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Interrogating Homonationalism in *Love, Simon*

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by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the portrayal of racial and sexual identities in the film *Love, Simon* (2018). *Love, Simon* follows the story of Simon Spier, a white, gay high school student who discovers true love and acceptance from his peers. Many Hollywood entertainment reviewers praised the film for its progressive portrayal of a LGBTQ romance between teenage characters. At the same time, *Love, Simon* uses Black characters to re-center Simon's to show that Whiteness can heal someone's LGBTQ identity. I use Jasbir K. Puar's (2007) idea of homonationalism- LGBTQ rights discourse privilege white gay men while conversely decentering Black and Brown (queer) people- and postracism as organizing frameworks for this thesis project. I ask: how might homonationalism create new understandings of how *Love, Simon* portrays race and sexuality? What are the costs of the film including some bodies while isolating and disadvantaging others?

Introduction:

Locating Homonationalism

Seventeen-year old Simon Spier wants you to know two things. The eponymous white male protagonist of Greg Berlanti's 2018 feature film *Love, Simon* is "just like you" (as he vehemently assures us in the opening montage). Simon is also hiding a "huge ass" secret: he likes boys- specifically, his anonymous online pen pal, Blue. Regardless, the film portrays Simon as desperate to keep his sexuality clandestine- even if it means hiding it from his friends and classmates. Simon is a senior at Creekwood High School, which the film locates within a fictional, upper-middle class suburb of Atlanta, Georgia. *Love, Simon* stylizes Creekwood as a space of conformity and conveys the importance students place on fitting in (e.g.: students are shown wearing the same type of clothing; Simon is depicted to be fearful of the consequences of coming out as gay to his classmates). The film suggests that characters who do not conform are ostracized. One such student is Ethan, a Black, gay, gender non-conforming boy student who is a constant target of Creekwood's bullies. Early in the film, Simon is shown on the sidelines as Ethan is verbally targeted by two male students. Simon even makes a lewd comment against Ethan's sexual and gender identities as he leaves the camera's shot ("I wish he wouldn't make it so easy [for the bullies]"). Though Ethan is a racialized character, *Love, Simon* links the justification for Ethan's isolation to his sexuality- race is never questioned. Teachers are never shown intervening to help Ethan in scenes where he is harassed. Simon is shown believing that if he, too, comes out, he will become another victim of homophobic tormenting. However, when Simon is outed by another student and is established as a target, a teacher is portrayed

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immediately stopping the bullies. Though *Love, Simon* has two gay characters, Simon is shown as white and can easily pass as heteronormative. He is often portrayed with a close-cropped haircut, heather grey hoodie sweatshirt, and dirty Converse sneakers. *Love, Simon* uses Ethan's Blackness, androgynous style, and chin-length bob to convey him as much different from Simon-and incapable of passing.

The constant student interaction is also shown occurring afterhours on CreekSecrets, an online chatroom for students of the high school to post confessions and rumors. CreekSecrets is how Simon meets Blue. It is also the space where the film outs Simon (Martin, a nerdy white boy portrayed as antagonist, anonymously submits Simon's e-mails with Blue after he stumbles upon the messages in the Creekwood library). Though Simon is shown experiencing a few lonely weeks without his friends and being harassed alongside Ethan, he eventually regains his space as an accepted member of Creekwood's student body after posting an apology note on CreekSecrets. The note also solicits Blue to come out and reveal his true identity. In *Love, Simon*'s penultimate scene- a winter carnival- Bram, a popular Black and Ashkenazi Jewish male student, reveals that he is Blue. The two boys are depicted sharing a very public and passionate kiss in front of their cheering classmates. The film concludes a few months later at the end of the school year. We are shown that Simon is reconnected with his family and friend group, which now includes Bram as his boyfriend.

Love, Simon is currently the only top grossing Hollywood teen romantic comedy film to prioritize a same-sex or gay love interest (Box Office Mojo, 2018). However, *Love, Simon* does not disrupt heteronormativity. The protagonist's love interest might be a Black, Jewish, gay teenage boy, but his role is portrayed no differently than many of the heteronormative, female leads in traditional romantic comedies that feature male-female couples. Even after Simon is

outed, the film portrays him as desperate to convince his family, friends, and fellow students that "he is [still] just like" them (Bowen, Godfrey, Klausner, Shahbazian, & Berlanti, 2018). While he is still in the closet, Simon is shown idly standing in silence as bullies shout homophobic epithets at Ethan in a crowded schoolyard. One scene even features Simon in his bedroom attempting to change his style to be "gayer." As he sports a dark green V-neck shirt, Simon is shown wrinkling his nose in disgust at his reflection, suggesting that he believes he would look "too" gay if he augmented his fashion sense. *Love, Simon* follows a trend of many United States (hereafter abbreviated to U.S.)-based romantic comedy films produced in the twenty-first century. Even though the film features a same-gender love interest, it still follows the ideology and models of heteronormativity (Moddlemog, 2009; Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2014; Poole, 2014). LGBTQ characters who are able to pass as heterosexual or act as an exception to heterosexuality must find ways to contain their queerness in another character, whose sexuality cannot be managed and is shown as uncontrollable in comparison (McRuer, 2003; McInroy & Craig, 2017; McRuer, 2006; Dhaenens, 2013; Dean, 2007). I argue that *Love, Simon* presents its protagonist as a perfect, post-closet character (Becker, 2009). By this, I am referring to Simon's depiction as a likeable and mild-mannered white, male, middle to upper-class protagonist who only stands out from other white male characters because he is gay (Peters, 2016). Becoming post-closeted is crucial for a character's well-being and solving a conflict or plot in a film. I suggest that *Love, Simon*'s emphasis on making Simon a post-closet character allows the text to show him as an exception to heteronormativity.

     Love, Simon engages with homonationalism, Jasbir K. Puar (2007)'s theory that U.S.-based LGBTQ rights discourses only benefit white gay people while simultaneously disadvantaging gay or queer-identifying people of color. This thesis asks: How might

homonationalism create new understandings of *Love, Simon*'s portrayal of race and LGBTQ sexuality? I seek to build upon existing research in Critical whiteness studies (Ahmed, 2007; Eguchi, 2018; Leonard, 2018; Giroux, 1997; Muñoz, 1998; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995), Postracism (Ono, 2009; Ono, 2010; Dubrofsky, 2013; Belcher, 2016; Griffin, 2014; Warner, 2015), queer media studies (Becker, 2009; Peters, 2016; Eguchi & Washington, 2016; McRuer, 2006), and homonationalism (Puar, 2007; Puar, 2013; Duggan, 2002; Rudnick, 2018) to interrogate how race and LGBTQ sexuality are (not) shown, watched, or imagined within this text.

Gay Films v. Queer Films

My project differentiates between gay films and queer films. By "gay", I am referring to identities and actions that exist outside the center of heteronormativity, but do not disrupt it. I use "queer" or "queerness" when referring to a performance of sexuality and identity that acts in opposition and resistive to a social norm (Halperin, 1995, p. 66). LGBTQ identities often adopt an "we're just like you" stance (much like *Love, Simon*), and embrace a likeness to heteronormativity regarding monogamy, nuclear families, and assimilation (Weber, 2016, p. 3). Conversely, queerness- in the context of U.S. popular media- might follow alongside a series of structures that aim to present a "mode of desiring" allowing characters within a text to see beyond what they always already know about race, sexuality, gender, and identity. Queerness on screen might be engaged through camera angles, storylines, or non-traditional character development (Muñoz, 1999). Because of such boundary pushing, queerness is often depicted in something in need of heteronormative control. Typically, this is conducted through social ostracization, intimidation strategies, and - in extreme cases- physical violence (Puar, 2007, p. 3).

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Love, Simon is the first major Hollywood-produced romantic-comedy film prioritizing a gay love interest (Knegt, 2018), but it is not a queer film. Rather, *Love, Simon* follows a trajectory of mainstream romantic comedies marketed in the United States that continue to follow the ideas of heteronormativity (e.g.: monogamy and proving that the gay protagonist is just like other, heteronormative characters). LGBTQ-leaning films overwhelmingly depict their gay protagonist as white, with easily concealable sexualities (Moddlemog, p. 162). For example, though Simon is attracted to boys, he is portrayed as quick to hide his romantic attractions at all costs from his family and best friends. Once Simon is outed, he is shown as very determined to still prove his normalcy and relationship to heteronormativity. Moddlemog argues that many Hollywood romantic comedy films feature white gay characters to suggest that certain portrayals of LGBTQ identities are acceptable over others. She highlights that many romantic comedy films feature dramatic final "kiss" scenes centered in front of a large audience who loudly and visibly applaud for the couple in a public place (p. 163). *Love, Simon* follows this model: Simon's eventual meeting with Blue/Bram at the carnival Ferris wheel is depicted as very public, with several of Simon and Blue/Bram's classmates watching. The final scene shows Simon and Bram in a monogamous relationship, suggesting that their monogamy and "traditional conformism" (Weber, p. 3) are a permissible portrayal of LGBTQ sexualities. As a text, this film reinforces, and does not subvert homonormativity and homonationalism.

I use *gay* to describe Simon's sexuality rather than *queer* because the depiction of his sexuality still appears to be accepted much like his heteronormative peers (Halberstam, 2005, p. 1). For example, after he is outed, Simon finds it relatively easy to regain acceptance from the Creekwood student body. After writing a lengthy post on CreekSecrets apologizing to his friends and family members, Simon declares "he is just like everyone else, and deserves a true love

story" (Bowen, et. al., 2018). Simon is shown returning to school the next day with students applauding him and approving of his gayness. Though Simon might identify as gay, *Love, Simon* portrays him as not *that* gay (as Simon reminds viewers throughout the film). Conversely, I use queer to describe Ethan because racialized LGBTQ identities "are linked in mutual impossibility" (McRuer, 2006 p. 304). Ethan's queerness is depicted as an easy target for bullies and he is constantly ostracized by the (mostly white) student body throughout the course of the film. I argue that this is one of the ways *Love, Simon* uses homonationalism. Simon is (quite literally, through the camera lighting- as I will further discuss in Chapter 2) shown to be capable of being accepted by other characters because he is a white heteronormative-passing gay boy. However, the film's portrayal of Simon's gayness as an exception while conversely rejecting Ethan (though the film does not discuss race and racialization). Essentially, gayness and the freedom to perform gay sexualities in *Love, Simon* does not extend to racialized characters, who are queered and are shown existing outside the norms of white heteronormativity and homonormativity.

Homonationalism

This project aims to problematize the ways the film shows Simon (a white gay boy) as acceptable while simultaneously rejecting Ethan (a Black, gender-fluid queer boy). Simon is framed as believing he has every right to become "who he truly is" (Bowen, et. al., 2018). Meanwhile, Ethan is portrayed as publicly ridiculed and shamed throughout the film, even after other students are shown embracing Simon as an out gay character. Duggan (2002) notes that the rise of neoliberalism before the new millennium resulted in new political opportunities for LGBTQ rights. However, such political progress is actually rooted in U.S. cultural imperialism

(p. 177). In the U.S., white, wealthy LGBTQ people who were vocal about assimilating became portrayed as more normal and exceptional compared to depictions of racialized LGBTQ people (p. 185). Puar (2007 & 2013) notes homonormativity relies on systematized racialization in order to show white LGBTQ people as normal and racialized LGBTQ people as disruptive and needing to be controlled. Therefore, as long as a white gay person conforms enough to racial, gender, and class standards to pass as straight, they become the homonationalist exception (p. 3). Puar warns white that gay exceptionalism actually supports tenets of heteronormativity that are intrinsically tied to imperialism and privilege, like race, class, and ability. Through these discourses, "homonationalism is fundamentally a critique of how lesbian and gay liberal rights discourses produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to accord some populations access to cultural and legal forms of citizenship at the expense "… of those rights of other populations" (2013, p. 25).

Currently, mainstream media texts in the United States continue to privilege narratives of white LGBTQ people as exceptions to heteronormativity, normalizing certain ideas about LGBTQ sexuality (Peters, 2016; Becker, 2009). However, racialized LGBTQ storylines are erased (McRuer, 2006; Brown, 2012), convey racialized LGBTQ characters as objects of control and fetish for white LGBTQ people (Eguchi & Washington, 2016) or as sources of enlightenment and emotional labor (Yep, 2003). Under this framework, white (LGBTQ) people are portrayed using racialized LGBTQ characters as objects to benefit white character development and growth. However, this one-way transactional flow of emotional labor and enlightenment in a mediated text depict white characters (straight and LGBTQ alike) as the only ones profiting from "the intersection of sexuality… and racial injustice" (Clare, 2017, p. 19).

Love, Simon's use of homonationalism as a process (Puar, 2013, p. 26) presents white LGBTQ

identities as normal, while displacing and dehumanizing racialized (LGBTQ) characters.

Postracism

This project uses postracism as a differentiating lens to determine how white LGBTQ

characters and racialized LGBTQ characters are portrayed in *Love, Simon.* By postracism, I am

referring to a framework in a mediated text that assumes racism is a historical issue that no

longer exists and frames tense racial relations as "never really that bad… and only getting better"

(Ono, 2010, p. 228). However, media texts that use such ideology eliminate the socio-historical

boundaries of systemic racism, minimizing its ingrained (and violent) reality for many racialized

people living in the U.S. (Ono, 2009; Ono, 2013; Joseph, 2009). Postracism additionally presents

the idea that "good" white people cannot be racist, because they helped to cure racial injustice

alongside "exceptional" racialized people (Ono, 2013, p. 314). Using this imagery presents a

discourse of distraction from the racialized discrimination that can be imbedded within a text and

dissimulates racialized oppression as a distant memory (Melamed, 2006, p. 1) that does not

require further discussion.

