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**Black Occularity, the White Gaze, and Color-Blindness in
Shonda Rhimes' *Bridgerton***

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors Studies in
Political Science

by

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Introduction

In December of 2020, producer and screenwriter Shonda Rhimes debuted her on-screen adaptation of Julia Quinn's best-selling book *The Duke & I* (2000) on Netflix. The show *Bridgerton* was “[the] biggest show” to stream on Netflix and garnered more than 82 million streams within the first 28 days on the platform (Statt, 2021). The show *Bridgerton* is a steamy, romantic fantasy of a color-blind historical era. The show is set during the Regency period from 1811-1820, when King George III took a backseat to the throne, and his son, George the Prince of Wales, was named Regent and ruled in King George's place (Valentini, 2020). This period drama, like Rhimes's previous television sensations like *Grey's Anatomy*, *Scandal*, and *How to Get Away with Murder*, offers a wide array of diverse characters from many races, ethnicities, and classes because of the color-blind casting that Rhimes has employed throughout her shows.

The Regency era was more diverse than what historical dramas prior have shown in the past and was a society “where different demographics mix and meet, particularly in social spaces” (Valentini, 2021). The production of Rhimes' newest smash hit demonstrates the inadequacy of the period drama and offers a multicultural celebration of Black and other non-white people in these televisual spaces. Traditional historical dramas are cast with primarily white characters and are aimed at “predominantly heterosexual, white... women” (Garden, 2021). These casting choices are meant to reinforce the feelings of “white comfort” whites get when they enjoy a segregated society by rendering Black people as invisible in all aspects of society; white people only see themselves in the spaces they live in, so it fits that they only see themselves in the media they consume (Yancy, 2017). They also produce segregated memory and history, suggesting that white people have lived in complete racial isolation. Thus, white people can pretend that Black people and non-Black people of color do not exist, and white viewers can

get lost in a world where the characters look like them, essentially projecting their own white-utopic fantasies onto these characters.

Season one of *Bridgerton* centers on Daphne Bridgerton, a wealthy, white woman from an old family, and Simon Basset, a roguish Black duke, as they make their way through London's courting season. According to producers, the diversity on screen is meant to "reflect the world that we live in today," since the storyline establishes that slavery was abolished earlier than in our reality (Jean-Phillipe, 2020). However, *Bridgerton* initially gained popularity because of the shock that many viewers experienced from seeing a high number of Black people and non-Black people of color in the drama. This reaction from viewers works to make visible the whiteness of television programs and highlight whiteness of soap operas and television programs, and the segregation that is still present both in media, the soap opera genre, and real life.

Part of the show's success comes from what makes it so controversial: the diversity in the casting choices. Producer Chris Van Dusen says that "color and race is very much a part of the show and very much a part of the conversation" (Nakamura, 2021). When watching the show, race and color do play a significant role in the conversation, but not in the way the writers and producers were aiming for. Though this adaptation does feature more people of color than most period shows, "there is a difference between showing brown skin onscreen and representing brown people onscreen" meaning that simply having them present does not warrant giving *Bridgerton* the title of a racially progressive show (Komonibo & Newman-Bremang, 2021). There also are not many conversations about race and color in the show, and they are limited by the Black-white racial binary creating a space where conversations and issues regarding race are *only* initiated by Black characters in the show, while the white characters are much more focused

on the white, patriarchal concerns of this period pertaining to marriage, dowry, and familial authority.

Critics of the show have called the presence of people of color in the show, specifically a Black duke, historically inaccurate, failing to consider that the “romances you’ve been reading all this time (including the *Bridgerton* series) . . . aren’t realistic at all” (Hibbert, 2019). Even if the existence of people of color or a Black duke could be considered unrealistic in this period, both existed and there were members of “even Black nobility” (Jean-Phillipe, 2020). However, because of the segregation present in historical dramas (and society) today, the appearance of Black people in these shows makes for hypervisibility of Black people and Blackness. Similar period dramas like HBO’s *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015), have been void of characters of color, which has been blamed on the impulse to remain “historically accurate,” but “a London society should have a mixture of people from around the world of different races and backgrounds in a way that period dramas haven’t adequately represented” (Valentini, 2020). *Bridgerton* actually shows “what race relations looked like in Regency London by introducing the idea of people of color in high social ranks,” making it more historically accurate than other depictions of Regency life in television and film (Valentini, 2020).

