

Justin Simien's *Dear White People* is idiosyncratic in many ways, but chief among them may be how the show-runner uses the fourth wall—and how often. Almost every character gets a moment to directly face the camera; almost every episode concludes with a protagonist facing the viewer.

Sometimes the formula is tweaked, but if anything, that underscores what it means to have someone stare into the lens—facing an audience, facing the future, facing the metaphorical music. It's a directness that suits the show's stylized, heightened, hyper-realism, which presents a world so self-conscious that it comes as no surprise its characters are fully aware of being watched. Narrator **Giancarlo Esposito** exhorts us to "watch closely," in Season 2, as if *Dear White People* is both a comedy and a series of clues. At times, it feels less that he is encouraging the viewer to watch closely than he is advising the characters to watch *us*.

But unlike other TV comedies that break the fourth wall primarily to accentuate punch lines, Simien's use of the fourth wall usually undermines his show's humor. These character don't confront the viewer to surprise them with self-aware mockery. Instead, it's a deeper, rawer, more painful form of address, a hybrid of the way both **Spike Lee** and **Wes Anderson's** protagonists approach the camera—an acute self-awareness combined with a searching, behind the lens, for the sympathy of an unseen, anonymous viewer.

For Simien's *Dear White People*, this seeking is acutely relevant. The comedy, whose second season debuts May 4 on Netflix, tells the story of black undergrads at a fictional Ivy League institution called Winchester University. (It's distinctly a Harvard-Yale-Princeton sort of school, thanks to what protagonist Sam (**Logan Browning**) describes late in the season as "Harry Potter shit.") The first season introduced us to a cast of characters living various versions of contemporary blackness, and all stymied by social expectations for that identity—whether those expectations come from their white peers, their black peers, or their own conception of what success as a black person is supposed to feel like.

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Cloistered in the ivory tower—and suffocated by it—the show’s leads are exceptional, isolated, and bursting with passion, which pours out from them in implausibly effortless quippy banter, so ridiculous it’s Sorkin-esque. But *Dear White People*’s characters are so charming, so endearing, that it’s a joy to sit back and watch them dazzle each other. The show itself is dazzling, too, with razor-sharp editing, gorgeous lighting and production design, and a self-conscious camera that gazes at the cast with barely suppressed love. In a late-season episode, Simien films nearly an entire argument in just a single take, with a directing bravura that rivals our most prestigious dramas.

Sam, a brilliant and charismatic radio host, is stymied by her own self-loathing. Her roommate and best friend Joelle (**Ashley Blaine Featherston**) is constantly relegated to second fiddle, both because it’s hard to shine next to Sam and because being darker-skinned pigeonholes her in a way that most of her peers can barely acknowledge. As the first season depicted, Joelle is into Reggie (**Marque Richardson**), a fierce activist with a soul rooted in the 70s. Reggie is into Sam. Sam’s former best friend, Coco (**Antoinette Robertson**), used to date Troy (**Brandon P. Bell**), who used to be into Sam. And in a romance that became the anchor of the first season, Sam’s into her film-studies T.A., Gabe (**John Patrick Amedori**), who is, to her chagrin, a white man.

Season 1 of *Dear White People* followed the narrative of the eponymous 2014 film, also from Simien, and featured many of the same actors. The second season gives Simien and this cast the chance to claim an original story, while expanding the world of Winchester University. In the main plotline, the show creates a microcosm of modern political discourse within Winchester’s campus dialogue. The events of Season 1 have spurred a conservative backlash, one that hits Sam particularly hard when a vicious, anonymous troll called "AltIvyW" makes her his personal project. AltIvyW is especially radical, but—just as in real life—the mainstream conservatives on campus also abet and embrace him. In a scathing scene that is both intensely relatable and deeply

frustrating, Sam and Joelle watch as three snotty Republicans record their new show, “Dear Right People”—and use phrases from African-American vernacular (“Preach, girl!”) to contend that black students on campus are unreasonably making martyrs of themselves.

It’s such a relief to see the idiocy of racist discourse revealed for what it is, that *Dear White People* scintillates, even when it’s depicting how upsettingly broken our discourse around race is. Within the confines of just 10 half-hour episodes, the show has a lot to say about the way we talk in a hyper-connected, outrage-prone, sound-bite world. Of course *Dear White People* is especially sharp about blackness in media, which it takes apart through fake TV shows (including one starring **Lena Waithe**), stand-up comedy, and most notably, a fake right-wing pundit named Ricki Carter—a “Ladera Heights **Tomi Lahren**” played by an actress Netflix asked early reviewers not to name.

There’s plenty of thinkpiece material to dissect in Simien’s vision, which expands in Season 2 to encompass the troubled history of race at Winchester. But the true strength of the show is the interiority it offers each of its quite distinct characters, and Season 2 brings them all to new crossroads. Reggie keeps seeing the campus security guard that pointed a gun at him in his nightmares. Joelle discovers an attentive beau in her anatomy class. Sam doesn’t know how to keep doing “Dear White People” without feeding the trolls plaguing her. Coco, with her hard-earned, fabulously long weave, can’t stop eating red licorice. And Lionel (**DeRon Horton**), in the midst of his reporting on Winchester’s secret societies, is trying to figure out how to get laid already.

To be sure, it’s all a bit adolescent; topically, *Dear White People* exists at the delightful nexus of teen soap opera and NPR’s *Code Switch*. But this is the great beauty of the show; when its stars inevitably look directly into the camera, what’s striking is not just who they are, and how intently they’re looking, but how much grace the camera has granted them, to allow them to confront the audience with their pent-up, messy, impolitic emotions. *Dear White People* was originally a film, but its instinct to slowly unfold each character’s personal journey proves that its soul lies in television. It would be great if we could get 10 more episodes of *Dear White People* as fast as humanly possible, so as to snack on another round of these addictive, delectably formed installments.

There’s one downside to this season: despite a lovely, enjoyable, watchable journey, the episodes don’t quite come together as a complete story. A few overarching narratives are resolved, but they feel minor compared to Season 1’s main narrative—and meanwhile, the plot with the most foreshadowing doesn’t end so much as dramatically pause, in the final scene of the second season, with a reveal that of

course concludes with a character looking directly into the camera. It's a moment that seems designed to create some very exciting story, so the subsequent fade to black is frustrating—but enticing, too. This final fourth-wall break is the show's most upbeat one—as if *Dear White People* is flirtatiously taunting the viewer. You want more of this? You'll have to wait.

Editor's note (April 30, 2018): When first published, this article discussed a casting spoiler that was still under embargo. We've since updated that portion of the story.

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