on the lived reality of people based on their membership in groups that are affected by systems of oppression like race, gender, etc.

2.2 Intersectionality

The second theoretical (and practical) tool to analyze DWP is “intersectionality,” a concept that highlights how different systems of oppression interact to subordinate particularly Black, Brown, and Indigenous women. According to Collins and Bilge 2016, intersectionality is a method for critical analysis and praxis.¹⁸ This means that intersectionality can be used to uncover “invisible” forms of discrimination but also inform political action. Intersectionality is closely tied to identity politics. In early Black feminist thought and activism (around 1850), Sojourner Truth used an intersectional lens to protest her invisibility as a Black woman.¹⁹ Truth expressed her frustration that the interplay of race, gender, and class prevented her recognition as a woman. She was not “helped into carriages” by men like White women, but Truth does not ask for equal treatment or being helped into carriages. Rather, she challenges a notion of womanhood that is grounded in fragility while demanding recognition as a woman.²⁰

In her seminal article that coined the term intersectionality, Crenshaw 1989 draws on identity politics as a vehicle for antidiscrimination.²¹ She uses an intersectional lens to highlight how Black women are yet to be served by antidiscrimination law. While different protected categories (race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, as presented in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964) are expected to provide remedies to those who have been unfairly discriminated in employment contexts, Black women had difficulties accessing justice due to the *convergence* of discrimination based on these categories. Courts denied Black women the opportunity to represent White women or Black men in class action suits against discrimination in the workplace but also dismissed Black women's claim that they experienced particular forms of discrimination due to gender *and* race.²² According to Black feminists, a struggle for justice must address all forms of oppression simultaneously rather than take a siloed approach like feminist and anti-racist movements have done in the past.²³

Both the White feminist movement and the male-dominated civil rights movement have excluded and subordinated the concerns of Black women. Racist middle-class White women have prevented Black women from speaking out on behalf of the group, thereby marginalizing the topics that are most relevant

¹⁸ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*.

¹⁹ Brah and Phoenix, “Ain't I A Woman?”

²⁰ Truth, “Ain't I A Woman?”

²¹ Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection.”

²² Ibid., 142.

²³ Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement;” and Lorde, *Age, Race, Class, and Sex*.

to Black women’s lived reality. Similarly, anti-racist causes have encouraged Black women to soft-pedal concerns about male domination or sexual violence because internal conflict might weaken the anti-racist movement.²⁴ In both movements for social justice, the understanding of race and gender issues as exclusive or separable has reinforced the marginalization of Black women. Intersectionality thus takes identity politics as a starting point to (1) showcase that “single-axis” analyses fail to see the least advantaged in society and (2) theorize the connection of individuals to larger social structures and power relations.²⁵

Criticism of intersectionality has emerged around claims that the concept essentializes identities and compartmentalizes the complexity of human identity. However, this criticism can be attributed to a misreading of intersectionality as an account of individual identity.²⁶ Intersectionality relates to individual identity only – if at all – in the sense that individual identities may be shaped or influenced by power imbalances and systemic oppression at the structural level.²⁷ Intersectionality then foregrounds structures (such as structural discrimination, structural inequalities) and how they interact with different groups of people (or “structural identities”). For Dhamoon 2011, “the constitutive feature of an intersectional-type research paradigm is [therefore] a critique of the work of power – how it operates, its effects, and the possibilities of transformation” (240).²⁸ Taking into account this focus on structural power relations, intersectionality nicely complements an account of “blackness” and race as a potentially identity-forming experience. Intersectionality foregrounds the omnipresence of converging forms of oppression and their significance for the lived realities and social justice claims of *structural* identities.

Both tools of inquiry – the theory of encompassing groups and intersectionality – go beyond a single-axis analysis and highlight the complexity of human experience. However, intersectionality is also a critique of structural relations and, as a critical praxis, covers areas that the theory of encompassing groups cannot. At the same time, identity formation via group membership (Margalit and Raz, Vondermaßen) informs intersectionality about the non-determinative meaning of structural identities to individual identities. Together, the two concepts can help get to a better understanding about how structural identities are negotiated at the political and societal levels and how they then take effect at the individual level. In the next chapters, we will illustrate where DWP comes very close to our theoretical framework with their account of oppression and character development, but where they also miss an opportunity.

