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"This Isn't Some TV Show, Okay?"

Mocking Cinema

The Power Walk

From the moment Dev Shah (Aziz Ansari) walks into the high-end Italian restaurant, Carbone, in *Master of None* (Netflix, 2015–present), the camera follows him with a long tracking shot ("The Dinner Party," 2.5). He greets the hostess, walks past a bartender, and makes his way through a narrow passageway to an interior space. When he reaches the main dining room, Chef Jeff (Bobby Cannavale) welcomes him exuberantly. Dev is a journeyman actor and host of the little-known TV show *Clash of the Cupcakes*, and yet his walk through the restaurant is reminiscent of the Steadicam shot at the Copacabana nightclub in Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas* (1990). In that longer tracking shot, Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) enthralls his date Karen Friedman (Lorraine Bracco) by bringing her to the Copacabana. From the moment Henry tips the valet, the camera follows him and Karen as they walk past patrons waiting in line on the street and enter an unmarked back door that leads them through seemingly endless corridors, where they run into bartenders and waiters, until they get to a cacophonous and maze-like kitchen, which finally and magically opens up to the bustling nightclub, where Henry and Karen are seated at a table right by the stage. For over two minutes, we are given unbroken access to how Henry glides confidently through these offstage spaces and how he seduces Karen by showing her the perks of being a glamorous mafia girlfriend or wife. When he escorts her to the back door, he claims he prefers this route because it is "better than waiting in line." Henry feels superior to the nobodies in the street, waiting at the door to get in, and the shot's fluidity conveys his mastery over this restricted space. *Master of None* nods at this scene, although there is something not quite the same. When Dev walks in, the shot stays alongside or behind him, as it does with Henry. With hardly anyone else in the frame, it appears as if he might also be accessing the restaurant through a secret or back door. But that is a

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misperception. He is merely walking through the restaurant to find Chef Jeff in the back dining room. Henry Hill may enjoy the privileges of being a made man, but Dev is not there yet.

Dev is smaller than Henry Hill; his shorter stature, combined with his subdued demeanor, draws a sharp contrast with Henry's extravagant masculinity. As he walks through with his date, Henry keeps reaching out with his arms—to shake hands with or to slip twenty-dollar bills to tough guys, to call out a kissing couple for being there "every time," to move two squabbling cooks out of the way, and so on. His body occupies much of the frame, and because people know him, they move out of the way, squeezing themselves out of the shot to make room for him. Stella Bruzzi analyzes this Copa shot in relation to other instances of powerful men walking through spaces to assert their authority over them. In particular, she compares it to the early sequence of President Andrew Shepherd (Michael Douglas) walking through corridors of the White House in Rob Reiner's *The American President* (1995). Reiner's arrangement is not a single take, and yet it appears seamless because the cuts occur when characters enter or exit the frame. As in *GoodFellas*, the emphasis remains on how a powerful white male character cuts through space in linear motion. In both instances, Bruzzi argues, a type of tough, self-assured masculinity is romanticized, and "ambivalences and uncertainties are . . . suppressed or brushed aside quite literally by the momentum of their walk."[1] Dev's walk also carries forward momentum, but he does not occupy the space in the same way. When he enters the restaurant, the hostess has to lead him to Chef Jeff, as Dev doesn't know his way around. When he passes the bartender, he is not welcomed or even recognized. Though he feigns confidence, he is actually an anxious aspiring actor hoping to hit it off with the celebrity chef, who pulls him in with a bear hug. Though *Master of None* mimics the walking sequence from a film like *GoodFellas*, as this description points out, the effect is quite different. Dev does not assume the same kind of masculine authority. He looks rather diminutive in that shot, as though unable to wholly inhabit it.

In that way, Dev resembles Allan Felix (Woody Allen) in Herbert Ross's *Play It Again, Sam* (1972). After going through a messy divorce with his ex-wife (Susan Anspach), who considers him unattractive and suffocating, Allan begins receiving dating advice from the ghost of Humphrey Bogart (Jerry Lacy). He worships Bogart's charm and wit and wants to be like him. Bogart coaches him, feeding him tough-guy lines that Allan can repeat to "dames," but they never work as well. Allan has known all along that his Bogart fantasy

is impossible to realize. After a screening of Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942) at the very beginning, he confesses: "Who'm I kidding? I'm not like that. I never was, I never will be." So his attempts to embody the perceived cool of Bogart's cinematic persona—the cigarette dangling from one side of his mouth, the laconic reserve, and the detached world-weariness—are bound to fail. In fact, his is not a serious imitation of Bogart but one that verges on mimicry. While standing in front of a mirror and impersonating Bogart's mannerisms, Allan fantasizes that his lovemaking has cured his date's frigidity. This moment could've been an homage. However, Allan looks ridiculous occupying the role of Bogart. Though the *Casablanca* star himself was not very tall, Allan appears strikingly miniature, and his exaggerated inflections highlight how unreal and inappropriate the Bogey persona itself is. The way Allan performs them, Bogart's gestures come across as boorish, not sophisticated. Allan not only fails to occupy the Bogey persona, but his failure mocks that persona, highlighting how ill-suited it is to this new context.

Master of None similarly places Dev in the position of Henry Hill in order to show how he doesn't fit that role. Whereas Henry is the model of self-confidence, Dev looks like anything but. Whereas Henry exemplifies the traditional masculine power walk, Dev shrinks from it. Dev can't not fit the space and Henry's mannerisms imperfectly. The comparison between Dev and Allan here is not coincidental. In the scene prior to the one at the restaurant, Dev walks and talks with his friend from Italy, Francesca (Alessandra Mastronardi), around the Brooklyn Museum of Art, in a manner reminiscent of Isaac (Woody Allen) and Mary's (Diane Keaton) wandering conversation that ends at the Queensboro Bridge at sunrise in Allen's *Manhattan* (1979). In that scene, Dev resembles Isaac, bumbling, stuttering over some words, underconfident—which makes the contrast with Henry even more jarring. The extended long take in *GoodFellas* heightens Henry's erotic allure, as he charms not only his date but also the audience with his dominion over his environment. Dev's entrance is literally shorter, intended only to get him from one point to another. It mocks Henry's more ostentatious arrival and the hypermasculinity that fuels it. If Allan Felix pitifully mimics the traditional machismo of Bogart's generation, Dev parodies Henry's tough-guy persona by downgrading its power.

More than that, Dev's occupation of this space underscores how Henry's power derives from *white* masculinity. Being the only person of color in this space makes Dev inhabit it restrainedly. But this shot does not rue his

inability to walk in Henry's shoes. Rather, it critiques how white masculinity colonizes the space that it treads on. As Larissa M. Ennis perceptively points out, though *GoodFellas* is critical of its "brutal man-children, locked into patterns of violence and self-indulgence," it is also nostalgic for that masculinity.[2] More damningly, Ennis argues, it belongs to a series of American films, particularly from the 1980s and '90s, that longs for "a historical masculinity that was invisibly white and unchallenged in its moral righteousness."[3] This kind of unchallenged white masculinity appears not only in the construction of gangsters but also in films as different as Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992), Doug Liman's *Swingers* (1996), and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997), all of which use the long take to represent white men asserting themselves over the territory they cover. The power of uncontested whiteness is what allows Henry Hill to walk through the back corridors of the Copacabana, uninhibited and with abandon. Dev does not have that kind of access or privilege. Indeed, his lack of mastery over this space might be connected to the series title; given his context, Dev may be competent but cannot truly excel. Intriguingly, the first (and missing) half of the idiom in the series title dates back to at least the early seventeenth century, when being a "Jack of all trades" was meant as praise for a man's breadth of knowledge or expertise. The phrase "master of none" seems to have been added in the late eighteenth century, connoting the opposite of its original, even though the previous phrase is still contained within it. Locating Dev in the space of Henry Hill et al. can be read in that way too: Dev can do much of what his white predecessors can, and yet he does not possess Henry's authority. What does it mean to put an Indian American character and actor in the space previously occupied by white masculinity? What is the effect of seeing Dev fail at traversing that space confidently? Space here is not only the physical space of this specific restaurant but also the institutional space of American cinema, which has long associated power with white masculinity. Dev inhabits this space while also rejecting it. But he does not regret being unable to become Henry Hill. Rather, this scene points out the impossibility of his occupying space with such smug self-assuredness. The same can be said about the show's creator, Aziz Ansari himself, who foregrounds the challenges of being an artist of color in a predominantly white industry that has uncritically occupied a central position in American popular culture. What does *Master of None*'s caustic recreation of *GoodFellas*'s showpiece, otherwise narratively out of place, tell us about how serial television can appropriate the space

occupied by cinema? To be more specific, what can we learn when we analyze cinematic appropriation in explicitly racial terms?

On Parody

Gottfried Helnwein's *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* (1984) places James Dean, Humphrey Bogart, and Marilyn Monroe at a corner diner at nighttime, with Elvis Presley behind the counter serving them. Though Monroe and Presley appear to be laughing at something, Dean and Bogart sit there brooding over their drinks. Except for the characters in it, every other detail imitates Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* (1942), including the diagonal composition, the eerie glow of fluorescent lights, and the expression of modern emptiness. But Helnwein's replacement of unknown customers with pop culture idols overturns Hopper's illustration. Monroe, Presley, Bogart, and Dean are playing familiar roles; therefore, they cannot embody the anonymous nobodies whom Hopper represents as symbols of human isolation. Beate Müller cites Helnwein's painting as an example of parody.[4] Though it puts the movie stars in place of anonymous patrons, I would suggest that this reproduction leans more toward a spoof than an actual parody. Helnwein's work is a humorous imitation of Hopper, but it functions more like a trick or a joke. In fact, one can find many such reimaginings of Hopper's diner online, replacing his customers with Santa and his reindeer or *Star Wars* characters or Lego creatures or the cast of the *Avengers* and on and on. There are serious recreations too, as in Herbert Ross's *Pennies from Heaven* (1981) and in James Foley's *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992). Ross's film draws on Hopper's tone of urban alienation to recreate Depression-era Chicago, whereas Foley uses it for a critique of capitalism's physical and psychological damage. Both films work more like sincere appropriations rather than parody. At the other end of the spectrum, caricatures of Hopper's work show up in *The Simpsons*, where the Nighthawk Diner becomes just another place where characters visit to contemplate how to spend their inheritance ("Old Money," 2.17) or celebrate their birthday ("Homer vs. the Eighteenth Amendment," 8.18). These versions have no sense of Hopper's solitude or gloom. They are similar to Helnwein's version, insofar as they are ridiculous. However, even though they rely on incongruity, they cannot be considered examples of parody.

