

VINCENZO BAVARO

## Taking Back One's Narrative: *Dear White People*, Cultural Appropriation, and the Challenge of Anti-essentialism.<sup>1</sup>

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced,” a James Baldwin quote Reggie Green’s father often imparted to his son. Reggie heard the message loud and clear. (S01E05)

In April 2017, the TV series *Dear White People* premiered on Netflix. It was created by director and screenwriter Justin Simien, and based on his critically acclaimed 2014 homonymous film. *Dear White People*, currently in its second season, is set in a fictional, and predominantly white, Ivy League College, Winchester University, and it focuses almost exclusively on the life and experiences of a group of African American undergraduates. Despite the title, which the protagonist defines as “a misnomer” in the very first episode, the series does not speak primarily, and certainly not solely, to a white audience. It rather investigates both intra-racial and interracial dynamics, dramatizing, among other things, how the group of black students at Winchester (like any community that is assumed to be homogeneous and monolithic anywhere) is made up of diverse subjectivities, both as individuals and as sub-cultures, with often irreconcilable agendas and sensibilities.<sup>2</sup>

At the center of the series is a commitment to interrogate, challenge, and rethink identity, which also characterizes some of the most interesting varsity fiction (a subgenre of the campus narrative that focuses on students rather than on faculty). It relies on a strong, fast-paced script, rich in inter-textual pop-culture and sophisticated meta-narrative references, which function primarily to produce a community of viewers who share a common cultural background and can laugh or cringe at the cryptic pop

references between the lines. The characters borrow or evoke lines from songs, TV series, and films (from Kendrick Lamar to *The Cosby Show*, from the groundbreaking film *Get Out* to the series *Big Little Lies*, from James Baldwin to Ta-Nehisi Coates). To give a couple of examples, in the first episode, the voice-over narrator, played by an exceptional Giancarlo Esposito, declares that “the writers of this program are depending on my ethnic but nonthreatening voice to explain things they are too lazy to set up traditionally,” and in another episode (S02E01) characters discuss “visually interesting ways to deliver exposition” (while they are delivering it in a visually interesting way). This and many other instances confer a unique style on the series, both in its script and in Simien’s directorial signature style (as is now the norm, several directors alternate throughout the series). One such distinctive directorial gesture that gives stylistic coherence to the whole series is the fact that the actors systematically stare back straight at the viewer. As Poniewozik, the critic for the *New York Times*, notes:

One of Mr. Simien’s signatures is to have actors stare into the camera directly, both in group shots and in cutaways during one-on-one conversations. The device underlines the show’s mission: to intrude on your safe space, to demand engagement, to make clear that, yes – whoever you are – *Dear White People* is talking to you. (n. pag.)

The Ivy League setting makes it possible (and, indeed, plausible) to have a group of characters that are capable of alternating multiple – otherwise improbable – registers. They are clearly elite students, self-aware, articulate, and their dialogues reflect “the way that a lot of hypervocal college kids talk to each other, endlessly speechifying on pet subjects and announcing exactly who they are five minutes after you’ve met them. (This is the kind of environment where ‘I don’t subscribe to heteronormative labels’ is a pickup line),” as the otherwise enthusiastic critic Matt Zoller Seitz wrote for *Vulture* (n. pag.).

The protagonist, Samantha White, played by Logan Browning, is a media studies major and the voice – and creator – of the campus radio program that gives its name to the series. Browning powerfully articulates the subjectivity of a young woman, combining both the bold

and uncompromising public persona of her radio show, and the fragile interiority and self-doubt of a young student committed to speaking the truth.

What I find most compelling in the series is the way in which it provokes more questions than it can afford to answer, engaging with some of the most pressing issues around African American identity and activism today. Namely: systemic racism, cultural appropriation, police brutality and subsequent impunity, the pervasiveness of micro-aggressions, cultural sensitivity (one of the posters of the original movie had a white hand inquisitively reaching for a character's afro), and the issue of how unaware white people are of their privilege, how invisible it is for those who have it – all issues that are potentially magnified on a popular, transnational online platform like Netflix.

*Dear White People* continues, and complicates, a conversation initiated by the cultural and political impact of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which is referred to and evoked, sometimes explicitly, throughout the Netflix series. While exploring the ambiguities of these issues and refusing easy dramatic solutions on screen, *Dear White People* reveals and explores a web of racial tensions that are not only still relevant, but newly crucial to an understanding of the United States in the Trump era.

