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## Finding Lionel: Reconciling Multiple Identities as Black, Gay, and Gifted in Dear White People

Christopher Sewell  
drchristophersewell@gmail.com

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## Finding Lionel

### Reconciling Multiple Identities as Black, Gay,, and Gifted in *Dear White People*

Christopher Sewell

#### Abstract

What does it mean to be a Black male looking to reconcile their intellectual, sexual, and racial identities? bell hooks (2004) notes that Black masculinity is inherently tied to notions of power; Black males, socialized to be dominant, find this power and dominance in tension with conceptions of power in society at large. Uber masculine depictions of manhood become the basis for the baseline Black male. Concurrently, scholarly conversation depicts Black males from a deficit perspective (Goings, 2016; Harper, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008). Justin Simien's *Dear White People* (2017) tackles the lives of Black students at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) as they deal with a racial incident on campus. Using Means and Mitchell's (2014) theory of Quadruple Consciousness and Whiting's (2006) Scholar Identity Model, this article argues that Lionel's positionality as a student writer at Winchester forces him to not only embrace his Black identity but grapple with the implications of being labeled and/or identifying as Queer. This article will explore the complex negotiations that Black, Queer males face at top Predominately White Institutions and begin to think about how we might support students as they negotiate the multiple identities that they embody.

**Keywords:** *Dear White People*, Black gifted, Queer Studies, Quadruple Consciousness, Scholar Identity Model, Black Male Representations

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Christopher Sewell is an Associate Dean of the College at Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts. E-mail: drchristophersewell@gmail.com

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## Introduction

What does it mean to be a Black male looking to reconcile their intellectual, sexual, and racial identities? bell hooks (2004) notes that Black masculinity is inherently tied to notions of power; Black males, socialized to be dominant, find this power and dominance in tension with conceptions of power in society at large. Uber masculine depictions of manhood then become the basis for the baseline Black male. Concurrently, scholarly conversation depicts Black males from a deficit perspective (Goings, 2016; Harper, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008). Both of these perspectives begin to paint Black men as a monolithic group. The imagery in the news and television profoundly shapes this narrative. In particular, the news and media have perpetuated a narrative about Black masculinity, which is defined by normalized cisgender heterosexual norms.

Justin Simien's 2017 *Dear White People*, a television show on Netflix, picks up from the 2014 movie that tackles the lives of Black students at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) after a Blackface party occurs in one of the social dorms on campus. Breaking the story of the party on campus is Lionel, a young, Black boy who is growing not only into his racial identity but also coming to terms with being gay and an intellectual in the Black community. Lionel's character in *Dear White People* allows examination of the portrayal of the Black Queer nerd critically while thinking about its broader implications for viewers (specifically students who identify with Lionel) and educators who work with students who are negotiating multiple identities finding their place in conversation work done on Black gay males at PWIs.

In his work *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, Hunt (2005) discusses the impact of television in impacting the views around the Black being:

But, for better or worse, popular television also functions as a central forum in our society. It serves as special space for the mediated encounters that distinguish the lived experiences of today from those of old, as a place for us to vicariously sample our fondest desires or our most dreaded fears, as comfort zone from which we can identify with our heroes (particular episodic programs) or affirm our differences from undesirable Others. (p. 1)

Popular television (and other social media forms) have therefore become a place where Americans begin to navigate their relationship to others and gain insight into their representations in the media. Specific to Black masculinity, Hunt (2005) discusses the continued "commodification of an exoticized and dangerous Black masculinity" (p. 6) which only supports the monolithic Black maleness.

A 2013 study by Nielsen noted that "Black viewers tend to mostly watch programs that provide diversity in casts or characters who are reflective of the Black lifestyle and culture – although not always reflective of how typical Blacks act" and that Black people tend to watch "watch 37% more television

than any other group” (Nielsen, 2013, p. 15). Since Black male depiction then sits in this space of hypermasculinity, what then happens to those who fall outside of this construction of masculinity? How do Black Americans engage with those who negotiate multiple identities beyond race? While we have seen images of the Black male collegian in television and film in the past (*Drumline*, *Higher Learning*, *School Daze*, *The Quad*, *A Different World*), where do we see a picture of the nonheterosexual Black male negotiating and navigating a world that calls into question their multiple identities for mass consumption? In this work, I will specifically engage with five critical scenes from the *Dear White People* (Netflix) to see:

- (1) How the depiction of Lionel matches the literature on multiple identities for Black Gay collegians on a PWI?
- (2) What negotiations Lionel makes in *Dear White People* to find a place on his campus?

### Review of the Literature

#### ***Black Men at Predominately White Institutions***

Black men in college face many challenges and stereotypes that mark their journey towards achieving a college degree. These challenges, inclusive of being incapable of achieving, disengaged in learning, and the inability to persist despite challenges (Brown, 2006; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008a; Mitchell & Means, 2014). Black male collegians at predominantly white institutions (PWI) face an uphill battle to find their place on university campuses. Part of this begins in their transition to college and issues like the lack of Black faculty members for support and mentoring (Sedlacek, 1999), the ability of their families to provide support in their transitions to college (Rice, Cunningham, & Young, 1997; Kenny & Perez, 1996), and the mismatch between their previous environments and their institution of higher education (Harper, 2009). Without supportive relationships and the ability to build a robust schema, Black male psychological well-being at PWIs can easily begin at a deficit. Feelings of belonging and acceptance find themselves at the center, then, of issues of persistence towards attaining their Baccalaureate degree (Harper, 2009).