Other Netflix originals with highly diverse casts like *Dear White People* (2017) and *Self Made* (2020) have had a voyeuristic aspect stemming from how those shows allow white audiences to experience Black issues and history. These shows depict Black experiences through a white lens, making the storylines softer and more digestible for white audiences. This gaze “gives the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world” to “peek in” on cultures that they have not had access to (Mulvey, 838). Black people and culture has been made inaccessible through “defacto residential segregation” and the resulting defacto segregation of the rest of

American life after de jure segregation was outlawed with *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) (Yancy, 2019). Consequently, these shows mold perceptions of Black people and the Black experience, but the representation has been filtered through a white lens to make it more palatable for white audiences, because when oppressed groups are placed in positions where to be listened to, they need to “frame [their] ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group” (Asare, 347). While *Bridgerton* offers a look into a historically white property ritual (marriage) that occasionally replaces white characters with characters of color, the show offers minimal insights into the characters’ cultural backgrounds or observations effects of the pernicious and deadly racism of historical period.

Given the controversies about the show’s racial politics and its tremendous success, this project offers a close textual analysis of Shondaland’s *Bridgerton* at the intersection of media studies, feminist studies, and critical race theory drawing on the work of Laura Mulvey, George Yancy, Kristen J. Warner, E. Anne Kaplan, Franz Fanon, and Cheryl I. Harris on the white male gaze, narrative conventions of soap operas and telenovelas, and Black ocularity, to study the visual and racial politics of *Bridgerton*. I’m interested in how the show challenges Western ideas of race and racial dominance while also buttressing the white gaze to produce what is functionally a colorblind period soap opera. In doing so, this project asks: *How does Shonda Rhimes invite the white gaze into Bridgerton and how does this function within or against generic conventions? How does she perpetuate a white aesthetic despite populating the show with so many people of color? How does the (hyper)sexualization of the Black characters (re)produce or counter the white gaze, particularly as sexuality is mediated through interracial relationships?*

In answering these questions, I suggest first that *Bridgerton* produces an interracial adaptation of generic soap opera conventions that transplants the modern white gaze into a new colonial era setting and thus re-colonizing Black people while celebrating them onscreen. Second, I argue that *Bridgerton* reproduces modes of oppression and violence used on Black people since slavery through its color-blind lens. Finally, I conclude that the show tells white stories through racial representation under the façade of diversity therefore negating and whitewashing the effect their representation could give to the communities in which they are a part. This project also offers an important consideration of a novel text produced by an iconic Black female producer to understand how the present-day Black liberation struggle is controlled on screen in ways that both conform to the white gaze and pushes against the commodification of Black bodies. As one of the first scholarly analyses of the blockbuster show on Netflix, this project offers a critical media analysis of race relations in the United States in the wake of George Floyd's murder.

Bridgerton's Plot and Complications

The genre of historical romances stems from Jane Austen's romance novels, which are rooted historically in the 18th and 19th centuries and the values of the time. Austen wrote these novels to express her own fantasies and values as a white woman (Garden, 2021). Her characters furthered white supremacy and the white gaze since they were all white. In her repertoire, there was only one character of color in Austen's last novel *Sandition*, "but Austen's untimely death left the novel unfinished" (Garden, 2021). Because of Austen's death, audiences do not know what the intentions for the one character of color were, but Austen's books perpetuate a white aesthetic since they are set in a period where people of color were actively exploited for their labor and natural resources as imperialism and colonization, effectively stripping England's

colonies to the ground and "feminized, eroticized, and fetishized" the people in the colonies (Garden, 2021). People of color were also considered non-citizens in these countries because of white racism and the belief that native people or Black slaves in the colonies were "savages" compared to whites. This belief is transplanted into the historical soap opera genre and *Bridgerton* through the violence that is executed exclusively on to Black people and by Black characters.

