

REPRESENTATION OF BLACKNESS AND WHITENESS IN THE AUDIOVISUAL PRODUCTION DEAR WHITE PEOPLE: Tensions and negotiations between identity and difference¹

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Abstract

We investigate the mediatic representation of blackness and whiteness in the film *Dear White People* by Justin Simien distributed on OTT streaming platforms. A British and Latin American cultural studies perspective grounds the reflection on identity issues in dialogue with studies on ethnic and racial relations while interfacing with media. We look to understand the film through Richard Johnson's Circuit of Culture methodological analytical protocol. The results point to new trends in the dissemination of representations and the opening of media discourses towards a more pluralistic conception of blackness and towards the insertion of the concept of whiteness in communication studies and identitary representations.

Keywords

Audiovisual; representation; blackness; whiteness; *Dear White People*.

Introduction

The film *Dear White People* (2014) by American filmmaker Justin Simien has recently become locally relevant towards understanding the relations among people perceived as white, black and mixed-race within global and local multicultural societies. Even though the audiovisual content is set in the United States, the mediatic visibilities and invisibilities constructed by the ideology of racism and its relation with the symbolic and the social (Hall, 2018) permeate Brazilian and North America cultures (among others), where to be black (on the dark skin spectrum) has repercussions on social mobility.

Consequently, the theme of this research occupies the relation between media, racism and identity/alterity/difference, and limits itself to the debate around discourses and representations of mediatised black and white identities. The state of knowledge on the interrelationship between media and racism is presently trending towards studies on: a) media content produced by black populations towards recognition; b) mediatic visibility of racism; c) racism in social networks; d) debates in media on affirmative action; e) black cultural diversity in media; f) black representations in media.

While we were conducting our research, (March to November, 2018), academic production on the film *Dear White People* was limited to the publication of two articles: 'Cheque seu privilégio ao entrar' Racializando o branco com a série *Dear White People* ['Check your privilege at the door': Racialising whiteness in the series *Dear White People*] (Bibiano, Enne, 2017) and *Dear White People: cinematografia, plástica e percepção* [*Dear White People: cinematography, aesthetics and perception*] (Mancio, Virgilino, Lemos, 2018). The former reflects on the representation of black people in media in terms laid out by Stuart Hall, and the latter analyses the aesthetics of representation according to studies made by Joly, Kossoy, Heller and Gomes Filho. The second paper refers to the concept of whiteness as related to white racial identity as published on the Geledés website.¹

Our contribution to this discussion within the Brazilian context investigates the film *Dear White People* using the Circuit of Culture analytical protocol conceived by Richard Johnson (1996) which confirms rather closely our observations on the production, narrative and reception of the audiovisual content (addressed later in this paper through the analysis of web comments posted on the series). Since 2014, the film and its namesake series adaptation on Netflix have been aggregated to the roster of over-the-top platforms.² For our research, we have relied on the work of thinkers such as Stuart Hall, Jesús Martín-Barbero, Nestor García Canclini, Nilma Lino Gomes, Lourenço Cardoso, Kabengele Munanga, and Boaventura de Souza Santos, among others, aligned with British and Latin-American cultural studies to dialogue with Brazilian studies on ethnic and racial relations.

Black Identity and White Identity in Theory

The relation between the concepts of social representation and alterity emerge in response to various ideologies which try to explain human diversity by way of hierarchies, principally through black or white racial identities. One of them is the ideology of racialism — the existence of various human races — posited through ideas of evolution, progress and modernization of societies.

In that vein, scientific racism crystalizes these ideas around a variety of propositions and thinkers, such as: a) Petrus Camper (1722-1789), a physician who compared human craniums to ape craniums; b) Carl Linnaeus (1701-1778), a scientist who classified humans into *Homo Europæus*, *Americanus*, *Asiaticus* and *Africanus*; c) Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), a researcher who classified humans into

¹ Retrieved January 10, 2019, from: <https://www.geledes.org.br/definicoes-sobre-branquitude>.

² Audiovisual product directly distributed through the internet to consumers are offered by over-the-top (OTT) media platforms. These include, Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Android TV, Apple TV, Sky Go, Now TV, iTunes and Youtube. There are OTT content providers for music, games, etc.

Caucasian, Mongolian, Malayan, Ethiopian, and American races; d) Arthur de Gobineau (1806-1882), a diplomat who postulated the inferiority of the black, yellow, and semite races in comparison to the Aryan white race who as a whole was responsible for all of humanities' advances.