Postracism can also reveal the various methods popular culture texts use under the guise

of "multiculturalism" to obfuscate racist realities present in U.S. media sites (Belcher, 2016, p.

492; Berlant, 1997). One way media texts might present postracial ideas is through emphasizing

other axes of oppression as central to the text's plot, while decentering race. For example, *Love,*

Simon's major point of conflict focuses on homophobia and LGBTQ acceptance. However, race

is largely ignored, despite the fact that race still very much informs how white and racialized

LGBTQ characters are respectively portrayed. Postracism also enables a stronger understanding

of how popular mediated texts turn to "multicultural" or inferential racism to obfuscate the presence of racism and racialization. Here, I am referring to an idea pioneered by Stuart Hall (2001) suggesting that films and televisions attempt to dispel racism by "diversifying their cast." In turn, such choices naturalize events in the film that seem to relate or connect to issues of racial tension and disparities (Belcher, 2016; Peck, 1994; Joseph, 2011; Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008). For instance, *Love, Simon* features many racialized supporting characters (Simon's love interest is a biracial boy), but the only student who is ever shown being bullied or socially isolated is a racialized queer character. The text features a racially (ambiguously so) cast, but *Love, Simon* rarely discusses race. The focus on homophobia as a locus of oppression attempts to obfuscate LGBTQ identity as something that all characters in *Love, Simon* are portrayed as experiencing universally. For instance (as I write about in Chapter 2), Simon is portrayed as believing that he will be treated like Ethan if he comes out. However, after Simon is outed, the film shows that he is accepted by other characters, while Ethan still remains a target of harassment and isolation. The differences in Ethan and Simon's treatment remains unquestioned throughout the film.

  Love, Simon also uses racialized girl characters as points of tension for the plot. Fojas (2008) argues that relationships depicted between white characters and racialized girl and women characters rely on racist tropes. *Love, Simon* features Simon's friend Abby, a Black girl constantly shown as an object of affection and fixation. The focus on Abby's sexuality becomes a point of contention for many characters throughout the film. Through simultaneously recognizing and denying difference, postracism uses aspects of "exceptionalism," in turn (re)creating homonormativity and homonationalism alike. For example, Blue/Bram, who eventually becomes Simon's boyfriend at the end of the film, is quiet, well-liked, and half-white (though his Whiteness is tied to an ethnic minority). Though he is biracial, Bram becomes an

exception. Meanwhile, Ethan is dark skinned and portrayed as loud, flamboyant, and unable to contain his queerness of his own accord. Racialized characters, especially LGBTQ characters, are always already understood from the central gaze of a white man (Eguchi & Washington, 2016, p. 410).

Methodology

This project uses textual analysis, with a critical cultural studies orientation. Each chapter will consist of an analysis of different characters, interactions/dialogue, or scenes where I believe homonationalism is useful to investigate portrayals of race and sexuality. I am interested in how the film presents Simon in comparison to racialized (LGBTQ) characters. I organize my chapters with three lenses: postracism as a foundation for understanding homonationalism; homonationalism and racialization; and homonationalism as an imaginative framework. I am interested in how *Love, Simon* attempts to present racism (especially in relation to portrayals of sexuality) as a non-issue. To do this, I engaged in a close watching of each scene I selected. I looked at things like lighting, camera angles, framing, character development, plot, narrative, dialogue, music for how these framed the story about race and sexuality.

Driving my analysis is an interest in the way Whiteness (through Simon, as a rhetorical agent) watches for racialized otherness from people of color. By Whiteness, I am referring to strategies a text uses that presents white characters as heroic, while recycling racist tropes to present racialized characters as lesser (Ono, 2010). In doing so, *Love, Simon* uses Whiteness to constantly decenter and lessen racialized experiences (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Kellner (2011) emphasizes the importance of a cultural studies textual analysis, noting that a prioritization of race, sexuality, or class "aims to make people sensitive to how relations of

power are 'encoded…'" within a mediated text (p. 3). I use an interdisciplinary critical/cultural framework that I believe helps me to examine the dangerous implications of obfuscating racialized representations in popular culture (McRuer, 2003; Griffin, 2014; Muñoz, 2009; Sloop, 2004; Belcher, 2016; Ono, 2013). My interest for this project focuses on interrogating how *Love, Simon* prioritizes white LGBTQ sexualities as normal and natural through character development, scenes, camera work, and lighting. I hope to use my analysis as an opening to a larger conversation regarding portrayals of postracism and homonationalism in U.S. popular culture.

Chapters

Chapter One: Postracism and Strategically Whitening Simon

The first chapter uses postracism to suggest that *Love, Simon* constantly recenters Simon's experiences as normal and natural. *Love, Simon* received many positive reviews praising its "progressive" plot (Debruge, 2018; Frosch, 2018; Manders, 2018; Sobel, 2018; Yang & Rogers, 2018). In a March 2018 interview with U.S.-based publication *The Hollywood Reporter*, the film's cast and production staff spoke out about their hopes that *Love, Simon'*s showcasing of LGB(TQ) identity would "become… regular" in other mainstream U.S. films (Waters, 2018). Others suggested that the film would act as "a watershed moment" about prioritizing other marginalized identities in U.S.-centric popular media texts. I use postracism in my first chapter to establish the ways racialization and subsequent racial tensions are ignored within the film. In the first part of Chapter 1, I turn to Stuart Hall (1981)'s theory of inferential racism to make sense of how *Love, Simon* engages with multicultural casting practices to obfuscate racism's presence in the text. These casting choices do not eliminate or address racial tensions; in fact, its

portrayals of these characters promulgates postracism and -in turn- homonationalism. I additionally examine Simon's relationship with two characters: Abby, a Black girl, and Blue/Bram, a biracial boy and Simon's love interest. I trouble the film's use of varied controlling images (Collins, 1990) to show Abby as a character who can only be seen as "good" if she is performing emotional labor to recenter Simon's importance as a white gay male character. My analysis of *Love Simon*'s depiction of Blue/Bram suggests that as a biracial, heteronormative passing character, Blue/Bram is "let in" (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014, p. 401) to Whiteness because the film uses him to further Simon's own personal character growth. Through the guise of a "multicultural" discourse, *Love, Simon* obfuscates the way racialized characters are used to help develop Simon's exceptionalism as a white gay character.

Chapter 2: The New Homonationalism: Race, Sexuality, and Post-Closet Belonging

The film follows Simon over the course of his senior year at Creekwood High School. *Love, Simon* stylizes Creekwood as a space in the film that prioritizes conformity. Characters who are portrayed as unable to conform are shown as targets of public isolation and harassment. Ethan is one such character. Simon is shown assuming that if he comes out, he will be treated similarly to Ethan. Therefore Simon is shown doing whatever he possibly can to protect his identity. I use this chapter to investigate how the film's treatment of Simon, a white gay boy, versus Ethan, a racialized and gender-fluid gay boy, (re)produces homonationalism (Duggan 2002; Puar, 2007). I argue that after Simon is outed, he is presented as an exception to white heteronormativity at the cost of Ethan's social isolation. This punishment, which ranges from verbal and physical bullying, humiliation, and isolation, places him as separate from Simon, even after Simon is outed. This chapter also analyzes the differences in how *Love, Simon* conveys

coming out as a (not) racialized process. I argue that Simon is a "post-closet" character (Becker, 2009)- a white, gay, upper-class, well-liked high school student who finds that life at high school becomes easier once he comes out of the closet. I suggest that because Ethan's racialization is shown making him more visible within Creekwood's confines, he always already will serve as a subject for containment and punishment for his outward performances of queerness.

Conclusion: Homonationalist Futurities

Love, Simon features many scenes that exist outside of a linear plot. As the film portrays Simon exploring his sexuality while he is still closeted, Simon is shown imagining an alternative world or universe where white LGBTQ identities are portrayed as more normal. José Esteban Muñoz (1999) notes LGBTQ identity "is a white thing" (p. 14). Puar (2017) likens white LGBTQ existence as something exceptional that can get better. I suggest that the film's use of these alternative reality scenes open an inquiry into imagining an abstract utopia, or a singular, ahistoricized, and individualized future that is dependent on "banal optimism" (Muñoz, p. 3). *Love, Simon* presents a world where LGBTQ sexualities are shown as normal. I conclude this project with an evaluation of the very narrow future *Love, Simon* presents- one that simply continues a singular potential way of being. I ask: what are the benefits of only accepting one possibility for LGBTQ existence? And who suffers because of it?

Chapter One:

Postracism and Strategically Whitening Simon

Love, Simon attracted attention from reviewers in the U.S. and Canada alike following its February 2018 premiere. The film, marketed as Hollywood's first mainstream LGBTQ teen romantic comedy, grossed nearly 12 million USD in its opening weekend (O'Malley, 2018). Many reports commented on the "diverse" cast, as several characters were people of color. In director Greg Berlanti's March 2018 interview with *Nightline*, a popular investigative news program on ABC, he likened *Love, Simon*'s popularity to *Black Panther* (2018). Berlanti suggested that both films, though dealing with different types of identities, are similar in how each film's style of engaged storytelling shares a typically underrepresented perspective (e.g.: *Black Panther* discusses the African diaspora while *Love, Simon* shows the challenges of coming out as an LGBTQ high school student) (Muldowney, Zepeda, & Mittal, 2018). *Love, Simon*'s co-screenwriter Elizabeth Berger noted, "We hope that [these events of LGBTQ identity] become as regular… as all other romantic comedies being made" (Waters, 2018). Natasha Rothwell, a Black American actor who portrays Ms. Albright, added: "There are a myriad of stories that need to be told about the queer community, about the black community, about marginalized voices overall. I hope that this is a watershed moment for diverse voices" (Waters). However, what are the limits of representation?

Love, Simon shares the lived experience of Simon, a white, upper-middle class, and conventionally-handsome teenage boy whose clothing style and mannerisms show him able to pass as straight. The only thing which the film presents differently is Simon's sexual preference. *Love, Simon* continues a long-standing trend in representing gay characters in US films by chronicling the lives of white gay youth as affluent exceptions to heteronormativity (Muñoz, 1998; Moddlemog, 2013; Byrd, 2014; Abate, 2017). Though Simon is gay, his gayness is easily concealed and he can fit into the film's wealthy, heteronormative world. Simon's wealthy family and Whiteness mitigate his gayness. *Love, Simon* continually centers Whiteness and white characters while simultaneously ignoring racial tensions. This erasure serves to obfuscate the ways the film portrays people of color with controlling images. Here, I am referencing to Patricia Hill Collins' (1990) idea that in the U.S., a set of racialized tropes were created to dehumanize and decenter agency from Black girls and women. One such trope is the Mammy, a maternal, domestic servant whose purpose is to nurture white people. In U.S.-based popular culture, Mammies are typically shown as superhuman, religious, and easily swayed into hysterics (Boylorn, 2013; Griffin, 2012; Wisseh, 2018). Sapphires depict Black girls and women as irrational and angry (Springer, 2007; Hobson, 2003). Another trope is the Jezebel- a sexually excessive being controlled by white men- work to extend white supremacy (Collins, 2005; Collins, 2016; Durham, Cooper, & Morris, 2013; Springer, 2007). Controlling images maintain power over racialized characters. I engage with postracism as a theoretical framework to make sense of *Love, Simon*'s use of controlling images. Postracism is a series of political and cultural strategies which suggest that racism and racial tensions no longer exist (Ono, 2010, p. 498). By postracism, I am referring to the idea that racism is solved and no longer exists in the United States or the Global North (Ono, 2009; Ono, 2010). Postracism portrays racism as a systemic

issue of the past. However, by depicting racial relations as conflict-free, popular culture

"reinstitutes whiteness as progressive and heroic…. [while] recycling and repurposing

stereotypes about people of color" (Ono, 2010, p. 228), essentially reinforcing racism (Warner,

2015; Belcher, 2016; Joseph, 2009; Dubrofsky & Wood, 2015; Enck & Morrissey, 2015). I adapt

this aforementioned work to examine *Love, Simon*'s inflation of Whiteness and "natural"

behavior (Dubrofsky & Wood, 2015; Belcher, 2016), I use the notion of postracism to make

sense of how the film's use of "multiculturalism" fails to disrupt the dominance of Whiteness in

Love, Simon. Using work on postracism, I show the ways in which people of color are portrayed

as always already subservient to white people and Whiteness. I use my analysis of *Love, Simon*'s

racialized characters' relationship with Simon (a white gay boy) to show that the film's attempts

at "multicultural casting" actually (re)produces racialized tropes and tensions.

In this chapter, I claim that *Love, Simon* includes characters of color to promote the

discursive power of Whiteness. The portrayal of people of color within this film suggests a

racialized character's agenticity is displaced. The film portrays white characters controlling any

and all interactions with racialized characters. Here, I am referring to the ways I interpret *Love,*

Simon portraying people of color as static and two-dimensional, used to advance the plot.