The soap opera genre has been built up in American media by Shonda Rhimes in her career. Rhimes has built up this genre by sticking to generic soap opera conventions and adding a signature color-blind cast to all her projects. Soap operas follow a general formula, and one of the elements present in soap operas is love, either "old lovers, new passion...[or] multiple suspects" in the main character's love life (Hayward, xxx). The love stories that are often present in these dramas are meant to provide a fantasy for the viewers to experience the "self (character/viewer) and Other (love object/sex)" and the story that follows these two subjects when watching each episode (Hayward, xxx). In *Bridgerton*, the (primarily white women) audience gets to live out their fantasies on interracial romances by participating via Daphne, in this "historically white mating ritual" (Jackson, 2021).

Produced by the most famous Black female tv showrunners of our time; however, despite populating the show with Black and brown bodies, *Bridgerton* is very white. The show is based on the book series of the same name and is centered around a white family, during a time in history that many consider very white. Though the Netflix adaptation heavily populated our screens with people of color, the characters of color in the show are relegated to the sidelines and are used to build up the white plot points. The focus is the Bridgerton family, an affluent, old money white family, as the eldest daughter Daphne makes her way through the courting season.

Her desire and expectation to find a suitable husband and have children are implied early on as Daphne idealizes her parents' own love story and wants to find love.

The white women in the show, particularly Daphne and her sisters, are the most desired in this society, regardless of the people of color that also share the screen in smaller (often uncredited extra) roles. However, Daphne experiences several obstacles before getting her fairytale ending. Daphne begins her story by being called, "flawless," by the Queen and a "diamond of first water," by gossip columnist Lady Whistledown, gaining the immediate approval of the high society (Season 1, Episode 1). This approval gives her a competitive edge over the other women in the town but does not result in gaining a suitor fitting of her status.

All the eligible young men that come to call on the attention of Daphne are chased away by her older brother, Anthony, who prefers Lord Berbrooke, a "peculiar suitor" (Season 1, Episode 1). Berbrooke eventually tries to blackmail Daphne into marriage she does not want by invoking a "scandal [that] could wreak havoc" on her and her family (Season 1, Episode 2). While Daphne's suitors are dwindling and Lord Berbrooke is chasing her affections, Simon Basset, the Duke of Hastings, is trying to dodge marriageable young women and their mothers. The show's intentional diversity also leads to an on-screen depiction of Simon Basset as a Black man, even though the original text imparts no clues to suggest he is not white. In fact, the first time that he appears in the novel describes Simon as "striking... tall and athletic, with thick dark hair," and his eyes are "icy blue, with an oddly penetrating gaze" (Quinn, 2000). Since his return to the London scene from his travels abroad, Simon has been bombarded with single young women on the same mission that Daphne is on, to find a suitable husband; however, Simon does not want to get married. Simon and Daphne meet at a ball while she is trying to escape the affections of Lord Berbrooke. When Lord Berbrooke attacks Daphne while they were

“alone...on the Dark Walk at Vauxhall” that Simon and Daphne agree to “pretend to form an attachment” so that they fool the town, the Queen, and Lady Whistledown, that they are falling madly in love (Season 1, Episode 1 & Episode two).

This arrangement benefits both by ensuring that “every suitor will be looking at [Daphne]” again and ensuring that ambitious mothers and single women in the town will not continue trying to “claim [Simon] as their prize” (Season 1, Episode 1). However, as the season continues, we see the affection the pair holds for each other grow from a business transaction to friendship to ultimately falling in love. After a passionate kiss in the garden the Simon and Daphne, along with her two older brothers, Anthony and Colin, scramble to defend Daphne’s honor. Unfortunately for Simon and Daphne, Cressida Cowper, one of Daphne’s white competitors in the London social season, “Cressida Cowper witnessed [them] in the garden” (Season 1, Episode 4). Though the kiss is a confirmation of mutual attraction between the two, because Cressida witnessed it, Daphne and her family will be “condemned to shame and reproach” if anyone finds out the couple kissed before marriage (Season 1, Episode 4). To solve this issue, “the duke and [Daphne] are to be married,” meaning that Daphne secures the future that Daphne wished for. However, Daphne is under the impression that her husband “[does] not love [her] and despises [her] so”, and she forced him into a loveless marriage (Season 1, Episode 4). Simon, though he did not initially want to get married, falls under the same belief that this situation forced Daphne to marry him. After a passionate wedding night where they declare their “burning” for each other, they begin a happy honeymoon period of their marriage (Season 1, Episode 5).

