

Right Kind of Discomfort

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and spot-on, but her own behavior frequently verges into unkindness, including to the white boyfriend who she keeps secret from her otherwise all-black social set. Sam is running for leadership of a residence hall whose traditional status as all-black has been altered due to a change in university housing policy. This is a matter of controversy about which she disagrees with her opponent, her ex-boyfriend Troy, a clean-cut, athletic campus leader who is much easier for majority-culture sensibilities to accept than Sam is. Troy is dating Sofia, the daughter of the white university president, who in turn has edged out Troy's father, the dean of students, in most competitions in their decades-long rivalry. Sofia's brother, Kurt, is the editor of the college humor magazine and a defiantly politically incorrect provocateur who reserves especially obnoxious taunts for Lionel, a nerdy gay black student who doesn't feel comfortable in any community and whose rangy afro evokes fascination in his white peers and irritation in his black ones. Also in the mix is Coco, a calculating economics major from the South Side of Chicago eager to distance herself from her original name, Colandrea, and its attendant ghetto associations. Coco seeks to forge a reality television career and a more assimilationist identity in direct contrast to Sam. All of this culminates in a black-ghetto-themed party in Kurt's residence hall where white students don black-face and polyester and gold chains and teeth and other

accoutrements of black culture as popularly depicted. (Simien cannily includes with the end credits news articles establishing that such parties have sprung up on actual college campuses across the country.) How the party came to be and how the black characters incite and respond to its elements is where all the disparate plot elements converge. Everyone is angling. Sam indulges romantic attention from Reggie, a political ally who she apparently sees as a more suitable romantic partner, though her heart doesn't seem to concur. Troy smokes weed several times a day to smooth his struggle to assemble a persona powerful-yet-non-threatening enough to please his father, his white girlfriend, and enough of his peers to fuel his political ambitions. Coco chafes at the sense that, for black men, she is destined to be only a way station to a white girlfriend. Bright and observant Lionel struggles to find a vantage point from which to express himself, but his experience mostly buffets him between bullying and invisibility and exploitation. Shifting between the half-dozen plot elements, the film's tone often feels self-conscious. But ultimately the complexity serves the film well; Simien is trying to get at themes we resist looking at, and multiple vantage points is a smart way to back us into doing that. The film is pitched at satire, and though the elements sometimes feel a bit too carefully assembled, they are more complex than stereotypes. The film captures the sense that, for African-Americans with a shot at rising, forging an identity is uniquely complicated. Am

I black enough? Selling out? Selling short? How hard should I work at being non-threatening to the people with the means to help me rise? What should my agenda be if I succeed? What would success even look like? Is there any point to asking these questions at all? Will I even have any say in the answers once I get there? As a person of mixed (European and Mexican) heritage, I related to these struggles, both from my own experience and from that of my friends from outside the dominant legal culture trying to make it in the world of law. But I also related to the anxiety evident in the white characters. Even denial (also much in evidence) appears at times to spring from a place of anxiety. I'm one of the good people, right? I get it, right? "Dear White People" doesn't presume to answer these questions. It is wisely content to pose and play with them. In doing so, it has offered up a collection of characters who, with the exception of Kurt (undeniably a jerk) and Lionel (the most guileless), are by turns unlikable and worthy of compassion. And it has aspired to more than any film I can think of: a conversation about privilege and identity and race that sits with the questions instead of pretending that they have been or can be easily put to rest, by anyone. Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column *Opinionated Judge* appears regularly in *The Portland Observer*. You can find her movie blog at opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com.



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