Conversely, white people are presented as dynamic character development. I engage a close

critical textual analysis to interrogate the larger implications of using controlling images in the

film. For instance, I am interested in the ways *Love, Simon* uses various controlling images

(Mammy and Jezebel) to portray the agency white characters have over Abby, a Black girl, in a

series of interpersonal interactions within the film. Additionally, I examine *Love, Simon*'s use of

lighting to depict Blue/Bram as a biracial (Black and white Ashkenazi Jewish) character who is

"let in" (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014, p. 401) to Whiteness because the film shows him to uplifting

Simon's own growth as a white gay boy. *Love, Simon*'s use of these images to depict Abby

ultimately "recenters...whiteness" as the dominant narrative in the film (Nakayama & Krizek,

1995). Using postracism as a frame of analysis, I trouble the ways in which *Love, Simon* depicts

the control of racialized characters through a constant re-centering of Whiteness. By Whiteness, I

am referring to a set of U.S.-based cultural processes that determine who benefits and who is

negatively targeted by racialization (Ahmed, 2007; Griffin, 2014; Nakayama, 2000;

Frankenberg, 2001; Nayak, 2007). I understand Whiteness to be an ideological marker in the

context of the U.S. that continues the legacies of racist behavior and white supremacy (Giroux,

1997a). Specifically, I am interested in the ways Whiteness mediates what certain groups of

people can and cannot do or feel in a specific cultural context (Tierney, 2006, p. 608).

Postracism and the Problems of Racial Humor

   Love, Simon is set in Creekwood, a fictional, wealthy suburb located outside of Atlanta,

Georgia. Creekwood's streets have large mansions, freshly mowed lawns, and three-car garages.

Simon and his friends attend Creekwood High School, a local public secondary school with

stately red brick buildings. Scenes featuring Creekwood High depict a majority white student

body, though racialized bodies are-- for the most part-- portrayed in the background. However,

some supporting characters are people of color. *Love, Simon*'s casting of people of color in

supporting roles contributes to the film's portrayal of racism as an already-solved historical

problem. For example, two of Simon's best friends, Abby and Nick, are people of color.

However, racial tensions are still prominent throughout the film. For example, Martin, a white

nerdy boy and the film's antagonist, is shown making an off-hand joke about race in a scene

taking place in Creekwood's cafeteria. "What do you call something Black and Jewish? Blue-

ish." In his work on U.S.-based comedians, Jonathan P. Rossing (2012) explains that postracial

humor operates under the belief that racial inequality is no longer a problem, resulting in racial

jokes "remaining unchecked" (p. 50). Simon glares at Abby as he leaves the lunch table. Abby

throws her head back and cackles as she says, "That's mean!" in reply to Martin. Her face is cast

in a dark shadow throughout the entire scene. While Simon and his friends' reactions to the

comment (leaving the table) suggest they might be offended, the film does not show them

challenging Martin's comment. Abby's reaction conveys that the film positions racial humor as

"coded… and nearly impossible to confront" (Rossing, p. 50). Martin's joke appears to serve as a

clever aside and foreshadow that Bram is the boy behind Blue, Simon's online anonymous

internet crush (at the end of the film, Bram reveals that he is Black and Ashkenazi Jewish). *Love,*

Simon's racially-charged humor in this scene portrays racism as an unchallengeable plot device.

As a framework, postracism helps to interpret impacts of marginalization, "mirror[ing] and…

interacting" (p. 46) of social problems and structures that *Love, Simon* portrays in this scene.

Love, Simon uses postracism as frame for comic relief that obfuscates the prominence of

mediated racial tension between Simon and other characters of color.

Inferential Racism and Post-ing Attitudes

    Love, Simon cast many people of color in supporting roles in an attempt to disrupt a trend

of portraying white male characters as the only bodies capable of fully belonging within a text

(Khan & Saltmarsh, 2011; Giroux, 1997b). Such practices reflect Stuart Hall's (1981) theory of

inferential racism. Inferential racism discusses the use of representation to distract viewers from

a media text's use of racial stereotyping. Hall notes: "inferential racism is… the apparently

naturalised representations of events relating to race… which have racist propositions inscribed

in them as a set of unique assumptions" (p. 91). According to Hall's (2005) paradigm for critical interpretations of media, a text (in this case, *Love, Simon*) might act as an agent that reinforces or continues to promote messages of white supremacy or Whiteness (p. 84). Inferential racism makes a film appear "diverse" and "multicultural" through its casting choices (Hall 1981; Hall 2001). For example, one of Simon's best friends, Abby is a person of color. Abby is portrayed as a light-skinned Black woman and wears her hair in a Jheri curl-style pixie cut. Abby's mother is a dark-skinned Black woman and is portrayed as a Mammy. She sits on the couch and clutches her elegantly coiffed weave as she crosses herself and mutters to Jesus. We never meet Abby's father, who she reveals cheated on her mother- contributing to tropes about absent Black fathers (Connor & White, 2006; Neal, 2013). Additionally, Blue/Bram, Simon's love interest, identifies as Black and white/Ashkenazi Jewish (performed by actor Keiynan Lonsdale). Like Abby, Blue/Bram is light-skinned and conventionally attractive- tall with an angular face. Blue/Bram is portrayed as a fairly popular boy in the film and easily passes as heterosexual until the end of the film when he reveals himself as Blue, Simon's love interest whom he met online. As previously mentioned in the Introduction, Blue/Bram is depicted as very private and careful about revealing his offline identity to Simon. Blue/Bram deletes his e-mail account after Simon is outed on CreekSecrets, an online chatroom that Simon and his friends use throughout the film. However, Blue/Bram eventually comes out after Simon posts a very public demand on CreekSecrets (which I will describe later in this chapter). Simon, as a white gay boy, is shown in control of Blue/Bram. For instance, Simon himself writes a note on CreekSecrets demanding Blue reveal his offline identity. The film shows Simon as feeling entitled to "set the parameters of interaction" with Blue/Bram (Griffin, 2014, p. 152).

Postracism can help to understand how *Love, Simon*'s use of multicultural casting creates an exciting diversion (Melamed, 2006) from the prominence of Whiteness and racial tensions in the text.. For example, *Love, Simon* features a white lead character who (eventually) openly identifies as LGBTQ. He is shown having a Black girl as a friend and is dating a biracial boy at the end of the film. U.S.-based film critics applauded director Greg Berlanti for "much-needed queer representation"(McPhee, 2018). Raka Shome (1996) notes many U.S. films use rhetorical strategies of Whiteness to control people of color who are present in such texts. I suggest that the film's tagline "Everyone deserves a true love story" is one such distracting strategy of control. The slogan appears to claim that LGBTQ representation is important and necessary. However, the film only presents white (gay) characters as able to make choices about romantic relationships (e.g.: Simon makes a public request for Blue/Bram to reveal his offline identity, but Blue/Bram is not granted that same opportunity). Nakayama and Krizek (1995) concur that Whiteness is used as a silent or invisible manipulator, determining how racialized bodies might be able to exist within a cultural setting. Such strategies echo the dangerous power of postracism despite that many racial tensions are still very real (Ono, 2010; Lacy & Ono, 2011). *Love, Simon* accomplishes this by its use of inferential racism in its casting and including people of color as Simon's friends and love interest.

Postracism and Controlling Images

Love, Simon's portrayal of Abby, one of Simon's best friends, shows the ways postracism can be used to fetishize racialized girl and women characters. Here, I am using postracism to further interrogate the ways *Love, Simon* depicts Abby as a Black teenage girl (Griffin, 2014; Joseph, 2009; Drew, 2011). In their work on *The Hunger Games* films (2012-2015), Rachel E.

Dubrofsky and Emily D. Ryalls (2014) theorize that lighting is used throughout the films to contextualize characters who perform Whiteness as authentic and natural (for example, white or bright light is projected onto a white character to indicate morality and goodness is tied with Whiteness). Conversely, *The Hunger Games* casts shadows onto characters presented as racialized, suggesting their behavior is disadvantageous and immoral (e.g.: an antagonist will always be presented in shadows or dark light) (p. 403). Building on Dubrofsky and Ryalls' (2014) ideas, I suggest *Love, Simon* uses varied lighting techniques to depict Abby through different controlling images. For example, Abby is portrayed in light when she performs emotional labor for Simon- speaking to Patricia Hill Collins' (1990) idea of the Mammy, a maternal domestic servant intended to nurture white people. Additionally, the film uses shadows to present Abby when she is shown talking to boys who are straight or wearing revealing clothing. I suggest the film casts Abby in shadows in such situations to show that she is a Jezebel, a sexual being whose excessiveness must be controlled by agents of Whiteness. As I explain later in this section, *Love, Simon*'s shadowing (a literal darkening of Abby's body and face) is used to mitigate what the film positions as an uncontrollable and overflowing Black girl's sexuality.

Love, Simon uses lighting to depict how Abby's Black femininity sets her apart from other (white girl) characters. For example, Abby's body is always already on display throughout the film- more so than the film's other girl characters. She is depicted as less feminine in her style as compared to other white female students. Abby is often seen wearing tapered jeans and t-shirts- not unlike the boys who also attend Creekview. As previously mentioned, she wears her Jheri-curls styled in a pixie cut. Abby is the only female character in the film depicted wearing her hair short. Conversely, white women in the film, such as her friend Leah, wear their hair past

their shoulders and wear typical feminine dress (e.g.: modest skirts, dresses, and frilly tops).Additionally, Abby's personality is portrayed as spunky and direct- Abby is much more honest with her emotions than many of the white female students at Creekwood. Abby's statements appear blunt ("At my old school, that would've been settled with a knife fight") next to Leah's silence. *Love, Simon'*s portrayal of Abby's vocal aggressiveness further contributes to her racialization and portrayal as another controlling image, the Sapphire- an Angry Black woman. Sapphires are typically stereotyped as sassy, bold, and irrational. Through a white person's control, any Black girl or woman labeled as a Sapphire becomes meek, quiet, and submissive to systems of Whiteness (Collins, 1990; West, 1995; Springer, 2007; Hobson, 2018; Wisseh, 2018). Whenever the film uses a controlling image to present Abby- in this context, as a Sapphire- she is shown in a dark light or a shadow. For example, as soon as Abby says, "At my old school, that would have been settled with a knife fight," she is cast in a shadow. However, Leah, Abby and Simon's mutual white girl friend, says nothing, and is therefore shown in bright light. The way Leah is depicted throughout the film in comparison to Abby- demure in clothing and speaking style, respectful, and more feminine- suggest that *Love, Simon* shows that "white women are always in control" (Griffin, p. 152) of their actions compared to how Black girl characters are portrayed. Through this, the use of shadows on Abby's face signal her "(in)visibility" as a Black woman (Griffin, 2013; Madison, 1995). The darkness on her face removes her agency and regularly marks her as unruly when compared to white girl characters, whose whole bodies are portrayed with light to indicate their naturalness.

Love, Simon commodifies Abby as an object of male desire. In certain scenes of the film, Abby's dress is explicitly racialized and sexualized throughout the film, especially compared to how white women are presented. Abby is never portrayed as agentic or in charge of her own

sexuality. Rachel A. Griffin (2013) notes the prevalence of controlling images (Collins, 1986) prevent Black women from wielding agency within the parameters of popular culture texts. For example, Abby is cast as Sally Bowles (a dancer who works in an adult nightclub) in Creekwood's production of *Cabaret.* Abby's costume portrays her flaunting much more skin than the other white female students who are cast as dancers in the ensemble. Additionally, Abby wears a revealing Wonder Woman costume for Halloween: the glittery tube top and high-waisted denim cutoffs expose her shoulders, upper back, and legs. Meanwhile, Leah, dressed as Yoko Ono, wears a long, flowy white dress that covers her entire body. The color of Leah's dress is not much different than the color of her skin. Though Leah's costume is a form of cultural appropriation- Ono is a Japanese woman- it is worth noting that she does not use "yellow face" makeup to make herself appear more racialized. Leah's costume appears more as a parody than an appropriation (Ivashkevich & shoppell, 2012). For instance, Leah is constantly cast in a white light and is dressed in all white, suggesting that her costume still allows her to be pure. Throughout the scene where Simon and his friends are at Bram/Blue's Halloween Party, the camera's lens often finds Leah gazing at Abby, a disgusted look on her face. Throughout this scene, different (mostly white) male characters make lewd comments about Abby's appearance (A flabbergasted Nick stumbles over his words as soon as he sees Abby- "Oh, um, Abby… you, you look amazing.." while Martin's gaze is shown focusing on Abby's breasts as he murmurs "Abby… Wonder Woman," in what appears to sound as an attempt at a seductive tone). Lighting is used here to present Abby through a controlling image. For example, in the Halloween scene, Abby's clothing is darker and she is cast in shadows. Leah is dressed in all white and is constantly shown with bright lighting. Abby is always marked as different from other female characters within *Love, Simon*- whether through her skin or her physical appearance and dress.