3 “Blackness” as an identity-forming experience

Drawing on Margalit and Raz 2014, we argue that DWP constructs Blackness as an identity-forming experience. The quality of the series lies in its skill to present Blackness in many facets. Blackness is thus neither a fixed or reduced identity nor a flat stereotype. The fact that the portrayal of Blackness and Black people as diverse is at all noteworthy must be seen against the background of a structurally racist media landscape. People of color are stereotyped, while internal diversity is considered self-evident for White groups. This has to do with the perception of “race” by White people. In mainstream discourses, Whiteness is not seen as a racial identity. It is simply considered the norm. Talking about race then always implies talking about non-White people, when one should consider the White “race” as well.²⁹ In its representation of Blackness as diverse and multifaceted, DWP has the potential to undo the reduction of complexity that always goes hand in hand with stereotyping. It thus responds to what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls “the danger of a single story.”³⁰ While Blackness is presented as an identity-forming experience, DWP also shows that

²⁴ Hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman?* 3, 127, and 183.

²⁵ Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection;” and Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 132.

²⁶ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 123f.

²⁷ Ibid., 114.

²⁸ Dhamoon, “Considerations on Mainstreaming Intersectionality.”

²⁹ Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other.”

³⁰ Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story.”

Blackness takes on different vehicles of expression and different meaning. Black students at Winchester are then *not only and not always primarily* shaped by their membership in the group of Black students.

The series DWP introduces Blackness as an identity-defining group membership starting with the pilot issue. Criteria (1), (2), and (6) as stated in Section 2.1 on identity formation are repeatedly emphasized throughout the series: First, Black students have their own house on campus, called “Armstrong Parker,” which is considered the center of the “Black community” at the university. Second, they have their own campus radio shows (including the show “Dear White People” hosted by Sam), and “Defamation Wednesday,” a film night described by Sam as the center of Black student life [S1; E1; 22:00]. Students discuss which films are “Black enough” [S1; E5; 10:40] or joke that a translator is needed to explain the language of “Blacks” to “Whites” [S2; E4; 4:20]. Repeatedly, students argue over the way Black women wear their hair, which is seen as a political statement [S1; E1; 13:30, but also S1; E9; 6:00]. These are explicit statements on “Black culture,” which are supplemented by interior design, fashion choices, and language use that differ significantly between student groups.

Borderline cases, for example, Sam’s struggle with her identity, illustrate that belonging only works through mutual recognition (criterion 3). Sam is the child of a White father and a Black mother. She was rejected by parts of the activist students at the beginning for precisely this reason and is struggling with it still today [S1; E1; 17:30, but also S1; E4; 4:00]. Mutual recognition also plays a role in the case of Alberto “Al” Lucas, a secondary character who is perceived as “Black” while he is in fact Latino, which he hides from his friends [S3; E1; 25:20]. Only in the last scene of season 3, we see Al going to a meeting of the “Latinx Alliance at Winchester.” While it is of course possible to be of African descent and Latino at the same time, in this case, the plot twist shows that it is possible to play with identities via others’ recognition in a way that grants access to spaces.

Finally, the fifth criterion (5) can also be found in the series, although more implicitly than the others: even if there are repeated arguments over whether someone fulfills the criteria of membership and whether members are equally affected by the social discrimination that Blackness entails [cf. S1; E4; 4:00], no one is threatened with exclusion on the basis of their performance. This does not mean that there is no pressure to adapt within the group, as a scene at the end of the first episode of the series illustrates. Here, Sam walks across campus, listening to pop music through headphones. When she crosses paths with other members of the Black community, she quickly changes the music to hip hop, to avoid discovery of her secretly preferred but “inappropriate” taste in music.

Young’s perspective on identity and group formation is also helpful in uncovering how Blackness ties students together and to certain expectations when it is ascribed by others. On the one hand, Black students at Winchester are part of a historically grown group on campus, the so-called “Black caucus.” This is where predominantly Black students from various initiatives at the university meet to organize and struggle for the rights of Black students. The fact that this group sees itself as an enclosed group, as being set apart from other groups, becomes clear when Gabe asks Sam if he may accompany her to the “Black caucus.” Sam replies: “It’s members only,” alluding to the membership in the group “people of color,” as there is no formal membership in the Black caucus [S1, E1; 10:20].³¹ On the other hand, the characters in DWP experience being ascribed to a group based on features. When Sam’s relationship to Gabe becomes public knowledge, Sam’s friends initially react by distancing themselves from her. Sam justifies her choice by pointing out that she is only partially Black. Her friend Joelle Brooks reminds her that, merely because of her skin tone, society at large perceives her as a Black woman. It is therefore the perception of others that determines Sam’s place (in terms of group belonging) in society.

