

The second season of Netflix's *Dear White People*: More of the same selfish, racial politics

Nick Barrickman
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The second season of the Netflix series *Dear White People* (based on the 2014 film of the same title, written, directed and co-produced by Justin Simien) picks up where the first season left off. This is more “Self-pity in the service of social climbing,” as we noted in a review of Season 1.

The series focuses on the exploits of a group of students, all African American except for one, at a fictional, upscale Ivy League-type institution, Winchester University. There is no sign here of protest or anger against social inequality, poverty and war. This is a crowd on the make.

The show has received nearly universal praise from media critics and maintains a rating of “100 percent” on the internet review-aggregator Rotten Tomatoes. The *New York Times*, promoter of all things race and identity politics-related, has touted the series’ focus on “appropriation and assimilation, conflict and conflictedness.” Last month, the creators of *Dear White People* announced a third season on Netflix.

In an interview with ABC News, creator Justin Simien defined the concept behind his show as “really about being black. And it’s really about the fact that blackness sometimes feels like a constant response to white people. Like you’re always having to explain yourself.” Simien then described the show’s Ivy League setting as a “stand-in for America,” apparently without the slightest trace of irony.

What sort of art do such racialist conceptions lead to? On such a basis, can the drama and situations depicted in this series artistically be convincing or moving?

As was the case in the first season, certain important issues are touched upon in *Dear White People*, “Volume 2.” Though there are no explicit references to

the current occupant of the White House, much of the new season is centered on a developing feud between Samantha “Sam” White (Logan Browning), the show’s main character and host of the campus radio show from which the series takes its name, and an “alt-right” social media troll, who may or may not be a student on campus.

Following the campus disturbances depicted in Season 1, the formerly all-black dormitory Armstrong-Parker House, where much of the goings-on take place, has been racially integrated (in what is spitefully referred to as a “white refugee crisis”). Reggie (Marque Richardson), the black student who was threatened by a campus police officer in the first season, is still coping with the trauma. The episode dealing with this character’s ongoing stress and difficulties is done fairly sensitively, if not for the inevitable injection of racial politics.

Sam’s on-again, off-again relationship with the series’ sole leading white character, Gabe (John Patrick Amedori), reaches a boiling point when the latter begins shooting a documentary titled “Am I Racist?,” which explores “white privilege” and other such notions. Gabe is accused of having a “white savior complex” and his sincere—albeit foolishly misguided—efforts to relate to his black peers are rebuked.

The season culminates with the appearance on campus of a right-wing African American media provocateur, Rikki Carter (Tessa Thompson), who Sam confronts—only to have events take an unexpected turn (more on this below).

The characters in *Dear White People* are largely caricatures; two-dimensional mouthpieces for the

conceptions of the show's creators. In general, scenes and interactions are truncated and contorted to fit the needs at hand.

When Gabe challenges Sam's insufferable self-righteousness and smugness (Sam: "Do the actual work to dismantle it [i.e. 'white privilege']. Get out on the front lines. Put yourself in real fucking danger!" Gabe: "You're getting trolled. How are you in danger? This isn't Selma!"), she responds with even more self-pity and moralizing ("pain and suffering is literally in my blood"), to which he quietly accedes, supposedly having learned a valuable lesson.

An end-of-season showdown between Sam and the aforementioned Rikki Carter, a "black conservative" alt-right-type figure (modeled on the real-life Candace Owens, the ultra-right Turning Point USA's "director of urban engagement"), raises uncomfortable issues when Carter, rather than being threatened by Sam, congratulates the youthful talk show host and social commentator-in-the-making, offering career advice and pointing out that "the only difference between you and me is time."

Though Sam is disturbed and disgusted by Carter's crassness, the latter has a point: Given Sam's promotion of racial exclusivity ("Don't fall in love with your oppressor") and other views associated with the far-right, why shouldn't Sam "cash in" as Carter has done?

The conventional and conformist character of the social views displayed by *Dear White People* is demonstrated most clearly through the character of Troy (Brandon P. Bell), the son of the school's dean. When Troy's self-indulgent lifestyle begins to threaten his place in the school's social hierarchy, he is promptly brought before a group of wealthy black business representatives, who declare: "Blacks make up only one percent of the one percent ... It's taken us a century to gain a foothold among the truly powerful. The doors are finally open; it would be a waste to see someone with so much potential not walk through."

Sam and other more "radical" opponents of "the system" are merely another, as yet less successful variant of the same social forces; wishing to have their own views and "experience" acknowledged and, more importantly, wishing to receive monetary compensation for them.

The finale of season two focuses on the main

characters' efforts to confirm the existence of a campus-based secret society called "The Order of X," consisting of elite black students dedicated to resisting the school's white hierarchy. There is no reason to think the fleshing out of this storyline will improve things at all.



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