These ideas have been rejected and replaced by a thesis that postulates a single human race which displays a diversity of non-deterministic human characteristics in accordance with research that has mapped human genetic data since 2005. Yet, as late as 2019, James Watson, the Nobel Prize-winner in Physiological Medicine (1962) and researcher into DNA processes responsible for hereditary changes, embroiled himself in bitter public polemics when he contentiously re-asserted the ideology of white intellectual superiority based on Eurocentric IQ tests.³

As such, the concept of race supersedes the biological realm to reveal itself as a political concept. According to Kabengele Munanga (2005-2006, p. 52-53), "if for molecular biologists or human geneticists race does not exist, it exists in the minds of racists and their victims (...)", "(...) racist ideology does not need the concept of race to remake and reproduce itself (...)". Analyses of controversies such as these, appearing in mediatic representations and discourses, are present in Stuart Hall's reflections on racism and the construction of ethnic and racial identities in which alterities are played down: where "(...) the racialized and ethnicized body is constituted discursively, through the regulatory normative ideal of a 'compulsive Eurocentrism'(...)" (Hall, 1996, p. 16), denotes power relations in established dialogues between the self and the other, that is, with the different.

These tensions and negotiations take place within the realm of culture, here understood as the ability of human beings to make sense of and relate to the world through symbolic interpretations. Thus, discourses and representations can be understood as creations and recreations culturally realized by cultural subjects who, for example, project them in theater, cinema, and television in everyday life.

In this scenario, as French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858 - 1917) has written, representations consist of social thoughts originating in collective representations of peoples' beliefs and myths handed down from generation to generation. However, for Serge Moscovici (1928 - 2014), representations are not deterministic as Durkheim thought. Instead, they are representations amplified by individuals active in human interactions which result in the construction of diverse branches of knowledge that ultimately structure society. For Moscovici, the social and the psychological are interdependent because representations generate a guiding understanding of behaviors and conducts derived from "(...) a set of concepts, statements, and explanations originating in daily life in the course of inter-individual communication" (Moscovici, 1981, p. 181).

Moscovici was a theorist of social representations who lived in the flesh the racism implicit in European anti-Semitism aggressively intensified during the Second World War. From this perspective, it was also the Nazi-racist concentration camp experiences in Hannover, Germany that led Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995) to reflect on the concept of being, and to break with the notion of wholeness. He questioned the One/Sameness and valued the Other/Diversity, which transcends the understanding of oneself through the multiple. For Lévinas, "the relation between the Same and the Other is not always reducible to the knowledge of the Other by the Same, nor even to the revelation of the Other to the Same" (1969, p. 28). In this sense, he formulates the concept of otherness to contemplate the insurgency of other ways of being as a way of resisting individualisms and overcoming self-serving Eurocentrisms. According to Guedes, "(...) Lévinas's project consists in drawing attention to the presence of the Other that manifests itself regardless of whether the I asserts it or not (...)" (2007, p. 76).

Identity constructions gain value. Researchers such as Stuart Hall (1932 - 2016), Néstor García Canclini (1939 -), Jesús Martín-Barbero, Zygmunt Bauman (1925 - 2017) and Homi Bhabha (1949 -), and their hybrid and mixed perspectives on cultural studies have contributed greatly to thought on identity

³ Retrieved December 18, 2018, from: https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2019/01/03/internacional/1546527532_263106.html and <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/geral-46847083>.

and its interfaces with communication. According to Moresco and Ribeiro (2015, p. 180):

Identity is understood as something not fixed, always under (re)construction, and from different perspectives: in Hall it is possible to perceive identity as diaspora; in Bauman as a liquid ambivalence; in Bhabha as a binary problem; as a multiplicity of time and space in Martín-Barbero; and as hybridism in Canclini. Finally, identity is driven by uncertainty, crisis (...). It is built by cultural and social heterogeneity (...).

In the heterogeneous sociocultural context of Brazil, its slave heritage indicates that most racist practices are related to black populations — the construction of identities permeates concepts of blackness, whiteness and racial mixing and are also found in media discourses and their social representations.

In addition to human skin-tone empathy/antipathy, activists initiate consciousness-raising and solidarity among the victims of racism by considering blackness as a concept and a movement that “crosses the many and diverse experiences of black identity construction in Brazil and in the African diaspora” (Gomes, 2010, p. 5). In this sense, Kabengele Munanga writes:

(...) in circumscribing the concept of blackness with notions of alterity and identity (...) one of the fundamental goals of blackness was the affirmation and rehabilitation of cultural identity, the very personality of black peoples. (...) From the problematics of blackness stem the difficulties that Afro-descendants encounter when politically channeling their cultural identity (...) (Munanga, 1999, p. 2).

From this perspective, black racial identities are diverse in that they incorporate elements from diverse cultural identities. To counter the ideology of inferiority of Afrodescendence, various cultural subjects came to construct the positivity of blackness by rescuing elements of their African ancestry.⁴

Through this process, the construction of black identities also deals with the concept of miscegenation. Through the ages, racial mixing has been a form of genetic exchange that produces human diversity. However, Eugenic theories focused on the generation of superior beings supported Aryanizing movements against interracial relations in the US, as well as in Brazil, by academics such as Raimundo Nina Rodrigues (1862-1906), for example, who condemned racial mixing. On the other hand, the historian and sociologist Francisco José de Oliveira Vianna (1883-1951) saw in racial mixing a path towards the racial whitening of Brazil. In this context, the ideology of whitening led Brazilian authorities to endorse public policies of non-black immigration to the country, thereby revealing how miscegenation ended up being considered “a transitory stage in the whitening process” and becoming a “keystone of Brazilian racial ideology”, rendering the “black element” invisible and “diluting it into the white population” (Munanga, 1999, p. 110-111).