The monolithic definition of Black manhood and masculinity compounds on the aforementioned experiences to burden queer Black men. Scholars continue to work towards looking at the intra-gender diversity among Black men highlighting how they have successfully mastered the changing academic and social realities (Harper, 2009). Strayhorn (2008a, 2008b) posits that for Black male students to thrive at PWIs, there is a needs to positive interactions with peers from different racial and ethnic groups. Unfortunately, he denotes that this is in constant tension with the messages and stereotypes that they encoun-

ter on a daily basis (being an athlete, being a recipient of affirmative action programming, being from urban, low-income households). Harper (2009) discusses that there are “overlooked populations of Black males on college campuses—they are academic achievers and student leaders who thrive inside and outside the classroom” (p. 708-709). Even when they do thrive in the face of racism and racial microaggressions, they have to encounter questions of their ‘Blackness’ and perceptions that they are “acting White” (Harper, 2006; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

### *Black Gay Male Identity and Experiences in College*

Black Queer men in higher education settings engage in a complex set of identity negotiations. Not only do they have to contend with the negative imagery and experiences of their heterosexual counterparts, but also t issues regarding their sexual orientation within a sometimes homophobic Black community (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & Devita, 2008). Black Queer males then must work to create spaces and places within their school and broader Black communities, negotiating between their sexual and racial identities—with many of them choosing to prioritize their racial identity (Christian, 2005).

Black Queer males must battle “institutional homophobia, or the dismissal of the legitimacy of gay students, faculty, and staff” which can take a toll on their academic and physical well being (Patton, 2011, p. 77). Research suggests that Black Queer men may deal with the psychological implications of not being able to be their full selves in academic spaces; this can look like feelings of loneliness, lower self-esteem, exhaustion from trying to remain closeted, and alienation from their schooling experiences (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002; Goode-Cross & Good, 2008, 2009; Patton, 2011). Specifically at PWIs, White heteronormative spaces exacerbate this issue; Black Queer men feel a “particular sense of “otherness” due to their multiple-minority statuses” (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009).

Relationship building can also cause angst for Black Queer males. This includes the question of whether coming out to their peer groups is essential (Wall & Washington, 1991) and whether joining gay groups on campus as a valuable or relatable experience as a result of their lack of cultural competence, relevance or engagement. (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). Sexual orientation then serves as a hurdle in building bonds or finding commonalities among their peers and with their professors (Goode-Cross & Good, 2008). Even when there may be small communities of other Black Queer men, some also fear being outed, and there is some stigma attached to the visibility of some of these bonds (Mitchell & Means, 2014; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Patton, 2011).

One particular and relevant relationship observed is between Queer and heterosexual Black males on these campuses. Strayhorn and Tillman (2013)

note that several of the males in their study chose to “mask,” to fit in with other Black men; participants who adopted “social identities and preferences that transgress hegemonic masculine roles and expectations limited what some Black gay male undergraduates had in common with their same-race, heterosexual male peers and made them “more different than similar” (pp. 98-99). Harper’s (2004) writing on masculinity of Black males on college campuses notes that the Queer men in his samples experienced no ridicule and found support from the other men on their campuses largely due to “their previous track records of service, leadership, and contributions to the African American communities at their university” (p. 101). Ultimately, for many Black Queer men, learning to not only challenge hegemonic constructions of masculinity but also actively contribute to the communities around them sat at the center of their interactions and relationships with other Black males.

### *Theoretical Frameworks*

For this particular work, I consider two frameworks to understand how the experiences for Black, Queer,<sup>1</sup> and gifted men begin to understand their place, space, and personhood. I employ Whiting’s Scholar Identity Model. For Whiting (2006) having a scholar identity means that “culturally diverse males view themselves as academicians, as studious, as competent and capable, and as intelligent or talented in school settings.” He posits that with a “sustained focus on developing a scholarly identity, hopefully, more African American males will find a sense of belonging in school settings, and value education and all that learning has to offer” (Whiting, 2006). His model centers around nine central ideas: masculinity, racial identity, academic self-confidence, self-awareness, need for achievement over a need for affiliation, internal locus of control, willing to make sacrifices, future orientation, and self-efficacy; all of which draw from the amalgamation of work done in several other disciplines. For Whiting, this model is holistic, not merely thinking about the student and their participation but the roles of outside forces on a student’s achievement.

Critical to understanding Whiting’s work are notions around racial identity development. Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, Cokley, Cross, and Worrell’s (2001) work on racial identity development articulates that Black people progress through five stages of development as they experience race: (1) Pre-Encounter, (2) Encounter, (3) Immersion-Emersion, (4) Internalization, and (5) Internalization-Commitment. As Gifted Black males experience negativity on their academic journeys, Whiting (2006) states that many begin to “question their academic potential and disidentify with their cultural backgrounds and academic achievement” (p. 226). For those who can make sense of the complexities of these negative experiences, they may articulate an understanding of their Blackness and use it to drive their future academic success.