Abby's agency is also stripped away in the portrayal of her interpersonal relationships-specifically with Simon. Throughout the film, Simon is shown interfering and attempting to control Abby's other relationships as a means of protecting his closeted sexuality. With Martin's threat of blackmail fresh in his mind, Simon frequently finds himself attempting to set Abby and Martin up, without considering if Abby is interested in Martin. Abby is also shown as an outsider (besides being racialized, she is classed- an early scene shows Simon picking Abby up at a weathered apartment building) and Simon feels a connection to her. Writing about *The Help* (2011), Griffin (2014) suggests the trope of the "outsider" is used to blur the dimensions of Whiteness in interpersonal interactions between white characters and racialized characters. Simon's initial coming out to Abby can be interpreted through their joint outsidership. The film shows Simon as not-belonging because he is gay, Abby because she is a Black girl who is new to Creekwood. In the film's earlier scenes, Simon is shown as always exchanging glances with Abby, "illuminating… the complexities of a motivation to work together" (p. 151). However, Griffin warns us to watch out for the "dependency to access for voice is exemplary of how whiteness strategically harvests levels of agency, power, and control…" (p. 151). Applying Griffin's work to *Love, Simon,* Abby's dysfunctional home life and racialized objectification presents her as vulnerable. For example, an early car ride scene depicts Abby and Nick (another biracial boy in Simon's immediate friend group) infatuated with each other. They are shown sitting in the backseat of Simon's car, with their bodies turned inward toward each other, flirting, and maintaining eye contact. However, Abby also captivates Martin, a nerdy white boy who serves as the film's antagonist. Martin and his best friend, and Suraj, a shy and sexually perverted South Asian boy are shown as considerably less popular than Simon. Martin eventually evolves into *Love, Simon*'s antagonist when he discovers Simon's e-mails to Bram/Blue in the

Creekwood library. Martin blackmails Simon into setting him up with Abby- if Simon does not

comply, Martin will leak the emails to CreekSecrets. Simon's attempts to set Abby and Martin

up are unsuccessful, and Martin leaks Simon's e-mails. The film negatively portrays Abby's

sexual behavior through the Jezebel image but attempts to control her behavior through another

image (Mammy) by positioning Abby as Simon's emotional prop. Abby is the person Simon

decides to come out to, despite the length of their relationship ("I don't know, maybe it was just

easier because I didn't know her for as long," Simon retrospectively admits).The film's portrayal

of Abby as a source of emotional support speaks to how white characters use relationships with

Black girl characters to prove the authenticity of their own Whiteness as unplanned and "natural"

(Dubrofsky & Ryalls, p. 399).

Love, Simon uses Abby to guide Simon toward his own personal growth. The film

positions white characters' friendships with Black female characters to present a white

character's dependence on a racialized character's emotional labor (Faye, 2017; Thornton, 2011;

Dunn, 2016; Dubrofsky, 2013; Hargraves, 2014; Joseph, 2009; Eguchi & Ding, 2017). For

instance, in the car scene, Simon is portrayed ignoring Abby's disclosure and redirecting the

conversation back to his own issues. Simon has a pallid expression and his eyes are unfocused,

suggesting he is barely paying attention to Abby. Simon's interruption contributes to the

emotional labor Black women perform for white people. After Simon is shown having control

over the conversation, the camera pans back to Abby's face. Abby's eyes are open wide, her eyes

rounding in shock and surprise at Simon's confession. Abby is shown putting her own problems

aside to make room for comforting her friend. Black girls and women are often pressured to

produce such work without their own feelings being considered (Harris-Perry, 2011; Scott, 2016;

Ganz, 2013). A similar framework is present in Love, Simon, because Abby, as a Black girl, is

placed in a situation where she must subserviently process a white man's own distress. Conversely, Abby is portrayed as expressive and supportive throughout Simon's coming out, despite him interrupting her. Though the camera's frame focuses on both Abby and Simon's profiles, he is the focus of the shot. Simon immediately begins to unload on Abby, completely shifting the focus from his friend to himself. Simon's tone ranges from aggressive to vulnerable: "You can't tell anyone though. Nobody really knows, and I don't want people to find out… Are you surprised…" (Bowen, Klausner, Shahbazian, & Berlanti, 2018). Abby briefly interjects: "Do you want me to be surprised? Well, I love you." She smiles at him warmly as Simon resumes his drive. A warm, honey colored light glows on Abby's face as she appears focused and responsive to Simon. Abby's eyebrows are knit with concern and a warm glow is projected onto her face. This scene portrays Abby in warm light to normalize and naturalize the emotional labor she performs for Simon as a Black girl (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014). Strategic whiteness places a dependency onto racialized women through controlling images, such as "Mammies", an image often used when a Black girl or woman character is shown performing emotional labor for a white character (Collins, 1986; Harris-Perry, 2011). *Love, Simon* uses warm lighting in this scene to naturalize Abby's role as Simon's Mammy and her willingness to provide him a ready flow of emotional sustenance. Abby is portrayed as instantly prepared to tune into Simon's problems without desiring his reciprocation to listen to her.

The film portrays Simon as unaware of Abby's vulnerability, limiting her own self-control of emotional needs. Wingfield (2010) when white people react negatively toward a racialized person for soliciting emotional support, white people often turn to interruptions, tropes, and other rhetorical strategies to control an emotional response that they sense "is not as genuine as theirs" (p. 260). *Love, Simon* limits Abby's ability to speak freely by portraying her

with a controlling image (Mammy). For example, earlier in the coming out scene, as soon as Abby begins to share the secrets of her unhappy home life, the film shows Simon rerouting the conversation because he suddenly requires Abby's emotional support to help his character growth. Throughout the film, *Love, Simon* engages with three different controlling images (Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire) to position Abby at the margins of Whiteness in order to create a postracial potential for Simon's development as a white gay character.

Postracism and the Strategic Whitening of Interracial Relationships

Simon begins an anonymous e-mail correspondence with Blue/Bram after reading his post about being closeted on CreekSecrets. We know very little else about Bram (with the exception of Bram's decision to dress up as "Post-Presidency Obama" for Halloween). As Simon and Bram spend the next few months sending each other e-mails, the film features several montages where Simon imagines "Blue" writing messages to him. This Blue has a changing identity and is typically shown as a stock blonde-haired, blue-eyed white boy). In *Love, Simon*'s penultimate scene, Simon learns that Bram is Blue. The film shows Simon reacting positively when Bram reveals that he is Blue, despite his previous assumptions that Blue was a white boy. In a post-closet CreekSecrets post, Simon publicly demands that Blue reveal himself at the Winter Carnival. However, once Simon is outed, Blue stops responding to Simon's e-mails and deletes his account as a way of protecting his own identity.

Love, Simon shows Simon as compelled to find out who Blue is. In his CreekSecrets post, Simon writes: "So Blue… I don't know your name or what you might look like. But I know who you are… So Blue, at Friday, 10 PM, you know where I'll be [riding the Ferris wheel at Creekview's annual winter carnival]. I hope you show up" (Bowen, et. al., 2018). Even in

situations where racialized bodies are blurred or abstracted, the "center" white LGBTQ individuals do not realize the rhetorical impact that their solicitations (e.g.: a demand for someone to out themselves) hold on queer people of color. Rather, white privilege obfuscates the consideration of other perspectives and ways of being LGBTQ (Eguchi & Washington, 2016; Griffin, 2014; Becker, 2006; Cohen, 2013). I apply these ideas to make sense of how the film frames Simon in rhetorical control over Blue/Bram's actions without considering the racialized implications for Bram. For instance, Simon publicly requests that Blue reveal his offline identity in the CreekSecrets post. However, using the lens of postracism, I believe the film does not show Simon reflexively questioning his actions. Throughout the film, Simon is portrayed assuming every gay person has a similar experience (for instance, in several scenes, Simon is depicted voicing that Ethan's own experience with queerness must be easy- as I will further discuss in Chapter 2). *Love, Simon* does not question that Blue/Bram might want to hide his identity because of the ways LGBTQ identity shifts when it is also raced (Ng, 2013). Though of course Simon is shown not knowing who Blue's offline identity is, he is depicted assuming Blue/Bram's apprehension does not stem from race. The presence of postracism positions *Love, Simon* as failing to consider that Simon's quest for love might "mask… the recognition of his power," (Nakayama & Krizek, p. 298; Puar, 2013). Simon is able do to this fairly quickly after he is outed- with a few considerable hiccups. Once the film begins to show Simon as normal, despite his sexuality, Simon increasingly believes his online crush should come out too. The thought of racial identity, like in many other areas of the film, fails to cross Simon's mind.

  Love, Simon presents racism as a historical issue that does not conflict with Simon's "true love story" (Bowen, et.al., 2018) by consistently depicting Bram in a bright light. For example, the film shows Bram in a bright light, even though the majority of *Love, Simon*'s other racialized

characters (e.g.: Abby and Ethan) are often cast in dark shadows. Racialized characters are

sometimes also shown in bright or white light in order to help "center" a white person (Dyer,

1997; Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014). I suggest that the film covers Bram in a bright light to suggest

that his relationship to Simon helped him develop and explore his sexuality throughout the film's

plot. Even though Bram is a person of color, the film shows Simon to have no qualms about his

c. The ethos of postracism believes that racism is a problem of the past (Ono, 2010) and through

the continued use of light, *Love, Simon* signifies Bram as "inside" of Whiteness- but only to

center Simon's needs and wants as a white gay male. Puar (2013) explains that it is only through

a white gay man that Brown and Black gay men can be out. Here, I am referring to Ahmed's

(2007) definition of Whiteness, an "ongoing and unfinished history, which orients bodies in

specific directions, affecting how they take up 'space…'" (p. 150). *Love, Simon* engages with

postracist strategies to make Bram/Blue become more assimilated into Whiteness, allowing him

to take up more space than other people of color within the film (i.e.: Abby and Ethan), but only

through using him to strengthen Simon's gay identity.

     Love, Simon depicts Whiteness as something that can solve or cancel out the stigma of

LGBTQ identities. For example, in the film's CreekSecrets apology montage scene, Simon

appeals to his mostly-white Creekwood classmates with statements attempting to show his

similarities ("I'm just like you," [Bowen, et. al., 2018]). Even though the film initially presents

Simon as afraid of coming out, by the end of the film other students are portrayed as accepting

and eager to support Simon. Bérubé (2001) notes that in U.S.-based cultural contexts (i.e.:

workplace, school, or social settings) white gay men are still awarded the safety they would

receive if they identified as heterosexual (p. 256). Applying Bérubé's writing to *Love, Simon,*

helps to contextualize the ways the film displays Simon's ability to (almost) seamlessly

transition into an openly gay identity. For example, one scene toward the end of the film shows Simon being cheered on and high-fived by other Creekwood students in the hallway. A bright light covers Simon's face as he remains the center of the shot. Conversely, racialized LGBTQ students at Creekwood, like Ethan, are not granted this same opportunity (he remains a bullying target throughout the film). The film's portrayal of Ethan speaks to the discomforts and lack of freedom many openly LGBTQ people of color face (Ghabrial, 2017; Haritaworn, 2008). Cho (2017) suggests that queer youth of color are limited in their performances of queerness online when compared to white gay youth (p. 5). However, the film concludes with presenting Simon and Bram as a happy couple. Bram is one of two racialized LGBTQ characters in the film. The other student, Ethan, is more visibly marked as gay. Comparatively, Bram is shown consistently passing as straight (for instance, Simon walks in on Bram kissing a girl at a Halloween party). The film depicts Bram's mannerisms similarly to Simon's.

In the film's conclusion, it is revealed that Bram and Simon are now both out and happily dating. Because gayness "is the white thing" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 4), the film does not quite award Bram the same gay freedom and privilege that Simon is depicted as having access to. Bram's post-closet experience is shown as similar to Simon's. For instance, the final scene shows Bram joining Simon's carpool. As Simon drives down a busy neighborhood street, the camera focuses on the boys openly sharing a quick peck on the lips. Aside from one awkward moment on the Ferris Wheel (Blue/Bram awkwardly admits: "I'm Black… and Jewish. Is that okay?" [Bowen, et. al.]), race is never discussed within this film. Though Simon is shown with a slightly shocked look on his face after Blue/Bram's reveal, I suggest that it is a relieved reaction as the film concludes with the two boys starting a relationship. The film shows their classmates and peers supporting their relationship. Simon's relationship with Blue/Bram appears unquestioned. Both

boys dress much like the other male students at Creekwood and seem to be well-liked by other students. The only other queer student of color at Creekwood, Ethan, still seems to remain as an outsider in Creekwood (as I discuss in my second chapter). I argue that Blue/Bram contains his sexuality within Ethan. By this, I mean that Ethan's portrayal in the film is much more racialized and queered than Bram's. Ethan is also shown barely interacting (save for one scene, as I will discuss in Chapter Two) with Simon throughout the film, placing him at the edge of popularity. Bram, however, is biracial and is portrayed as both popular and able to pass as straight. Ethan serves as a way for Bram to find a way to be queer through Simon. Writing about depictions of homosexuality in mainstream U.S. films, McRuer (2006) suggests that "the transformation comes… to a picture-perfect heterosexual…Hollywood ending" (p. 25). Because the film uses Bram as a final plot device to center Simon's growth as a white gay boy after being outed, Bram becomes an exception to the rule of homonormativity, though he is biracial. Conversely, Ethan is depicted as an unpopular character who does not have a popular white and straight-passing boyfriend. Because of Ethan, Bram is portrayed as able to overcome the limitations of being a racialized queer person especially since Bram serves as a postracial figure to amplify Simon's growth. The film presents Ethan as Bram's antithesis: unable to conform or pass under Creekwood's standards of Whiteness and heteronormativity.