## On campus

As a way of contextualizing the experiences of the students at the fictional Winchester College, and before diving in a discussion of the series, I intend to take a few steps back and reflect on the choice of the setting, and the appeal it may have for the viewers, especially international ones for whom the experiences associated with US campuses may seem utterly exotic.

To talk about campus life from my position – an academic, foreign by birth but partially trained in US universities – may risk being overly self-referential, leaning towards some form of academia-centrism, which too often characterizes those who work at the university, or some degree of insularity that sometimes constitutes one of the deepest problems of our

institution (the well-known image of the ivory tower is self-explanatory). And this would happen exactly at a moment when the centrality, the relevance, the very mission of the university in social and political life, and, paradoxically, precisely in the cultural arena, seem to be under profound scrutiny.

On the contrary, the university (especially the spatial configuration of the traditional US campus) ignites the interest of cultural critics precisely for its capacity to produce a self-sufficient microcosm, a community with its own social structure, dynamics, and rules. Its own history. As an object of critical inquiry, it has become a favorite arena wherein to investigate processes of subject formation, ideological interpellation, dynamics of assimilation, negotiation, and resistance of young students seeking to find their identity and place in the “adult” world.

The American campus functions as an autonomous universe, removed from the chaos, the distractions, and the seductions of urban life, especially if we think of the historical role of the prestigious Ivy League universities, tucked away in what were formerly rural settings, where traditionally the powerful sent their scions to get a solid education, and to establish long-lasting social connections with fellow members of the elite. The “Houses” scattered across campus, as well as the fraternities or sororities, are an integral element in the production and distribution of social capital. When student housing is not assigned by the administration, the “selection” process to become affiliated to some of the most exclusive houses, and the initiation ceremonies (including “pledging” and “hazing”) that this entails can be particularly tough and unpleasant: exotic pledging rituals are a favorite topic of both campus and varsity genre.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis given – both in real-life campuses and within the representational realm – to the Houses and their pledging rituals foreshadows and mirrors the anxiety related to the job market: accommodation on campus becomes an instrument of social networking and a means for creating social capital and connections. But it also bespeaks the anxiety of belonging to a group, a community, to assert, or cling to, one’s identity.

In a typical Ivy League college, and Winchester is no exception, there are traditionally “Greek Letter” Houses, which often accommodate legacy students, i.e. sons and daughters of alumni, and/or houses that gather

more easily identifiable groups of students: football players, cheerleaders, the “theater people,” LGBT students, Asian American students and so forth. This identitarian anxiety, the need to label others but also to find a powerful and readable label for one’s self, in short the need to belong, is both thematized and questioned by *Dear White People*. The second episode of the first season focuses on Lionel, a journalist in training who is coming to terms with his homosexuality. In a scene which is both hilarious and poignant, his boss Silvio, who directs the newspaper (and who identifies as a Mexican-Italian, gay, vers-top, otter pup . . . ) urges him: “Trust me. Find your label. . . . Labels keep people in Florida from drinking Windex.”

The Houses thus provide the background to the series. In one episode (S01E07) we are taken around campus from house to house, as the protagonists attempt to gather support for a forthcoming rally by literally knocking at the doors of the various Houses, thus displaying, in the process, the diversity (and the compartmentalization) of the campus. The central setting, the very house where the protagonists live, is the Armstrong-Parker House, the AP House. The ironically self-styled “ethnic but non-threatening” voice-over narrator informs the viewer, at the opening of the second season, that the AP House was founded in 1837 when two former slave quarters were knocked together to accommodate the influx of ethnic students, which at the time meant students of Irish and Italian origin. When these minorities “graduated” to “whiteness,” in other words, when they effectively became “white” within the American racial discourse, “sometime after the 1920s,” the Armstrong-Parker House became the “residence of choice” for African American students, especially after the mid-1960s.

The AP House, throughout the first season, hosts various groups of black students and diverse student associations: CORE, AAS, BAF, BSU. Very early on during the first episode, the protagonists gather in the living room of the AP House to discuss a major event that is at the basis of the entire series: a blackface party organized by white students on campus. As a way of narrative exposition, Samantha White introduces the various groups to Lionel who is reporting on the event, and it is clear that despite their transitory coalition, each group has very different backgrounds, sensibilities, and agendas.