Secondly, I employ Mitchell and Means' (2014) Quadruple Consciousness theory as a way to specifically think about the connections between racial and sexual identity. Helping to ground their work is W. E. B. DuBois' (1903) double consciousness and Cass' (1979, 1984) sexual identity formation theory. They posit that DuBois helps to frame around the important idea that "African American men often negotiate their racial identities to fit-in in spaces where Whiteness is seen as normative" and that Black people have negotiated the two-sides of their being (Mitchell & Means, 2014). Cass' work then serves as a way to specifically add color to the idea of switching between multiple identities, in this case, that of sexual identity. Cass' theory helps to explore the idea that the environment and interactions with individuals form sexual orientation identity. Her model articulates six stages of identity development: "(1) identity confusion—an unexamined belief in being heterosexual and an awareness of gay feelings; (2) identity comparison—considering the possibility of being gay; (3) identity tolerance—initiating a gay community of peers; (4) identity acceptance—when contact with other gays increases; (5) identity pride—rejection of heterosexual beliefs and values; and (6) identity synthesis—when a person's sexual identity becomes congruent with other identities" (Cass, 1979).

Situated and derived with the PWI in mind, Mitchell and Means (2014) note that Black gay and bisexual men often must tackle complex decisions that sit at the intersection of their sexual and racial identities. Therefore, for the authors, Black gay and bisexual men often vacillate between four dominant states of consciousness as they seek acceptance and do not want to be stereotyped, harmed, "outed," or ostracized: (I) White and heterosexual, (II) White and non-heterosexual, (III) Black and heterosexual, and (IV) Black and non-heterosexual. As Black gay and bisexual men begin to find spaces for themselves at PWIs, they negotiate these four categories represent the negotiations that Black Queer males make, in this specific case at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI), as they come to terms with both their sexual and racial identities.

### ***Methodology***

I employ content analysis for this study, which Patton (2002) defines as, "Any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (p. 453). I apply this method to specific scenes and dialogue, which I consider as text, extracted from multiple episodes of the first season of *Dear White People*. Content analysis allowed me to "...examine meanings, themes, and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text" (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016, p. 1) to elucidate to piece together how he begins to see himself as a Black Queer and gifted male at Winchester University. More specifically, I used Qualitative

Document Analysis, as described by Altheide (2011), to examine both the dialogue and the subtle interactions and reactions with and around Lionel. Altheide (2011) argues that documents “are studied to understand culture—or the process and the array of objects, symbols, and meanings that make up social reality shared by members of society” (p. 2). For this work, the first season one of *Dear White People* served as the document used to understand the experiences of being Black, gay, and gifted.

I employed a data collection protocol that focused on three specific themes: (1) interactions between Lionel and other Black characters that specifically made mention of his relationship to Blackness and/or the Black community both inside and outside of Winchester, (2) any discussions of Lionel’s contributions as a writer to *The Winchester Independent*, and (3) any mention or discussion of Lionel’s perceived or actual sexuality. During this first time watching the season, I used the protocol to identify specific scenes to serve as units of analysis. Any scenes that highlighted any of these themes and interactions I watched two more times. During this revisiting of the work, I captured and analyzed the discursive interactions between Lionel and other characters, took notes on these interactions, and began to map out any changes that Lionel experienced over the arc of the first season. Through this analysis, I came to look at five specific scenes/moments between Lionel and other characters to understand how Lionel came to terms with being Black, Gay, and gifted in those moments.

### Analyzing Lionel: Five Critical Moments

#### *Nerd on Arrival, Black Not So Much*

In the second episode of season one, we begin to see a more in-depth look into the character Lionel. While we see a Black boy, the narrator instructs us that “Lionel Higgins was not always a revolutionary, do not let the Afro fool you” (Bowser, Allain, Lebedev, & Simien, 2017). After which, we see Lionel entering a White barbershop and the White barbers looking perplexed at his hair followed by an important moment in the Black barbershop. As he is walking in, Lionel overhears a Black barber stating, “whoever sent that nigga to my chair is foul as fuck, you know I don’t cut fags,” followed quickly by another barber, who seemingly is free, telling him, “Nah nigga waiting for somebody” (Bowser, Allain, Lebedev, & Simien, 2017). At this moment, the narrator notes that for Lionel, his hair, has been on site of negotiation of his self-identity: “In fact, Lionel has made multiple failed attempts to tame his hair while at Winchester” (Bowser, Allain, Lebedev, & Simien, 2017). This experience in trying to find a space for cutting his hair (a visual cue for his Blackness) becomes a reminder of his over relation to other Black males specifically. Through this experience, we see notions of [fictive] kinship at play (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). While he should be able relate to other Black men due to their hair and experiences in

White America, he has no real relationship with a barber or barbershop, a space that is at the center of many Black male experiences as it is seen as “stable sites of resistance to racial and political oppression” (Baker, Stevenson, Talley, Jemmott & Jemmott, 2018). Without a feeling of a shared relationship, Lionel is left feeling alone and unkempt, symbolic of his relationship with his Black identity.