Conscious of this problematic, Brazilian sociologist Alberto Guerreiro Ramos (1915 - 1982) proposed the concept of whiteness after studying statistics demonstrating the compromised socioeconomic mobility of the Brazilian black population in the 1950s. In line with the Critical Whiteness Studies originating in American universities which scientifically researched issues of racial discrimination, his thesis posits that most research objects dealing with the study of racism in Brazil focus on black identities rather than on white ones.

From the point of view of alterity, manipulated in relations of power, whiteness (which actualizes the concept of being white) would be “(...) a structural standpoint from which a white subject can look at

⁴ In the history of the continent there is no denying the existence of black political, economic and social organizations — even before the year 1400 AD when histories are being written in Europe that disparage African civilizations. Thus, in order to construct black identity consciousness, the rescue of a historical past is a perennial task in order to safeguard the memory of events and experiences such as the Revolution of Haiti and its independence (1791-1804), Pan Africanism, the Negrismo Movement of the Caribbean region, the Négritude Movement in France, the Civil Rights Movement in the US, the black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, the various decolonization and independence movements of African countries, and celebrations of black Awareness Day in Brazil.

others and himself (...)” from where “(...) one can attribute to another that which one does not attribute to oneself (...)” (Frankenberg apud Cardoso, 2010, p. 611).

According to this logic, white identities, for the most part, revolve around leveraging social and ethnic-racial advantages associated with the appearance (phenotype) of Caucasoid people (lightness of skin, straight hair, fineness of mouth and nose, etc.). In contrast, blackness (darkness of the skin, curly hair, thickness of the mouth and nose, etc.) would restrict socioeconomic and cultural mobility. Racist societies are rooted in these ethnic-racial disparities where privileges and non-privileges are linked to phenotypes and to the insistent valuation of whiteness and the devaluation of blackness.

Even so, according to Lourenço Cardoso (2017), white racial identities are diverse and constructed through uncritical whiteness or critical whiteness, by virtue of being related or not to the awareness of material and immaterial social privileges available in racialized societies. In the case of Brazil, racism is linked to the preservation of the status quo emerging from the mistaken belief in the existence of a racial hierarchy among human beings. The dream of a post-racial society has to be deferred because skin color still polarizes the social in terms of lightness and darkness of skin tones within local reflections. When we call into question the worth of the Other, any identity — whether white or black — cannot be criticized of racism, and “even whiteness itself would be anti-racist” (Cardoso, 2017, p. 39).

In settings such as Brazil, individuals statistically identified as white: a) dominate the leadership rules in the three powers of government and the corporate world; b) have better access and permanence in educational institutions; c) suffer fewer femicides and homicides; d) constitute the majority of communicators, directors, writers and are affirmatively represented in the arts and media; e) produce cultural outputs considered universal which are widely disseminated; among other peculiarities, public redress policies have been put in place. In Brazil, affirmative action in the provision of opportunities has served to reduce inequalities between whites, blacks and various other underrepresented groups.

Around the world, public policies designed to redress social stratification gained visibility owing to the vocation of Indian anti-racism activist Mahatma Gandhi, assassinated in 1948, who served as inspiration to civil-rights activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela who crusaded for equal opportunities for all. To attain such goals, anti-segregationist government policies are needed like those implemented in Malaysia, Australia, Canada, Nigeria, South Africa, Argentina, and Cuba, among others. Thus, in 1982, affirmative action legislation was introduced in the first European Economic Community Equal Opportunities Action Program. In Brazil, the Constitution of 1988 guarantees material equality, but social movements also lay claim to a formal equality that truly guarantees citizenship rights to all Brazilians regardless of race or color.

When one reflects on concepts of whiteness, of blackness, or racial mixing in a racist society such as Brazil, one needs to understand the persistence of ethnic and racial inequality. Since racial mixing has been unable to guarantee the cessation of violation of rights based on chromatic scales of skin color or racial traits, affirmative action ends up revealing hidden discriminations based on ideologies of racial hierarchy. In this context, constructions of identities and alterities are also projected in representations and media discourses, thereby underscoring the need for research to address these issues.

Research Paths and Methodological Options

From March to November 2018, our methodological path, informed by an emancipatory paradigm towards the production of knowledge, favored a qualitative and empirical approach in communication studies. Based on the film *Dear White People*, we sought to construct visions of realities of racialized societies, being aware of the inter-knowledge, recognition, self-knowledge and absences that a plurality of crossed or reciprocal knowledges can denote (Santos, 2006).