Particularly interesting from the perspective of identity formation is the case of computer science student Reggie Green. When Sam asks Reggie in season 3 why he smiles more than ever, he replies: “I finally found my people” [S3; E7; 25:30]. Here, Reggie refers to a group of programmers, making a point that seemingly counters his experiences in the months before. Reggie had been threatened with gun violence by campus safety personnel because of his skin color, an occurrence that moved the Winchester Black

³¹ For the citation of film scenes, the following pattern is used: (Season, Episode; minute:seconds).

community to unite behind him. For hardly any other character in DWP, his structural identity as a Black man constitutes such a formative experience, and yet, in the end, the group of Black students is not his primary "people." Being a survivor of police brutality based on being identified as Black does not mean that belonging to the group of "Blacks" is automatically the hegemonic source of one's identity. Reggie's story fits into the overarching narrative in which Blackness is an important source of self that brings both positive and negative experiences, but is not an immutable fate and experienced as such. Reggie's story represents another finding: The importance of a particular group membership varies among individuals and potentially changes over time, even if this membership is an identity-forming one.³²

In summary, the experience of belonging to the Black student group – whether self-chosen or externally attributed – influences preferences, behaviors, social interactions, and character development. However, although Blackness is portrayed as having an impact on identity, DWP also shows that this impact varies. Furthermore, DWP displays the diversity and heterogeneity of Blackness. Not only can Blackness be interpreted differently, but personal experiences tied to Blackness vary.

4 Intersectional experiences: Blackness plus

While DWP constructs Blackness as an identity-forming experience, the series is not ignorant of equally constitutive experiences based on gender, race, class, national origin, or sexuality. In this vein, the series highlights how different experiences of oppression converge to produce a unique lived reality for people at that intersection (e.g., being perceived as Black + gender or being perceived as Black + sexuality). This is not to say that converging oppressions determine the characters' personalities or individual identities. Rather, the characters in DWP are aware of their implication in structural dynamics. In the following, we focus on Black female protagonists' experiences, although DWP narrates experiences with numerous interlocking systems. Lionel Higgins for example is affected not only by racism but also homophobia in the Black community. Rashid Bakr, who is originally from Kenya, struggles with racism in the USA but also exclusion by the African American community at Winchester. Although society clearly recognizes him as Black because of his skin color, his way of being Black (e.g., speaking with a Kenyan accent, appearance and demeanor, culture) is not determined "actual" Blackness by his African American peers.

The case of Black women in DWP is particularly interesting because they are prominently placed in the series. Sam is the host of the radio show "Dear White People"; she is the main character of the pilot episode and a leader in the Black students' struggle for racial justice at Winchester. Coco Connors and Joelle have their own episodes throughout all seasons as well. Despite her active involvement in the fight for equality at Winchester, Sam is marginalized in the movement due to her status as a woman. When she falls in love with her White fellow student Gabe, she initially keeps the relationship a secret from her Black friends. A post by Gabe in a social network makes their summer romance public – just at the moment when Sam gives a passionate speech at the "Black caucus" and mobilizes fellow students for the civil rights struggle at Winchester. Her Black friends are irritated, and her best friend and roommate Joelle is on edge [S1; E1; 15:20ff.]. She accuses Sam of a double standard since Sam had recently published an opinion piece calling on Black women to stand by "their" men [S1; E1; 17:40].

This scene nicely represents the larger conflict between identity politics in support of women's or gender issues and civil rights for Black and Brown people. Sam originally prioritized civil rights matters over her relationship. She felt pressure to comply with expectations of her Black peers in the struggle for racial equality. This made her put aside her own needs, rights, and preferences (including her sexual desires). While it may seem that Sam's secrecy around her relationship could also be a concern for Black men who are dating White women, Black men are not scrutinized to the same extent as Black women due to the way sexism works.³³ The tension highlighted by the scene is well-known to Black feminists who are

³² Vondermaßen, *Anerkennung der Anderen*, 206ff.

³³ Hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, 24f.

pressured to navigate or balance their own interests and the interests of Black men or male leaders. By way of example, Crenshaw 1989 shares her experiences as a college student, where she became hyper-aware of the omnipresent barriers for Black people to the extent that she did not want to risk the success of tearing down one barrier (based on race) for another one (based on gender).³⁴ Intersectionality puts a finger into this wound and, as a critical praxis, demands attention to *all* forms of oppression rather than centering one oppression.