In fact, all of the examples in the previous paragraph lead to a broader question about this mode of referencing: is parody simply a matter of derision? Linda Hutcheon argues that though it is commonly defined as ridicule,

parody cannot simply be equated with mocking imitation. First, the association with "ridicule that developed in tandem with the art of Pope, Swift, and Hogarth doesn't necessarily feel right today."[5] Second, parody has often served a function more complex than ridicule. At times, it has been compared with quotation or allusion; at other times, parody has appeared closer to irony or satire. Some see parody as subversive, while others believe it reestablishes existing power dynamics. If homage and evocation suffer from being woefully undertheorized, then parody, like genre, has the opposite problem. In Western culture, the first usage of *parodia*, the Greek word for parody, can be traced back to Aristotle. In calling Hegemon of Thasos the inventor of parodies, Aristotle provides a rough definition of the term as a ludicrous alteration of well-known poems. He suggests that unlike Homer or Cleophon, Hegemon represents "people worse than us."[6] That is how Aristotle aligns parody with disdain. More than that, he sneers at it because he believes parody belittles its sources. This denigration of parody has not carried over into literary or film theory. In fact, widely different definitions of parody have been produced, by writers who are otherwise dissimilar, even irreconcilable, in their interpretive approaches, from Quintilian to John Dryden to Mikhail Bakhtin to Fredric Jameson. Given its recurring appearance, it would be impossible to offer a comprehensive history or linear evolution of parody. In what follows, I will discuss some key questions raised by the multitudinous accounts of parody in order to reveal its intersections with intertextual analysis.

In Aristophanes's *Thesmophoriazusae*, or *Women at the Thesmophoria* (411 BC), a character portraying the classical tragedian Euripides requests his elderly relative Mnesilochus to disguise himself as a woman and sneak into the festival of fertility. At the festival, Euripides believes, the women of Athens are debating an appropriate revenge for his misogynistic portrayals of mad and murderous women. The masquerading Mnesilochus speaks up on behalf of Euripides and is promptly discovered. In a scene that comically inverts a moment in Euripides's *Telephus* (438 BC), Mnesilochus threatens to kill Micca's baby, which turns out to be a dressed-up wine skin. Still, Mnesilochus persists in mock-stabbing the wine skin, while Micca catches its "blood" in a pan. Though Quintilian famously declared parody to be a Roman invention, scholars have since gone back to Aristophanes's Old Comedy to mark the beginnings of parody. Typically, the Old Comedy plays, which are composed of song, dance, buffoonery, and political criticism, focused on real personalities and topical references. Here, Aristophanes imitates Euripides,

but he turns the tragedy upside down by undoing the threat to a baby. Since Mnesolichus, Micca, and the women continue to treat the wine skin as a baby, it appears more as a farce, thus diminishing the seriousness of Euripides's tragedy. This isn't the only moment where Aristophanes duplicates Euripides sarcastically; *The Acharnians* (425 BC) and *The Frogs* (405 BC) also resurrect scenes or themes from Euripides in order to ridicule them. But Aristophanes's work goes much further, mocking contemporary playwrights, philosophers, politicians, and even the Athenian polis. As Ralph M. Rosen points out, Aristophanes in particular or Old Comedy in general may not have "anything resembling a coherent critical agenda or aesthetic mission," but these works "poke and prod at precisely those aspects of society which appear to be most stable and authoritative."[7] Aristophanes is not trying to depose or supplant Euripides. These comic reversals take jabs at the seriousness of Greek tragedy, but their critique does not go much further. There may be *in*version here, but this isn't *sub*version. We can read these early instances of parody as part of a broader cultural move in fifth century BC toward wittily questioning and destabilizing authority.

I imagine Aristophanes spoofs Euripides in the way Mel Brooks's *High Anxiety* (1977) comically inverts several Hitchcock films. *High Anxiety*'s opening echoes Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), where Dr. Anthony Edwardes (Gregory Peck) becomes the new director of a community mental hospital, though it turns out that he himself suffers from amnesia and a traumatic phobia of parallel lines against a white background. Brooks's film also begins with Dr. Richard Thorndyke (Mel Brooks) arriving at the Psychoneurotic Institute for the Very, Very Nervous, but instead of the patients, it is the physicians and nurses who are crazy. Dr. Thorndyke has a fear of heights, recalling the retired police detective John Ferguson (James Stewart) from *Vertigo*. Ferguson's vertigo has tragic consequences, as he becomes an accomplice to murder, whereas Dr. Thorndyke's acrophobia leads to hysterical antics. The film also recreates specific stylistic techniques, like the long tracking shots in *Rope* (1948), where the camera seems to glide effortlessly through the walls and windows. Brooks's camera is not so lucky, and a dolly shot is explicitly ruined when the camera crashes into a glass door, startling the characters and, more importantly, drawing attention to the cinematic apparatus. These examples demonstrate how Brooks plays Aristophanes to Hitchcock's Euripides. *High Anxiety* overturns the gravity of Hitchcock's premises by making them seem absurd. Instead of a direct or sincere imitation, Brooks's film pokes at its sources, as if he were deflating a balloon.

It is aware of its parody and foregrounds that awareness. Interestingly, early critics did not consider *High Anxiety* to even be a parody. Writing for the *New Yorker*, Pauline Kael declared that "Brooks seems to be under the impression that he's adding a satirical point of view, but it's a child's idea of satire—imitation with a funny hat and a leer."[8] Charles Champlin does not critique Brooks's immaturity, like Kael. In his *Los Angeles Times* review, Champlin suggests that what Brooks is doing isn't parody at all; rather it is homage because "it is both knowing and reverential."[9] Though Champlin is more generous than Kael, both of them get to the core of what is at stake in understanding parody. Robert Alan Crick frames the debate this way: "even granting Brooks' 'spoofs' are often deliriously funny, is it enough solely to imitate in a funny way, or must the parodist dip his pen, even lightly, in Swiftian poison, exposing the original as foolish, faulty, and ill-conceived?"[10] To put it another way, is "imitating in a funny way" parody's distinguishing feature? Or does it have to be more acerbic than that? Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729) is cited as a prime example of parody, wherein Swift hyperbolically mocks British policy toward the Irish in particular and the poor in general. Should imitation have to turn into mockery for a text to be parodic? Should Brooks have to mock Hitchcock or the classical Hollywood tradition that his films represent in order for *High Anxiety* to be considered parodic? In other words, does parody need to present a moral or political critique of an authoritative discourse? The answer to these questions depends on whether the term is defined broadly or narrowly.

Linda Hutcheon proposes one of the most expansive definitions of parody—by revising our traditional notion of the term's etymology. Most theorists understand the Greek word *parodia* to mean "counter-song," but Hutcheon reminds us that the prefix "*para* in Greek can also mean 'beside,' and therefore there is a suggestion of an accord or intimacy instead of a contrast."[11] This leads her to downplay the significance of ridicule in the construction of parody. Hutcheon defines "parody as a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity."[12] Drawing on the open-endedness of this definition, she makes the case that there can be multiple kinds of parody, "from the reverential to the playful to the scornful."[13] Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which borrows mostly reverentially from a wide range of literary and philosophical sources, and Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983), which comically mimics the documentary genre, are both treated in her work as examples of parody. That is because Hutcheon wants to move away from insisting on ridicule or humor of any kind in a parodic text.

Though Eliot's text champions the continuity of cultural tradition and Allen's film mocks the American ideology of assimilation, they are both included because they signal their relationship to earlier texts by emphasizing their distance from them. By decoupling it from ridicule, Hutcheon widens the reach of parody, which she redefines as "a form of inter-art discourse."[14] In that way, her analysis brings parody closer to intertextuality.

Margaret A. Rose posits a broader reading of parody as well, moving away, like Hutcheon, from its traditional alignment with ridicule. Rose's key insight is that parody resembles metafiction. "The use made of parody by ancient authors such as Aristophanes as well as by more modern authors from Cervantes onwards," she argues, "has shown it to have been used in ancient as well as modern times to reflect in both 'meta-fictional' and comic fashion on other authors as well as on the composition and audience of the parody work itself."[15] For Rose, parody signals itself self-consciously as an imitation. Not all metafiction can be parodic, however. Beyond foregrounding their aesthetic practices, parodic texts such as "Cervantes' *Don Quixote* . . . also show how the parodist may use them in several different and comic ways to criticise and refunction less self-reflective works of fiction; to educate their own readers to a greater awareness of both the possibilities and limitations of fiction; and to create new works from old."[16] In Rose's hands, parody becomes comically commentative. In creating new works from old, it is also productive rather than destructive. Such expansive theorizations rescue parody from being cast too narrowly in an oppositional role.

Many recent investigations of film parody draw on this capacious model. Dan Harries argues that parodies try to find a balance between imitating and altering. "Parodic texts," he notes, "simultaneously generate similarity to and difference from their targets in a regulated fashion—privileging neither."[17] It is this idea of a neutral evaluation of source texts that differentiates film parodies from satirical imitations, which aim their critiques more explicitly at their cinematic or cultural targets. Another way to put this is to say that the disruption created by parody is not in service of tearing down its sources. Rather, as Geoff King argues, film parodies deflate as well as reaffirm conventions. Using the *Scream* series as an example, he demonstrates how "conventions of the slasher-horror film are deconstructed and reinstated at the same time."[18] After all, the *Scream* films still belong to the horror genre, and they may even assist in the evolution of generic customs. There is even a slight overlap between parody and homage. As Barbara Klinger points out, "Parodies may in part pay homage, but they create their alternative

textual universes through less earnest means."[19] For affection is continually undercut by parody. In a direct nod to Margaret Rose, King suggests that parody is aware of this destabilization. It reflects on established conventions, often by way of a wink to the audience. Though such self-conscious moments are funny, instead of merely making fun of the sources, film parodies remark on the constructedness of those conventions without rejecting them entirely.

It is precisely this kind of playful self-consciousness, however, that has led critics of parody to see it as an uncritical, empty device. Decrying the aesthetic and cultural practices of the late twentieth century and beyond, Fredric Jameson makes his now familiar—and perhaps now facile—distinction between parody and pastiche. Jameson allows parody to contain elements of sympathy for the source, but its fundamental task is to mock it. During the postmodern era, this tendency has been replaced by pastiche, which appears "without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter."[20] What bothers Jameson most is that pastiche is a pointless imitation of dead styles. In this argument, he seems to have taken literally Vladimir Nabokov's axiom: "Satire is a lesson, parody is a game."[21] Nabokov is actually himself playing a game in this ostensibly strict division, for he quickly blurs the line between serious parodies and playful ones. Moreover, what he objects to is stolid instruction, never instructive games. But Jameson doesn't allow for such obscuring of boundaries, because he sees pastiche as a meaningless cannibalization of the past with no reflective features. He cites Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* as an example of pastiche that cuts and pastes together moments from varied films, especially classic noirs, without any historical context or assessment. These dehistoricized quotations appear as decorative rather than critical. In Jameson's linear account of history, parody is no longer possible in the postmodern era, because it has given way to pastiche, which is a kind of blank or emptied-out parody.