For the data gathering process, a hybrid method of approximation techniques was constructed

with the object. This included systematic observation as well as documentary and bibliographic research. These methodological choices are consistent with the conditions of the research, which even though they can entail risks and discomforts from engaging with racist practices and how they relate to the advancement of human rights, it indicates respect for differences.

Systematic observation took place on the Internet, both for the direct viewing of the film and the Dear White People series, as well as to capture the flow of comments on various websites. Within the virtual context, we focused our interest on comments made by the Brazilian black movement, and specifically on posts from the Geledés Black Women’s Institute website. Our documentary research focused on the analysis of the script and the film Dear White People, but also considered the repercussions of the data from Brazilian and American demographic censuses that shed light on the current state of ethnic and racial relations.

To support the process of interpretation in light of cultural studies, Richard Johnson’s cultural circuit was chosen as the analytical protocol for the research data. The protocol proposed by Johnson is articulated along three analytical axes: 1) production, as revelatory of the social, political and historical contexts of mediatic cultural production; 2) text, which highlights the narratives present in the media product; 3) readings, which serve to foreground the production of meaning in the reception of mediatic cultural production. In the analysis, these axes intertwine with the cultures lived in the social contexts of production, of narrative and reception. The results of the research are forthwith presented.

Dear White People: from Production to Reception

Social representations and specific media discourses on racism and issues of ethnic and racial relations appear in Justin Simien’s film Dear White People and the subsequent web series of the same name. The film won the U.S. Dramatic Special Jury Award for Breakthrough Talent at the Sundance Festival on January 18, 2014. It also garnered two awards at the Gotham Independent Film Awards and an Independent Spirit Awards. The film was released in movie theaters in October of the same year. Subsequently, the Netflix streaming platform commissioned a web series based on the film.⁵ What follows is a reflection on the film.

Living Cultures in Production

The producer of Dear White People is Justin Simien⁶, an African-American born May 7, 1983, in Houston, Texas. He attended the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in the Montrose District of Houston and received his undergraduate degree from Chapman University, a private, multiracial, Christian institution in Orange, California where he attended the Dodge College of Film and Media Arts, one of the top ten film schools in the world⁷.

These experiences led Justin Simien to reflect on questions of sociability — “Are we friends with all these people just because we are black or because we would like them?”, and “How you talk with your white friends and how you talk with your black friends?”⁸ In writing the film script, Simien considers questions of identity and the shortcomings of the post-racial society of the Obama presidency — “That’s

⁵ Netflix web series such as The Get Down, Chewing Gum, Luke Cage, Greenleaf, She’s Gotta Have It, Luther, How to Get Away with Murder, Master of None, and American Crime Story: The People v. O. J. Simpson, bring plural representations of black, white, and mixed ethnic characters into the plot, even though racism is not the central theme of these productions.

⁶ Retrieved November 08, 2018, from: <http://www.justinsimien.com/blog>.

⁷ Retrieved November 08, 2018, from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dodge_College_of_Film_and_Media_Arts.

⁸ Retrieved November 08, 2018, from: <http://therogersrevue.com/justin-simien/>. Accessed

when it really became more about the American black experience and larger than I understand it". For him, "that was the moment when the movie became "Dear White People"" and took on a satiric tone.⁹

The first scenes of Simien's film script (2013, p. 1-11) offers descriptions of key characters such as Sam, Gabe, Reggie, Troy, Fairbanks, Kurt, Fletcher, Lionel, Sofia and Coco, as featured in Figure 2:

Figure 2 — Cast of the movie Dear White People.

PRESIDENT HERBERT FLETCHER and DEAN WALTER FAIRBANKS, a well-adorned black man. Fairbanks eyeballs Fletcher – tension between the two.

TROY FAIRBANKS, 21, black. He drags a brush through his finger waves anxiously. The look of guilt is the only mark of imperfection in his privileged and chiseled demeanor.

KURT FLETCHER, 21, white. No sympathy in his jaded blue eyes as he watches on an iPad in a lavish parlor room.

SAMANTHA white (SAM) 21, records the broadcast in an edit bay. Despite her light skin, the Afro pick in her fro pompadour leaves little doubt she identifies as black.

GABE, 24, white and ruggedly handsome in spite of his shaggy hair and "laundry day" flip flop clad ensemble...

REGGIE, 21, black - his fro top and preppy punk attire is both bohemian and radical.

LIONEL HIGGINS, 20, black, watches through dark rimmed glasses in a bustling indifferent Dining Hall. A guilt pains his otherwise boyish face.

SOFIA FLETCHER, a dewy-eyed, pink lipped brunette who exudes a kind of sexy boredom and COL-ANDREA CONNERS (COCO), 20, black with blue contacts, adjusts the straight bangs of her weave to better see the small TV in her dorm. A smirk on her glossy pink lips.