The Black women's intersectional oppression receives full attention only in season 3. Here, the series illustrates the tension between White and Black feminists, which resurfaced again and again in American history. Black women's rights activists have been excluded from the dominant White women's rights movement. The Black women's rights activists challenged both racist women's rights activists and sexist civil rights activists. The concept "intersectionality" describes this multifaceted discrimination.³⁵ According to the concept intersectionality, *structural* identities (which can be understood as social groups) are situated at the intersection of various systems of oppression.³⁶ All forms of oppression are equally constitutive of a person's lived reality and matter equally – whether the person is affected by racism, (hetero)sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, etc.³⁷ Although Black feminism stresses that Black women experience structural disadvantages as a group, the theory does not claim that every single Black woman in America is oppressed.³⁸ Intersectionality acknowledges diversity *within* identity groups; members of the group may have different experiences of privilege and oppression depending on the member's concrete positionality in society.³⁹

In the series, the conflict between Black and White feminists is introduced by a conversation between Muffy Tuttle and Joelle during a recording for the radio show "Dear White People." Muffy urges Joelle and Black women to become more vocal in their support for women's rights. She says: "You got to lean in," alluding to a White, neoliberal stream of feminism represented by Sheryl Sandberg and her movement *Lean In*.⁴⁰ Joelle explains that she cannot express her feminism the same way Muffy can because Black women are still stigmatized as naturally angry. Joelle also laments the racism of White women's rights activists [S3, E2; 2:30ff.].

Questions of alliances and gender politics within the Black community are raised anew when the protagonists learn that Black professor Moses Brown allegedly sexually harassed Muffy. As is often the case with sexual assault, the scene in question took place in private; like the protagonists, the viewer does not know what happened exactly. Moses initially denies the assault and Muffy remains vague, contradictory, and unconfident in her statements. In this confusing situation, the protagonists of the series position themselves differently. Three Black women (Coco, Brooke Morgan, and Joelle) stand with Muffy in solidarity. At the same time, most of the Black students show solidarity with Moses. Reggie, for example, found a mentor in Moses and refuses to see his personal role model in a negative light. Black teachers make up only six percent of the faculties in higher education in the USA.⁴¹ The few Black professors are therefore important role models. In addition, the professor and Reggie share the fate of being survivors of racist violence, as they had both suffered police brutality. So Reggie plays down the incident and doubts Muffy's statements. Others are equally skeptical. Sam fears that, if the accusations made by a White student against a Black professor are true, "its gonna set the movement at Winchester back into slavery times" [S3; E9; 14:40]. A group of students discuss how they can carefully make the case public. Troy Fairbanks points out: "If we go after Moses, people will be fucked up." Al, Troy's colleague on the writing team, replies, "Poor

³⁴ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection," 161.

³⁵ Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins;" Cooper, "Intersectionality;" Hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*; and Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

³⁶ Cooper, "Intersectionality."

³⁷ Lorde, *Age, Race, Class and Sex*.

³⁸ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 25f.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 246f.

⁴⁰ Sandberg, *Lean In*.

⁴¹ McFarland, *The Condition of Education 2018*.

Reggie!” Brooke replies indignantly, “Poor Muffy!” [S3; E9; 16:40]. These scenes illustrate the different priorities and experiences of Black women and men in the context of women’s rights issues. In the case of Muffy’s abuse, Black women mostly side with the White woman and try to win “their” Black men as allies.

5 Intersectionality as critical analysis and praxis: Why DWP fails Black women

The examples provided above illustrate that the series DWP portrays the complexity of interlocking systems of oppression that generate unique experiences for different groups. Yet, despite these efforts, the show misses the opportunity to *foreground* the experiences of Black women. In particular, the series renders invisible the extreme violence that Black women face due to their position at the intersection of race and gender. When the show thematizes police brutality, the protagonist affected is a Black male. During a party on college territory, campus security hold Reggie at gunpoint and demand that he hands over his student identity card. Police shout at Reggie, asking whether he is a student on campus [S1, E5, 21:30]. Harassment of Black people by authorities – whether it is police or campus safety personnel – is a common practice in the United States.⁴² However, it equally affects Black women (and especially Black trans women), whose stories of police abuse are rarely told.⁴³ Black women’s visibility as victims of police abuse lacks behind prominent cases of male victims. A recent example is the police killing of Breonna Taylor that succeeded little action by the authorities compared to the case of George Floyd, who received “justice” in the sense that White police officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty and may face a prison sentence of up to 40 years.⁴⁴