After his engagement in the barbershop, the narrator lets viewers know that “it’s not that Lionel is afraid of Black people, just those that remind him of the kids from high school” (Bowser, Allain, Lebedev, & Simien, 2017). At that moment, a flashback occurs where Lionel, dressed as Geordi La Forge from *Star Trek*, begins to go back and forth with a group of Black high school classmates at a dance. After explaining who he is supposed to be, Lionel’s classmates begin to note that he “looks like a gay figure skater” and other quips about how his costume makes him look gay. While not specifically related to his speech patterns, there is an inherent distinction made by his peers in high school—Lionel is not “Black enough.” Fordham and Ogbu (1986)’s acting White comes into play as his peers have “certain forms of behavior and certain activities or events, symbols, and meanings as not appropriate for them because those behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings are characteristic of white Americans” (p. 181). In this specific case, it is not simply a distancing from a White identity but one that is gay. While Lionel tries to respond to their taunts, there seemingly is nothing that he can do to make them believe that his costume is representative of a Blackness that they see as valuable and relatable, again rendering Lionel as someone alone and without connection.

As the shot comes back to the present, we see Lionel in Armstrong Parker, the Black dorm on campus, looking at the invitation for Dear Black People party. While he did not have a strong relationship to his Blackness or Black people, the narrator notes that “despite his lifelong timidity, his discovery of Pastiche’s Dear Black People party lit a fire under Lionel’s ass that burned straight through to the coccyx” (Bowser, Allain, Lebedev, & Simien, 2017). While he may not have these connections, Lionel does understand and see himself as a Black male. It is in this moment as Blackness is under assault at Winchester University, that Lionel begins the encounter and immersion stages of his racial development (Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, Cokley, Cross, & Worrell, 2001). Something about this incident made Lionel see that he could no longer live in Armstrong Parker and simply exist; people who looked like him were the target of racialized incidents. As the camera zoomed in, we see Lionel gasp, note that something was wrong, walk over to some of the Black students in the dining hall as he leads the charge to the party to break it up and destroy the speakers. This action would thrust him into a community that he lacked connection to before.

*Validation (or Not) from Other Black Men*

Upon returning from the party, we see Lionel feverishly typing an article for the school newspaper, *The Winchester Independent*. His roommate Troy, an overtly masculine, popular, son of the dean, walks into their shared space and notes “you did that shit, man” (Bowser, Allain, Lebedev, & Simien, 2017). This brief exchange sits in direct contrast to the conversations that Lionel had with his Black high school classmates; it is affirming and validating of not only his intellectual prowess but also his ability to mobilize around a Black issue at this Ivy League institution. It is in this moment and the subsequent scene that Lionel’s fire catapults him into the center of the Black community.

The next morning, Lionel walks into the dining hall as many people read his article. Three Black male students, known to be “down for the cause,” walk by him and say “we got the next Ta-Nehisi Coates” and “welcome to the revolution.” These comments lead to Lionel saying thank you and smiling, a clear understanding that he is finally moving to a community that he failed to find a space in before. Troy then walks in and invites Lionel to a table of Black men who represent a different dynamic, one that presents not only the issue of class but also toxic masculinity that lingers in the Black Winchester community. As these men quip back and forth, the camera pans to a third group of Black men, who appear to be Queer, who look over at Lionel as he sits awkwardly with Troy and his friends. Troy breaks the conversation turning it to reflect on Lionel’s experience the night before:

**Troy:** Yo, no one on this entire campus has the balls to do what you did, Lionel. And this article, lord the pussy you about to get my man.

**Troy friend 1:** And this we can agree. Nothing pulls pussy around here like prose well penned.

**Troy friend 2:** And that’s the gayest mention of the pussy I’ve ever heard.

**Troy Friend 1:** Blow me.

**Troy Friend 2:** You wish, fag.

**Troy:** You gonna be knee deep as we do something about all that. (Points to Lionel’s Afro). You know I cut hair. (Bowser, Allain, Lebedev, & Simien, 2017)

Through this exchange, we see the various ways in which Lionel has to engage with the multiple facets of his identity through the relationship with these three groups of Black men. Since he is not out as gay at this point in the series, Lionel must not only pass as a straight male but as this revolutionary who is fired up about leading a cause for Black students at Winchester. It is in this moment of “passing” that Lionel shows his understanding of his “inherent complexities... of his social identities” (Strayhorn & Tillman, 2013). Caught between different groups, Lionel’s visible discomfort in the situation is not simply about

the language that his peers are using but with the speculation about how he is to find spaces in the Black and Queer communities on campus. While his high school experience places him within the white and heterosexual categorization as presented in Means and Mitchell (2014), the experiences with Pastiche and this subsequent conversation over lunch forces him to begin to think about how he begins to not only see his racial identity but where his own sexual desires lie and how he will choose to put those identities on display.

### *Encountering His Queerness*

Immediately after the scene in the dining hall, we see Lionel on his bed, at first trying to not listen to Troy having intercourse in the room next door. He slowly pulls his headphones off to listen and begins to pleasure himself. The shot changes to show us Troy in the act, seeming looking at Lionel, until Lionel quickly snaps out of it. Despite being aware of his Queer desires, Lionel chooses to stay behind the wall—close enough to hear and see his desire but not allowing his desire to shine through. Similarly to his movement in his racial identity, Lionel moves from identity confusion to identity comparison (Cass, 1979, 1984). His self-pleasuring moves to a place where he actively desires men and can see himself with someone. But, unlike the space that Armstrong-Parker provides for him to examine his blackness, he lacks a known and visible queer community with which he can begin to explore his own desires and find kinship. Unexpectedly, shortly after that experience, Lionel has to confront his Queerness while fighting for the ability to speak on behalf of the Black students at Winchester. In a staff meeting with the *Winchester Independent* staff, the editor, Silvio, reads a portion of his work to humiliate Lionel by noting his work as not being hard news. In a private exchange after the meeting, the conversation continues bringing forth the question of intersectionality that Silvio believes should exist in his work:

**Lionel:** You asked me to cover race relations at Armstrong-Parker. This what they are.

**Silvio:** At Armstrong-Parker, not for Armstrong-Parker. This paper is for everyone at Winchester not just your friends, okay?