This happiness lasts until Daphne realizes that Simon is lying to her about his ability to have children, and thus she rapes him in an attempt to have children of her own (Season 1,

Episode 6). This particular sex scene between the two is an act of rape because Simon does not consent to giving Daphne his “strong healthy seed” so they can have children, and he has made it clear that he does not want any children as well (Season 1, Episode 6). Daphne’s act of rape essentially colonizes Simon’s body through their sexual relationship and “closes down the possibility of free agency” that Simon has gained as a free Black man (Neilsen, 2011). The next couple of weeks threaten to separate the couple. Nevertheless, they eventually make up and can recapture the magic of their relationship once again. The season ends with a shot of Daphne giving birth to their child while Simon looks at them fondly.

Though the storyline focuses on Daphne and the Bridgerton family, there are also subplots centered around the supporting characters. Simon gets his arc outside of his rake persona. We learn that as a child, Simon was abused and neglected by his father because he “had trouble speaking as a child”(Season 1, Episode 8). The late Duke of Hastings also had a “strained” marriage with the previous Duchess and was very concerned with “[having] an heir” to continue the Hastings name (Season 1, Episode 6). Because he was neglected by his father, Simon is raised by Lady Danbury, a close friend of his mother and a former slave, who “showed [Simon] what he was capable of” (Season 1, Episode 8). The abuse of Simon’s mother and later of himself has contributed to his desire to never have children or marry, swearing on his father's deathbed that “the Hastings line will end with [him]” (Season 1, Episode 1). One of the biggest plots outside of the main characters is the love triangle between Marina Thompson, a light-skinned Black woman, Colin Bridgerton, and Penelope Featherington. The Featheringtons are an affluent family much like the Bridgertons, and Penelope is one of their daughters that is going through their first courting season. When Marina arrives at the Featherington household, the Featherington women are left in shock at her beauty and Lady Featherington is immediately

threatened by her presence. Marina is declared “an even rarer jewel of only the most remarkable brilliance” and has many suitors calling for her attention, while the Featherington girls do not have any (Season 1, Episode 1). However, the excitement quickly comes to an end for Marina when “[she hasn’t] bled” in the month that she has been with the Featherington family, meaning that she is pregnant with an old lover's child (Season 1, Episode 1).

After a period of isolation imposed by Lady Featherington, Marina and Lady Featherington hatch a plan “[Marina] will seduce [Colin]” into marriage to ensure that he does not suspect of Marina’s pregnancy occurring before they married (Season 1, Episode 5). Penelope hears of this plan while snooping in on conversations and tries to warn Collin that “[Marina’s] heart belongs to another” and that the relationship with another man “was no mere flirtation” but Penelope is too late and the couple becomes engaged (Season 1, Episode 6). Marina’s pregnancy is revealed by Lady Whistledown, and she promptly “falls from grace”(Season 1, Episode 7). This revelation “leaves a horrid smear” on Marina, the Featherington family, and the Bridgertons and all are left humiliated (Season 1, Episode 7). Though Marina does obtain the future she wants for her child by securing a “respectable marriage” to her lover’s brother, it occurs on Penelope’s terms not Marina’s (Season 1, Episode 8).