There are three major conflicts around which the first season develops, all of which call into question some of the basic assumptions about the myth of post-racial America, or what is left of it after 2016 and the Trump backlash. The first episode revolves around an incendiary blackface party; the fifth episode presents a scene which painfully stages police abuse of power against black citizens; finally, the last episode, the tenth, introduces the third conflict which arises at the intersection between the controversial issues of “the corporate university” and a strategic threat to racially “integrate” the AP House.

### On blackface

The plot begins when the satirical campus paper *Pastiche* starts organizing a blackface party to protest what they perceive as the confrontational and divisive tone of the radio program created by Samantha White “Dear White People.” The blackface party is in fact called “Dear Black People,” and allegedly aims at countering White’s “reverse racism” and defending the freedom of speech of the white majority, who feel “oppressed” by the climate on campus.

The Dean of the College, an African American man aligned, however, to the establishment and the financial interests of the University, prohibits the party’s organization, but somehow a person (whose identity is revealed in the second episode) cracks the Facebook account of the organizers and sends out the invite anyway. As Samantha will boldly say in the dean’s office, “that invite should have been met with derision and outrage. Instead, 100 people showed up and showed their asses. And in doing so, showed this supposed post-racial institution exactly where it’s at” (S01E02), bringing to the surface the unburied racism of the campus (and of the American society at large).

Minstrel Shows in blackface, or Black Minstrelsy, a popular form of entertainment in America from the 1830s until the early twentieth century, saw white performers paint their face and hands black and impersonate “black” stereotypes. The spectacularization and objectification of the black body for the consumption of a white audience clearly needs to be

understood as the product of a slave-owning society. But as Eric Lott argues in his groundbreaking work *Love and Theft. Black Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993), the expropriation of the “commodity of blackness,” perpetuated mostly in northern cities, should not be flattened into an understanding of it as a solely racist practice of mockery and stereotyping born out of loathing and dehumanization. As Lott’s title suggests, the theft performed in blackface is the theft of something the white performer longs for, it is a simultaneous construction and *transgression* of racial boundaries (Lott 25).

The blackface party on campus is only apparently an anachronism, and the voice-over narrator encourages us to understand it as a phenomenon whose popularity among white people has never ceased (“google it!” Esposito’s voice urges us). This event in the series allows the script to treat instances of racism that most of us thought extinct, and also to evoke a discussion on free speech, hate speech, and censorship (what kind of “speech” can be protected by the First Amendment? What counts as hate speech and what as satire?). The series therefore addresses the issue of racial sensibility, which is not seen as just one more of the questions associated with “political correctness” and therefore to be prematurely dismissed. Samantha Whites gives a list, in her show, of “unacceptable Halloween costumes” (S01E01) which may be seen as both castrating and empowering, since she is starting a debate, and creating through irony a community with a shared sense of respect and a common understanding of what is “acceptable.”<sup>4</sup> The white audience (of the radio program as well as of the Netflix series) is invited in. Moreover, the series at once stages and undermines a clear-cut binary opposition in the logic of “*Pastiche* = bad, black kids = good” (this sentence is explicitly repeated, with varying degrees of irony, in Episode 2).

The blackface party, which viewers witness multiple times during the first four episodes through each character’s subjective perspective, together with a few other crucial moments in *Dear White People*, allows the characters and the audience to reflect on the complex issues around cultural appropriation at the center of many recent debates in the US, whose contours I would like to outline briefly in the following few pages.

## On cultural appropriation

In 2015, the issue reached the headlines of most American papers with the scandal surrounding Rachel Dolezal. The latter, who was then the president of the Spokane, Washington branch of the NAACP, resigned after the controversy following a series of events (her declaration of having been the victim of hate speech, the ensuing police investigations, and her parents' letter to the media), which revealed that she had been lying about her racial identity for decades. She claimed to be African American but was, in fact, born Caucasian to Caucasian parents. Dolezal's case is entangled in a series of complex implications, and legitimate doubts. Can someone be born in a white body but identify as black, the way we have come to understand the transgender issue? Or rather, is her "impersonation" to be understood as one aspect of a more nuanced mental disorder? What is the "black" experience that Dolezal was faking? Would any other "authentic" black person necessarily "own" that experience? Who owns black culture, and what does it mean to steal it? And would that make any difference in relation to her job as a civil rights activist? These are some of the questions one may ask and which do not seem to come with easy, straightforward answers.