Conclusion: Postracist Foundations for the New Homonationalism

In a March 2018 interview, director Greg Berlanti emphasized the film's positive impact for LGBTQ youth in the U.S. Though Berlanti acknowledged that "it's [*Love, Simon*] isn't going to be everyone's experience…this film will make it easier for them to tell their stories…" (Garcia-Navarro, 2018). *Love, Simon* is the first major Hollywood studio-produced coming-of-

age film featuring an LGBTQ love interest. However, what are the limitations of diverse casting and progressive plotlines within the film? *Love, Simon*'s push for multiculturalism falls short because it fails to discuss racial tensions, which rhetorically reinforces the importance of Whiteness in U.S.-centric popular culture (Ono, 2010; Belcher, 2016; Lacy & Ono, 2011). *Love Simon* cannot escape postracism's prominence- though Berlanti's film attempts to paint a different picture with its casting. This prevalence is especially apparent in how the film portrays Simon's relationship with racialized characters. For instance, Simon's friend Abby, a Black girl, is depicted through a varied collection of controlling images- an attempt to strategically reinforce the power of Whiteness. Additionally, the film shows Blue/Bram, Simon's biracial love interest, in constant light. I believe this suggests that even though Bram is racialized, the film's use of constant lighting suggests that Bram's race and queerness can be contained in another Black, queer character: Ethan. This allows the film to present Bram as able to acclimate into white gay exceptionalism. *Love, Simon* shows both of these relationships centering Simon and prioritizing the ways his racial and sexual identities as normal and natural.

Though *Love, Simon*'s portrayal of Simon fits definitions of homonormativity (Duggan, 2002) and homonationalism (Puar, 2007; Puar 2013), I conclude that the text's engagement with the latter is unique. The film presents a "progressive" multicultural discourse to camouflage the ways racialized (LGBTQ) characters are punished while white LGBTQ characters as free and in control. Under what I call "the new homonationalism," *Love, Simon* portrays racialized (queer) people as plot devices that must be (quite literally) made whiter through lighting in order to be seen as an exception to Whiteness and heteronormativity. This new homonationalism comes at the cost of production- one that continues to prioritize white gay relational comfort at the expense of a queer person of color's emotional labor

Chapter Two:

The New Homonationalism: Race, Sexuality, and the Politics of Post-Closet Belonging

Early in the film, *Love, Simon* introduces viewers to Creekwood, where Simon and his friends attend high school. A panoramic shot reveals Simon's gently used red Subaru Outback pulling into the campus' parking lot. The idyllic school grounds are bordered by oak trees, which shake off their remaining leaves with a gentle bristle. This scene is used to showcase the student body. Simon's classmates are portrayed as mostly white and affluent. Students wear the latest fashion trends and are glued to the newest smartphones. The camera then centers several white, heteronormative couples scattered across the school's quad. The coupled students are shown embracing each other, holding hands, and kissing. This intimacy remains unchallenged- the other students are too glued to their phones and teachers are nowhere to be seen within the shot. The upbeat music and the white students' varied body language (coupled or not) suggests that they are comfortable and excited to be in Creekwood's space, where most everyone else looks like them. The few people of color are either light-skinned (like Simon's friends Abby and Nick), white-passing, or are shown conforming to standards of Whiteness through dress, body language, or friend groups (e.g.: many Creekwood students who are depicted as people of color appear to surround themselves with mostly white friend groups).

One student stands on the periphery of the camera's gaze: Ethan. Ethan (portrayed by actor Clark Moore) is a Black male character who is openly gay and genderfluid. In this scene, the camera's gaze concentrates on exposing Ethan's differences from the other (white) students.

Ethan's skin is much darker than other Black characters in the film. The film uses Ethan's high pitched voice, gender fluidity, and LGBTQ sexuality to quite literally place him on the outside of the Creekwood community. While other racialized students in the film are portrayed as able to assimilate with their white friends, Ethan's Blackness and queerness are negatively and visibly marked(e.g.: placing him away from other students, receiving very public and loud verbal harassment from other students).

I argue that the film does this to suggest that Ethan (as an openly queer racialized character) is not worthy of belonging. In this chapter, I investigate the ways that race is used to differentiate (and privilege) Simon's sexuality from Ethan's. The film awards Simon the privilege to explore his sexuality without consequence. Conversely, *Love, Simon* does not prioritize the same opportunities for Ethan. This chapter will closely examine scenes where Ethan is harassed for his sexuality and gender. I take interest in the ways the film initially frames Simon as a bystander and then (once he is outed) a one-time target of bullies. How does Simon's racial identity impact the ways the film (does not) depict his harassment? In addition to the above, I inquire *Love, Simon* use of strategic whiteness in differentiating between Simon's coming out versus Ethan's outness. Here, I am referring to the ways Whiteness can be used to establish who gets to be white and how Whiteness determines what Others can or cannot do, feel, or act within a mediated setting (Tierney, 2006; Rossing; 2012). Because the lens of postracism attempts to portray racism as a problem of the past (Ono, 2010), my second chapter discusses the ways in which the film does not trouble the intersections of race and sexuality. I am interested in how *Love, Simon* attempts to display sexuality as completely separate from race. However, the film shows Simon's coming out as acceptable, while positioning Ethan's sexuality as something other characters can mock or shame. At the end of the film, Simon is just like any other white

character (he even gets his shot at love), while Ethan is still on the sidelines, isolated and alone. I use critical whiteness scholarship and LGBTQ Identity (Ahmed, 2007; Logie & Rwigema, 2014; Ward, 2008; Shome, 2000) as well as feminist surveillance studies (Dubrofsky & Magnet, 2015) to deepen my analysis. I suggest that *Love, Simon* presents Creekwood as a place where white gay characters will always already be protected and allowed to explore their sexualities. Simon's deliberate belief that "coming out is my own choice" (Berlanti, 2018) speaks to the film's portrayal of white LGBTQ students. Whiteness simultaneously protects and allows white LGBTQ youth more agency over when and where they choose to come out (Cho, 2017; Blockett, 2017; Eguchi & Washington, 2016). Conversely, *Love, Simon* presents its Black, queer characters as more visible in spaces of Whiteness. The film consistently depicts racialized queer people facing more public isolation in scenes staged at Creekwood High School. Additionally, the only interactions racialized queer characters have with white (heteronormative) characters involve public ridicule and verbal harassment. I concur that the freedom and constant re-centering of white gay characters' experiences in *Love, Simon* can be understood as homonationalism- the discourse that suggests white LGBTQ deserve to belong at the expense of punishing racialized LGBTQ individuals (Puar, 2007; Puar, 2013).

The Strategic Watching of Whiteness

The film uses lighting as a way of distinguishing differences between Simon and Ethan. In their writing about Whiteness and postracism in *The Hunger Games* franchise (2012-2015), Dubrofsky and Ryalls (2014) suggest film lighting is often used to conflate racialization with morality. For example, white characters are frequently portrayed with brightening lighting to indicate the "goodness" of a character (p. 401). Dubrofsky and Ryalls' theorization is also

applicable to the way *Love, Simon* uses lighting. As the camera focuses on Simon in this schoolyard scene, a bright light is displayed upon his face. Simon dons a wrinkled maroon t-shirt, heather-grey hooded zip sweatshirt, and straight-legged jeans. His mussed brown hair is cropped short, and his faded Jansport backpack is slung over his right shoulder, not unlike many of the other students depicted in this scene. Despite Simon's sexual orientation, he appears to look like any other white, heteronormative male Creekwood student. Dubrofsky and Ryalls continue that *The Hunger Games* projects darkness or shadows onto the faces of antagonistic or immoral characters (p. 401). This scene in *Love, Simon* shows Ethan in shadows in order to intentionally indicate the ways in which he stands out. Ethan wears his hair in a long, permed bob. His blue button-down blazer, elegantly draped plaid scarf, and taupe-colored tote bag remain in stark contrast to the other Creekwood students in this scene. Ethan is the only character in this scene to have shadows on his face. Other people of color within the scene wear gender-typical clothing akin to white students (e.g.: other Black boys are shown wearing hoodies, solid colored t-shirts, and straight legged jeans). Conversely, the use of shadows infers that certain characters must be shown as racially and morally harmful. Applying Dubrofsky and Ryalls' work to *Love, Simon*, the film's projection of shadows and dark light onto Ethan proposes that his racialization and queerness must be portrayed as bad. The application of bright light onto Simon, a white boy, allow Simon's character to be interpreted as virtuous and likeable. Here, shadows indicate a re-centering of white bodies as the focus throughout this scene and the rest of the film (Giroux, 1997; Dyer, 1997; Griffin, 2014).

The scene also reveals that Ethan is a subject of constant harassment. Here, I am referring to a series of negative actions that are intended to create an imbalance of power and targets an individual or group for racial, sexual, or gender status (PACER, 2019). Ethan is targeted by two

popular student athletes, Spencer, a white boy, and Aaron, a Black boy whose clothing, body language, and vocal tone suggests that he conforms with Creekwood's Whiteness whenever possible. Curiously, Ethan's bullies do not target him because of his racial identity. Rather, he is harassed over his gender and sexuality. Writing about postracism in *The Help* (2011), Rachel A. Griffin (2014) argues that in settings featuring both white and racialized characters, white people are always portrayed in control of communication (p. 152). For example, Spencer, the white student, is shown as in control of the conversation. Aaron, the Black student, is never depicted engaging in Ethan's harassment until Spencer has already spoken; Aaron is presented looking toward Spencer before targeting Ethan, giving Spencer the chance to "exert influence over every day life" (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 252).

Ethan is constantly cast in shadows within this scene. Interestingly, as the camera pans from Simon walking into school surrounded by his group of friends and other students, to Ethan standing off at the edge with a small cluster of girl students, Simon is always cast in a light glow, while Ethan's body is covered in shadows. The camera focuses on the darkness of Ethan's skin color, coiffed black permed bob, and the dark rims of his glasses. Despite Ethan's affinity for flashy colored clothing, the camera seems to always diffuse darkness on his body whenever he is in the camera's frame. At this point in the film, viewers know Simon is gay, but closeted. The film uses bright lighting to indicate that white LGBTQ sexualities are natural. Subsequently, shadows are used to portray that certain characters are immoral or incapable of belonging in a space (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014). This darkness serves as a way to suggest students like Ethan do not belong and should not be seen within *Love, Simon*'s confines of Whiteness.

Love, Simon's use of casting shadows onto people of color within the film infers that they are subjects intended to be watched. My use of "watching" refers to Rachel Finn's (2011)

definition of "surveillant staring." Surveillant staring is an ongoing and "active social process that reinforces the differential structural positionings of its targets" (p. 424). In this scene, Simon is shown watching Ethan getting harassed. Whenever Simon is shown as a bystander of other students harassing Ethan, he becomes defensive. One scene shows Simon's body language turning inward and bracing himself away from Ethan. He also is depicted as verbalizing disgust with Ethan ("Wish he [Ethan] didn't make it so easy for them [Ethan's bullies]"). Simon does not stare at the bullies, but instead focuses on Ethan. Finn argues staring can be used as a controlling strategy that allows a dominant group to assuage their fear (p. 426). For example, Simon stares at Ethan because he fears that if he, too, is outed, he will receive the same harassment. Michel Foucault (1977), writing about surveillance practices, infers that the act of watching invokes social power. He argues that institutions and individuals "who look are invested in power, while those who are subject to the gaze enjoy less relative power" (Finn, p. 420). Because Simon is doing the watching, I suggest that he is more powerful in this scene than compared to Ethan, who is being watched and therefore less in control. I use Finn's idea as a tool to analyze the ways *Love, Simon* depicts Ethan's public harassment and social isolation through camera work. In the schoolyard scene, the camera only features Ethan in stark, sudden shots with dark lighting. The frantic movement is used foreshadow the ways Spencer and Aaron target Ethan. The bullies proceed to publicly tease Ethan, shouting: "Nice scarf, Ethan. Hope it doesn't get caught in your dripping vagina", and "Whatever, fag!" (Bowen, et. al., 2018). After the bullies run into the school, the camera pans back to Ethan, who is now projected in light, not shadows. Dubrofsky and Ryalls write that literally highlighting a person of color's skin infers that the person enacted something that might allow them to be seen as "Whiter" (p. 401). *Love, Simon* portrays Ethan as someone who willingly submits to his homophobic bullies. Thus, Ethan,

accepting harassment and the surveillant staring, is "let in" to Whiteness- but only through a framework of punishment. This scene clearly emphasizes the stark differences between Simon and Ethan's social standing within Creekwood. By casting Simon in bright light and easily blending into the crowd, the film portrays white gay people as worthy and capable of belonging. Ethan is oppositionally depicted, physically positioned away from other students, and a camera using dark light to conceal his racialized body- until he becomes the target of bullying. Simon's belonging comes at the expense of the staring and torment Ethan endures.