Source: Created by the authors based on the film script and publicity photos sourced from the web.¹⁰

The unfolding of the storyline offers a succession of scenes which juxtaposes objective events and the memories of the characters linked by a voice-over narration. The film is set in a recent past, towards the end of the presidency of African-American Barack Obama (2009 - 2017), during the ascendancy of a black family in the White House, which justifies the premise of a post-racial society.

In a broad sense, one can appreciate within the storylines of *Dear White People*: a) the charting of the persistence of inequalities motivated by racism; b) the valuation of black resilience in a society where whites are privileged; c) the possibility of racial integration through racial mixing.

Living Cultures Within the Narrative

The living cultures within the audiovisual narrative take place within the physical space of a fictional university located in the North-Eastern United States. The film transpires at Winchester University, a private, predominantly white institution with pretensions of Ivy League standing. In this milieu, discourses and representations of blackness and whiteness are presented as we discuss below.

Representations of Whiteness

One of the principal representations of whiteness is related to the main problem of the plot, a blackface party promoted by a predominantly white student association within the premises of Winchester University. They take advantage of the revelry that accompanies Halloween as an opportunity to lampoon

⁹ Retrieved November 08, 2018, from: <http://therogersrevue.com/justin-siemen/>. Accessed

¹⁰ Retrieved August 29, 2019, from: <https://www.google.com.br/search?sa=X&hl=p-t-BR&q=cara+gente+branca+elenco&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAAONgFuLSz9U3qIo3rzA1U0JiawllJ1vpp2X-m5IIJq-TE4pJFrBLJiUWJCumpeSWpCkIFiXnJiQqpOal5yfkARL5owUkAAAA&ved=2ahUKewioocrE-parkAhW5IbkGHdISAcgQMSgAMCJ6BAGNEAE&biw=1012&bih=392>.

the racialization of the black student body through the blackface theme chosen for the party and dressing up as black stereotypes. The University administration is cognizant of the intentions of the students of Pastiche Magazine to put on the event but doubt its realization. However, the party does take place after an invitation is broadcast anonymously on social media. During the soirée, a small-time race riot breaks out and the story is picked up by major tv broadcasters. This results in the launching of a criminal investigation into racism at the University.

Throughout the plot, it is clear that the ideology of supremacy is the basis for the construction of white racial identity as, according to Stuart Hall, it is “the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation” (Hall, 1986, p. 29) which give meaning to the ethnic and racial relations in the narrative. The commitment of the white people in guaranteeing rights to the black population is barely touched upon in the film. Even if notions of Critical Whiteness are present, the power related to white people is still represented as the site of speech (Ribeiro, 2017). We can discern some axes in the representation of whiteness, among them: 1) white people downplay the persistence of racism; 2) white people are concerned by the supposed loss of privileges; 3) white people believe in integration through racial mixing — facets we shall now examine.

Silencing the Persistence of Racism

In the sequence below, the dialogues point to the depiction of white people naturalizing others and being insensitive to racism directed at black people. In the dialogue below, President Fletcher, Winchester’s top administrator, calls on Dean Fairbanks to contain the conflict by considering racism against blacks an outdated issue.

Figure 3 — Dialogue between Fairbanks and Fletcher
Scene 32 (36:29 to 37:07): INT. DEAN FAIRBANKS OFFICE - DAY

DEAN FAIRBANKS: Every race issue is my issue.

PRESIDENT FLETCHER: It’s a student issue. You are the Dean of students aren’t you? The Times has been watching us like a hawk. Last thing we need is some “race war” on newspapers across the country. How do you think our donor base will feel about that? Our fundraiser is four weeks away.

FAIRBANKS: How bad is this deficit of yours?

FLETCHER: Worse. But let me tell you something. If this blows up any further? It’s on you, Walter.

FAIRBANKS: (laughs ironically)

FLETCHER: Racism is over in America. And if anyone’s still dealing with it, it’s the — I don’t know Mexicans probably.

Source: Created by the authors using Print Screen and the film script.

In the scene depicted in Fig. 3, it is obvious that, despite the advances in racial equality post World War II, the ideology of racism persists. This representation of whiteness reveals, on the one hand, the fear of a mostly white institution of being accused of racist practices against blacks; and, on the other hand, the ironic acceptance of racist practices against Mexicans seeking US citizenship. Here, one cannot deny that racism persists and is at the service of perpetuating inequalities between human beings.

Linking Affirmative Action to Privilege

In the scene analyzed below, the exchange shows white people feeling unfairly treated when blacks are guaranteed access and increased inclusion to universities through quotas. In the dialogue featured in Fig. 4, Kurt, a white student, takes advantage of his situation as the son of University President Fletcher to question affirmative action, a public policy defended by Sam.

Figure 4 — Conflict between Kurt and Sam
Scene 21 (20:24 to 21:11): INT. ARMSTRONG / PARKER - DAY

KURT: The biggest athletes, movie stars, hell your president is black. Sometimes I think the hardest thing to be in the American work force right now is an educated white guy.

SAM: You're not serious.