This highly debated issue of cultural appropriation ranges from the appropriation of a minority "outfit" to a music or dance genre, from the use of a subgroup's language to literary practice, among other things. Kjerstin Johnson has written that, when this is done, the imitator, "who does not experience that oppression is able to 'play', temporarily, an 'exotic' other, without experiencing any of the daily discriminations faced by other cultures" (n. pag). This hierarchical "borrowing" along the last few decades of minority tropes, elements, and cultural commodities (to quote Lott) by a majority group needs to be contextualized within neoliberal multicultural practices and postmodern aesthetics, but also within a certain objectifying appreciation of diversity. Diversity, at least some versions of it such as certain sanctioned performances of blackness, has acquired a high value in the cultural sphere and especially in the entertainment business, a certain currency that those in the majority group aspire to "own." From hip-hop stars, to wannabe Beyoncé clones, where do we draw the line between



appropriation and appreciation, between theft and tribute, in a postmodern society that is inherently hybridized and rapacious?<sup>5</sup>

Within the field of literary theory, there was a time, between the 1980s and the 1990s, when African American poststructuralists were accused of *appropriating* a hegemonic “white discourse”: this accusation of appropriation as referred to black intellectuals was, in short, an attempt to portray them as selling out their cultural specificity in order to achieve success within a white-dominated, Eurocentric academic field. Michael Awkward wrote one of the seminal responses to these accusations, titled “Appropriative Gestures: Theory and Afro-American Literary Criticism,” in which he defended the right to appropriate, insisting on the usefulness of crossing boundaries and on the significance that a poststructuralist critique could add to an understanding of African American culture and identity. Awkward quotes Zora Neale Hurston’s “Characteristics of Negro Expression” stressing that the African American is an appropriative creature, that “while he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything he touches is re-interpreted for his own use” (28).

In 2016, Lionel Shriver, the admired author of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, gave a controversial speech at the Brisbane Writers Festival (then published in *The Guardian*) in defense of cultural appropriation, of the right – and what seemed to be an intellectual imperative – to wear “other people’s hats,” arguing in favor of imagination and intellectual freedom. She stated that writers “should be seeking to push beyond the constraining categories into which we have been arbitrarily dropped by birth. If we embrace narrow group-based identities too fiercely, we cling to the very cages in which others would seek to trap us” (n. pag). Her point is most convincing when she addresses the freedom of a writer to choose a story to tell, and a voice to tell it (a voice, I would add, which is always already that of an “other”), regardless of the author’s own racial, national, class, and gender identification.<sup>6</sup>

Her speech was problematic for a number of reasons, but I read it as a paradoxical response to the very myth of essentialism that the same critics of “cultural appropriation” seem to embrace and perform, and a loud recognition that our culture (any culture, always) is already fundamentally the product of multiple, stratified, overlapping, decontextualized

*appropriations*, and that this “mixture” is the best thing that can ever happen to any culture. I would indeed argue that purity, and the policing of a culture’s boundaries, is a much more pervasive and toxic practice.

One of the crucial problems with Shriver’s speech is that she does not seem to acknowledge fully the difference between cultural exchange/traffic, and cultural theft and mockery, and the latter’s ensuing reduction of the other into a stereotype or one-dimensional commodity. She underestimates the power imbalance and hierarchical structures integral to the act of taking something from an underrepresented group and re-circulating it, of ventriloquizing, so to speak, an already silenced community. For example, she starts by describing as a “tempest in a tea-cup” the events of a group of Bowdoin College (Maine) students throwing a tequila party, where they handed out tiny sombreros to the participants (apparently a scandal on campus, for which many people had to publicly apologize). She compares this to her favorite Mexican restaurant decorating the dining rooms with sombreros and painted skulls, and again to her childhood memory of a trip to Mexico where her parents bought their kids sombreros to protect them from the scorching sun. These are all fascinating life stories, but only one of them is rooted in white privilege and the stereotyping of the Other (she also suggests that maybe soon Mexican restaurants will remove sombreros from their decor). She eventually reverses the discourse, as most defenders of cultural appropriation would do, with the “you can appropriate *my* culture anytime you want” rhetoric: “my culture” being in her case German-American, which clearly has not undergone quite the same forms of discrimination as blacks, Native Americans, Latinx, or Asians, at least not in recent times.