Here, we see that the discourse around racism and sexism at the fictional Winchester mirrors larger debates in US society. Also in American public discourses, Black women are often erased from debates around racialized and sexualized violence. In her Ted Talk “The Urgency of Intersectionality,” Kimberlé Crenshaw criticizes that Black women survivors of police brutality are less well-known than Black male survivors.⁴⁵ Although Black women experience the same degree of physical abuse by authorities, their cases are marginalized in the public debate.⁴⁶ Similar claims can be made with regard to sexual violence against Black women. The campaign #SayHerName wants to put Black female survivors of violence front and center.⁴⁷ While the movement does not seek to advocate a “victimization” of Black women, it is concerned that Black women’s experiences of violence are marginalized. Historically, Black women have been perceived as particularly robust and resilient when it comes to violence; the rape of a Black woman was not considered as grave as the rape of a White woman.⁴⁸ These biases prevent us from seeing the extreme violence that Black women face, and especially Black trans women.⁴⁹

This brings us to the second plot in DWP where Black women are *not* centered in their particular experiences of violence. When the series discusses rape on college campus, it features the story of Muffy, a White woman. As the plot unfolds, we learn about the experiences of Black women who stand with Muffy in support. When Muffy discloses her decision not to make her allegations public, Coco says “I respect that – more than you know,” which can be interpreted as an indication of similar experiences and choices [S3, E8, 28:15]. Brooke shares her own experience more explicitly when she tries to convince Muffy to go public with her story. Brooke states that she was abused by her piano teacher when she was younger

⁴² Hinton, *America on Fire*.

⁴³ Ritchie, *Invisible No More*.

⁴⁴ Oppel Jr., “What To Know;” and Levenson and Cooper, “Derek Chauvin.”

⁴⁵ Crenshaw, “The Urgency of Intersectionality.”

⁴⁶ See also Ritchie, *Invisible No More*.

⁴⁷ Williams, “#SayHerName.”

⁴⁸ Hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman*, 6.

⁴⁹ Ritchie, *Invisible No More*, 74.

[S3, E8, 1:00]. Yet, these two clips of information remain rather isolated, and the experiences of the Black women are not further discussed. While we understand that the series wanted to convey the complexities of power, identity, and solidarity with this particular plot (a Black male professor assaults a White female student), DWP does so at the expense of Black women's recognition as disproportionately affected by sexual violence.⁵⁰ Additionally, "because of African-Americans' unique history of racist and sexist victimization, the Black community has an even harder time than others dealing with rape. This prevents survivors from getting help and [the Black] community from addressing the issue effectively."⁵¹ DWP could have taken up the opportunity to center this difficult conversation, as it does with other difficult conversations.

What does this critique mean for our overall analysis of DWP? Certainly, DWP nicely weaves plots that highlight multiple converging forms of discrimination and disadvantage into the overall story. However, DWP does not fully apply intersectionality as a critical analysis and praxis. An intersectional analysis means making visible experiences of those who are most marginalized in society.⁵² Especially as a critical praxis, intersectionality helps reflect whom we center in our works – whether they are academic works or film products. As a critique of power, intersectionality helps uncover discrimination not just within contained plots but enables us to make larger connections to the film industry, the choice of characters, and how their roles impact public perception. Intersectionality thus helps us formulate important questions: Why are Black women the main protagonists of the show but their experiences of violence do not find a spotlight in seasons 1–3? Whom does the series speak to by highlighting diverse experiences within the Black student community while also being a satire of student life? What potential for political action does the series generate in terms of identity politics?

6 Conclusion

Our analysis is limited by our own positionality. As White international authors, we did not have insight into the authenticity of Black American representation. Our interpretation is guided by a White European and therefore highly privileged perspective. Nevertheless, closely following an intersectional lens allowed us to offer an ethical critique of the concepts, character portrayals, and plots presented in *Dear White People*. The series is a timely production that tackles important ethical and political questions in American society. Specifically, the series takes up and engages in the debate about "race" and racism. The series highlights the nuances of Blackness as an identity-forming experience but also alludes to experiences of intersectional oppression. Despite this accomplishment, the series misses the opportunity to foreground Black women's experiences of extreme violence. This is a mirror of the broader debate about racism in America, where Black (trans) women remain largely invisible when it comes to police brutality and sexual abuse. Our analysis of DWP showcases that intersectionality remains an important tool of analysis. If we had only drawn on theories of identity formation, we would have concluded that the series dismantles entrenched stereotypes and does a wonderful job in constructing Blackness and Black experience in its complexity. An intersectional analysis helped us uncover a major blind spot of the series, and its connection to the broader debate around race and "racism" in America.

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⁵⁰ Barlow, "Black Women, the Forgotten Survivors."

⁵¹ Robinson, *I Will Survive*.

⁵² Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection."

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