

Justin Simien would like to clarify something about *Dear White People* Season 1—a joke in which Joelle tells her lighter skinned friend, Sam, that she’s not “**Rashida Jones** biracial,” but “**Tracee Ellis Ross** biracial.” “People think of you as black,” Joelle explained. The show, and Simien, got some criticism from viewers who took the line as a statement that one of these women is “blacker” than the other.

“But what I’m commenting on is the fact that *society* has deemed that one of these people is blacker than the other,” Simien said during a recent interview. “In my opinion, Joelle is kind of in the wrong for saying that—but the reason she’s saying that is because she is being affected by colorism,” or a prejudice against people of the same race based solely on skin color, “in a way that is oblivious to Sam.” Season 2 explores the topic in more depth, providing even more context for how colorism has defined Sam and Joelle’s relationship—as well as others’—from the beginning.

Just as the first season of *Dear White People* enriched the world first introduced in Simien’s eponymous 2014 film, in its second season, *Dear White People* has further found its groove—filling in the gaps and deepening the shallower aspects of its already notable first season. It’s as emotionally resonant as it is funny, and as **sharp as it is stylish**. It’s as adept at **absorbing and quietly reflecting** our media landscape and habits as it is at **lamprooning** them. Thanks to its increased attention to its characters’ inner lives, *Dear White People* Season 2 delivers simultaneous meditation and catharsis, at a time when both are direly needed. It also delivers a series of truly unexpected plot twists that not only surprise, but also complicate the narrative.

Watch Now: 7 People Who Changed the World

Perhaps best of all, Season 2 shades in some of Season 1’s more two-dimensional characters and adds more nuance even to well-established characters like Sam. That extra attention is especially welcome when it

comes to Joelle, played by **Ashley Blaine Featherson**. By dialing up Joelle's presence throughout the season, *Dear White People* can explore Sam's blind spots: "It was always my goal to give her her own episode and explore her experience as a dark-skinned version, frankly, of Sam," Simien said. "They're best friends, but they're having different black experiences. And also, I just think Ashley is so frickin' talented; she's so easy to write for."

Telling that story, however, required careful consideration. As Simien notes, the show's conversation about colorism and how it affects people's self-perception is indirect rather than overt, which was intentional. By letting it unspool in the background of larger stories—a quiet but recognizable hum that alters several characters' interactions—Simien could keep the topic present without it becoming overwhelming. "We're set up in this system to talk about race in very black and white binary terms, but it's actually a lot more complicated than that," he said. "I wanted to get into the complexity of Joelle being Sam's friend, and also being a darker-skinned girl, without it being preachy or dogmatic. . . There's a tension there that's kind of imposed upon them, that I just wanted to just show."

The tension between self perception, societal expectations, and personal relationships manifests, in some form, as part of just about every story this season. Even the plot twists ask viewers to question conventional wisdom, adding layers of meaning to an already nuanced story. Take, for instance, one of the biggest shocks of the season: the revelation that @AltIvyW, a vitriolic and racist Twitter troll who pulls Sam into a seemingly endless online feud, is actually Silvio—the independent student paper editor who kissed Lionel at the end of Season 1.

For a while this season, Lionel tries to date Silvio before realizing it won't work out—but it isn't until much later that he learns about his former editor's online alter-ego. Silvio, who once described himself as "a Mexican-Italian gay verse-top otter pup," is the last person viewers may have expected to be a regressive troll—which was Simien's point.

"I thought that was a more interesting story than putting a white person at the center," Simien explained. Silvio turned out to be a perfect fit for the role—even as the writers went back and considered all that viewers would have learned about him in Season 1. "I knew that from the beginning that @AltIvy was somebody that we've met," Simien said. "When we said it, it just made sense. And we went back and we watched the first season and it was like, 'Oh my God, it still makes sense.' . . . I wanted you to ponder, *what does it mean when it's not so easy to pinpoint who the villain is, and there's lots of straw men in between you and who actually started this whole problem?*"

Even more impressive than the Silvio reveal is another that comes later—when Sam faces off against Ricki Carter, a shrewdly self-aware conservative pundit played by, *drumroll*, **Tessa Thompson**, who played the original Sam White in Simien’s *Dear White People* film. In a chilling moment, Ricki—while revealing that she knows she’s playing a right-wing caricature, purely to advance her own career—looks Sam in the eye, telling her, “The only difference between you and me is time”—both an ominous thought for Sam and a brilliant meta joke. As surprising as it was to find out Silvio’s true nature, this face-off brings with it an even more harrowing implication: even Sam, whom viewers likely think they knew better than anyone, has the potential to become someone unrecognizable, unknowable.

In many ways, the story behind Ricki and Sam’s face-off—and the worrisome hint that they’re not as different as Sam would probably like them to be—comes from the same inspiration that led Simien to choose Silvio as @AltIvyW: “I wanted to get into twisting the screw and complicating it,” Simien said. He was fascinated by how economically struggling people get swept up by racist messaging that really only helps the rich—and even more fascinated by how people of color and other marginalized groups can get ensnared by that same movement. “I wanted to have an alt right character, and I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be interesting if that character was a person of color?’” Simien said. “Not like a blowhard that was easily dismantled, but somebody who actually kind of made some sense, and made you wonder, ‘How did they get there?’” Enter Thompson.

Ricki Carter, Simien said, embodies the question that’s quietly been built into the series all along. She’s what Sam could become if she gets lost in her own rhetoric—a person who, though ideologically opposed to Sam, has completely lost sight of where her persona ends and she, as a real person, begins.

“We’ve always thought of Sam as teetering on the edge between being completely lost in her persona and finding a balance; that’s kind of her struggle throughout the movie and the series,” Simien said. The question for Sam, now and in the future, continues to be the same: “How do you both fight against oppression but not get so sucked into that fight that all you are is the fight?” It’s a question that will likely take her years to answer, if she ever finds one at all—but if *Dear White People* can keep up this streak, her journey will be beautifully rendered along the way.

GET VANITY FAIR’S HWD NEWSLETTER