Yassmin Abdel-Magied, a Sudanese-Australian activist who walked out on Shriver’s lecture, responded in the pages of *The Guardian* engaging in particular with the lecturer’s appeal to writers:

It’s not always OK if a white guy writes the story of a Nigerian woman because the actual Nigerian woman can’t get published or reviewed to begin with. It’s not always OK if a straight white woman writes the story of a queer Indigenous man, because when was the last time you heard a queer Indigenous man tell his own story? How is it that said straight white woman will profit from an experience that is not hers, and those with the actual experience never be

provided the opportunity? It's not always OK for a person with the privilege of education and wealth to write the story of a young Indigenous man, filtering the experience of the latter through their own skewed and biased lens, telling a story that likely reinforces an existing narrative which only serves to entrench a disadvantage they need never experience. (n. pag.)

Abdel-Magied's focus on the conditions of production of "other narratives" is enlightening and necessary. And the anaphoric "not always" allows room for debate, ambiguity and complexity, and avoids the essentialist binary opposition us/them, or the flimsy belief that a minority's own narrative is always necessarily liberating and "authentic," whereas the majority's narrative is always oppressive and deceptive.

I would add, however, that much of the rhetoric against cultural appropriation evokes a zero-sum-game, whereby culture is a given quantity, and if someone is taking it from one side, another one will be left without. Obviously, the cultural field is a more complex arena: on the one hand, it is true that it can be saturated by powerful single narratives (the passive woman, the inassimilable Asian, the violent African American, the degenerate homosexual). In the article the character of Lionel from *Dear White People* writes in the campus paper after the blackface party, the student acknowledges the power of narratives, arguing that: "While endless depictions of white men in particular exist, there aren't that many versions of us in the culture. Culture has a powerful way of telling people what they can and can't be. For people of color, the options are rather limited" (S01E02).

However, in the contemporary cultural scene, the power imbalances embedded in the production and circulation of narratives rarely approach the exclusivity and total ambition of a monopoly of representation, and certainly do not *per se* prevent, and indeed have rarely prevented, other counter-narratives from circulating and eventually questioning and subverting the established representational patterns and structures of domination. In 2009, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie delivered an influential TED talk precisely on the "Dangers of a Single Story," in which she examines the causes and the consequences of the

domination of one single narrative, generally a simplifying, essentializing, objectifying one, through a racial, national, and gender lens.

In *Dear White People* a similar challenge to essentialism and binary oppositions is articulated not only through the focus on the heterogeneity within the black student population (issues of intersectionality, black privilege, homophobia, class, and colorism take center-stage in various episodes),<sup>7</sup> but also by creating a mixed-race protagonist (Samantha's blue eyes bespeak the fact that her father is in fact Caucasian), who is for most of the first season dating a white classmate (and their relationship does not come without its own conflicts). Moreover, Samantha's own biracial identity is presented crucially as a bi-cultural one: in the first episode, we see her listening to commercial "white" romantic pop, only to switch it to hip-hop when she approaches a group of black classmates. This comedic effect however, far from being a reference to the conflicted "tragic mulatto" type of a century ago, also reflects a different split in her personality: the confrontational public (radio) persona and the young woman who is engaged in a process of self-discovery. This partial "closetization" of her white heritage is itself an instrument of strategic essentialism, but is never loaded with the nuances of secrecy or shame: at one point she plays Italian opera – unapologetically, one might say, mimicking a certain essentialist rhetoric – during her radio show. In another episode, the narrator informs us, at the beginning of the second season, when Samantha is pouring sugar on her grits in an eventually (albeit painfully) integrated AP House, that she "has never felt more at home," in a montage that shows Sam as a child in her kitchen, eating grits in front of her white dad.