But many theorists quarrel with Jameson's narrow attack on postmodernism at large and on parody in particular. John Docker holds that parody persists, because, unlike Jameson, he doesn't see postmodern culture as a radical break from the past. Indeed, he aligns parody with Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque. Bakhtin has argued that the ancient and medieval festivals enable us to theorize a carnivalesque mode of thinking, for the carnival's tricksters, clowns, and fools may be regarded as proto-deconstructive thinkers, who, by overturning hierarchies, were able unmask dominant social ideologies through humor or jest. Carnivals were never merely spectacle. They offered the space for contesting claims to truth and for overturning

certainties. Bakhtin sees the carnivalesque as a polemical energy, directed at everything that is sacred, allowing a "second revelation of the world in play and laughter."[22] For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque makes its way into literature, in polyphonic novels like Fyodor Dostoevsky's works, which are characterized by a plurality of voices that keep undermining any singular overriding discourse. Parody, for Bakhtin, is the perfect vehicle for polyphonic expression. "Parodying is the creation of a *decrowning double*," he argues, because "it is the same 'world turned inside out.' "[23] Because in a world turned inside out, the carnivalesque emerges, where multiple ideas and truths are tested and contested. John Docker sees postmodernism continuing this work of turning the world inside out. He argues that postmodernism "is interested in a plurality of forms and genres, a pluralising of aesthetic criteria, where such forms and genres may have long and fascinating histories, not as static and separate but entwined, interacting, conflicting, contesting, playing off against each other, mixing in unpredictable combinations, protean in energy."[24] In particular, Docker eschews Jameson's hostility toward popular culture. Instead of being immersed in blank pastiche, popular culture can be seen as "a frequent site of flamboyance, extravagance, excess, parody, self-parody."[25] Docker is not alone in freeing postmodern culture from the high modernist prejudice against it. Moreover, many scholars have invoked the carnivalesque to demonstrate how postmodern parody can be more than a presentist spectacle. As Simon Dentith puts it, when combined with postmodernism's investment in denaturalizing received forms and truths, parody "drags into view other modes of discourse, other possible ways of understanding the world."[26] In Bakhtinian terms, parody decrowns established ways of seeing the world. Drawing on Bakhtin enables scholars like Docker and Dentith not only to champion postmodernism but also to argue for the abiding viability of parody in contemporary culture.

More significantly, tracing parody's roots back to the carnival allows us to focus on its ambivalence, underscoring the challenge of defining it unequivocally. Bakhtin maintains that the carnival is an ambivalent space. A jester may be crowned king, but just as quickly he may be decrowned. Authority may be displaced at the carnival, but this is no serious overthrow of the aristocracy or monarchy or papacy. When power structures are turned upside down, they are not replaced by alternative modes of authority. As Bakhtin points out, the carnival's crowning/decrowning "absolutizes nothing, but rather proclaims the joyful relativity of everything."[27] This explains why parody is also ambivalent. It rejoices in the process of turning the world

inside out or upside down, but it does not serve as a precise oppositional discourse. Bakhtin suggests that, if parodies "degenerated into a purely negative *exposé* of a moral or socio-political sort," then they would "los[e] their artistic character" and become "transformed into naked journalism."[28] To concentrate on parody's ambivalence is to see it as a mode that displaces without replacing one order for another.

Ultimately, it is this ambivalence that has allowed parody to thrive in different guises and aim at different targets. During the medieval era, parody is used to mock the seriousness of religious life. Texts like "Life of St. Nemo," a comical stringing together of mentions of "nobody" in the Bible to create a fictional saint, reveal how mimicry is used subversively.[29] Such instances, though they help revise our assumptions of medieval decorum, do not overthrow the power of the church. Rather, they show that parody and devotion can coexist. If medieval parody gently lampoons religion and the liturgy, during the neoclassical era it is used in defense of the humanist tradition. John Dryden suggests that parody is an act of transformation, where "Verses [are] patch'd up and turn'd into another sense than their Author intended them."[30] But, unlike in the classical period, these alterations are not necessarily used for attacking the author of that source text. In *The Rape of the Lock* (1712), for example, Alexander Pope imitates Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton in order to mock the vain sensibilities of *his* age, not theirs. Though some epic conventions are being called out for being too grandiose, Pope mainly directs his critical eye toward the trivialities of Augustan high society. However, by creating an ironic distance between the prestigious epic and his contemporary moment, Pope's parody is a double-voiced discourse, exemplifying how neoclassical parody remains ambivalent in its assaults and in its sympathies. Postmodern parody functions this way too. *The Simpsons*, for instance, attempts to demystify the idealized American family and its depiction in television sitcoms, from *Leave It to Beaver* (CBS, 1957–58; ABC, 1958–63) to *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984–92) to *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–present). It may be skeptical about the nuclear family, but the show is no suburban dystopia. *The Simpsons* recreates the idyllic lives and homes and suburban spaces of earlier sitcoms. It even locates itself in Springfield, reviving ironically the romantic Midwestern town of *Father Knows Best* (CBS, 1954–55, 1958–60; NBC, 1955–58) and then puncturing that romance. It works within and often makes fun of that space, but, given parody's ambivalence, it does not replace it with an alternative discourse about familial bonding.

It would be useful to pause here and unpack how notions of placement and displacement are central to parody. Jonathan Gray emphasizes this territorial metaphor when he argues that "parody exists on another's ground."[31] *The Simpsons*, for instance, enters onto and occupies a pre-existing space like Springfield. But a parodic imitation "is not always an ideal guest," because it is more like an "outside force that steps onto land that is not its own and uses it as it wishes."[32] For Gray, this land—or text or genre—is recontextualized or denaturalized, but it cannot be destroyed. Or, in Bakhtinian terms, parody decrowns, but it does not dethrone. In a passing reference, Marshall McLuhan offers a way to flesh out this metaphor further. He comments on indigenous wood craftsmen who are perplexed when asked to package their elaborate handmade carvings into boxes for shipment. "Putting one space inside another space," he notes, feels like "a parody of their own work."[33] Though McLuhan is focused on the literal absurdity of placing artisanal work inside empty shipping containers, this anecdote provides a useful way of thinking about parody's connection with deterritorialization. Parody can be defined as a stepping onto or trespassing upon a pre-existing, valued space. Parodic encroachment may not obliterate that established space, but it certainly weakens its power. As we saw in the first chapter, homage encroaches upon its source texts too. Whereas homage intrudes in order to devour, however, parody disrupts in order to displace. Whereas homage's point of entry is affection for its source, parody attempts to dislodge the source's claims and to dislocate its authority.

I would argue that it is displacement—and not ridicule, as in the traditional definition, or self-consciousness, as in the expansive definition—that lies at the heart of parody. And therein lies its intertextual potential too. Jonathan Gray posits that "critical intertextuality's crown form exists in parody," because, by "working on its target's ground," parody attaches itself "to the host . . . parasitically."[34] Though Gray's claim might be a bit hyperbolic, it compels us to think about how parody destabilizes parodied texts by inhabiting them. Robert Phiddian explores this analogy further when he provocatively calls parody a form of deconstruction. Unlike explicit imitation or subversion, parody "doubles and deconstructs the tropes of authenticity on which 'straight' writing depends."[35] Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), for instance, parodies by "inhabit[ing] the rhetorical structure of the detective story," which it does not reject outright, because it "becom[es] a sort of costume detective story in turn; yet the detective story is also ironized and placed under erasure."[36] Parody here displaces the authenticity

of the traditional detective story and defers its definitive interpretation—in the way that Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) does with travel books. Phiddian argues that such parodic displacement accomplishes more than conventional critique might. By dwelling on the territory of its source, almost like Gray's parasite, a parodic text becomes the thing it parodies—but not quite. That is what gives parody its critical energy, for the difference between the two amplifies ambiguity. That is also what explains the immense backlash against a text like Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988). The novel uses magical realism to tackle cultural and political issues in contemporary British and South Asian cultures. Philosophically, it deals with the religious conundrum of good versus evil. But the reason it remains provocative is because of its reliance on a few verses from the Qur'an that were supposedly spoken by the prophet Mohammed and then withdrawn with the claim that they were deceptively sent by Satan. The novel is reviled in the Islamic world because it is considered blasphemous. A year after its publication, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran issued a *fatwa* inciting violence against Rushdie. The *fatwa* is ignited not so much by the novel's perceived critique of Islam, Phiddian argues, as it is by its parodic "spirit of doubt, ambiguity, and criticism."[37] *The Satanic Verses* does not offer an alternative understanding of Islam or the Quran. It is seen as sacrilegious because, as a parody, it distorts the surety and purity of all religious or ideological claims. This distortion is possible because parody "comes from the margins of a preexisting text or discourse, supplementing it dangerously; giving it what it lacks (its own implicit critique), giving it what it deserves (a vision of its own absurdity), and taking its place (decentering it and overcoming it)."[38] That is to say, parody is not a ridiculing oppositional force that stands outside valued texts in order to mock them. It usually displaces an established, even valued, tradition by embodying it and then attempting to hollow it out. But the parodic text does not replace the parodied text. By occupying the same space, parody unsettles our confidence in the source's authority or inherent certainties.

Intriguingly, though Phiddian does not note this explicitly, his claim about parody coming from the margins and attempting to decenter the parodied text links parody with cultural theories that attempt to displace normative ideologies. In the critical discourse on race, this usage goes at least as far back as Frederick Douglass's parody of "Heavenly Union," a white Southern hymn. "A Parody" appears in an appendix at the end of the first *Narrative* (1845). He claims that, despite what the preceding tale might imply, he is not opposed to all religion, only to white American Christianity, whose hypocrisy he exposes

in the parodied hymn. He derides white Americans' fixation on heaven while they commit acts of terror on earth. He retains the rhythmic pattern and even specific phrases from the original, but Douglass overturns its meaning, mocking "pious priests" who "tied old Nanny to an oak, / And drew blood at every stroke, / And prayed for heavenly Union."[39] The union being parodied here is not only heavenly but also political. For a slaveholding nation cannot live up to the union denoted in the preamble to its constitution. Thus, Douglass samples from and thereby attempts to dislocate "Heavenly Union" as well as the US Constitution itself. That is why Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls him "a master Signifier." In his groundbreaking study, Gates has argued that Signifyin(g), or a critical reinterpretation of the tradition, is a central feature of African American cultural practice. When this reinterpretation occurs in relation to the white tradition, as we see with Douglass, it "functions to redress an imbalance of power." Such redress can be expressed in territorial terms, for Signifyin(g) happens on another's terrain. "To achieve occupancy in this desired space," Gates argues, "the Monkey rewrites the received order by exploiting the Lion's hubris."[40] The political effect of Signifyin(g) is parody, for the African American aesthetic tradition deviates from the white norm "by failing to coincide with it—that is, suggest[ing] it by dissemblance."[41] But the failure is not in the imitation; as Douglass demonstrates, a parodic copy inhabits the space of the original in order to illustrate its failures. Postcolonial theory also emphasizes this idea of a failed imitation. Homi K. Bhabha defines relations between colonizer and colonized in terms of "colonial mimicry," which arises out of the colonialist desire for replication—that is, for creating "a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*." Because of the ambivalence built into the project of colonial mimicry, however, it produces a parodic copy, one that foregrounds "its slippage, its excess, its difference."[42] Like the work of signifyin(g), mimicry here becomes menacing. Judith Butler makes a similar argument about denaturalizing gender configurations through drag, which demonstrates that all gender is a parody, "derived, phantasmastic, and mimetic—a failed copy, as it were."[43] Butler's point is not that drag performances topple orthodox gender constraints, though they do carry that potential. What they do, however, is elucidate the conventionality of such conventions. And that is the project of parody in general: by creating a deceptive double of something that occupies a distinguished cultural space, parody furtively displaces the authority of an original. Such displacement can be polemical or benign; critically or lightheartedly, it unsettles established cultural traditions. Playing

on existing terrain and interrogating tradition make parody particularly effective for intertextual analysis.