Though *Bridgerton*’s plot makes it seem like a typical historical romance, there is a lot more nuance to the story. The Regency era is defined by its extravagance, and most notably the opulence and extreme wealth that is displayed in the social events of the aristocratic families. However, when considering how recent the emancipation of Black people is in this storyline, as well as the historical context of the period, the wealth came from “directly [enriching] themselves from the transatlantic slave trade” (Hinds, 2021). The story also makes the Black

characters complicit in their own oppression. In the show, the marriage between Queen Charlotte, a then-slave, and King George sparked massive emancipation and desegregation of society. After the emancipation, the monarchy “granted this [money]” to Black freedmen and women, like the late Duke of Hastings and Lady Danbury (Season 1, Episode 2). The extreme wealth that the Black characters have inherited is connected to the suffering, exploitation, and subjugation of their race for the profit of the white people they are surrounded by. However, the caveat to the monarchy granting land and money to Black people after emancipation is that they “must remain extraordinary” meaning that the Black elites must work to be even greater than their white counterparts and cannot make mistakes as it could cost them everything (Season 1, Episode 2). The depiction of Black and white aristocrats living in harmony with each other when This denial “an empire that has colonized so many nations all over the world” creates a narrative that erases the oppression brought to Black people and non-Black people of color by fantasizing that there were no long-lasting consequences of said oppression (Salam, 2021).

Though the producers of *Bridgerton* want audiences to see the show as an exemplar of media that fosters diversity and racial acceptance as they “tried to imagine history and the world in the way [they] wanted to see it,” ultimately creating a color-blind Regency society (Nakamura, 2021). This color-blindness still results in whiteness being the most significant aesthetic throughout the show. Ultimately what we see playing out on our screens is the affirmation of whiteness as the ultimate beauty standard even in a supposedly color-blind and post-racial society and the social benefits that whiteness and being associated with whiteness brings. From the ways that white women are depicted on-camera compared to Black women to the sexualization and villainization of Black men and women and their storylines. Ultimately, the

show perpetuates cycles of white violence and white supremacy that have been present in our society for hundreds of years.

How Interracial Marriage Functions in *Bridgerton*

Though Rhimes has populated the show with Black people and non-black people of color and creates interracial couples, the story itself does not touch on the possibility of a racialized experience within these interracial relationships. Interracial relationships have an inherent power imbalance; this imbalance is the product of a society built on slavery, colonization, and white supremacy which creates a “highly and historically racialized society” that shapes the lived experiences of Black people and non-black people of color (Kaplan, 1997).

Given the context from the show’s storyline, the Regency era, and the writers’ goals with the series, *Bridgerton* and its society should create explicitly racialized experiences for the interracial couples that the audience can recognize from “the world we live in today” (Phillipe, 2020). However, much like the other shows in Shonda Rhimes’ repertoire, regardless of the skin color and racial differences that the characters show, there is an intentional “neutralization of race” (Warner, 2014). By neutralizing their race, the characters shed any racialized experiences that they would live through in a post-slavery, post-colonization world and live their lives as whitewashed Black and brown people. Rather than deliberately reproducing racism, *Bridgerton* works to deliver a “colorblind package like contemporary racism and promotes an assimilationist perspective that encourages the view that race does not matter” (Warner, 2014.) Despite attempting to camouflage Black and non-black people of color with white storylines, the characters in *Bridgerton* still live racialized experiences within their interracial relationships.

The interracial relationships in *Bridgerton* also serve to hypersexualize the Black and non-black people of color characters. Black men and women in *Bridgerton* serve as the catalyst

for white men and women sexual and romantic awakenings. Though this may not seem like a destructive relationship dynamic, anyone can be someone's romantic or sexual interest, the way that the relationships play out on our screens are what produce harm. The first season focuses on the coupling between Daphne and Simon, which are now a part of an interracial couple because of the "blindcasting", or the process of not working race into the script, methods that Shonda Rhimes employs in her shows (Warner, 2014). Though the couple begins their relationship without any sexual or romantic intentions, this starts to change as Daphne develops feelings for Simon. After Daphne begins to develop feelings for Simon, the way that he is seen by the audience takes on a "scopophilic...pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (Mulvey, 1975). Rather than seeing Simon as a human being, we begin to see him as an object that Daphne intends to own, both sexually and maritally. The first instance of this occurs when Daphne gazes longingly at Simon while he is licking a spoon after they eat ice cream together, an action that is known in pop culture to simulate cunnilingus (Season 1, Episode 3). Daphne's ownership over Simon's body grows throughout their relationship, ultimately culminating in Daphne raping Simon after finding out that he was lying to her about his ability to have children. However, throughout their honeymoon period the viewers get to see numerous sex scenes between the couple. The focus in the sex scenes is not Daphne, but Simon and his body. The focus on Simon's body not only hypersexualizes him, but also re-colonizes his body.