   In the bullying scene, Simon also takes part in the surveillant staring as a way to defend himself. Finn notes that white "good citizens" use staring to maintain the boundaries between Whiteness and people "repeatedly racialized as Others" (p. 416). As a bystander, Simon is placed on the parameters of the camera frame when Spencer and Aaron yell, "Whatever, fag!" to Ethan as they run away from him. Though Simon is surrounded by his group of friends, his body language is portrayed as frozen and stiff as his gaze remains fixed on Ethan. I suggest that Simon's intense surveillant staring at Ethan is linked to the legacies of white colonizers and their constant gaze on Brown and Black slaves' sexualities. Andrea Smith (2015), discussing the legacies of settler-colonialism and surveillance, explains "the sexual surveillance of native peoples was a key strategy by which native peoples were rendered manageable populations within the colonial state" (p. 22).The camera then blurs out the background, focusing instead on Simon as he turns his head away. Simon deeply furrows his brows and continues to intensely stare in Ethan's direction, inferring that he is on guard and might be defensive about the subject of Ethan's bullying. Leah, a white female character, appears disgusted and says, "Dicks," inferring that she is sympathetic towards Ethan. Simon gruffly replies: "I wish Ethan wouldn't make it so easy for them." As he says this, Simon's eyes are focused on something happening off

the screen (the uninterrupted gaze suggests he might be looking at Ethan). The film presents Creekwood High School as a space of Whiteness. Simon's uninterrupted gaze acts as an attempt to control Ethan. One strategy is through the camera work: there are dark shadows covering Ethan in this scene even when he is in the direct shot. It is only once Spencer and Aaron publicly humiliate Ethan that he is shown in a bright light. I suggest that the brightness in this particular part of the scene highlights a type of colonial maintenance that is used to make racialized and queered characters within the film subject to the driving, normalizing forces of Whiteness. The film suggests that to belong in Creekwood is to embody Whiteness and heteronormativity. The light cast onto Ethan after the embarrassing epithet of "Whatever, fag!" signifies that Ethan can only belong if he modifies himself to be like the other Creekwood students- an impossibility.

Simon's surveillant staring directed towards Ethan is so pronounced because he is still closeted. Wendy Peters' (2016) article on portrayals LGBTQ characters in contemporary U.S. and Canadian teen television identifies that white closeted characters often partake in bullying of other LGBTQ teens- even if their heterosexual friends are portrayed as empathetic towards the victim (p. 495). Applying Peters' analysis to this particular scene in *Love, Simon*, the film uses Leah's reaction to distinguish her readily-available empathy towards Ethan. For instance, Leah's facial expressions suggest empathy. Meanwhile, Simon's reaction infers disinterest and defensiveness- following Peters' paradigm for a closeted character par for the course. Peters notes that white "'wounded' closeted individuals act out until they come to terms with their 'real' sexuality…[rendering] the closet as a site for the *production* of homophobia" (p. 495, emphasis original). *Love, Simon* blurs the camera's shot in this particular scene in order to emphasize Simon's dismissive tone and guarded body language. Additionally, Simon's body language and secondary harassment of Ethan ("Wish he [Ethan] wouldn't make it so easy for

them [the bullies]") suggests that his white "desires for sexual privacy… are really just a cultural demand for keeping a heteronormative status quo of power" (Manning & Stern, 2018, p. 250). The film shows Simon as a gay teenage boy who desires to conceal his sexuality as a means of protection, even if it means partaking in the bullying himself.

Finally, Simon's staring may contribute toward the structural power of what Smith (2015) refers to as "seeing-not-seeing," or that white people use a surveillance practice (e.g.: staring) to acknowledge and control their power over racialized peoples. However, I argue that Simon's stare is framed out of fear of his own outing, and not a fear of Ethan's Blackness. In this scene, the camera blurs the background to focus in on Simon's gaze as he jarringly darts his eyes to and from Ethan. I believe the film's postracial lens obfuscates the reasons why Ethan is watched by Simon. However, the framing of Ethan's racialization and sexuality results in greater and more visible punishment throughout the film. Even when Simon is outed, he is never quite watched at the same level of intensity as Ethan because he is a white male student who is easily able to pass as straight.

Homonationalism, Punishment, and Privilege

Until Simon is outed, Ethan is depicted as the only openly gay student at Creekwood. The film shows Simon afraid of coming out. In an e-mail to Blue/Bram, Simon writes: "I'm afraid… besides Creekwood already has a resident gay kid [Ethan]" (Berlanti, 2018). Simon's desire for secrecy speaks to analogies "between social stigma and discrimination" (Stacey, 2011, p. 11). that surround coming out discourses (Peters, 2016; Becker, 2009). Simon's desires for concealment become threatened after Martin, a white nerdy male, leaks Simon's e-mails with Blue/Bram on CreekSecrets (an online blogging website that acts as an after-hours platform for

Creekwood gossip). When Simon returns to Creekwood after Christmas break, his fears are now reality. Simon spends a few friendless days in isolation and is harassed by Spencer and Aaron. However, Simon's lack of popularity is merely temporary. Simon posts a quasi-apology on CreekSecrets defending his choices, which magically restores his friendships and connects him to Blue/Bram (who becomes Simon's boyfriend at the film's conclusion). *Love, Simon* frames Simon's coming out experience much differently than it does Ethan's. Simon is able to regain his popularity and openly explore his sexuality. Meanwhile, Ethan remains on the margins of acceptance. Within the confines of the film, Simon is granted the freedom to pursue his sexuality. Simon is able to regain his popularity and even openly explore his sexuality, while Ethan remains on the margins of acceptance in Creekwood. Within the confines of the text, Simon is granted the freedom to pursue his sexuality at the cost of Ethan's punishment.

I believe the film's competing portrayals of Simon's coming out versus Ethan's coming out can be understood through the framework of homonationalism. Pioneered by Jasbir K. Puar (2007), homonationalism is the idea that white gay wealthy citizens who can pass as straight are awarded the freedom to openly pursue an LGBTQ identity because they can still easily produce or represent the ideals of a community. At the same time, LGBTQ people of color are penalized for being very visibly unable to conform to standards of Whiteness and heteronormativity. White gay people reproduce homonationalism by insisting that their ability to more or less conceal their queerness within their Whiteness is vital toward maintaining its dominance (McCaskell, 2018; Ritchie, 2015; Currah, 2013; Shome, 2012). Puar (2013) explains:

> Homonationalism is fundamentally a critique of how lesbian and gay civil rights discourses produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to accord some populations access to cultural life and legal forms of citizenship at the expense of partial and full expulsion from those rights of other populations (p. 25).

Here, homonationalism is a useful tool to map out the differences between Simon and Ethan's portrayals within the film. As a white character, Simon's gay identity is eventually shown as something accepted by other characters. For instance, one scene at the end of the film shows Simon waiting for Blue/Bram to reveal his offline identity at the Winter Carnival. A huge group of Creekwood students are shown in a circle around the Ferris wheel, cheering on Simon with smiles and shouts of encouragement. Simon is shown in a bright light throughout this part of the scene. Contrarily, Ethan is constantly depicted on the outskirts of Simon's acceptance. In this same scene, Ethan is again located at the edge of the cheering students, with his face covered in shadows. *Love, Simon* presents Ethan as a racialized queer person whose belonging in the film is impossible. This penultimate scene suggests that regardless of Ethan's trauma, its purpose is framed as contributory toward helping Simon discover sexual freedom. I understand homonationalism as an "uneven and unpredictable process" (Puar, p. 32) in order to investigate how *Love, Simon* frames a character's sexuality in relation to their respective racial identity. Simon's racial privileges outline the normalization "of certain domesticated homosexual bodies" (Puar, p. 38) that white LGBTQ people are granted within the film. I suggest that the portrayal Simon's Whiteness frames his sexuality as "personal and relatable" (Weber, 2016, p. 9), while Ethan's racialization does not convey a "normative" sexuality, thus resulting in the shadows which are constantly projected upon Ethan's face- even in a scene celebrating LGBTQ sexuality.

Ethan's harassment is only deemed worthy of intervention when Simon also becomes a target. One such example is from a scene after Simon is outed on CreekScrets. I turn again to Puar (2013) to make sense of how the film frames Ethan in this particular moment. Puar writes that "[white] gay rights is built on the backs of racialised and sexualised others for whom such progress… has never arrived" (p. 25). *Love, Simon* only frames LGBTQ sexuality as acceptable

when a white character is also openly gay, because the film frames white gay sexualities as visibly worthy of intervention. This becomes apparent in the only scene where Simon is bullied. In this moment, Aaron and Spencer, the film's two bullies, enter the cafeteria, pretending to be Ethan and Simon respectively (Aaron even dons a straight black bobbed wig and Ethan's signature plaid scarf). The camera quickly pans to the cafeteria door, as Spencer and Aaron rush into the stark white lunchroom. The camera zooms in on the two bullies as they jump onto a table and scream: "This one's for you, Spier!" (Bowen, et.al., 2018). The bullies are projected in a bright light as they turn their bodies toward each other as they begin to rub their hands all over each other and bring their faces close together, as if to simulate kissing one another. Puar (2007), writing about the U.S. military's sexualized discipline of suspected terrorists, suggests that "public torture or humiliation" of non-normative sexualities contributes to the "patriotic mandate" of normative genders and sexualities (p. 100). I consider Puar's theorization here and liken it to the way the film shows Spencer and Aaron within this bullying scene. The bullies are projected in bright light as mockingly pretend to kiss each other. The bright light suggests that their punishment can be interpreted as natural and authentic (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014; Dyer, 1997). The bullies then proceed to simulate anal penetration. Spencer is shown turning and bending down sticking his bottom up while Aaron moves close behind him, making gyrating motions and pretending to slap his bottom to the beat of the hip hop track. The inclusion of a satirized act of anal sex suggests that the bullies believe the visibility of gay and queer bodies within Creekwood create "pathological spaces of violence" (Puar, p. 71). However, as soon as Simon is portrayed angrily confronting the bullies, Ms. Albright, a Black teacher, intervenes, publicly disciplining the bullies and protecting Simon. I argue that Ms. Albright's intervention with the cafeteria harassment is possible because homonationalism is a process in which white

gay bodies benefit from a growing shift toward embrace homonormativity (Puar, 2013, p. 25). Simon's Whiteness is framed as the only possibility for Ethan's intervention. Puar notes that homonationalism limits the possibilities for queer bodies of color to exist within a social space (p. 34). Through its use of bright lighting, *Love, Simon* frames Spencer and Aaron's attempt at public humiliation as a strategy to control the publicity of Simon and Ethan's gayness. I interpret that it is easier for Spencer and Aaron to bully Ethan because the film portrays white students harassing students of color as permissible (e.g.: in an earlier scene, Martin very publicly corners Abby into going out on a date in front of the entire school). Puar (2006) explains in U.S.-based cultural and social contexts, challenging discrimination is framed as something that is easier for white LGBTQ-identifying people than it is for LGBTQ people of color (p. 70). Additionally, Spencer-as-Simon initiates the act with Aaron-as-Ethan, suggesting that within the film, white gay men will always be in sexual control of queer men of color's sexualities (Eguchi & Washington, 2016; Griffin, 2014).

Love, Simon portrays Simon's post-closet life as a turning point which conveys Creekwood students and faculty gradually accepting white LGBTQ identities. This turning point is initially shifted through Creekwood faculty members. For instance, as soon as Simon is bullied alongside Ethan, Ms. Albright quickly intervenes. Once Simon is outed, Vice Principal Worth is shown wearing a LGBTQ Pride Flag pin on his lapel. Peters (2016) notes that the white, post-closet character is depicted as an exception to the rules of heteronormativity. Poor behavioral traits like impulsivity, manipulation, and defensiveness are resolved once a white, male closeted character comes out. I apply Peters' writing to Simon's portrayal after he comes out. Despite his sexuality, Simon is still framed as a mild-mannered, wealthy, and likeable character- in fact (as I will discuss in my next section) after coming out, Simon is shown as even more likeable and

without the problems and conflicts he dealt with during his time in the closet. Conversely, Ethan is portrayed as a threat to the maintenance of Whiteness and heteronormativity throughout the film. It is only when Simon also becomes a victim of anti-LGBTQ harassment that Ethan is shown as worthy of intervention. In this scene, Simon's role in stopping the bullies is not accidental. Rather, I argue that the film is buttressing yet another act of homonationalism, or, what Puar (2013) suggests is the act of "white [gay] man saving brown homosexuals from being brown homosexuals" (p. 35).