This chapter draws on this understanding of parody for analyzing how *Dear White People* attempts to displace cinema itself. Based on the 2014 of the same name, *Dear White People* follows the lives of college students at Winchester University, a fictional Ivy League campus replete with white privilege and racial hostility. Being at a historically white university, Winchester's black students grapple with integration and appropriation, complacency and conflict. The series gets its title from a radio show hosted by Samantha White (Logan Browning), a politically active black student who confronts the challenges of living and working on a predominantly white campus, of inhabiting a space that has not been constructed for her. In a similar manner, the series tackles the difficulties of making an African American show in a traditionally white industry where whiteness is the invisible norm. Its work parallels what Ayo Kehinde observes in the contemporary African novel. In the postcolonial context, Kehinde argues, intertextuality can be "an effective postcolonial weapon used to reject the claim of universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature."[44] In a similar vein, *Dear White People* parodies a range of American and European films, deromanticizing their mythologies and decentering their plotlines. More than that, it denaturalizes the ways in which cinematic narratives are woven together.

"Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up!"

After getting wasted with and being egged on by his friend Troy Fairbanks (Brandon P. Bell), Reggie Green (Marque Richardson) goes on a bed-hopping bender. To the non-diegetic sound of Louis Cole's "Blimp," a series of similar shots shows Reggie having sex, each cutaway revealing a different unidentified woman. Mindless repetition is underscored here, so much so that by the end of the montage, he looks bored by this escapade ("Chapter II," 2.2). This scene is familiar, particularly in films that represent and excuse the "boys will be boys" attitude. It is especially reminiscent of the opening sequence in David Dobkin's *Wedding Crashers* (2005), where two divorce attorneys, John Beckwith (Owen Wilson) and Jeremy Grey (Vince Vaughn), crash weddings in order to meet and charm unsuspecting women, who are "so aroused by the thought of marriage that they'll throw their inhibitions to the wind" and sleep with a stranger. To illustrate John and Jeremy's style, a

montage presents them schmoozing with guests using fake stories and forged identities and seducing women at varied weddings. As champagne bottles pop, John and Jeremy dance with their targets to the Isley Brothers's "Shout," and one woman after another falls into their arms and beds. As Tamar Jeffers McDonald points out, this sequence presents "each woman beginning the twirl upright in her wedding outfit and ending it falling backwards onto a bed in her lingerie."[45] These sex-crazed shenanigans connect *Wedding Crashers* to the college comedy, from John Landis's *Animal House* (1978) to Walt Becker's *Van Wilder* (2002). Dobkin's film partially pokes fun at grown men behaving like teenagers—as John later realizes, "we're not that young"—and then settles this issue by marrying them off to women they have met at earlier weddings. There is no real conflict at the heart of the film. After calling a woman he's just had sex with the wrong name, in a moment of post-coital honesty, John hopes he is only 50 percent "full of shit." Their carousing ways are excused, as long as they are abandoned in time for the film to reach a heteronormative resolution.

Unlike John and Jeremy, who can barely recall their nights of unrestrained sex, when Reggie wakes up, he is staring at the barrel of a gun, pointed at him by a campus police officer. He sits up in bed, gasps for air, and extends his arm in defense, only to realize that he is actually being awakened by his roommate Clifton (Erich Lane) with a list of grievances about how Reggie's drinking affects him. At that moment, a nearly naked woman wakes up next to him, and Clifton offers her a hot pocket. This comic relief notwithstanding, Reggie's nightmare is neither imaginary nor resolved. For it is the manifestation of post-traumatic stress, caused by that same police officer having held Reggie at gunpoint at a party weeks earlier. This is not the first time that cop, Officer Ames (Scott Michael Morgan), has haunted him. Reggie wakes up having dreamed of him, and he hallucinates seeing him coming at him, ready to fire, while walking down an empty hallway. Later that morning he confesses to Dean Walter Fairbanks (Obba Babatundé) that he "can't sleep" and has been "having panic attacks" and that therapy has not helped. As the two men stroll through campus, the camera keeps them in focus, while in the background we see a blur of majority white students. Dean Fairbanks underscores the distinction between them and young men like Reggie, claiming that "their biggest concerns is [*sic*] about relationships and how they're gonna get into grad school." Reggie and his cohort of black students at Winchester fret about relationships and grad school too, but "on top of that, [they]

have to be concerned with not getting shot up at a house party." Even before Dean Fairbanks asserts this agonizing fact, Reggie spots Ames joking around with other campus safety officers in the distance. This time his appearance is no mirage, and the dean has to physically stop Reggie from having an altercation with Ames, lest Reggie endanger his career at Winchester or his life itself. Dean Fairbanks counsels him to "find a way to let this out." Interestingly, that's exactly what Reggie was attempting to do with his night of sexual indulgence, which Troy labels "sympathy pussy," because his racial trauma presumably endears him to women. Reggie's absence of interest in these women beyond bedding them parallels John's and Jeremy's attitude, but his night of debaucherous fun must end dramatically differently.

I would argue that *Dear White People* places Reggie in a familiar situation in order to accentuate those disparities by parodying those recognizable scenarios or texts. Justin Simien has argued explicitly that he aims to situate black bodies in places that are saturated with whiteness. His point of entry, if you will, is the desire "to see black faces and faces of color in these kinds of frames."[46] But the series does not merely illustrate the logic of substitution. Locating black characters on a predominantly white campus changes the storyline. What does Simien's substitution reveal about American racial politics in general and about Hollywood's racial representation in particular? What, for instance, has been elided in seeing *Wedding Crashers* as a comedy about two guys crashing weddings to seduce naïve women *without* analyzing the privileges of white masculinity? What does it mean to zoom in on black coeds, who, to paraphrase Dean Fairbanks, are obsessed with drinking and sex but must also contend with cultural prejudice and racial terror? In his foundational study of white racial representation in American culture, Richard Dyer argues that "as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm."[47] Because John and Jeremy are the norm, their whiteness is not named. Their violations go unchecked; through the institution of heterosexual marriage, they are absorbed into the narrative of adulthood. *Dear White People* critiques this form of perpetual racial norming. It overtly appropriates a range of films, both American and European, that are traditionally regarded as race free—from young-adult comedies and one-crazy-night films to the work of Stanley Kubrick, Jean-Luc Godard, and Ingmar Bergman. By foregrounding blackness *and* whiteness, the series argues that there can be no race-neutral representation.

Since *Dear White People* is set on a college campus, it is unsurprising that it alludes to a range of films that constructs this experience as a time to let go of old inhibitions and indulge in exuberant, even if irresponsible, behavior. After introducing the setting of a predominantly white university, an unnamed narrator (Giancarlo Esposito) takes us to what may look like a typical house party. A roving long take shows us around, as young people bump and grind, drink, and move in and out of the frame. The lighting is dim, simulating a club-like ambience, and the drifting camera does not linger for too long on any individual character. This could be a scene from Alan Metter's *Back to School* (1986) or the *American Pie* series or Todd Phillips's *Old School* (2003), where inebriated young adults or those who want to relive their youth lose their inhibitions and indulge their wildest fantasies. And yet, even before the assist from the voiceover, this party looks wrong—because the guests are in blackface. Some are made out to resemble Serena Williams or Nicki Minaj, while others are dressed to mimic stereotyped blackness, with women in mammy head wraps and men in dashikis. As the narrator facetiously informs us, "This is a thing white children are into." Before we meet more characters, "actual black people" barge into the house to disrupt the party. The white kids run out, but they are forced back in when a cop car pulls up ("Chapter I," 1.1). By rooting the party in blackface, however, *Dear White People* dispenses with the notion that youthful carousing is innocent. Sam enters the house with a group of disgruntled black students, armed with her camera. Ever the film student, she is there to document this racist incident. Because she has the power to break up the party, however, Sam appears less like a bystander-documentarian and more like one of Pam Grier's gun-toting vigilantes, in films like Jack Hill's *Coffy* (1973) or *Foxy Brown* (1974), showing up unannounced and targeting the provocations of whiteness. From the opening sequence, the art of black filmmaking is associated with political power. In fact, Sam's super 8 not only functions like a gun, but it also scares the white students more effectively than the cops do.

If this opening party scene stresses the cops' fecklessness, then another house party underscores their danger to black students. When Reggie is distressed that people have moved on from the blackface party, Joelle (Ashley Blaine Featherson) and Al (Jemar Michael) convince him to go out with them. They spend the Saturday night moving aimlessly from one potentially entertaining thing to another, following Joelle's philosophy that "sometimes being carefree and black is an act of revolution." With Rashid (Jeremy Tardy), Ikumi (Ally Maki), and Lionel (DeRon Horton), they see

a movie with terrible racist stereotypes, have dinner together, and head to a party at Addison's (Nolan Gerard Funk) house. Addison invites Reggie to play a drinking trivia game, in which they trounce the opposing team. Testosterone-driven drinking games are a staple of college comedies. That is the central premise of Jon Lucas and Scott Moore's *21 and Over* (2013), for instance, where Miller (Miles Teller) and Casey (Skylar Astin) have to play a series of drinking games in order to get their highly intoxicated friend Jeff (Justin Chon) home for a medical school interview. What is a major obstacle for Miller and Casey is no trouble at all for Reggie. He crushes the opposition at trivia. "I know y'all's shit *and* my shit," he claims, thus pointing out how race underpins even something so frivolous as a drinking game. The party then moves to the living room, where everyone is drinking and dancing to Future's "Trap." Addison sings along, repeating the n-word in the lyrics. Reggie requests that he stop saying the word, but Addison aggressively defends himself against perceived charges of racism. Kurt (Wyatt Nash) fuels the growing fire by ironically asking Addison to "hide anything [he doesn't] want destroyed in a riot." The party quickly devolves into a shouting match, when Reggie gets pushed onto Addison, and the two of them end up in a fight. Just then, as is often the case during house party scenes, the cops show up. Instead of trying to break up the party, Officer Ames targets Reggie, claiming that they've "had complaints" and asking for his ID. When Reggie hesitates, Ames holds him at gunpoint ("Chapter V", 1.5). What might have been a moment of cops dispersing kids for underage drinking or making a racket becomes a question of life and death.