### Taking back one's narrative

Another instance of cultural appropriation, albeit a decidedly more ambiguous one, is at the root of the second climactic moment that takes place in the fifth episode, directed by Oscar winning Berry Jenkins of *Moonlight* fame. During a house party in a fraternity, a confrontation arises between Reggie, one of the protagonists, and Addison, one of his white

friends, who was singing along to a hip-hop song, rapping the lyrics of the hit, including the N-word.

ADDISON. (*singing and dancing, like the crowd of students around him*) . . . *Shootin' craps, nigga – Fuck what you heard – Hey bustin' all the trap niggas . . .*

REGGIE. – Man, don't say that.

ADDISON. – What? You know I don't really use that word.

REGGIE. Yeah, man, I know, but, uh. I just really heard you say it, though . . .

ADDISON. Wait, so it's bad if I'm just repeating what's in the song? . . . But it's not like I'm a racist.

REGGIE. Never said you were a racist. Just don't say "nigga." Like, you didn't have to say it just then.

ADDISON. I guess it just feels kind of weird to censor myself.

REGGIE. It felt kind of weird to hear you say it. I mean, how would you feel if I started rapping to songs, you know, that say "honky" and "cracker"?

ADDISON. [chuckles] I wouldn't care at all.

REGGIE. Exactly, that's the difference. The fact that you don't care and I do.

. . .

ADDISON. I just don't like being called a racist.

JOELLE. Again, he never said you were a racist. He said "don't say that word."

ADDISON. I'm not some redneck. Is that what you think of me, Reggie? . . .

REGGIE. We're friends, but suddenly, I'm supposed to give you nigga dispensation?

ADDISON. Dude, I didn't do anything wrong. It's a song. Hell, it's in the title. What am I supposed to do? Hum?

REGGIE. Yes, nigga.

KURT. Come on, Reggie. You don't want him using his "white privilege" to rewrite black art, do you?

ADDISON. You're at a party at my house, drinking my booze, and now you attack me? Can nobody just have fun anymore?

REGGIE. Oh, I sorry, massa. We didn't mean to ruin your fun, now.

ADDISON. Sure, back to slavery. It always comes back to slavery.

REGGIE. Okay, now I'm calling you a racist.

ADDISON. Yeah?

As other analogously loaded words born out of a history of murderous violence and discrimination, the *N-word* has been appropriated by the minority community to which it originally referred as empowering (think *fag*, *dyke*, or *queer*), but has become an acknowledged taboo for the majoritarian community that traditionally employed it. The confrontation between the two young men is portrayed once again in all its ambiguity: the white student guilty of using the *N-word* was in fact just “singing along” like anyone else at the party would and did, while dancing with some of his black friends. Unlike the blackface party, which is represented by the narrator as well as by the entirety of the characters, blacks and whites, as something unequivocally “unacceptable,” this scene is infinitely more troublesome. Addison is actually surrounded by several black friends, who are all in various degrees of tipsiness, and who are all dancing and singing along to the same song. Is Addison incapable of seeing his own offensiveness? Is Reggie overreacting and over-politicizing? Sam, whose opinion could polarize at least the audience’s perspective of this event, is carefully observing the scene from afar, frowning in silence.

Precisely at the moment when their argument turns into a physical altercation, the campus police officer enters, and with little hesitation identifies Reggie, the black student, as the culprit, and, after immediately letting his white friend go, even questions his status as a student, ordering the young man, at gun point, to provide his university ID. Reggie is surrounded by terrified friends, both black and white, who first try to reason with the white officer, but then, shocked by his reaction, are petrified at the thought of the possible consequences.

Reggie is caught in a double bind: his ID is obviously in his pocket, but he would not dare to reach for it at gunpoint. The entire climax, from the argument with his friend to its eventual peaceful resolution (the ID is shown, the cop leaves, and Reggie and a few friends break into tears, out of terror and relief) takes about five long minutes to unfold, but the talent of the actors, and the mastery of the direction, make this a disturbingly intense and violent scene to witness. The tangible perception that to some officers a black life “does not matter,” the belief that had Reggie been a white student he would never have elicited the drawing of a gun by the officer, is clearly reminiscent of the various smartphone-videos recording

police brutality and murderous racism against black citizens, which initiated the Black Lives Matter movement.