**Lionel** (mumbling): ... friends is optimistic.

**Silvio:** Where are the intersections?

**Lionel** (quizzically): Intersections?

**Silvio:** You're not just a Black man. You're a gay Black man. Homophobic incidents at AP are as common as they are among the Pastiche staff. Where is the conflict of these entities represented?

**Lionel:** I'm sorry... gay?

**Silvio:** Oh. I am sorry, are you straight?

**Lionel:** I really don't subscribe to those kinds of labels?

**Silvio:** Labels keep people in Florida from drinking Windex. Personally, I'm a Mexican-Italian gay vers top otter pup.

**Lionel:** Individually, I know what those words mean.

**Silvio:** Let me guess you are in your straight roommate, phase?

**Lionel:** ... no.

**Silvio:** How can you hope to arrive at a truth, when you can't find your own. Trust me, find your label... (Bowser, Allain, Lebedev, & Simien, 2017)

As seen in this exchange, Silvio pushes Lionel not only to begin to think about how his writing about Armstrong-Parker is personal and political, involving the multiple identities which he occupies. While being pushed by Silvio to think more deeply about the spaces that he occupies and the ways in which his intersecting identities exist, this exchange still does not help him in finding a space for himself within a queer community. Silvio suggests that he begins to search for this truth by going to a party held by the theatre kids. While he follows Silvio's advice, his experience there only serves as a place where he fetishized as a Black man and not seen for all of the ways in which he exists. While these new interactions have not pushed him into the Black, non-heterosexual space in the larger campus, Lionel begins to see how he might use the allyship that is forming with both Troy and Silvio not only will aid in his ability to thrive in the newspaper but also in the larger Black community at Winchester. Much like the gay participant in Harper's (2004) work, he was growing in his "previous track records of service, leadership, and contributions to the African American communities at their universities" (p. 101).

### *Shaving Off But Speaking Out*

Later on in the episode, after Lionel listens to another one of Troy's sexual encounters, he knocks on their shared bathroom door to take Troy up on his offer to cut his hair. As Lionel sits on the chair, Troy asks him what "setting" he wants his hair. Lionel, having not successfully navigated this water, says that he does not know. As they come to a decision, Troy asks Lionel if the chic from the theatre party was hot. As the camera looks at Lionel's back, he sighs, and his coming out begins,

**Lionel:** Troy...I'm gay. I don't know why that is so hard for me to say. I've always known.

**Troy** (walking back from his room shirtless): What you say, my man?

**Lionel:** Just I'm into guys.

**Troy:** Oh.. cool.

**Lionel:** Yea, vaginas are like art in a museum. Beautiful to look at but don't touch.

**Troy:** Yea, agree to disagree. Now, I gotta get these edges super crispy because you motherfuckers are picky as shit.

**Lionel:** I'm not like that.

**Troy:** Nah, you're an original, man. Anyone can see that. (Bowser, Allain, Lebedev, & Simien, 2017)

Simultaneously, Lionel gets a message from Silvio after a scoop that Lionel leaked comes out on the radio. This conversation is the first time that Lionel chooses to take on a label. He shaves off his hair, a symbol that stands for his inability to connect with those around him while embracing his gayness and his place in the Black community. As the love song plays and the haircut happens, we also see Lionel freely engaging in masturbation—a literal and figurative release that his haircut by Troy allows him not to engage sheepishly but with his clothes strewn about his room recalling their closeness. While Cass (1979, 1984) talks about identity acceptance as a time when those developing increase their contact with other homosexuals, Lionel's masturbatory moment is the contact that he needed with himself to begin to accept who he is as a Queer male while simultaneously embracing the Blackness he gains through his new found [platonic] relationship with Troy. This moment with helps give Lionel the sense of belonging that he has longed for since high school.

### *Embracing Black Nerdiness and Engaging Queerness*

As Lionel continues to reconcile his racial, sexual, and intellectual identities, it is the finale that serves as a point where they finally converge. After engaging in more critical research as a reporter for the *Winchester Independent*, Lionel finds out that the family that founded the paper is funding and supporting a measure to integrate Armstrong-Parker, seemingly as a result of the racial tensions that persist post-Pastiche Dear Black People party. Usually timid and quiet, Lionel sits back as people ask questions in the room. The moderator notes that they have time for one last question and chooses Lionel as she buys into the perception that he cannot speak for himself or others beyond some of the writing that he has done.