KURT: You guys still got affirmative action, you're set.

SAM: What are you doing in here?

KURT: Obama. Leader of the free world got into Harvard on affirmative action. Know who's not president right now? The guy that didn't get in.

SAM: On behalf of the colored folks in the room, let me apologize for all the better qualified white students whose place we're taking up.

Source: Created by the authors using Print Screen and the film script.

In this scene, one can appreciate the debate on socio-cultural privileges which sustain economic inequalities. Thus, affirmative action on racial matters is perennially called into question by relativizing black and white identities. In Brazil, the University of Brasilia (UnB) was one of the first to adopt an admission policy based on quotas to guarantee access to blacks and indigenous peoples. At UnB, between 2004 and 2017, 47,000 students, including black and indigenous individuals, were accepted into undergraduate and graduate programs under that initiative. The most positive aspect of affirmative action in Brazil is the attainment of equal opportunity through the democratization of higher education, access to which still predominantly favors white people.

Black Integration Through Mixed-Race Relations

In the scene below, Sam's racial, combative militancy seems to lose steam because of her mixed parentage and the betrayal of her secret: a romantic relationship with Gabe, a white graduate student. Throughout the storyline, the relationship provokes tensions and negotiations between the characters, many of whom expect Sam to date black men, such as Reggie. In the dialogue presented in Fig. 5, the position of oppression is reversed: the black woman assumes a position of power in an intimate situation and the affirmation of racial mixing gains value in the representation as a mode of racial integration.

Figure 5 — Intimacy between Gabe and Sam
Sc. 26 & 27a (29:47 to 31:50): INT. GABE'S ROOM. DAVIS HOUSE

SAM: On your knees. (Gabe kneels below frame).

(... Later... Sam's eyes pop open - a startled scream escapes her lips.)

GABE: What? You dream in "Cosby" again?

SAM: My hair was so straight. My sweater so big. I told you about that?

(Sam's phone buzzes. Gabe grabs it and sees Reggie's photo pop

up. He swallows his envy and hands it to Sam. She doesn't answer. Silence as it hits her voicemail.)

GABE: Hey so...this whole "Head of House" thing. Congrats?

SAM: Yeah, it's... it's.

GABE: Weird, right? Never took you as a student politician...

(Reggie's photo again - New Voicemail. Regret in Sam's eyes.)

SAM: Yeah, well...

GABE: Sam? What are we doing?

SAM: Fucking.

Source: Created by the authors using Print Screen and the film script.

Notions of segregation and integration are often related to racial blending and mixing as a manner of attaining ethnic and racial harmony. These ideas have been appropriated by Demétrio Magnoli (2009) in his book *Uma gota de sangue—Historia do Pensamento Racial (A Drop of Blood—A History of Racial Thought)*. The Brazilian geographer asserts that in the USA ethnic and racial relations are binary (black or white), whereas in Brazil relations are for the most part mixed-race. In their view (and that of other authors), the aspiration towards racial belonging would lead to hatred, while integration would be encouraged by racial mixing. The myth of racial democracy still persists with the help of media representations and discourses.

Representations of Blackness

In the film, we are treated to diverse representations of blackness. But the principal one is related to the expression 'Dear White People', a militant call-to-arms which spurs us to reflect on whiteness. *Dear White People*, the name of the film and of the series streamed by Netflix, is primarily the name of a program that airs on the university's student radio broadcast via a public address system across the campus. The radio show's announcer is Samantha White, a first-semester student at the Goodman Media School at Winchester University, who not only opens and closes the show but is also its creative producer. Sam, as she is known, critiques ethnic and racial relations inspired by Craig Steven Wilder's book *Ebony & Ivy* (2013). Listeners can participate or contribute to the program principally by phone. Subsequent scenes shows that the issue of discrimination is pervasive throughout the entire film. Its presence is felt in the traditional media — radio, print, and film — as well as the social media which serve to explore the complications of the students' states of mind motivated by the ideology of racism.

The unfolding of the film articulates the notion of inherent difference between the students and how this pertains to a social activism relative to questions of blackness. As Guedes (2007) suggests, the intertwining of a singular I opens the way for an analysis of parts that reveals 'Sameness of Me in the Other' and 'Difference from Me in the Other' — where that which is similar is affirmed, and that which is different is negated. This is because notions of the Other and the I, the alter and the ego in Latin, which for centuries have served as the foundation of Western philosophy that underlie citizenship and negate alterity for the benefit of some and to the detriment of others. The film explores black people's contradictions in connection with racial belonging so as to reveal the modes of acceptance of a group one seeks to affiliate with, whether it be black or white. In what follows, one can appreciate different vectors within the various representations of blackness: 1) black individuals attesting to the persistence of racism; 2) black individuals questioning racial integration; 3) black individuals suffering the consequences of the contradictions of racial mixing.