"I Deserve a True Love Story": Postracist Apologia and the Politics of Marginality

Love, Simon frames Simon as dependent on racialized characters' emotional labor throughout the film as he continues to go through the coming out process. As noted in my previous chapter, Simon often relies on his friend Abby (a Black girl) to help soothe his emotional wounds, even if it means disrupting Abby's vulnerable moments. The same pattern occurs (this time, with Ethan) in the scene following Simon and Ethan's very public lunchroom humiliation. This scene is the only time in the film where Simon and Ethan speak to each other; it also serves as a turning point for Simon. The scene begins with Simon and Ethan shown sitting next to each other in the dark outside of Vice Principal Worth's office, their bodies are turned away from one another. Despite the room's darkness, Simon is featured in a bright light, while Ethan's face is covered in shadows. Though both boys did not aggravate the bullies, the use of lightness to show Simon and darkness to project onto Ethan suggests Simon is "more likely to behave" simply because he is white (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, p. 400). Meanwhile, the darkness cast onto Ethan infers that his behavior and sexuality is not as natural. The camera pans to Simon, who clears his throat and speaks: "I'm sorry Ethan. None of this happened when you were the

only one who was out." Ethan smiles before he says: "You know, you could've told me you were gay." Simon begrudgingly replies as tense electronic music begins to faintly play in the background: "You know, I didn't think we had much in common. I don't know, maybe I was jealous. You've been out since you were sixteen. It's been easier for you." In this moment, Simon controls the viewers' comprehension of Ethan's racialization and queerness. In her writing on *The Help* (2011), Griffin (2014) notes that white characters are portrayed as kind in order to disguise "their setting parameters for an interaction… and inability to publicly challenge racism" (p. 152). Griffin's theorization helps to explain the way the film uses Simon within this interaction. Simon is depicted as recentering the conversation and placing his own interpretation of Ethan's experience as objective fact. Simon's reaction also conveys that he does not consider the impact that race might have on LGBTQ sexualities. It is also worth noting that Simon is only shown speaking or acknowledging Ethan when they are both alone in a private space (the Vice Principal's office). Simon's hunched over body language suggests that he "impedes upon his own ability to fully humanize" Ethan (p. 152). *Love, Simon* portrays Ethan as a person of color whose purpose in the film is to perform emotional labor for Simon's emotional growth. Additionally, Simon also believes that because Ethan has been out for approximately one year, being gay is easier. Race is never contested or questioned. In their article about race and LGBTQ identity, Carmen H. Logie and Marie-Jolie Rwigema (2016) concur that queer people of color in white spaces are essentialized and seen as enduring the same obstacles that white gay or queer people do, even though the way people of color are racialized creates a significant disparity in the coming out process. Such theorization is present in the conversation between Simon and Ethan. The camera then pans to Ethan, still covered in shadows though he is the focus of the shot. In a sad and exasperated tone, Ethan replies: "Easy? Are you kidding me?" (Bowen, et. al.,

2018). Ethan's typical day at Creekwood (as previously depicted in the film) features social

isolation and constant harassment for his queerness- a far cry from Simon's mornings surrounded

by friends. In this scene, I interpret Ethan as obtaining a double-life, whereas Simon's gayness is

accepted into his every day persona. Simon's post-closet suffering is only temporary and the rest

of the film seems to "reaffirm" Simon as the "citizen of the center" (Nakayama & Krizek, p.

293). Additionally, in "the true spirit" of homonationalism (Puar, 2013), Simon's problems are

suddenly portrayed as solvable after speaking to Ethan.

After speaking with Ethan, Simon is shown regaining his friendships, his popularity, and

finally begins dating Blue/Bram. Simon accomplishes this by writing a note on CreekSecrets, an

online chatroom which Simon's friends frequent throughout the film. In the entry, Simon

apologizes to all of the friends whose trust he betrayed while in the closet. Throughout this

scene, Simon refers to a "proverbial closet" (Rudnick, 2018, p. 67) in order to justify his

mistakes and to buttress his apology. Here, I am referring to the ways in which white gay men

defend their mistakes by making themselves appear more marginalized. I highlight the ways I

interpret Simon's use of the proverbial closet in his CreekSecrets note:

> I had all of these reasons: it was unfair that only gay people had to come out. I was sick
> of change. But the truth is, I was just scared… then I realized, no matter what,
> announcing who you are to the world is pretty terrifying because what if the world
> doesn't like you? So I did whatever I could to keep my secret. I hurt the best, most
> important people. I want them to know I'm sorry. I'm done being scared. I'm done living
> in a world where I don't get to be who I am. I deserve a great love story (Berlanti).

The film frames Simon as inflating his struggles of closet with hurting his friends along the way.

Rudnick (2018) refers to a "growing exasperation towards otherwise dominant/majority persons

claiming gay victimhood to strategically eschew victimhood for… [mistakes]" (p. 67). The film

also portrays Simon engaging with strategic apologia tactics. Simon proclaims that he "deserves

a true love story" (Berlanti) in spite of his mistakes. The film positions us to assume that because Simon says "sorry" to a concentrated public (readers of CreekSecrets), he is allowed to conflate his coming out struggles with his imperfect friendship.

Love, Simon uses the CreekSecrets letter to frame a post-closet Simon as more self-reflexive. By post-closet, I am referring to Ron Becker's (2009) term, used to explain depictions of queer men in contemporary U.S. popular culture. This idea describes the phenomenon of the almost overwhelmingly white, middle-class, able-bodied male character who is mild-mannered and generally well-liked by other characters in a text. I use post-closet here to make sense of how *Love, Simon* frames Simon's life as easier once he is outed. For example, in his CreekSecrets manifesto, Simon likens his choice to stay closeted as a personality flaw and requests forgiveness from his fellow Creekwood students. The first shot in the scene features Simon sitting at his bedroom desk a few evenings after he speaks with Ethan. Simon's voiceover speaks clearly as he begins to type the message: "Dear Creekwood students: As you may know, a post on this very website declared that I was gay… the message is true. I am… gay" (Bowen, et. al., 2018). Peters (2016) notes that the white gay male post-closet character is able to find joy and redemption after they acknowledge they identify as LGBTQ (p. 499). Coming out is framed as a necessity for a character to belong and be redeemed by a text. *Love, Simon* establishes Simon's only problems as inextricably tied to the closet. His fractured friendships are portrayed as a fear of being outed. Simon's voiceover in this scene continues: "For a long time, I was killing myself to hide that fact… I did… whatever I could to keep my secret. I hurt the best, important people" (Bowen, et. al., 2018). His voiceover continues as the next shot features a string of different characters reading the message, including Abby and friend Nick. As Abby is shown reading the letter on her iPhone, a bright light is cast onto her face as she smiles. Here, the bright light infers to Simon

as a character whose mistake must be interpreted as naturalized and as an "authentic choice" made by a good person (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, p. 401). The light projected onto Abby's face frames Abby as readily accepting Simon's apology, thus "letting her in" to Whiteness. Moreover, the bright light also suggests that Simon's friendship with Abby is now repaired. Simon's coming out is framed as "no big deal and… as a necessity" (Peters, p. 500). Simon's embracing of his gayness post-closet absolves an oppression that "was an illusion that [he] must overcome" (Bergman, 2004, p. 15).

Simon's apology is very brief in this scene and focuses on the proverbial closet. Because Simon's letter speaks from a place of marginality (gayness) he is able to frame the note as a way to excuse his white privilege (Rudnick, p. 68). At the end of the apology note montage, Simon is shown returning to school the following morning. A crowd of (mostly) white students fixedly gaze at Simon. The students are shown smiling and cheering Simon on as a white light is projected onto his face. The film uses apologia tactics to recenter Simon and his complicity with Whiteness. For instance, in the letter scene, Simon's voiceover says: "I hurt the best, most important people… [but] I'm done living in a world where I don't get to be who I am" (Berlanti). In her work about polygamy and reality television, Brenda R. Weber (2016) notes that "forcing claims like 'We're just like you' … [work] to privilege a normative… LGBT structure" (p. 3). I argue that *Love, Simon* uses the same statement ("I'm just like you") to recenter Simon's white gay identity as a mere exception while framing Ethan's racialized gay identity as "non-normative… and rejected" (p. 3). Using Whiteness to frame this scene helps to explain the ways Simon's apologia looks past racial inequalities and frames his treatment of Abby and Ethan as "individualized, interpersonal issues" (Peters, p. 499).

I suggest that in this scene, Simon engages in (post)racist apologia, a series of rhetorical strategies that white celebrities often use to decenter their relationship with a system of oppression. Michelle A. Holling, Dreama G. Moon, and Alexandra Jackson Nevis (2014) note apologies rooted in postracism "are deeply entrenched in the 'everydayness' of colorblind racism" (p. 280). They introduce the strategy of minimization, noting that this is a "white attempt to downplay a problem or underestimate intentionality" (p. 274). Holling et. al. continue that any sort of (post)racial apologia must appear "very early" in an apology "as an attractive means of escaping stigma" (p. 273). The apology emphasizes Simon's fears homophobic marginalization ("For a long time, I was killing myself to hide that fact") as a frame, downplaying the consequences of his actions. The film also redirects Simon's hurtful choices to the proverbial closet ("I did whatever I could to keep my secret"). Rudnick (2018) writes that for many white celebrities, using social media as a platform for issuing apologies "enables to ignore our own complicity in perpetuating marginalized subject positions" (p. 68). In the case of *Love, Simon*, Simon uses his CreekSecrets apology to accomplish what Rudnick writes as "locating a site of blame" (p. 68). The guises of postracism and homonationalism help to interrogate the ways that the film positions Simon desire for the love story he claims that he so rightly deserves. Though race can be located as a site of tension in *Love, Simon*, the film attempts to frame it as a non-issue. At the end of *Love, Simon*, it becomes very clear that Whiteness (and not Blackness) is framed as the "queer thing" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 14). I suggest that the use of apologia tactics within this scene obfuscate Simon's wrongs and finally award him with the freedom to be portrayed as a white male and openly gay student in Creekwood.

Conclusion: The Cost of Homonationalism

Both postracism and homonationalism are applicable frames to interrogate the ways in which *Love, Simon* maintains Whiteness as a dominant structure. This becomes most evident in the ways the film treats Simon (a white, straight-passing boy) in comparison to Ethan (a Black, gender non-conforming and openly queer boy). The film shows the disparity in Simon and Ethan's framing through camera work (e.g.: Simon is always located among a group of friends and has light casted onto him, while Ethan is usually alone or among one or two friends, is positioned away from the crowd, and is constantly covered with shadows and darkness unless he is the subject of bullying) or dialogue among characters. Simon is shown as observant of the ways Ethan is treated by other students and, fearing that he will be next, even engages in secondary, indirect bullying of Ethan. The film's use of postracism centers Ethan's victimization around claims of homophobia. But once Simon is outed, *Love, Simon*'s strategic engagement with homonationalism clearly spells out that racialization is still an influencing factor. For instance, the first time Simon becomes Spencer and Aaron's target, the bullying is intervened by a teacher. Here, I suggest the film portrays queer people of color as only worthy of saving when a white gay person is also targeted. Homonationalism also frames an understanding of how the film positions Simon as able to redeem his social standing through postracist apologia tactics that focus on his closeted sexuality as a problem solved by coming out. *Love, Simon* fails to evaluate the significant gaps between the white, gay, passing citizen and the always already subjugated queer person of color. By the end of the film, viewers are made to think that Simon's Whiteness makes him truly just like us, even in spite of his queerness. Meanwhile, Ethan's Blackness exists at the margins of LGBTQ acceptance, something to watch and punish. For Simon, it truly does get better- but at what costs? Who benefits and who suffers?

Conclusion:

Homonationalist Futurities

This thesis project conducted a close textual reading of the ways race and sexuality are portrayed in the film *Love, Simon* (2018). Throughout my analysis, I suggest that the film's representations of race and sexuality are homonationalist in nature- meaning white gay male characters are awarded freedom to be gay at the cost of racialized (queer) characters' social punishment and isolation. Homonationalism serves as a beneficial tool for analyzing representations of race and sexuality's interaction within media; other scholars in Communication Studies (Chávez, 2013; Hatfield, 2018; Travers & Shearman, 2017; Szulc & Smets, 2015; (Eguchi 2018a & Eguchi, 2018b), Gender Studies (Puar, 2013; Bacchetta & Haritaworn, 2016; Hartal & Sassoon-Levy, 2018), and Queer/Disability Studies (Schalk, 2013; Chen, 2012; Puar, 2009). Puar (2017) suggests that homonationalism works with the idea of "getting better"- a claim that ties ideas of cure to heteronormative-passing white gay men. By getting better, I am referring to a U.S.-based cultural belief that a white gay man can healed into homonationalism through forced assimilation. For example, Simon is depicted as going out of his way to prove to his friends, family, and classmates that he is still "just like" them- by following them on the streets or sending out an emotional mass letter on CreekSecrets (Bowen, et. al., 2018). A homonationalist future is one that produces a politic benefitting white LGBTQ citizens who can pass as heteronormative through imagining possibilities about what a white gay

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future might look like (e.g.: portraying scenarios where homosexuality is the norm and straight people must be the ones who "come out").

A queer utopian future can fail when it is too abstract. Muñoz (2009) defines the abstract utopia as one "untethered from any historical consciousness" (p. 3). Muñoz's theorization is helpful to understand Simon's college scene, as well as the film as a whole. The progressive politics that *Love, Simon* portrays creates only one possibility: a future where white gay boys can be loud but Black queer boys are punished; a future where white gay characters are wholeheartedly supported by their families without conflict, but Black queer boys are shown having their queer identities erased at home; a future where only white gay men can be "gay, but not *that* gay" (Bowen, et. al. , 2018). It is my hope that this project provides further insight on the ways Whiteness is working together with and against sexuality in the film. Taking an intersectional approach allows me to show how Whiteness works to recenter certain LGBTQ sexualities as exceptional, while rendering others as racialized and therefore unacceptable.