When he begins talking, Lionel starts timidly. He asks the college president, "How much money are we all to you?" He avoids being interrupted by the moderator, Coco, to begin noting the facts that support the notion that the administration of the university is actively working against the experience of the students of color. He calls out the Hancocks, the founders of the paper, and how the institution is taking a 10 million dollar donation and allowing

them to wield power. As he continues to run about the room avoiding Coco, he blasts an article to the entire campus that speaks to the integration of Armstrong-Parker. Even as Coco takes the mic from him which worked to amplify his voice, Lionel continues his message to the student body. We then see screenshots of Lionel's newspaper article come to the screen. Through his deep research and growing acceptance of his Black identity, Lionel is able to not only be self-confident but also willing to sacrifice his place at the newspaper to expose the injustices that exist in the Winchester community, two key tenets of Whiting's (2006) scholar identity model. As Lionel's racial identity and understandings have grown, he is not focused on simply gaining a space at the newspaper or be affiliated with the Black community, his internalized Blackness comes forward in his commitment towards truth and justice for students of color at Winchester.

As melee ensues around him, Silvio approaches him angrily. The conversation that happens between them situates the moment where Lionel begins to practice the intersections of his identity and gaining agency in displaying them:

**Silvio:** What part about the Hancocks are off limits possessed you to put the story about the motherfucking Hancocks.

**Lionel:** Silvio, can you shut up?

**Silvio:** What did you say?

**Lionel:** I said Silvio "can you shut the fuck up?" (shots of the students' reactions to the release of information)

**Silvio:** Listen, I just...

**Lionel:** No, you listen. This is important to me. And if you want me on the Independent, these are the types of stories I am going to write. And if you don't like it, you can just go fuck... (Silvio grabs Lionel's face and kisses him) (Bowser, Allain, Lebedev & Simien, 2017)

In this brief moment, Lionel cannot only advocate for writing about race issues but also uses his prose to gain the attention while being comfortable engaging in his first Queer moment on the show. Through the growing relationship with the Black males on campus, specifically Troy, Lionel finds his voice and place within a community. The season ends with Lionel bringing Silvio to Armstrong-Parker to see Black community life as they watch a parody of *Scandal* called *Defamation*. This decision to bring Silvio into this space brings him into a place where he begins to realize the space of Black, non-heterosexual as proposed by Mitchell and Means (2014). Lionel sees how he can begin being his whole self as a Black Queer man at an Ivy League Institution. By merging what was once distinct identities that he fumbled to see their intersections, Lionel has reached identity synthesis as proposed by Cass (1979, 1984); he sees how his Black, queer, and intellectual identities are not at war but work together to build a stronger version of himself.

### Discussion

As Harper (2009) suggests, it is critical for Black men to find safety in their academic settings, especially at PWIs. Seeing that Lionel did not have a safe environment in his high school as a Black Queer nerd, he was initially reticent to build relationships and see himself as Black. When thinking about Whiting (2006), Lionel only walks into his experience at Winchester with some semblance of academic self-confidence. His acceptance into the elite institution and his talents when it comes to writing are at the center of how he sees himself as he transitioned to life at Winchester. Through the vantage point of his hair, Simien grapples with Lionel as being phenotypically Black but not seeing himself as someone who is Black. Being in Armstrong-Parker immerses Lionel in a Black world that he had no choice but to engage. He now had the ability to begin to think about his racial identity in a space that was much safer than that of his high school and allowed for him to begin constructing his own sense of self as a Black male. Through this growing understanding of his place and space in the larger Black context at Winchester, Lionel understands the importance of speaking out against Pastiche and their parody of Black culture.

While this was the case, unlike Whiting (2006) who argues that Gifted Black men focus on a need to achieve rather than having a specific affiliation with particular groups in their schools, Lionel needed to align himself with particular people and groups for his self-discovery to happen. Armstrong-Parker and being part of the Black community felt weird for Lionel in the beginning, but as he gained his voice and began to unearth the myriad of racial issues at the center of Winchester's issues, Lionel learned that being aligned with Troy was critical to his story's development. Through this alignment, Lionel gains access not only to relevant information, but also the traditional and Black cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973; Carter, 2005) needed for him to thrive at this Predominantly White Institution. Strayhorn and Tillman (2013) and Harper (2009) see the building of these strategic relationships across the spectrum of masculinity as a means for survival on this campus and acknowledge how he can be a positive contributor to the change needed at Winchester. It is his ability to begin engaging in his development as Black male that would allow for Lionel to engage in questions around his sexuality.

Lionel seemingly is read as non-sexual by his peers and only Silvio questions his potential Queerness. His relationship with Silvio helps Lionel to grapple with the intersectionality of his identity while also feeling like he had a space in which he could speak on this freely. Goode-Cross and Good (2013) note this building of relationships between queer males can be hard and serve as a hurdle. Because Silvio is obvious in his sexuality and "labels," he cannot only model but also articulates ways in which Lionel can see a vision for himself at Winchester. Engaging in the process of "finding his truth," helps for Lionel to

see how he can be Black, Queer, and an intellectual at Winchester, something that he had not seen as necessary in his development.