In *Bridgerton*, love was able to "conquer" slavery through the vehicle of Black-white interracial romances. The interracial romances in the show also work to "legitimize Black women as rival beauties to white women" (Asare, 2017). The interracial romances also show that Black women, specifically darker-skinned women, are not going to end up the favored woman

because “the media is still biased towards who approach a ‘White standard’ of beauty” (Asare, 2017). Although *Bridgerton* has “conquered” slavery, these interracial romances reproduce the same patterns of oppression that have existed since slavery was in practice, especially when concerning Black women.

As a result of the presentation of Black women in the show, we see the hyper-sexualization of Black women through their sexuality through Marina's storyline. Marina is immediately “kept away” by Lady Featherington after finding out she is pregnant and keeps her hidden from her daughters so that they do not catch the moral degeneracy associated with pregnancy (Season 1, Episode 2). Marina’s isolation, along with the innocence that Penelope, Eloise, and Daphne show when all three begin asking how women become pregnant, serves to highlight the “sexualization of Black women in *Bridgerton* compared to the show’s obsession with the chastity of white women” (Garden, 2021). Marina’s hyper-sexualization by the Featheringtons also works to reinforce the “shaped perceptions of Black sexuality in women” (Asare, 2017). Marina plays the role of the Jezebel in the series, a “distorted image of Black femininity” that has endured throughout history (Asare, 2017). Marina is “a seducer/manipulator that obtains sexual drives that are uncontrollable” and the Black female sexuality is villainized through her occur through the seduction of white men through the characters of Sir George and Collin Bridgerton (Asare, 2017). Her pregnancy further solidifies her position as the Jezebel since she must try and manipulate men into marrying her so that her position in society will not be jeopardized by her child. However, as a pregnant Jezebel, Marina is a threat to the “critical core of a system of [the] system of whiteness” by seeking a rich white man to marry so that she can have a good future for herself and her child (Harris, 1993). The fact that Marina also wants to have a choice into which family she brings her child into also takes her from a “poor Black

thing” that whites must save to a human being with the freedom to bring “the next generation of human subject” to any family she chooses (Yancy, 2017). Thus, Marina both breaks the patterns in the show that establish Black people as white property while also threatening white property with her insistence that she have a choice in who she marries and which rich white family she brings her children into.

The Violence that *Bridgerton* Inflicts on its Black Characters

Bridgerton follows the typical romance genre formula by showing the men in the story perform acts of violence to seem dashing to the audience; however, many of the acts of violence in the show are inflicted upon its Black characters, specifically the Black male characters. Expressing violence through the Black male body in a show that is based around a white reality continues patterns of violence that not only create an “objectification by the white gaze” but also portray Black males as “lethal and threatening in the white imaginary” (Yancy, 2017).

The boxing scenes in *Bridgerton* are an example of how violence Black male body is used as a spectacle and exemplify the stereotypical Black masculinity as it is understood by the white gaze by showing two Black men performing “dangerous and threatening” acts of violence (Yancy, 2017). The two Black characters that are seen engaging in this violent show of masculinity are Will Mondrich, Simon’s best friend, and Simon; Will through boxing as his profession, and Simon through boxing as stress relief. Will’s character is based on the Black British boxer, Bill Richmond, Britain’s “first Black sports star” (Elton, 2013). The scenes with Will and his story are limited, as he was “essentially just there as a device to fuel one white family’s narrative, and to remind Simon of his (mysterious) ties to the working-class Black community” (Romano, 2021). However, many of Will’s scenes feed into “white racist violence which disavows itself only to brutalize the specter that embodies its own intention” through the

interracial fights that he participates in and as a function of the predominantly white spectators, both in the boxing match's audience and the actual viewers of the show as well (Yancy, 2017).