Revealing the Persistence of Racism

In the following scene, the dialogue shows black people in conflict for taking opposite sides on the issue of activism: on the one hand, for condoning militant black activism; on the other, for encouraging non-militant activism. In the exchange, Dean Fairbanks seeks to take Sam to task for making *Dear White People* a racist radio show. Sam turns the tables on Fairbanks when she explains what racism means for her.

Figure 6 — Argument between Dean Fairbanks and Sam
Sc. 59A (01:02:28 to 01:02:51): EXT. WINCHESTER UNIVERSITY - DAY

DEAN FAIRBANKS: Do you honestly think this is in the spirit of Armstrong / Parker house?

SAM: The role of the counter culture is to wake up the mainstream to --

FAIRBANKS: -- I've got furniture older than you. Counter culture? Is that what you think this is? That show of yours?

SAM: What about my show?

FAIRBANKS: Your show is racist.

SAM: Black people can't be racist. Prejudice? Yes. But not racist. Racism describes a system of disadvantage based on race. Black people can't be racist since they don't benefit from such a system.

Source: Created by the authors using Print Screen and the film script.

Brazilian sociologist Fernando Machado (2000, p. 9) explains that the concept of racism is articulated between ideology, prejudice and discrimination through racist practices depending on cultural and temporal contexts. A racialized society is one that, in its construction, accepts the ideology of the existence of different races and assigns a differential value to each one of them, such as in Brazil or the United States. The targets of these ideologies, prejudices and discrimination are the most vulnerable groups, considered subaltern and for the most part racially marginalized by privileged groups.

Relating Integration to Cultural Dominance

In the following scene, the dialogue shows that black people believe that the white model of integration leads to a renunciation of black cultures, social groups and identities. In her campaign speech for house president, Sam belittles her political adversary's position: Troy Fairbanks, the Dean's son, represents the submission of blackness to whiteness

Figure 7 — Sam's Campaign Speech

Sc. 16 (10:18 to 11:50): INT. ARMSTRONG/PARKER DINING HALL - NIGHT

SAM: Troy my brother, it's broke. Troy's a legacy kid. And yet it's under his watch that Armstrong/Parker, the bastion of black culture here was gutted. By the Randomization of Housing Act.

Troy: That's absurd!

SAM: Second years of color no longer have a say in where they go. The culture that's been fostered in this house for two decades will be wiped out in two years. This wasn't motivated by a desire to mix things up. Bring about racial and socio-economic harmony. No, the black kids are sitting together in the proverbial cafeteria and they must be up to no good. (...) The black Student Union and I have brought a petition to repeal the Randomization of Housing Act. I plan on bringing it to the President and together we can bring black back to Winchester.

Source: Created by the authors using Print Screen and the film script.

The dialogues make reference to the difficulty of racial co-presence that recognizes the right to equality — against de-characterizing inferiority and concomitant with the right to difference — which ghettos represent. In this sense, according to Santos, one has the right to equality and to difference, since "people and social groups have the right to equality when difference makes them inferior, and the right to be different when equality de-characterizes them" (2001, p. 38).

Revealing the Contradictions of Racial Mixing

In the following scene, the dialogue shows that black people live a perpetual conflict as to their ethnic and racial origins, for they are fully aware that their line of descent is interracial. In the dialogue below, Sam's frailty in accepting her own inter-racial origins is welcomed by Gabe, her white boyfriend.

Figure 8 — Being black, being white, being Mixed-race?

Sc. 97 (01:14:05 to 01:42:43): EXT. WINCHESTER UNIVERSITY - DAY

GABE: Want to talk about it?

SAM: My mother worked nights so he would take me to school. And it pissed me off because he would follow me all the way to homeroom. Every time he tried to hold my hand I'd scream and pull away. He thought I was just being... difficult. But it was the kids. And the parents and the teachers. They'd see this black girl and this white man and wonder what we were doing together. (...) I was just a bratty girl, didn't know any better but-- The thought of losing him-- You know? I just feel so bad. How awful am I to do that to him? To anyone I love?

GABE: I'm sure he forgives you.

SAM: Think so? So anyway. I didn't mean to say all of that. I don't know why I did.

Source: Created by the authors using Print Screen and the film script.

The issues of racial blending and racial mixing find spaces for reflection in both Brazilian and American contexts. Between 1942 and 1955, Oracy Nogueira conducted comparative studies on racism in the United States and Brazil. The research was intended to be a counterpoint to the ideology of Brazilian racial democracy generally accepted after the publication in 1933 of Gilberto Freyre's book *Casa grande & Senzala*¹¹. Freire preached the existence of a racial democracy in Brazil, resulting from racial mixing between aboriginals, enslaved Africans and Portuguese colonizers. Nogueira's (1985) research led him to describe racism in the two countries differently: 1) racism in the US emerges as a prejudice of origin since markers of African ancestry (genotype) motivate US racial discrimination; 2) Brazilian racism emerges as typological discrimination based on visible racial traits in people's appearance (phenotype).