This is particularly striking, since, in most young-adult movies where the young adults are white, the party scene is played for laughs, and the cops often join in the adolescent fun. In Greg Mottola's *Superbad* (2007), cops do not arrest Fogell (Christopher Mintz-Plasse) when he is caught with a fake ID; instead, they agree to drive him to the party, for which he has used his fake ID to buy alcohol. Along the way, Officers Slater (Bill Hader) and Michaels (Seth Rogen) transform into the juvenile rabble-rousers they are supposed to keep in check. They themselves start drinking, use their sirens without cause, and shoot their guns at a stop sign. When they arrive to bust an underage party, Slater and Michaels claim they "assume [they] all have guns and crack." But they are only kidding and arrest nobody. Instead, after kicking everyone out, Slater ends up dancing to The Coup's "Pork and Beef." He literally inhabits the space most recently occupied by white teenagers, bopping to "don't trust the police / no justice no peace / They got me face down in the middle of the

street." Given that nobody will be dehumanized in the middle of the street by these cops, the scene appears to be quoting this lyrical protest against police brutality ironically. But Joseph J. Fischel cautions against any easy dismissals, calling this kind of humor "more insidious" because it "neuters The Coup's political critique."[48] There is no real need for political critique in *Superbad*, of course, because, as in most cases where the protagonists are white, the line between cops and young adults is negligible. In fact, Slater and Michaels become buddies with Fogell. They are not on opposing sides, and the cops even stage Fogell's arrest to make him look "bad-ass." At the end of the film, they all stand shoulder to shoulder, while Fogell shoots at their police car, which they have already set on fire. This is how the younger white man becomes "both outlaw and ascending man."[49] For this is a bonding moment for the cops and potential juvenile offender, who receives howling approval from the law for his behavior. The cops' arrival at the party does not signify trouble, as they are there to teach the younger white male about the privileges of white masculinity.

At first blush, there may be no overt intertextual relationship between a film like *Superbad* and Simien's series. These texts appear to be located in different generic registers, as the party in *Dear White People* takes a harmful rather than hilarious turn. "Imagine if McLovin were black," Fischel argues—"it would not be humorous *at all*."[50] By imagining what would happen if cops showed up at a party and found mostly black youth, *Dear White People* rewrites the script. The moment when Ames barges into Addison's house and accuses Reggie of being a suspicious intruder brings to mind scenes from police procedurals, where typically white cops go after black criminals or gangsters. In Dennis Hopper's *Colors* (1988), two white LAPD officers, the older and respected Bob Hodges (Robert Duvall) and the rookie Danny McGavin (Sean Penn), team up to stop gang violence in the streets. Though Hodges advocates restraint, McGavin is raring to go more aggressively after gang members. During a pursuit of one of the Bloods, McGavin chases High Top (Glenn Plummer) on foot, until the latter tries to escape through a restaurant by taking a female bystander hostage. As soon as McGavin enters the space, he points his gun at High Top and threatens to shoot. He has earlier let High Top go for a minor drug infraction at the behest of Hodges, and this scene looks like a moment of personal vengeance. The other customers at the restaurant blur in the background, as McGavin pursues and beats High Top into submission. Ames does not have this kind of history with Reggie. He doesn't know him at all, and yet he immediately demands proof that Reggie

is indeed a student at Winchester. Without cause, Ames is suspicious of Reggie, and his insistence on seeing an ID is not met agreeably. When Reggie responds with "fuck these pigs, man," he is calling up a history of racial agitation against legal authority and linking himself with such protest anthems as The Coup's "Pork and Beef," where cops are referred to as "P-I-G's." Ames also makes this connection, as he holds Reggie at gunpoint like a criminal. The partygoers fade in the background, as the restaurant patrons do in *Colors*, and Reggie transforms into a black thug, always already guilty. By locating a cop action film within a college comedy in this scene, *Dear White People* points up mainstream American cinema's racial blind spots. More than that, it demonstrates exactly what Gates suggests about black parody, which can include "a fairly exact repetition of a given narrative or rhetorical structure, filled incongruously with a ludicrous or incongruent context."[51] The series cannot simply copy the college party sequences and replace white bodies with black ones. Rather, its power lies in failing to fully coincide with the white cinematic tradition. That is why what can be played for laughs becomes deadly serious when one places black characters in familiar—that is, white—cinematic spaces.

Even when things are not literally perilous, even when one inhabits white spaces willfully, the series shows the challenges of being black. Coco Conners (Antoinette Robertson) represents the other end of the spectrum from Reggie's in terms of navigating Winchester's whiteness. Unlike Sam, who is raised in a traditional, albeit biracial, nuclear family in the suburbs, Coco is from inner-city Chicago. She is the first in her family to go to college, thanks to philanthropist Leonard McCullen (Stewart Skelton), who mentors her and pays for her private education. She finds little emotional support from her mother, Evelyn (Yvette Nicole Brown), trying instead to fit into the white world McCullen introduces her to. Her early life is shaped by racial trauma. A flashback shows her being forced to play with a dark-skinned doll that another little girl calls "the ugly one" and implicitly associates with Coco ("Chapter IV," 1.4). She sees so much violence growing up on the South Side of Chicago that she chooses to tune out. After Reggie is held at gunpoint, she advocates against activism, arguing instead that they "need to manage [their] blackness," which she regards as "self-preservation" ("Chapter VI," 1.6). She manages her own blackness by uncurling her hair and straightening her diction. She changes her name from Colandrea to Coco and joins the Coalition

for Racial Equality, a student union that supports assimilation and complies with the administration. Her politics are derided by Sam, who considers her a sellout. Coco is cynical about any white commitment to social equality, claiming that "these people don't give a fuck about no muthafuckin' Harriet Tubman!" That is why she befriends a small group of well-connected white women in order to get ahead at Winchester. Coco resembles the black girlfriend in 1990s teen films, where diversifying the cast implies casting black actors in minor roles; these characters stand in for the entire race and exist primarily to support the emotional transformations of the white leads. In Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995), Dionne Davenport (Stacey Dash) plays this role in relation to her best friend Cher (Alicia Silverstone). She is literally a couple of steps behind Cher in many scenes, confirming her secondary status. In Robert Iscove's *She's All That* (1999), Alex (Kimberly Lil'Kim Jones) and Katarina (Gabrielle Union) similarly appear in the shadows of Taylor (Jodi Lyn O'Keefe) and Laney (Rachel Leigh Cook), white girls who vie for the title of prom queen. Coco occupies this territory, though the series does not let her remain confined to that space. Despite jabs from Sam, Coco goes to the Midsummer Night's Dream party with her three white women friends. Though it is a regressive soirée, where girls wait around for a senior to come kiss them, Muffy (Caitlin Carver) claims they are there to subvert that script. They are there to "get laid by a guy who might make [them] First Fucking Lady someday," so they might have a shot at revamping "this ass-backwards, patriarchal, corporate republic we call a country" ("Chapter IV," 1.4). Muffy's omission of racism in this list of condemnations is glaring, as is the fact that Coco is the only one who is not picked by anyone. She is befriended by white women who rail against heteropatriarchy but never mention the role of race. In mainstream cinema, the black girlfriend is not a leading character. As Dionne does with Cher, she may assist the white woman's evolution, but she is not expected to have a narrative of her own. Given her ostensible subservience to Muffy, Coco may look no more than an accessory in the lives of white women who want to appear progressive.

But Coco quickly turns the tables on them. When Armstrong-Parker House, a black student dorm, is integrated in order to appease wealthy white donors, she eases white students' transition into a traditionally black space. She surrounds herself with insecure white students, taking requests as though she were Don Corleone (Marlon Brando) in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*. In a wood-paneled room, Coco holds court. With a string of red licorice in one hand for effect, she commands the attention of white

students who bring her their problems with assimilation. She explains to Abigail (Sheridan Pierce), for instance, why her roommate plays Beyoncé's *Lemonade* on repeat when she is working on an assignment for her Feminist Lit class. For Abigail, it is an affront that the words of Emily Brontë get mixed up with those of Beyoncé. Instead of scolding Abigail for her inability to see Beyoncé as a part of the feminist literary tradition, Coco explains why her black roommate holds up Beyoncé as a model for existing in this world. But she isn't serious about racial equality, as she gets back at these white students who want to be affirmed by a black person. "Plus slavery," she declares to Abigail, tongue firmly planted in cheek ("Chapter IV," 2.4). Unlike someone like Barack Obama, whom Melanye T. Price calls the "race whisperer" because he "tailors his racial grammar" to not offend the white majority, Coco mocks this responsibility.[52] She may soften her racial rhetoric, but only to lampoon hapless white students. As they sashay around Armstrong-Parker together, Muffy now follows Coco, because Coco has "very consciously seized on the opportunity to maintain a cult following of white girls."

It would be productive to see Coco's subversive performance of compliant blackness through the lens of what Marvin McAllister calls "whiting up." Unlike centuries of racial passing, McAllister analyzes a range of black performances of whiteness in American culture. This tradition dates back to whiteface minstrelsy, where enslaved and free blacks appropriated and mocked the gestures and mannerisms of white folks. McAllister broadens the notion of whiting up to include Homer Plessy's 1892 train ride, which eventually became the basis for the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. Plessy did not intend to pass; rather, he "fully accessed whiteness, as legal and performative property, to reveal its loopholes, its constructed nature, and even its terror."[53] This cultural work of whiting up spills over into popular culture, like Busta Rhymes's 1997 video for "Dangerous," where he dons a blonde wig to mimic Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson), the explosive cop in Richard Donner's *Lethal Weapon* (1987). Whiting up, then, "exposes the ordering principles of America's racial and cultural hierarchies, while questioning the absolutism of these structures."[54] Whiting up includes explicit and intentional as well as implicit or parodic challenges to racial hierarchization. Coco realizes that becoming more than the black girlfriend includes performing—and thereby undermining—white femininity. The series's opening blackface party illustrates how she is whiting up. Recall that that extended sequence wanders through a house party where white students are in blackface. Before Sam and her crew shame the revelers, we see Coco walking into the party,

looking appalled, and walking away. The narrator introduces her as the first "actual black person" ("Chapter I," 1.1). But she is wearing a long blonde wig and could be mistaken for a white woman in blackface. Or she could be seen as a black woman who wants to be perceived as white. Though she is outraged by white people in blackface, when Sam confronts her, she alters her attitude, saying she does not want to be "a freedom fighter" ("Chapter IV," 1.4). That may be true, but her assimilationist tendency cannot be taken at face value. Our introduction to Coco is through Sam's camera, which underlines the performative aspect of her person, making her the ideal character for whiting up.