The promotional poster for a "battle" between Will and his opponent Billy Gillespie, in which the portrayal of the match is reminiscent of the posters that are associated with Bill Richmond's match with Thomas Crib (Season 1, Episode 4; Stezano, 2017). The match between Will and Gillespie itself introduces the white gazing the fights Bill Richmond experienced as "a Black man...besting the best young white boxers in England" (Stezano, 2017). The outcome of the boxing matches is heavily gambled on, as shown through the discussion before Will's final match of the season spectators excitedly yell at the book maker "Three-to-one Iron Fist to win! Five-to-two in favor of Iron Fist!" (Season 1, Episode 8). By attaching value to the violence that Will is going to experience and exert on his opponent, the match's (white) audience is reinforcing the "white domination" where "Black do not appear fully human" (Yancy, 2017). The violence that Will experiences, along with the monetary value the spectators add to the boxing matches, also serve to emphasize fact that the white gaze, and thus white people, see the Black body as an object where "white racist pleasure, masochism, and dominance" can be displayed by basically purchasing Will's body (Yancy, 2017). The ownership of the Will's body calls back to the recolonization of the Black body by reproducing patterns of oppression present in white supremacist societies since slavery was practiced.

The only times that *Bridgerton's* storyline includes dark-skinned Black men, other than using them as props for Daphne, is when they are being violent. Though we see this throughout the season with Will's storyline and his boxing matches, the relationship between Simon and his father, and the brawls that Simon gets because of Daphne, also illustrate violent Black masculinity. In learning Simon's backstory, we learn of the violent acts, both physically and

psychologically, that the late Duke of Hastings performed on his son and his wife. When Simon is a small child, the duke wants to hear Simon speak and exclaiming that he “shall get a sound out of him still” while raising a brush to hit him (Season 1, Episode 2). This act of almost violence serves as a visual confirmation that even in imaginary settings, “Black males still embody a lethal and threatening presence,” extending beyond the Black male body as a threat to whiteness and shows Black men as a threat to Black families as well (Yancy, 2017).

The Black male characters are not the only ones in *Bridgerton* that are subjected to violence, Black women, in particular Marina, experience violence throughout the show both psychological and physical at the hands of the white characters. While in the care of the Featherington family, Marina is subjected to both physical and psychological stress and abuse multiple times. When it is revealed that Marina is pregnant, she is “kept away” by Lady Featherington until they can come up with a solution to this disastrous situation (Season 1, Episode 2). Marina must marry despite being in love with the father of her child, and it is only after she reads a fabricated letter saying that “[Sir George] pretends there was nothing between [them]” that she begins to participate in courtship rituals with intent to marry (Season 1, Episode 3). The letter is an “effort” by Lady Featherington and Mrs. Varley, the Featherington housekeeper, to show her “the truth about men” (Season 1, Episode 3). Though this effort to do “what is right and what is best” was done to protect Marina and her child from a life of poverty “if she does not agree to be married” Lady Featherington causes Marina a tremendous amount of emotional distress (Season 1, Episode 3). However, this help serves to reinforce whiteness as a force that “[destabilizes] and traumatizes” Black women (Yancy, 2017). Also, although these actions may seem noble because they are intended to help Marina, the Featheringtons are basically investing in Marina’s future, and her pregnancy threatens the family economically and

socially. Lady Featherington needs Marina to cooperate and get married to pay off her husband's debt to Marina's father, thus making Marina "[an] object of property" that can be manipulated to fit white needs (Harris, 1993). An instance of this manipulation is the physical violence Marina experiences while under the Featherington's care. Since the Featherington family does not have the money to fund their lifestyle and because of this the girls must reuse dresses. Rather than getting her refitted for dresses to fit a pregnant body, we see her being forced into corsets that no longer fit her to the point where the modiste says that "perhaps [she] took [Marina's] measurements wrong" and she struggles to tighten the corsets (Season 1, Episode 3). Though corsets were largely support garments, "wearing tightly laced corsets...had negative health effects on the unborn baby" meaning that this handling of Marina's body would have harmed both her and her child (Bach, 2015). The carelessness of not refitting Marina's corsets, along with the falsification of a letter from Sir George, serve to reassert the white "violence that [fragments and traumatizes] Black embodiment" and continues patterns of Black people as white property (Yancy, 2017).

