

Dear White People Volume 3 and the weaponization of identity politics

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Volume 3 of writer-director Justin Simien's Netflix series *Dear White People* (released August 2 and based on the 2014 film of the same name, also directed by Simien) continues to follow the self-centered intrigues of main character Samantha "Sam" White and her various associates at the fictional Ivy League school, Winchester University.

By the third season of *Dear White People*, the themes of racial exclusivism and middle class self-absorption have been well established. The new season begins where the second left off, with Sam and her friend Lionel Higgins (DeRon Horton) on the trail of the African-American, campus-based secret society known as the "Order of X." In Volume 3, the "order" is discovered: indeed, its campus representative, Dr. Edward Ruskin (Giancarlo Esposito), is actively seeking to recruit new members.

In his first encounter with Sam and Lionel, Ruskin delivers a lecture whose obscurity is increased because the director cuts away from the speaker after the garbled opening words. What we do hear is suggestive. Ruskin tells the pair that because "of an increased scarcity in a capitalistic system [that] will necessarily lead to a more vicious and heartless form of competition itself ... that's a free market." Presumably, the representative of the "order" is not opposing any of that, but conditioning Sam and Lionel as to how to pursue success within it. Ruskins also imparts a seemingly nonsensical credo for the two to decipher: the students must "consider the pyramid through the eye of God" and "kill the narrator."

As the seasons progresses, the two learn the advice is, first, an appeal for them to consider inequality (the pyramid shape of society) as merely a matter of perspective. Furthermore, as Sam learns from her successive interactions with a pretentious, arrogant

"avant-garde" filmmaker and a conventional, commercial one, no "type of storytelling is better than the other ... it's just different. ... [W]hen you look at the pyramid from God's eye view, what do you see? ... You see the whole thing. Flat, same level. Everyone connected ... We're all in this together." This banal and superficially egalitarian view is actually an argument for a thorough acceptance of the status quo, politically and artistically.

Second, to "kill the narrator" means, as Ruskin eventually tells them, "the only voice you need in your head is your own." Again, this could be interpreted positively: as a call for intellectual independence. In fact, here it means ignoring what remains of one's ethical compass (one's moral "narrator" or conscience), as well as the criticisms of others, and indulging in even more self-serving careerism. After all, from "God's eye view," all means to an end are equivalent. For this social layer, essentially anything goes! The implications of this intensely cynical philosophy—as Sam sums it up: "You've been gaming the system your whole life. Everyone does. It's a survival instinct"—are seen throughout the new season.

Following this initial encounter with "The Order of X," the series itself takes a turn toward the self-involvement—some career-motivated, some not—of the show's ensemble, with the show's trademark racial and gender politics ever-present along the way.

Sam (Logan Browning), fresh from her unsettling encounter with an alt-right media personality in Volume 2, has decided to take time off from her activism to focus on her film school thesis. She can't even bring herself to sign a petition calling for the university to become a "sanctuary school" for undocumented immigrants. Her college radio show, from which the series takes its name, is being handled

by her best friend, Joelle (Ashley Blaine Featherson).

More interesting is the plight of her white boyfriend, Gabe (John Patrick Amedori), who learns that his family's business has gone bankrupt and he is without means at the Ivy League university. The most substantial (and interesting) portion of season three deals with Gabe's efforts to procure funds so he can finish his graduate thesis. This includes bartending at a college gay bar, falsifying his ethnicity to qualify for grant money and joining a graduate student unionization drive. Through Gabe's situation one gets a sense of broader social realities facing young people.

However, this plotline is basically dropped as tensions erupt at Winchester following a #MeToo-style rape allegation against a popular African-American professor, Moses Brown (played by Blair Underwood). The charismatic Brown has gained a certain following among students due to his promotion of 21st-century black capitalist ideals. His accuser, a white student (played by Caitlyn Carver), riles the race and gender-obsessed partisans of identity politics on campus, with friendships strained to the breaking point. In this "intersectional" battle, which will prevail: race or gender?

Predictably, the show's protagonists accept the allegation as fact, with students resistant to the claims derided as "apologists." The show's finale features Professor Brown thrown under the bus by his supporters while Sam's activist fire is "relit" and she returns to the not-so-good fight of promoting the #MeToo frenzy ("Real talk, I let some hateful people convince me that my anger was the same as hate, but... [w]hat is justice if there is no anger?"). Lynch mobs have been whipped up in the basis of such sentiments. It is never in fact clear whether Brown is guilty of—or even being charged with—anything criminal.

The Brown-Muffy plotline falsifies the reality of the vast majority of #MeToo accusations made since October 2017. Far from being individuals whose voices are suppressed by the powerful, as *Dear White People* would have it, recent accusers have been given full access to the bourgeois media and celebrated as heroes and martyrs on the basis of unsubstantiated and often anonymous allegations.

In a discussion with *Variety*, director-writer Simien notes the influence of the #MeToo phenomenon on the themes of Volume 3: "The writers were working on the

season in the midst of stories surrounding Bill Cosby resurfacing in the media after his arrest and the launch of both 'Surviving R. Kelly' and 'Leaving Neverland,' documentary projects that explored the allegations against singers R. Kelly and Michael Jackson, respectively."

Simien likens his supposedly being "let down" by various African American celebrities to his decision to "give space" in the series for "heroes... who I thought were allies who ended up being antagonists, and... people who I thought were antagonists who ended up being allies."

The racist and identity politics fixation of the show impacts more than the plot, however. Although there are certain talented performers here and a few honest, accurate moments, virtually every sequence—in the end—revolves around the race, gender or sexual orientation of the given characters, often in the form of a slight or a snide comment putting one individual at an advantage over another. One begins to simply hear "me, me, me" in various tones and pitches. This picture of petty bourgeois self-obsession may not be entirely inaccurate, in that sense, but the internal warring becomes tiresome.

Similarly, the less than three-dimensional quality of the show's writing finds its sharpest expression in the portrayal of the white characters, the majority of whom are portrayed as absurd, even racist caricatures. Simien and the other writers hint from time to time that they are capable of more intelligent commentary and drama, but the gravitational force of their identity politics ideology continually distorts and warps any insights they might have to offer.



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