In order to realize that performance, Coco carries herself like a devotee of Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon) in Robert Luketic's *Legally Blonde* (2001). Elle is a dazzling fashion merchandising major and sorority girl from Bel-Air who goes to law school at Harvard only to win her boyfriend Warner (Matthew Davis) back. Though she looks like an airhead, with her ostentatious wardrobe choices and her hyper cheerfulness, she earns a coveted internship with Professor Callahan (Victor Garber) and successfully defends Brooke Windham (Ali Larter), who is accused of killing her husband. Elle faces some obstacles, like being belittled by Warner's new girlfriend, Vivian (Selma Blair), and being sexually assaulted by Callahan, but they are regarded as minor and easily handled. She can navigate all intellectual and carnal challenges, the film argues, as long as she is outfitted in designer clothing and accessories and focused on using what Kelly A. Marsh calls her "traditional style of femininity"[55] (Figure 4.1). After adding a cute pair of glasses to her trim-fitting ensemble before her first class at Harvard, she claims to "totally look the part." Coco looks the part too. In chic outfits, stylish handbags looped over her arm, and weaves or wigs to hide her coils, she moves through her Ivy League campus with as much bougie flair as Elle Woods (Figure 4.2). Like Elle, Coco believes that in order to make it in a man's world, a woman must marry right. She has had a "life plan" since high school, and the second item on her list, right after getting into Winchester, is to "find 'the one' " ("Chapter IX," 1.9). She settles on Troy, and she fantasizes about going to Columbia together, then working on the Hill and as a lobbyist, and then running for the White House. Because he is the dean's son, he can give her access to the white world that she aspires to belong to, that she whites up for. At a party for wealthy donors, Coco plays the part of the trophy girlfriend perfectly. She impresses benefactors like the Hancocks and ingratiates herself with the college's President Fletcher (John Rubinstein). She negotiates

Figure 4.1. *Legally Blonde* (Robert Luketic, 2001)

Figure 4.2. *Dear White People* (Justin Simien, 2017–present)

this space of white power and privilege with ease, demonstrating that she is "fluent in WASP."

But *Dear White People* returns to *Legally Blonde* in order to show that even racial fluency is never enough. As a junior, Coco is determined to get the prestigious Global Venture Fellowship at the Sorbonne, for which she needs a letter of recommendation from the toughest professor on campus. Professor Queensfield (Francis X. McCarthy) is an intimidating traditionalist, who has a reputation for being ungenerous with such requests. Coco is not initially daunted by the challenge. Just as Elle says that she "can handle anything," Coco tells Dean Fairbanks that she can "always find a way to get what [she] want[s]." But Elle gets into Harvard Law and gets the sought-after internship with Callahan almost magically, as if her pink fluffy feather pen were an enchanted wand. It is not magic at all, because Elle succeeds, the series points out, because of her white femininity. Coco hopes that her performance of whiteness will be enough, but it isn't. Shortly after she asks Queensfield for the recommendation, he presses her about Chanakya's philosophy during class discussion. This is clearly alluding to a moment in *Legally Blonde*, where Elle is called upon by Professor Stromwell (Holland Taylor) to discuss a reading assignment that she hasn't completed. When asked to leave the classroom, Elle is mildly annoyed, whereas Coco has the right answer but still feels so humiliated that she runs out and has a panic attack, which her friend Kelsey (Nia Jervier) describes as "watching Wonder Woman fall into quicksand and not even her superpowers could save her from sinking further and further" ("Chapter V," 3.5). The sinking is visually underscored by Coco's vertiginous point of view, where it looks like she is being squeezed into an ever-narrowing tunnel. The hallway becomes a claustrophobic nightmare. It is as if the space that is typically used to depict Coco's command over a predominantly white setting is strangling her. She cannot brush off a harsh encounter with a curmudgeonly white professor the way Elle does. Coco works harder and scores higher than anyone in class, but Queensfield, whom Sam calls "just some old, wrinkly white man with coffee breath," refuses to support her for the fellowship. Despite McAllister's optimistic argument about the subversive power of whiting up, in *Dear White People*, it does not save Coco from a descending spiral—or, to borrow a term from Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), from the Sunken Place. The series parodies *Legally Blonde* by making Coco imitate white femininity flawlessly. Her imitation may interrogate racial hierarchies, but she remains, in a manner of speaking, illegally blonde, never able to fully transcend her background or assimilate into the

white culture she whitens herself for. Though she can occupy her space—quite literally, if we compare the frames in Figures 4.1 and 4.2—Coco cannot embody the privileges that Elle effortlessly enjoys.

Like Coco, Troy Fairbanks, Dean Fairbanks's son, believes he can navigate white culture adroitly. He is raised on Winchester's campus and has been surrounded by whiteness his entire life. But he feels like an interloper, never fully at home in the only home he has known. That is why he seems adrift, rejecting his father's grooming and ill at ease about his legacy status. He moves through the plot without purpose at first, aware that he is not living up to his potential, like Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) in Mike Nichols's *The Graduate* (1967) or Andrew Largeman (Zach Braff) in Braff's *Garden State* (2004). Both films chart the course of their young protagonists who feel disenchanted with what their worlds have to offer them. Troy is disillusioned too, because no matter how hard he tries, he does not fully belong at Winchester. An unlikely source for Troy's character is Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*. Simien lists Kubrick among his influences, and *Dear White People* tips its hat to this film in many scenes that focus on Kurt Fletcher (Wyatt Nash) and his pals at *Pastiche*, a long-standing, white-run satirical magazine. Though they supposedly enjoy mocking established ideas, *Pastiche* is rooted in tradition; all its members are from wealthy families, and they are legacies who expect to use their connections to retain their social status. Since *Barry Lyndon* is set in the aristocratic world of eighteenth-century England, this reference makes sense. Significantly, the series places Troy, and not Kurt, in the position of Barry Lyndon (Ryan O'Neal), an Irish rogue who marries a wealthy widow to join patrician society. Troy's attempts to belong at Winchester at large and at *Pastiche* in particular echo those of Barry, but his presence in group shots reminds us that while Barry can pass as aristocratic for a time, Troy never can. He can "dick around" with the *Pastiche* gang, he may even be invited to join the magazine, but he will always feel and look like "the token black guy on *Saturday Night Live*" ("Chapter VII," 2.7). That is, even when he follows the classic narrative of masculine self-discovery, Troy is not at the center of his own story.

This idea is poignantly underscored when, after he joins *Pastiche*, Troy incites his white friends to ask Kurt for more editorial control over their stories. In a scene that feels like an updated version of the moment where Barry's stepson, Lord Bullingdon (Leon Vitali), tracks him down at a

gentlemen's club in London, Troy sits in the center of the frame, his arms draped over the chair in Barry's pose, while his friends sit around him, including a couple of them at a higher perch in the back ("Chapter VI," 3.6). With its wood-paneled walls, dim lighting, taxidermied animal props, and an open bar in the background, the scene reeks of old money and traditional white masculinity. When Kurt reminds him that the magazine's rigid editorial policies are one hundred years old, Troy remarks that Kurt is "acting like it's a hundred years ago." Though he is not slumped over in his chair like Barry Lyndon, Troy is aware of the outmoded space he occupies. *Barry Lyndon* itself looks for inspiration from the past for its period settings. This moment in the film is actually a recreation of William Hogarth's *Mariage A-La-Mode* (1743–45). Hogarth's series of paintings satirizes the imperfections of aristocratic households, and its second installment, *The Tête à Tête*, is refashioned in the London club scene in order to depict the absurdity of aristocracy and to parody masculine insecurities. Kubrick seems to be arguing that this age stimulates the desire for brute masculine strength and social power. *Dear White People* draws on Kubrick's use of Hogarth to argue that that old aspiration for masculine dominance has not weakened with time. Moreover, it is carefully guarded by young white men, who will not allow young black men, even legacies, within that sphere of privilege. Troy's "duel" with Kurt ends in defeat, because Kurt threatens to withhold favors, like an internship recommendation for *SNL* and an invitation to a party with Conan O'Brien. His white friends back down, and since Troy has nothing to offer them, he walks out on his own.[56] It is as though Troy is sparring with Kurt without a pistol. Though they share antiquated ideas about masculinity, he will never fully inhabit or own spaces of white power.

Seeing the error in Coco's and Troy's attempts at managing their blackness, Sam decides to flaunt it. She calls out Winchester's blithe attitude toward personal and structural racism, wearing her radical activism on her sleeve. Ostensibly, she is a militant character straight out of a Spike Lee joint. But what is significant here is that, through Lee, she is also calling up and calling out European art cinema. She is styled in the tradition of Vaughn "Dap" Dunlap (Lawrence Fishburne) in Spike Lee's *School Daze* (1988). At Lee's fictional historically black Mission College, Dap is politically conscious and hopes to awaken his fellow students about the apartheid regime in South Africa. He champions institutional divestment and wants his friends

to care less about fraternity and sorority life. Early on, even those who are committed to the anti-apartheid movement are terrified about the institutional consequences for their activism, but Dap wins them over. Quite literally, Lee's handheld camera captures him running around campus, ringing bells and yelling "wake up, wake up, waaaaake upppp." He even gets the attention of his arch-rival, Julian Eaves (Giancarlo Esposito), who stumbles out onto the courtyard looking critically roused. Dap and Julian turn and look directly into the camera, as Dap says, "Please, wake up!" Sam believes that her campus needs to be similarly awakened. She directly quotes Dap on her radio show after the blackface party: her own words, "for those of you who thought our ivory tower was immune to this type of shit . . .," are followed by a snippet of a man's voice screaming "wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up!" ("Chapter I," 1.1). The urge to prove that the campus needs to be galvanized leads Sam to send out the invitation to the blackface party herself. It turns out that at the behest of his father and Winchester's president, Kurt stops *Pastiche* from hosting a blackface party for Halloween. On her show, Sam confesses that she hacked into the magazine's account, as "a sociological experiment," in order to expose "what was lurking beneath the surface when [Winchester's white students] were given an excuse to suspend [their] polite, passive liberalism." After excoriating her fellow students for fumbling and dithering, she stirs them out of inaction. Citing Dap and Julian again, she ends her show by staring candidly into the lens. On the one hand, this imitation works sincerely, as Sam too hopes to agitate the ivory tower to wake up the audience. On the other hand, this moment parodies *School Daze*, whose political work ends, as underscored by a freeze frame, when everyone awakens from their dazed state. For Sam, consciousness raising is the first, not the final, phase of fighting for equity. Moreover, *Dear White People* does not freeze Sam's direct address to the camera, critiquing the triumphalism in Lee's ending but also building upon his ending.