Conclusion:*Bridgerton* and Color-Blindness in a Post-2020 World

Creating a reality where race is neutralized through colorblindness does not mean that racism or its proxies do not exist, especially in a reality where the meaning of power is constructed through "a long history of white domination" via colonization and slavery (Yancy, 2017). *Bridgerton* was initially painted, by both its producers and much of its audience, as a feminist and progressive text; however, analysis of its content has proven otherwise. Color-blind attempts to create a post-racial society (as opposed to a post-racist society) only work to "reinforce and sustain white hegemony and mythos" that has been held over Black people and other people of color for hundreds of years (Yancy, 2017).

Producing a “deliberately skewed fantasy” where race, racial differences, and the historical implications of European colonization for non-white people are ignored is not progressive for a society where white supremacy has been established, both in the shows and in real life (Romano, 2021). Colorblindness creates a reality where people’s identities have been erased and they are simply people. Due to the domination of white people within societies, the identities and behaviors placed on people are “[repetitions] of white sensibilities and values [and] the encouragement of white solipsism” because whiteness was established as the norm through violent colonization (Yancy, 2017). Color-blindness bolsters whiteness and perpetuates discrimination rather than eliminating discrimination.

Color-blindness creates a reality where the established norm, whiteness, and white people, is not disturbed by the existence of non-whites by creating “[acceptance] on their terms” and erases Blackness (Yancy, 2017). Black characters in *Bridgerton* do not get “live as Black [people]” as Rege Jean Page, who plays Simon, asserts in interviews, without experiencing the systems that oppress them in real life. The story capitalizes on violence against Black people, establishes Black people as whites’ property even after the abolition of slavery in this story through Black-white interracial relationships, asserts centuries-old stereotypes about Black women and men’s sexuality, and paints them as threats to whiteness, and establishes whiteness as the standard of beauty by showing Black women as competition for white women. Building a narrative where Black people are a part of high society is not unrealistic; however, it is unrealistic to erase Black identities, place oppressive narratives onto them, and expect progress rather than the reproduction of oppression.

The reproduction of traditional white supremacist oppression within the *Bridgerton* universe extends outside racial oppression and expands towards the suppression of sexuality.

Since white supremacy has created a normative culture based on whiteness, anything that does not conform to the standards set is shunned from society altogether. Heteronormative white cultures construct “[a] sense of rightness... [that] is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life,” *Bridgerton* upholds the norms of the regency era, and today, rather than pushing against them (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Rather than creating a show that embraces LGBTQ+ characters, or uses LGBTQ+ actors, the storyline queerbait audiences by hinting that Benedict Bridgerton, Daphne’s middle brother, could be questioning his sexuality. Much like the discussions about race in the show, there are no explicit discussions about sexuality or of any possible homophobia present in this universe other than between the characters that are written to queerbait watchers, and ultimately this storyline “ends up feeling performative [and] disappointing” (Meszaros, 2021). The sexuality given the most focus in *Bridgerton* is heterosexuality, which is expressed mostly through interracial relationships.

The events of summer 2020, have shown a rise in support for the #BlackLivesMatter movement after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. This moment, along with the insurrection on January 6th, 2021, has made it clear that we are not living in a post-racial society, and has made it clear to those that do not experience racism that “white racism is alive and well” (Yancy, 2017). The increasing support for color-blindness is meant to appease people like those that supported the insurrection by soothing white anxiety so that whiteness no longer feels threatened and upholds American individualism by blaming marginalized people for failing in a society that has been created against them. Color-blindness in a society that has systemic issues that place those with marginalized identities at a disadvantage continues these system wide issues. If society is to progress, we need to create a reality where differences are accepted, not discriminated against, and are portrayed in ways that do not continue existing systems of

oppression. All these aspects combined do not make *Bridgerton* the progressive show that it claims to be. The goal the writers had for the show to be a “reflection of our own society” was achieved. Our society currently is like that of *Bridgerton*, a static rather than a progressive society, living through a conservative fantasy that “speaks to us of the illusion that we are living in a post-racial America” (Yancy, 2017).

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