It is this space that helps Lionel come out to Troy. Through these various experiences, Lionel continues to gain the necessary levels of consciousness needed for him to truly enact his whole self at Winchester. His *quadruple consciousness* as articulated by Mitchell & Means (2014) now has the ability to come to fruition. By seeing the need to build these bridges and find his truth, the intensely private relationship between the two men becomes critical to his development in this space. Seeing that his relationship with Black men in high school was tenuous, his relationship with Troy allows him to build a schema for a positive relationship with other Black men on campus. Troy not only provides the tools and access in the Black community that Lionel needed to become comfortable but also is the first place where he can flex his Black intellectualism through his writing. Troy, also, becomes the object of his initial desires, helping to push his questioning into a reality. Being aligned with Troy helps to minimize some of the anxiety and stress that he associated with coming out and coming to terms with his multiple identities. This strategic coming out protects him from being seen first as Black rather than gay while also working to ground him an experience that is white that often plagues Black men at Predominately White Institutions. These expanded social networks allow for Black, Queer gifted students to grapple, explore, and hopefully, learn to accept their multiplicity of their identities.

Ultimately, Lionel vacillates between the heterosexual and non-heterosexual categories as seen in Mitchell and Means (2014). While he enters college with a complicated relationship to other Black people (especially Black men) and finding his intellectual space and voice, his presence in Armstrong-Parker helps to ground him as both Black and gifted. He transitions into a more self-aware Black identity; his racial pride grows as a result of his acceptance by his peers at this PWI, much different than his experiences in high school. Confusion around his sexual identity fueled much of this wavering. Once he can gain the necessary vocabulary around intersectionality and see how Silvio works within and around those intersections, Lionel can see how and when he needs to negotiate his identities and their ability to gain him what he needs to be successful at Winchester University.

Lionel's character expands the definition of being a gifted Black male through this Queerness. Despite negative experiences with other Black males, Lionel uses his curiosity and his ability to communicate through prose to develop a stronger sense of Blackness. Unlike the work of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) who speak to notions of "acting white," Lionel has to navigate being Queer. His "otherness" is invisible to those in this space. His masculinity goes unquestioned because as Whiting (2009) posits that "Black and Hispanic males with a scholar identity do not equate being intelligent or studious or talented

with being ‘feminine’ or ‘unmanly’” (p. 56). While being at a Predominately White Institution can impact one’s ability to situate one’s racial and sexual identities, his placement in Armstrong Parker with other Black males, who while speaking in heteronormative ways, do not reject Lionel’s place the community helps him to gain in his racial pride and identity development.

While Mitchell and Means (2014) call for an examination of context, it is essential to think about how the racial climate for Black students at Winchester seemed to lessen Lionel’s choice about his Blackness. It became an imperative for survival to use race as a lens even though it was something that he was not comfortable with before coming to Winchester. It is imperative then to think about how these “choices” of being Black/Non-Black or heterosexual/non-heterosexual in these elite educational environments center around survival and thriving. Lionel has all of the conceptual understanding about his race and Queerness, and Winchester serves as the place that he has the language to verbalize his experiences and actively engage in the intersections of his identity. This intersectional exploration and understanding are paramount to the experience of Black Queer males who are high-achieving.

Finally, as we see Lionel coming to understand these intersections, it is important that as we put scholar identity in conversation with quadruple consciousness, it is important to see how these intersecting identities do not simply allow for one to neatly follow these developmental markers. As Lionel shows us, in order for his sexual awakening to emerge, he had to come to terms with who he was as a Black male and for him to find a purpose to allow for him to have the ability to grapple with his sexual identity. As we think about Black Queer males in elite predominately White institutions, we must explore how the developing conceptions around masculinity and their racialized bodies become critical points of examination and reflection as they move through their choice to be open with their sexual preference. Vacillating between Mitchell and Means’ (2014) stages of development is not simply then about being aware of where they are on a sexual spectrum and their consciousness of the Blackness; Lionel exemplifies that there are many more complicated facets of one’s identity that push people in and out of the colored closet.

### Implications

As Harper (2004) and Strayhorn and Tillman (2013) help us to see, continuing to operate under the assumption that all Black males are a homogenous group is dangerous. As we continue to support Black students in their transition to and through predominantly white institutions, we must engage with intersectionality and how students experiences differ as they negotiate, learn, and grapple with themselves in new environments. As schools begin to think not only about community building and inclusivity at predominantly white institutions, more

work needs to be done within communities of color to foster and celebrate intra-racial diversity and promise. One way this can be done is through staff and faculty examining which student voices are privileged within communities of color. They need to examine how they can work to ensure that students like Lionel are able to find their voice and lead in ways that are authentic to who they are and in the service of the larger community of the institution.

In addition to thinking about how higher education leaders and faculty can develop space and leadership among a more diverse set of Black students, more work needs to be done in thinking about how to support students to grapple with complex conversations around race within Black communities in these spaces. Part of Lionel's struggles in coming to terms with his Blackness and his Black queerness stemmed from a lack of discussion, beyond the students, that helped them to see how they can bring their full selves into Armstrong Parker. While his peers were important, having clear mentorship, space for crucial conversations about the ways in which decisions impact the communities as a whole, and simply acknowledging that Black identity is not monolithic should be at the center of how predominantly White institutions look towards shaping and guiding the Black social, cultural, and academic experiences of their students. This work should not be shouldered onto students as they are in transition and need the necessary supports in reimagining themselves anywhere along the continuum of Black identity (Sewell & Goings, 2019). While Lionel did not view this as a form of emotional labor, we must still think about how we put the responsibility on students to learn and teach the community when they already have lots on their minds and on their social and academic plates.