I want to step away from Sam for a moment to argue that there is a lot more going on in this direct address than an ironic nod to Lee's *School Daze*. Sam is not the only character who confronts the camera, and therefore the audience, straightforwardly. Indeed, direct address is used repeatedly in *Dear White People*. How do we analyze this distinctive stylistic technique, employed by a series rooted in cinematic parody? Direct address, sometimes called breaking the fourth wall, has been addressed inconsistently in film studies. It is occasionally connected back with the pleasures and disruptions of cinema's origins. What Tom Gunning terms the era of attractions was

overtly engaged in acknowledging the camera, with characters glancing at or winking at or talking to the camera. With the turn toward narrativization, the story goes, cinema lost this direct dialogue between the performer and the audience. "The look at the camera," Gunning argues, "becomes taboo and the devices of cinema are transformed from playful 'tricks'—cinematic attractions (Méliès gesturing at us to watch the lady vanish)—to elements of dramatic expression, entries into the psychology and the world of fiction."[57] As is obvious, the aesthetic of attractions did not disappear, and it recurs in spectacular moments in narrative cinema. But what about direct address in particular? Though it appears in a range of films, film theorists sometimes align it with art cinema, seeing it as a Brechtian technique of distanciation, where the audience can no longer believe in the illusion of a naturalistic world. This argument might make sense at first: if direct address becomes "taboo" after the development of classical narrative cinema, then the counter impulses of art cinema would naturally be drawn to engaging and breaking with that prohibition. Jean-Luc Godard is often cited for his exemplary use of this technique. Laura Rascaroli demonstrates how central the direct address is to Godard's work of deconstructing "the border between fiction, documentary and experimental film-making."[58] In his *Notre Musique* (2004), for instance, Godard uses direct address to involve the viewers "in a dialectical relationship with the director."[59] Without disputing this definition of direct address, we can say that this technique is neither limited to counter cinema nor employed only to dislodge the audience out of their comfortable illusion by subverting classical conventions, as Godard does. Only recently have we begun seeing varied ways of analyzing how and why characters break the fourth wall. In his wide-ranging study, Tom Brown effectively challenges the narrower understanding of the device. Brown follows the lead of Jane Feuer, who argues against seeing direct address only as "inherently subversive or radical."[60] It is not limited to the oppositional aesthetic of European cinema as it fits just as easily in mainstream fictional narratives. As Brown insightfully notes, "There is no contradiction between our emotional involvement with fictional characters and their addressing us through the apparatus of the camera."[61] Direct address sometimes signifies intimacy with the audience, and at other times resistance. A character's direct gaze can be ironic or epiphanic. It can be deployed for humorous or polemical purposes. It is just as likely to show up in films by Groucho Marx or Woody Allen as it is in the work of Jean-Luc Godard or Federico Fellini or Michael Haneke. Having said that, direct address still appears most often in films that are trying to break

with classical conventions or those that offer self-aware or caustic commentary. It is noteworthy that most of Brown's examples are either from European cinema, like Max Ophüls's *La Ronde* (1950), or from American comedies or musicals, like Stephen Frears's *High Fidelity* (2000).

Perhaps that is why, even in his comprehensive treatment of direct address, Tom Brown does not mention Spike Lee, whose oeuvre is filled with gut-wrenching shots of characters peering into the camera. The montage of racial epithets in *Do the Right Thing* (1989) is a classic example of Lee's distinctive use of this technique. After Mookie (Spike Lee) confronts his boss's son Pino (John Turturro) about his racist attitude toward African Americans, the naturalistic diegesis is suspended, as various characters launch into horrifying racist diatribes against groups of others. Each character is centrally framed, and the camera dollies in as their tirade intensifies, before cutting to the next, equally intense outburst, until the local DJ, Mister Señor Love Daddy (Samuel L. Jackson), urges them "to cool that shit out." *Do the Right Thing* adapts the direct address technique to foreground how racism functions. Spectators are appalled by Mookie et al.'s overt bigotry because it feels like the barbs are directed at them. Conversely, because Lee reduces the distance between them and the characters, literally with the dolly shots, spectators become aligned with the hurlers of these assaults too. As Todd McGowan notes, *Do the Right Thing* "demands that the spectator experience and confront" the pleasure in perpetuating stereotypes.[62] Audience confrontation is hardly novel when it comes to direct address, though we would be hard-pressed to find too many examples in European art films or American comedies that use this technique for a consideration of the persistence of racism. In that sense, Lee is scornful of how audiences have not been challenged more directly by white filmmakers on race. The only exceptions are a handful of sixties independent films that, as Katherine Kinney's astounding recent analysis shows, frequently include black actors confronting the camera, in gestures of "confrontation, reciprocity, and alignment [which] demonstrate respective possibilities for critique and resistance, recognition and exchange."[63] Lee's films seem to draw upon this short-lived tradition while implicitly calling out the inadequate ways that direct address has been used for social critique.

This is what Simien does as well. When Sam stares into the camera, she breaks the fourth wall in search of a sympathetic unknown viewer on the other side of the lens, someone who might actually be affected by her raw plea for justice. For *Dear White People*, direct address is not merely an intellectual exercise or a meditative critique of classical conventions. The series

makes Sam look directly at the camera repeatedly. As her popularity grows beyond Winchester, a Twitter troll insults her biracial family, posting a picture of them with the caption: "Too bad your father ruined you by fucking a monkey." Sam reads this post seconds before going on air. Devastated, she puts her headphones on, plays The ARC Choir's "Walk with Me," and turns her tear-drenched face toward the camera. The shot zooms in for about ten seconds, to allow spectators to feel the full impact of racist denigration, before fading to the end credits ("Chapter I," 2.1). The scene is overtly reminiscent of the ending of Fellini's *Le Notte di Cabiria* (1957). Cabiria (Guilietta Masina) is a naïve prostitute who wanders around the streets of Rome looking for true love, though she finds mostly heartbreak. At the end of the film, Oscar (François Périer), the man who has promised to marry her, robs her of all her money and abandons her in the woods. After much convulsive crying, Cabiria picks herself up and stumbles out to the main road, where she runs into a group of young revelers. Her eyes well up, and she sheds a single mascara-colored tear. But she also begins to smile, acknowledging her resilience, and gazes directly at the audience (Figure 4.3). Most critics have followed André Bazin's pioneering reading of Fellini's film, where he compares this concluding moment of direct address to Charlie Chaplin's films, thus drawing a straight line between art films and popular comedies. The moment when Cabiria, "emptied now of herself, stands on a road without hope," Fellini "forces us suddenly to identify with his heroine." What Bazin

Figure 4.3. *La Notte di Cabiria* (Federico Fellini, 1957)

praises most is that Cabiria does not "come bearing some ultimate truth." It is "this marvel of ambiguity" that takes the scene beyond identification and into a philosophical contemplation of resilience.[64] It is easy to see where Sam connects with Cabiria. She too seems without hope, and her candid look at spectators compels them to contemplate her sorrow and her strength (Figure 4.4). Though *Dear White People* borrows one of the most recognizable moments in art cinema, it also parodies it—for the series employs the practice of breaking the fourth wall for explicit racial criticism. It's as if the show is rhetorically asking, What would happen if we place a tough but vulnerable young black woman in place of the sympathetic Cabiria? Would she garner the same kind of attention and compassion from the audience? Ironically, Cabiria is surrounded by nighttime revelers who appear to acknowledge her sad-happy contemplation. But Sam's tearful appeal occurs in the soundproof studio of her radio station, where nobody except her best friend Joelle can see her. Bazin is right to say that Fellini compels us to identify with Cabiria at the end. *Dear White People* wonders if audiences would identify with Sam in that way too. More importantly, would a web series that uses narrative suspensions to jolt the audience about racial justice be analyzed with the same critical heft as European art cinema?

That last question is engaged more broadly in the unlikely relationship between Sam and her white boyfriend, Gabe Mitchell (John Patrick Amedori). Gabe is Sam's graduate teaching assistant in her film classes, and they bond over "the great movies of all time." Though they debate conventional and art cinema, their love story resembles, from Gabe's point of view, "a Godard film in color." Indeed, *Dear White People* conjures up the quirky romance, with its

Figure 4.4. *Dear White People* (Justin Simien, 2017–present)

awkward pauses and small cruelties, between Michel (Jean-Paul Belmondo) and Patricia (Jean Seberg) in Godard's *Breathless*. One of their early postcoital scenes in particular resembles Godard's protracted bedroom scene. Gabe and Sam roll around in bed, discussing their relationship, but tangentially. She pretends to be preoccupied by a game of Candy Crush, and he shows her how to level up. He gets jealous when Reggie texts her to join the Black Student Union meeting, in the way Michel resents Patricia's meeting with her editor ("Chapter I," 1.1). Patricia and Michel are informed by narratives of love; she wants them to be like Romeo and Juliet, she argues. But theirs is a story about love rather than a love story. Godard's lovers, Dwight MacDonald argues, are "unable to make contact with the other" because they are "emotionally impotent."[65] Indeed, they remain abstractions as characters. As film students, Sam and Gabe are invested in narratives too, but they seem more self-conscious and more wary of love stories. Gabe flirtatiously kids with Sam that in Candy Crush, spreading the digital goo "is one of the most pressing issues of our time," but social realities weigh heavily on their relationship, even when they are in their bubble. Never free of racial history, they are unable to just be lovers. In that way, they are parodies of Michel and Patricia, for they do not have the luxury to lounge around and analyze Shakespeare or Picasso's *The Lovers*.

If Godard sets up their relationship, then Ingmar Bergman is used to amplify its cracks. After Reggie is assaulted by Officer Ames, Sam offers Reggie solidarity and comfort, spending all her time with him and practically avoiding Gabe. When she misses a protest at a pep rally, he suspects that she might be sleeping with Reggie, who does nothing to disabuse him of the notion. When Gabe extends his support, Reggie deliberately looks over at Sam and claims that he "got what [he] needed." This makes Gabe more paranoid, so he visualizes them having sex. His flight of fancy occurs in black and white, where the two imagined lovers appear in carefully choreographed close-ups, such that half of Reggie's face is obstructed by Sam's profile ("Chapter 7," 1.7). This intrusion explicitly parodies an iconic moment from Bergman's *Persona* (1966), where Elisabet Vogler (Liv Ullmann), a stage actress who has suffered a nervous breakdown and is being treated at a seaside cottage, and Alma (Bibi Andersson), her nurse, are similarly juxtaposed with each other. For the duration of the film, Elisabet remains silent, while Alma recalls personal memories or takes philosophical positions. Though the silent actress smiles, we cannot be certain whether she agrees or disagrees with Alma's views. Bergman's film has received extraordinary critical attention. Scholars have

focused on how the women could be two sides of a single personality desperately trying to reunite; how identity works as persona and mask; how their overlapping personalities could be metaphorical doublings of emotion and intellect or film and theater or presence and absence; and so on. Again and again, critics have returned to the ways in which Bergman visually portrays Elisabet's and Alma's faces, which overlap or exist side by side or merge with each other. Many of these overlaps are a result of the two women's conflicted relationship with motherhood. After her confession about her abortion, for example, Alma's dark profile covers the right half of Elisabet's face. In their climactic face-off, Alma accuses Elisabet of lacking motherly compassion in an aggressive monologue. The woman speaking is in the background, and the one being accused is in the foreground. But given her own abortion, Alma's accusations reflect back on her. At precisely that moment, Elisabet leans in closer, their noses virtually touching, as though they were becoming one (Figure 4.5). Maaret Koskinen calls this a "tandem shot," designed "to express an existential or religious idea—that wholeness is only momentary or provisional."[66] For a flash, Elisabet and Alma seem to be one; their stories are nearly identical, and their fluid identities intersect to form a cohesive whole.