In my first chapter, I trouble the film's use of multicultural casting practices, supporting such choices with strategies of postracism (Ono, 2009; Ono, 2010). *Love, Simon* follows a trend of racially diverse casting practices in mainstream Hollywood films. Casting strategies are an attempt to satisfy issues of Whiteness and diverse representations (Enck & Morrissey, 2015; Dubrofsky, 2013; Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014). Turning to Dubrofsky and Ryalls' (2014) analysis of lighting in *The Hunger Games* film franchise (2012-2015), my first chapter examines how *Love, Simon* uses lighting and shadows to conflate portrayals of how racialized characters are (not) shown as authentic or well-intentioned. Rather, I suggest the film's "reliance on racist tropes" (Dubrofsky, 2013, p. 83) establishes a stark differentiation between Simon and two supporting characters: Abby, a Black girl whom Simon comes out to, and Bram, a biracial (Black

and white/Ashkenazi Jewish) boy whom Simon anonymously chats with online and eventually dates offline at the end of the film. I demonstrated how *Love, Simon* uses controlling images (e.g.: Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire) to negatively frame Simon's friend Abby, a Black girl, as immoral and uncontrollable- especially within Simon's relationship to Abby. Here, I again refer to a set of racialized tropes created during the institution of U.S. slavery. Controlling images are intended to dehumanize and decenter Black girls and women as subservient domestic workers (Mammy), aggressive, outspoken, and angry (Sapphire) or excessive sexual beings whose existence is controlled by white men and other extensions of white supremacy (Jezebel) (Collins, 1999; Celeste, 2018; Williams, 2017; Durham, et. al., 2013; Collins, 2016). Films like *Love, Simon* typically frame racism as a past issue that is already solved- even if a film's plot is rooted in its racialized depictions of characters (Belcher, 2016; Joseph, 2009; Dubrofsky & Wood, 2015). The first chapter additionally questions *Love, Simon*'s depiction of Bram, a biracial boy (who uses the pseudonym "Blue") with whom Simon has an anonymous online friendship which evolves into a relationship), *Love, Simon* portrays Simon's interactions with Blue through the lens of postracism (e.g.: Simon convinces Blue/Bram to come out to him in front of the whole school without contemplating whom Blue might be). Using postracism as a theoretical frame, I troubled the use of multicultural casting and the implications such practices hold for racialized characters in *Love, Simon*, especially at the expense of a white gay character's need for emotional fulfillment.

In Chapter Two, I focused on how *Love, Simon* depicts race in relation to LGBTQ identity. I suggested Jasbir K. Puar's work on homonationalism (2007 & 2013) ass a useful tool to understand how portrayals of Simon and Ethan are guided by racialization. I argued that the film's postracial lens and lighting practices (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014) obfuscate how Simon is

portrayed as good, moral gay character and Ethan is shown as a negative, immoral gay character who deserves to be isolated and publicly humiliated. The film portrays Ethan as only worthy of saving when Simon is also harassed alongside Ethan. I turned to Puar (2013) once more in order to frame how the interactions of Whiteness and LGBTQ sexualities portray white, LGBTQ characters as more able to challenge discrimination (p. 70). Finally, I examined the film's use of apologia tactics and strategies which *Love, Simon* uses to place Simon within a proverbial closet (Rudnick, 2018). In *Love, Simon'*s penultimate scene, Simon writes an "apology" letter on CreekSecrets where he attempts to right behavior wrongs which he links to his closeted life. However, Simon is only able to come to this conclusion after speaking with Ethan. Again, the film portrays a racialized character's performing emotional labor (this time, using Ethan) as imperative for Simon to grow and demand the freedom that he claims ("I deserve a true love story"). In this scene, I suggested that *Love, Simon* establishes Simon's post-closet life (Becker, 2009; Peters, 2016) as joyful and conflict-free. The film never troubles Simon's white privilege for the mistakes he made while he was closeted. Homonationalism helps to highlight significant gaps of how Simon is portrayed as an LGBTQ character as opposed to how Ethan is shown as an LGBTQ character. I suggested homonationalism's ties to strategic whiteness (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) allow the film to present Simon's white gay identity as normal and natural. Simultaneously, this comes at the price of the film showing Ethan's racialization and queerness as identities needing punishment and isolation.

Imagining a Homonationalist Future

Throughout the film, Simon is shown experimenting with what it means to be gay. Seemingly frustrated with his present, Simon imagines a future or alternative world where

identifying as gay is normal. For example, one scene entertains the what-ifs of coming out as heterosexual (instead of LGBTQ) to a family member. The scenes are pleasantly disruptive to the film's otherwise-linear plot and offer viewers a chance to imagine Simon's present and future as "a different time and place" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 5). Muñoz explains that a queer future is one that "dwells in the not-yet… a utopia… that speaks to the "hopes of a collective" (p. 3). These moments in the film are portrayed as an opportunity to imagine what does not yet exist for Simon as a gay teenage boy. The scenes intend to provide some creative usefulness for Simon as an individual character who is determining what it means to be part of the LGBTQ community.

Scenes like this appear to help Simon grapple with his developing sexuality. Simon is shown pursuing many different inquiries in which he entertains what a queer future or alternative *could* look like. For example, in one such imagined future, Simon imagines his post-closet life as a college freshman. Simon is found sitting in front of his computer as he sends an e-mail to Blue/Bram. His eyes are underlined with dark circles and the computer's bright white glow covers his face. As Simon types away on his keyboard, his voiceover speaks: "… Maybe there's not that much of high school left and part of me wants to hold onto who I've been for just a little longer. And then, when I got to college in Los Angeles, I'll be gay and proud, I promise" (Bowen, et. al., 2018). The film then with a loosely-put together scene- one with much brighter lighting, conveying a discontinuation from the film's other-wise linear plot. The shot immediately transitions to a near-future Simon in a large dorm room as he pastes a poster of Whitney Houston (an icon of the LGBTQ community) on his wall. The upbeat beginning bars of Houston's single, "I Wanna Dance With Somebody" begins to play, shocking the imaginary scene to life. As Simon backs away from the wall, viewers get a glimpse of his rainbow-adorned, LGBTQ-pride friendly dorm room. Simon is dressed in a grey t-shirt and slacks. He opens the

door and is immediately surrounded by a crowd of (mostly) racialized dancers wearing brightly

colored clothing. The next shot finds the dancers filing into two rows out of the dormitory's

stately grey brick entrance. Simon himself exits the building and gazes off into the distance. The

racialized dancers are shown constantly moving, and revolving their dancing around Simon,

pushing him and energetically passing him off as he moves down the path. As the shot begins to

zoom out, "Liberal University" signs and rainbow LGBTQ Pride Flags adorn the campus lawn.

The inclusion of Whitney Houston's classic hit and the racialized dancer's bright, genderless

streetwear invoke a sense of nostalgia, even though this scene is clearly intended to take place in

the future. Though *Love, Simon* positions Simon's daydream as a politically-charged and

transformative alternative, racialized characters are still being used throughout this scene as

props for Simon to reach a conclusion or a new outcome of his LGBTQ identity. Such

narrativizing erases the historical legacies of racism and white supremacy. Here, I suggest the

film engages in an abstract utopia, or "a banal optimism" which imagines an "elite [LGBTQ]

evasion of politics" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 3). *Love, Simon*'s abstract utopia is extremely

individualized, and does not focus on the collectivity of change. For example, while there are

other bodies in this scene, they serve to re-center Simon, who does not interact with them much.

An abstract utopia, Muñoz warns us, presents the possibilities of naturalizing certain gay or

queer experiences over others (p. 4). There is no community in the future that *Love, Simon*

portrays, just Simon attempting to halfheartedly explore his gayness.

The abstract futures that *Love, Simon* envisions depicts "the normativizing" of queer hope

that Duggan and Muñoz (2009) lament about in their work on hope and queer theory. Their

writing claims that queer hope has largely evolved into discourse on marriage equality and other

forms of homonormative assimilation (p. 279). In this scene, Simon is shown attempting to

imagine a world where he apathetically joins the crowd of dancers and smiles as he attempts to recreate their energetic and exciting dance moves. The rest of the dancers are blurred out as Simon fails in his endeavor and he is unable to keep up with others' pace. The music fades and the dancers begin to depart from the shot. Simon appears to be embarrassed and a dark shadow covers his body. He breaks the fourth wall and (looking right into the camera) says in a deliberate tone: "Yeah, maybe *not that* gay" (Bowen, et. al., 2018). Suddenly, a bright light appears on Simon's face. The future that the film imagines in this scene for Simon is homonationalist- giving Simon the right to be gay ("but *not that* gay") at the expense of using racialized bodies to help him achieve his self-acceptance. I turn once more to Dubrofsky and Ryalls' (2014) theorization on lighting as a practice used to normalize Whiteness with morality or goodness. The film casts Simon in shadows when he is depicted exploring LGBTQ identity (e.g.: decorating his imaginary dorm room with queer iconography or dancing in a public space), suggesting that a queer identity performance is bad and immoral. However, once he is shown verbalizing his disgust ("*not that* gay"), the light returns to him once more. Here, the film is suggesting that the only possible futures worth thinking about are ones where white, gay boys can readily pander to heteronormativity.

I coin the term "homonationalist future" to reference a narrow set of possibilities that only depict an alternative or possible outcome "of getting better" (Puar, 2017, p. 7) for white LGBTQ people in conjunction with the decentering and punishment of racialized LGBTQ people. I use the concept of a homonationalist futurity to make meaning of how *Love, Simon* depicts alternative ways of being or knowing which do not intend to disrupt, break free, or create new possibilities for imagining what LGBTQ youth identity might look like. Rather, the future in *Love, Simon* only creates opportunities of getting better for white LGBTQ people who readily

assimilate with Whiteness and heteronormativity. Nothing about the futures *Love, Simon*

imagines are collectively queer. Rather, their "it gets better" mentality is centered on the idea

that as long as an LGBTQ-identifying person can hide or conceal their sexuality and does not

openly flaunt it, they can fix the "normalcy" that was lost because of an LGBTQ sexuality. Puar

(2017) writes that such notions are "based on an expectation that it was supposed to be better…

and such affirmations… might turn out to mean, you get more normal" (p. 10). Through

imagining a homonationalist future, Simon (whom the film shows as normal from the very

beginning) brainstorms for alternatives that allow him to pull himself up from the throws of

queerness. This allows *Love, Simon* to portray Simon as an exception to its white,

heteronormative universe. Even though Simon is gay, he is constantly depicted as eschewing

open or racialized performances of queerness (e.g.: Simon openly admits he only wants to dress

"straight"; Simon partakes in Ethan's harassment by using an individualistic mindset to decenter

Ethan - "I wish Ethan wouldn't make it so easy"). Though the film's very last scene depicts

Simon and Bram kissing in Simon's car in front of their friends, Simon's depiction as constantly

trying to displace himself from (racialized) queer interpretations of identity suggests that the only

ways race and sexuality can be performed together are clearly tied to Whiteness and

heteronormative assimilation. In doing so, the film redeems Simon with a "perfect,

heteronormative Hollywood ending" (McRuer, 2006), restoring his abilities to be an exceptional

LGBTQ character who does not disrupt, but continues to imagine a future of homonationalist

possibilities. Conversely, the film frames Ethan as incapable of belonging, and presents white

LGBTQ sexualities as moral, just, and capable of social production. For example, Simon is

shown accomplishing many milestones in spite of his sexuality- the film presents a post-closet

Simon easily restoring his friendships, regaining acceptance from his family members, and

finding a love interest. Meanwhile, Ethan is stuck in time and is never shown progressing past the limitations and shadows the film places onto him. Even though Simon tells us that Ethan "has been gay since… sixteen" (Bowen, et. al., 2018), he is never shown outside of Creekwood's space. We, as viewers, never learn about Ethan's friendships, his family relations, and we never see him chance a shot at romance. While Simon grows, Ethan is shown suffering or is being used for Simon's emotional labor. The film positions Ethan's existence (and to an extent, Abby's and Blue/Bram's) solely to allow Simon's capacity for homonationalistic growth and assimilation. In doing so, I argue that *Love, Simon*'s homonationalist futures also engage with slow death to imagine (Berlant, 2007; Puar, 2017). By "slow death", I am referring to the idea of "certain populations [are] being marked… [and] being worn out to produce life" (Berlant, 2007). Berlant explains that slow death does not happen in singular traumas; rather, it is created over time in mundane events (p. 759). It is my sense that the film only includes Ethan, a racialized queer character, to hold Simon, a white gay character, up. A homonationalist future relies on the support, emotional work, and life of a racialized queer character to help a white gay character grow. But the cost of imagining in *Love, Simon* readily sustains strategic whiteness through starving and stunting racialized bodies.

As I conclude this thesis project, I would like to end on the following note: ideology does not just originate in a text; rather (akin to Hall's [2005] theorizing), a media text serves as a channel for ideas, beliefs, and epistemologies to reach a greater audience. Hall (1980) likens watching a film to consumption- when we engage with a text, the presentation of ideas or concepts does *something* to those tuning in. I started this project in March 2018. At the time, I was working in a very different area of Communication Studies and had no intention of writing a thesis. However, something compelled me to join my roommate one Saturday night to watch a

movie she was dying to see at our local AMC. I vaguely knew about the film; I remember scrolling past an article a friend had shared on Facebook about *Love, Simon* being a breakthrough for the queer community. As a queer person, I immediately found myself drawn to *Love, Simon*. It wasn't too cheesy, it was smart, and yet I knew there were gaps- huge gaps – in the ways racialized characters were portrayed in comparison to Simon. Why were media outlets proclaiming the film to be queer when *Love, Simon* shows Simon only wanting to kiss boys, and hide the rest of his LGBTQ identity? Why was Ethan positioned as a punchline? *Love, Simon* may be one of the first major Hollywood studio romantic comedy films prioritizing an LGBTQ storyline. Yet its media celebration cannot erase the consequences of homonationalism. *Love, Simon* depicts a world where LGBTQ identities are normal. However, who gets to be normal? What are the implications of an LGBTQ person getting better- a discourse rooted in notions of healing and neoliberal productivity- when only *some* are extended that opportunity?

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