Often in educational research, there is a focus on empirical studies. As we move into an increasingly digital age where television and film have a more extensive reach, there is a critical need for engaging in analysis of popular culture representations of Black Queer male identity. These representations may cast/constrain the developmental trajectory of similarly situated individuals. As Hollywood works to be diverse, we have to be an advocate for positive and realistic depictions of Black, Queer gifted males who are searching to find comfort in themselves if they choose to thrive in predominantly white spaces. Lionel serves as a window into an experience that we have not seen in any prior television series that centered around Black student life in college. Centering the Black queer identity among the various other shades of Black identity helps people to realize a place for themselves in similar spaces and models for how they might go about choosing to exist in predominantly white intellectual spaces.

Finally, while Christian (2005) has begun to think about how Black Queer men negotiate and rank identities, more work can be done to think about the reason why and the specific circumstances that Black Queer men choose to rank their identities in the ways that they do, primarily related to conversations around their academic identity. There is a great need to think about how we

see Black Queer gifted men as also thinking about their academic selves as it comes into play when negotiating their relationships within Black spaces, especially if they are perceived to be “acting white” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1987). When two identities could be engaged to promote safety and progress, what is the rationale and thought process that Black Queer gifted men More work needs to be done to think about how Black, Queer, gifted students negotiate and prioritize their identities.

### Considerations and Questions for Future Work on Black Queer Gifted Students

As more research continues about the intersections between one’s academic, racial and sexual identities, I would posit the following areas for consideration or probing:

**(1) Distinctions between sexuality and sexualization of Black boys:** We must begin to openly discuss sexuality when it comes to Black boys and to not equate that with sexualizing Black male bodies. Historical tropes of Sambo and the Buck that often come to the forefront of conversations around the Black male being sexualized also continue to perpetuate a heteronormative and heterosexual way of viewing Black males. Even when Black queer males and issues around their sexuality emerged as topics of conversation in the 1980s and 1990s, connections to HIV/AIDS and down low culture continued to not only hypersexualize the Black male body but also work towards further marginalizing and vilifying the Black queer presence. For Lionel, this is manifested in his struggle to see who is he and where he might fit in and find himself as a Black queer male at Winchester. As we work to move away from deficit thinking around the Black male experience, it is imperative that we work to normalize discussions around sexuality without having to talk about sex or sexualizing experiences for Black queer boys. While shows like POSE on FX complicate the notions around what it means to be Black and queer, we must continue to ask how we are incorporating this imagery and discussions around that into classrooms and spaces that celebrate the Black queer experiences. *What would it mean for educators to center discussions of sexuality away from sex? How might we begin to help Black queer students move from a deficit thinking about their sexual beings and see how it is something worth being explored? What does celebrating Black queer bodies look like in K-16 education that will lead to more positive exploration and communication as a person ages?*

**(2) Sexual Passing and Its Impact:** In discussions of passing in Black spaces, we often talk about passing in racial terms. Lionel’s story, and the story of many other Black queer men, is around passing sexually as heterosexual. The choice to pass as a heterosexual male could be one of safety for queer people

but also is tied to notions of acceptance and having the ability to move forward in one's pursuits without having barriers to access. Passing for Lionel enables him to be privy to conversations that help to not only boost his own social clout but better the community as a whole. With that being said, while Lionel comes out in the story to his peers, his sexuality is often a non-factor in conversations, rendering a sort of erasure of part of his persona. His ability to pass as a cisgender and straight male due to his gender performance allows him to have access to spaces but also makes him question how he should go about reconciling his multiple identities. Lionel's situation then speaks to a silent passing, a passing placed on him not an active choice to blend into the community. *How might we begin to think about the ways in which institutions and communities force the need to pass on the Black queer body, not due to institutional homophobia but due to a lack of empowerment? What might it mean if Black queer males sexuality was not rendered invisible but seen and spoken.*

**(3) Leadership by Black queer males on college campuses:** While much of the literature mentioned earlier in this describe the angst and discomfort that Black queer males experience on their college campuses, it is imperative that we also talk about the ways in which Black queer males take on leadership roles and construct narratives for larger consumption on college campuses around the country. For Lionel, he is the one who not only breaks up the party with Pastiche but also breaks the story of the experiences of Black students on the Winchester campus. Lionel is quickly thrust in a leadership role and serves as an important interlocutor in the quest for equity and inclusion on campus. While Harper's (2004) speaks to how this service to campuses by Black queer males is often something that provides safety, in the case of Lionel, if it weren't for his role on the *Winchester Independent*, would his story have been shared and celebrated as widely. This celebration of the intellectual, cultural and social impact of the Black queer male on college campuses cannot continue to be written solely by those from within the community. Lionel's leadership, and similar leadership by Black queer males on college campuses, helped to not only change his own situation but that of entire communities. *What are ways in which Black communities not only rely on Black queer labor but can also shine a light on the ways in which queer people's unique experiences situate them to understand and mitigate multiple perspectives on college campuses? How can we ensure that we don't erase the stories and experiences of Black queer males on college campuses? How can we not only ensure that stories of Black queer males are told but that they have a say in how those stories are told and controlled in perpetuity?*

### Note

<sup>1</sup> In this work, I will use Queer and Gay interchangeably based on the literature and Lionel's own self-description.

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