Figure 4.5. *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966)

Though this geometrically designed close-up is intimately associated with *Persona*, it recurs in European arthouse cinema, and its ubiquity has generated countless parodies in film and television. Here are only a few examples of how this type of framing has persisted. Bergman himself first uses it in *Thirst* (1949) in an instant that considers Viola's (Birgit Tengroth) escape from sadistic psychiatrist Dr. Rosengren (Hasse Ekman). It appears in Agnès Varda's *La Pointe Courte* (1955) too to portray a couple's existential crisis about their marriage. The tandem shot, where the wife's (Silvia Monfort) profile covers half of the husband's (Philippe Noiret) face, visualizes that they are at odds with each other, and yet reconciliation or wholeness is possible. Bergman returns to it in *The Silence* (1963) to analyze what binds and separates two sisters. Perhaps Godard's *A Married Woman* (1964) is the earliest example of destabilizing this device and its desire for wholeness. In Godard's version, tandem shots take place in extreme close-up, when two lovers, Charlotte (Macha Méril) and Robert (Bernard Noël), meet at an airport hotel before he is to leave Paris for Marseille. Instead of "Bergman's measured nose-to-nose composition in full face," Godard offers "right-angle fragments of the magnified face—from lip to eye and eye to lip."[67] The visual effect of these fragmented close-ups is that they capsize the momentary wholeness in Bergman. As John Orr puts it, Godard's "is a study in the art of misalignment, a near Cubist image, denying Bergman's 'moment of grace.'"[68] If the juxtaposition of faces used to hold out the possibility of unity, here "closeness signifies separation."[69] Woody Allen completes the task of destabilization, especially in *Love and Death* (1975), a preposterous take on nineteenth-century Russian epics. After Natasha (Jessica Harper) tells her cousin Sonja (Diane Keaton) about an absurd love octagon, and Sonja responds with a farcical definition of suffering, the two women end up nose to nose, repeating the word "wheat." Godard mocks the tandem shot by bowdlerizing it, but it is still meant to anticipate the end of the lovers' relationship. Allen's is a complete mockery, as it critiques the hyper stylization of European cinema by devolving the tandem shot into nothingness. Still, it has endured, recurring in popular film and television as a direct quotation or complex reworking. In Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* (1985), for instance, when Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) zooms into the past, he walks into a diner for something to drink and coincidentally ends up sitting next to his father, a teenage George McFly (Crispin Glover). Marty's realization that he is encountering his father in the past is filmed using a tandem shot; their noses line up for a split-second, long enough for the audience to comically recognize the connection

between the two young men. This shot has also been deliberately burlesqued, especially on television. Peter Matthews recalls one such "spoof on the late-70s Canadian television show SCTV where the famous merging of the two lead characters' faces was reprised with the actresses going blind."[70]

Dear White People's is not that kind of spoof, even though it is far from a neutral citation. I would argue that it is the series's most conspicuous moment of cinematic appropriation, which pivots on what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls dissemblance. As an example of how jazz works as parody, Gates cites in passing John Coltrane's reworking of Rogers and Hammerstein's "My Favorite Things." Ingrid Monson elaborates on Gates's argument, by analyzing how Coltrane "inverts the piece on nearly every level."[71] Coltrane's version "makes the interludes, not the verse, the subject of the performance; it transforms waltz time into a polyrhythmically textured six-feel; and it transforms a sentimental, optimistic lyric into a vehicle for a more brooding improvisational exploration."[72] More than that, it undermines the uncritical celebration of white standards by removing the song's "emphasis on white things in the lyric."[73] I believe that this is how *Dear White People* reworks the tandem shot. As the scene begins, a kind of curtain opens from left to right, creating an explicitly theatrical effect. The stilted, formal exchange between Sam and Reggie suggests that the shot must be read sardonically. Even if a viewer were unaware of the exact reference, the switch to black and white heightens the impression that something is being referred to, perhaps from an earlier era. The mannered construction seems to be declaring its connection to the European art cinema tradition (Figure 4.6). Though

Figure 4.6. *Dear White People* (Justin Simien, 2017–present)

there is a long roll of films that have used the tandem shot, this is a play on Bergman's *Persona* in particular; after all, the film has already been invoked via a poster on Sam's bedroom wall. But this is no earnest reflection on their relationship. It actually upends the seriousness with which the tandem shot is treated in Bergman and beyond, especially because of Sam's closing gesture of looking directly at the audience. Her turn toward the viewer signifies a subversion of the gravity associated with a philosophical meditation on the likeness between two beings. Sam and Reggie occupy the central space visually as Elisabet and Alma; their faces overlap, their noses converge, but one of them could never be mistaken for the other. Moreover, the series punctures our visual concentration on their association by letting the characters speak. Reggie asks Sam if she wants "to come in and have sexual intercourse." She protests that she must go to her boyfriend, then hesitates, and, in a direct address wink, adds, "Sexual intercourse does sound good." Given that this shot is a manifestation of Gabe's suspicion, it can be interpreted as a gag about a white man's anxiety about Sam and Reggie's erotic coupling. It is more than that too. For the scene attends to white fear of black unification—not only sexually but also politically. In this situation, Sam's nod to the audience is as much a wink as it is a dare.

What, then, is the broader implication of rooting this intertextual moment in parody? By putting black faces where they might appear to be incongruous—that is, where we are only accustomed to seeing white European or American faces—the series treats artistically characters who are not typically associated with high art. Unmistakably, it censures the whiteness of the venerated cinematic tradition, where "whiteness is allowed to retreat safely into unconcealed opacity."[74] *Dear White People* brings this opacity into sharp focus by repeating it via dissemblance. As Justin Simien himself puts it, his show usurps moments from revered films in order to "tell stories about characters who normally don't get the cinema treatment."[75] Giving these characters "the cinema treatment" implies magnifying their stories. It confers aesthetic gravitas upon critical narratives that centralize race. This concept becomes the basis of Sam's junior thesis film. As a result of an uncharacteristic burnout, she has no real thesis at first and presents a series of images of nature filmed around campus to Professor Bodkin (Terry Hempleman) and visiting artist Jerry Skyler (Justin Simien). The pictures themselves are extraordinarily striking, shot in cinema verité style, but they lack a guiding principle. Skyler is a Tyler Perry-esque filmmaker whose *Mista Griggins*

series has been successful at the box office. As a guest artist assigned to help her discover her voice, Sam sees him as a sellout, accusing his central character, like Perry's Medea, of being steeped in racist stereotypes that date back to the minstrel show. When Skyler critiques her fragmentary presentation as not fully conceptualized hokum, itself steeped in media studies jargon like "tonal juxtapositions" and "a dark night of the soul," she defends it as "a more subtle approach to the human condition" and compares herself to Michelangelo ("Chapter III," 3.3). When Sam accuses Skyler of being a turncoat for selling out to Hollywood, he notes that it is her footage that is influenced by Italian neorealism. "Europeans invented your style," Skyler reminds her, a criticism she takes to heart and reinvents her style. She confesses to Lionel that she has "been thinking that one type of storytelling is better than the other, . . . chasing what [she's] been told is the best" ("Chapter VII," 3.7). What she makes of her footage is a documentary about race relations at Winchester, juxtaposing the footage she's already shot with black faces and voices telling their stories ("Chapter X," 3.10). The associations are sometimes jarring, at other times funny. They draw upon the white cinematic tradition and yet displace its hegemony by centralizing blackness within it. In that way, Sam's student film is similar to Coltrane's inversion of "My Favorite Things"; it retains the Italian neorealist style that was at the core of her working draft, but it dislocates that style's as well as that history's centrality by foregrounding minoritized expressions of critique and pain. A roving camera that was used for vague observations of nature now bears witness to poignant racial stories.

After Troy is hired as the token black writer at *Pastiche*, Kurt puts his first story on the cover but edits it heavily. Troy's piece was meant to read like a caricature of white objections to affirmative action, but Kurt removes the parts that "make fun of white folks." What remains makes him sound like "a black guy who's shitting on affirmative action." Troy had hoped it would serve a satirical role, but Lionel calls it a "farce" instead, which emphasizes "entertainment over social commentary" ("Chapter IV," 3.4). Troy's perspective is easily invalidated and transformed into what matches *Pastiche*'s overall point of view, which pokes at authority but leans toward amusement. That is because the writers of Winchester's predominantly white satirical magazine have no intention of challenging existing power structures; rather, they hope to use this experience to join them. As the narrator points out early on, they

will become the nation's leading satirists and television writers, who, we can assume, will continue to defend those structures. Mockery is insufficient for condemning or dismantling dominant ideology.

Parody, as *Dear White People* demonstrates, can offer more robust critical politics. Though a parodic intertextual relationship enables specific criticism of particular antagonistic sources, it also critiques the entire tradition. I have been using Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s argument about repetition through dissemblance being integral to the African American cultural practice. In the same year that Gates released his seminal work on the role of signification in African American literature, Alan Nadel published a stunning exploration of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*'s (1952) place within and quarrel with the American literary tradition. Many scholars have observed how Ellison alludes to major American authors, but Nadel frames these allusions in terms of Ellison's engagement with issues of canonicity. "Ellison exploits the literary-critical potentials of allusions," he argues, "to revise the interpretive assumptions that structured the canon which emerged during his childhood and which reflected the social hierarchies that rendered him invisible."[76] Thus, allusions to acclaimed literary works become a form of literary criticism. Parody is a key component of this type of criticism, because the parodic relationship between Ellison and, say, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, and T. S. Eliot makes visible the erasure of black voices and lives in those texts—as well in the American literary tradition at large. As we saw in the first chapter, homage is governed by critique too, but it is mixed with love and aimed at particular texts. Parody's critique lands a blow at the whole tradition that venerates that individual (white) text. Nadel argues that that is how Ellison defines himself in relation to the American literary canon. *Dear White People* functions this way as well in relation to cinema. Whether it is with popular generic American films or with European art films, the series inserts black characters where whiteness has been the norm. By prioritizing racialized identities and circumstances, it interrogates the relative absence of racial discussions in those spaces. More than that, the series names whiteness where it has previously remained unnamed. As a media studies major, Sam observes that any list of canonical filmmakers routinely foregrounds "David Lynch, Mike Nichols, Woody Allen, white, white, white" ("Chapter IV," 1.4). *Dear White People* includes canonical white filmmakers too, but it does so in order to lampoon their racial blind spots.

The cinematic tradition, the series ultimately argues, has been almost exclusively white. As Gwendolyn Audrey Foster puts it, "in the face of the biological evidence that race doesn't really exist, more than a century of filmic performances of whiteness would appear to insist on the existence and visual supremacy of whiteness."[77] Through parody, the series attempts to deterritorialize whiteness and roll back its persistence. In contrast to homage, which tries to devour and surpass its beloved object, parody becomes a takedown. It belies the assumption that cinematic television evinces a desire to glorify, compete with, and then become cinema. In that sense, though it is steeped in film history, *Dear White People* is not really cinematic at all.