However, the new mixed-race face of the United States is changing certain logics. Representations of blackness in dialogue with representations of white people sensitized to the contradictions of racialized societies is little explored in media productions, but here it is examined as empathic intercultural dialogue.

Indicating trends, but without being conclusive, one can appreciate in *Dear White People*: a) a variety of representations of black identity consistent with reality; b) racial mixing emerges as a point of conflict and of negotiation in the reflexions on racism.

Reception of Living Cultures: Analysis of Comments on the Series

The reception of the film has taken on different forms, including online commentary in social media and various websites. In Brazil, the Geledés Portal, produced by the Instituto da Mulher Negra [the Black Women's Institute], maintains a page devoted to voicing opinions on *Dear White People*.

In 2018, during the research phase, we identified seven posts relevant to our work on *Dear White People* in the Geledés Portal: (i) "Satirical comedy about racism gets new trailer featuring the main character from *Everybody Hates Chris*" (10/13/2014); (ii) "Cara Gente Branca/ *Dear White People*" (10/17/2015); (iii) "Dear White People and black skin diversity" (4/29/2017); (iv) "About Reggie" (05/01/2017); (v) "Dear White People" is the series a white man like me needs (05/03/2017); (vi) "Why do we ignore *Dear White People* and make 13 Reasons Why go viral?" (07/05/2017); (vii) "Dear White People looks at racial micro-aggressions and the debate on civil liberties" (11/05/2018).

Three posts were selected as the qualitative research sample on reception. The criteria used to select the interlocutors consisted of being a receptor/producer of content with manifest understanding of media, and possessing implicit familiarity with the concepts of whiteness and blackness. In the analysis that follows, one can discern that the comments by two white commentators demonstrate critical sense with respect to their whiteness and one young black man comments on universalized blackness.

We can glean certain tendencies from the posts on the Geledés Portal: a) audiences interact with meaning production in the construction of black identities as an important consideration towards

¹¹ The book has been translated to English as *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization* (1986), Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. The literal translation of the Brazilian title would be *The Mansion and the Slave Quarters* (Freyre, 1986, p. xvi). (Trans. note)

the understanding of blackness; b) audiences reveal that the satirical bent contributes to a construction of white identities conscious of privileges, and that it is positioned against racism; c) audiences believe in racial integration as necessary, yet complex, because it generates tensions and demands negotiations.

Final Considerations

In the course of the research, we came to appreciate that the film *Dear White People* is committed to the mediatic representativeness of a new US reality. In 2013, African Americans represented 13.2% of the population.¹² And according to the latest US Census Bureau demographics, by 2050 the projected percentage of white people relative to non-whites will decrease, not only pointing to an increase of single race non-white and mixed-race populations, but also to a rise in their relative percentages.¹³ As such, this demographic forecast points to the need for more diverse social mobility. As in the rest of the world, the sociocultural problem to be solved is the integration of people from various ethnic origins. This would point the way to giving value to the experiences of everyday co-presence in both the production of relations of belonging and the constructions of identity in the intercultural dialogue between the me and the we.

Dear White People espouses this thinking which is also operative in Brazil. Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) points to the blackening of Brazilian society due to an increase in the number of brown people identifying themselves as black, as well as that of mixed-race people self-declaring as brown instead of white. Analysis of the 2018 National Household Sample Survey (Pnad), indicates that this is a side effect of the implementation of affirmative actions aimed at black people (black or brown phenotype with black race markers). Intellectual and political debates on racism are subjected to the interference of ideological narratives advancing the predominance of a mixed Brazilianness which seeks to challenge public policies of racial equality.

However, structural racism is alive and well in Brazil. Inherited from an economic system founded on slavery, based upon the idea of race, and reproduced in the exclusionary practices that still persist in Brazilian society, it perpetuates the low occupation of positions of power and socioeconomic ascension by black people. This is the cause of the slow progress in implementing policies of racial equality that would reverse short-term, medium and long-term ethnic and racial inequalities in the most diverse areas of activity.

Given these conditions, we conclude that *Dear White People* merit positive and negative criticism for both its broadening of views on media discourses and its representations of whiteness and blackness in cultural communication studies. On the one hand, the work provides reflections for the deconstruction of social structures of racial inequalities; on the other hand, as much as it wishes to deconstruct racism, one can also say that it ends up reinforcing ideologies that racialize human beings.

Nevertheless, we hope this research will contribute to broaden reflection on the persistence of the notion of race in determining socioeconomic and cultural structures in Brazil, as well as in other countries. Beyond the relevance and social interest of the theme, we seek to inspire cultural transformations within Brazilian human relations by underscoring the relevance of the ancient South African Zulu and Xhosa adage *Umuntu ngumuntu nagabantu*, "I am because we are". It would go a long way to help reassess theories of identity and otherness based on the right to equality and difference, on the unity and diversity of the self.

¹² Retrieved from <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/united-states/quick-facts/all-states/black-population-percentage#map>

¹³ Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p25-1143.pdf>

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