The last issue I would like to discuss comes up in the last episode of the first season, and highlights the capitalist structure and the corporate nature of the university. One of the big donors of Winchester University is the Hancock family, which is incidentally the sole financier of the campus paper named (ironically) "The Independent." The Hancocks are worried about the latest wave of protests organized by the African American students' organizations, and they threaten to withhold their annual donation of \$10 million to the school, unless these protests cease. An alternative, the Hancocks propose, could be to "integrate" the Armstrong Parker House.

Even in a case like this, the issue brought to the fore by the series has anything but an easy and unequivocal resolution. Integration, of course, is a rather desirable goal, and what many generations of civil rights activists fought for. But as Martin Luther King states in the original footage presented at the beginning of the second season, James Baldwin once told him "what vantage is there in being integrated into a burning house?" The fact that the Hancocks, who we will later discover have long been a white supremacist family, see integration as a form of retaliation against Black activism reveals repressive motives in making that move. Their real objective is in fact to limit the spaces of racial solidarity, and to deprive the AP House of its status as a refuge where various cultural and social activities had been taking place, managed by the black students.

By staging "integration," this episode thus foreshadows the entrance of white students into the AP House, and it constitutes the premise of the second season. As the closing episode of the first season, it brings together in an uneasy dialogue the corporate world of big capitals, which is at the very heart of the survival of the contemporary campus, with a more intimate dimension of safe spaces and the possibility of cultural and political activism.

The three major events of the first season see the characters cornered by oppressive forces that are institutionalized and structural (widespread racial stereotyping, the police force, the corporate backbone of the University). As a community, and as individual students and activists, the protagonists need to react, discuss, elaborate a plan, and push back, with an urgency

that gives strength to the series, as the *IndieWire* reviewer Ben Travers points out:

By tracking characters confident enough to challenge the status quo but young enough to adapt when challenged, the series never feels self-righteous. Moreover, Simien's focus on the party as a game-changing event for everyone on campus grounds the characters' responses in immediacy: they have to act now, and they do. They *all* do, which gives *Dear White People* an inclusive voice even as it shouts harsh truths. (n. pag.)

At the same time, with all its nuances, ambiguities, and unanswered questions, this is certainly not a simple piece of activist propaganda: the big issues coexist and collide with the intimate ones, the personal and the political are intertwined. In the dialogue below, Samantha and her best friend Joelle are discussing the aftermath of an important march on campus (mostly about abuse of power by campus police), which sparked a disturbing wave of hate speech and threats to Samantha on her various social media accounts. Joelle realizes that Sam has lost herself in the reaction to this backlash and has in turn fallen into a state of silence, overwhelmed by the racist non-sense and by a bundle of accusations entangled in various types of logical flaws and prejudices.

SAM: – Um, are you giving me advice, or . . .

JO: I've had to speed-read a lot of evolutionary psych. I can't always control how and when the information's synthesized, – okay? –

SAM: Copy that.

JO: So the world isn't acting the way you thought it would. But we don't see things the way they are. We see them the way we are . . . Fuck, I'm about to ace this exam! Yes!

SAM: Sooo . . . I need to take back my narrative. But how do you argue with nonsense?

JO: Sam, you are articulate to a fault, but real talk, who have you ever convinced out of their opinion? This conversation isn't about you or them. It's about us. To make sense out of the chaos, to give us a reason to keep persisting. (S02E01)

Joelle, who is ironically prepping for an exam, after debating the non-



existence of the color blue, is telling her friend in undergraduate jargon that our perception is not a transparent reception of an external objective reality, but it is in itself the production of that reality. To this arguably postmodern statement, Sam reacts, appropriately, not with the realization that she needs to take back “herself” or even just her “voice”, but her “narrative.” A narrative can be both understood as the powerful “discourse” of ideology, and also as the capacity of the individual to connect the dots, the events of an experience, into a (sometimes) coherent line, producing, in fact, a story. To take back one’s own narrative then means to claim agency, to become the author of one’s own story, in a defiant stance against an outside world which is trying to monopolize the narrative, that is trying to tell your story for you.

What *Dear White People* seems to do most convincingly, in fact, is to take control of, to “appropriate,” the narrative of black identity in Trump’s America, not so much in an attempt to “argue with nonsense,” but as a way of starting a conversation that is not about a speaker (you) intent on persuading, convincing an audience (them). But it is a conversation about “us,” about a community that is whole, that shares a common sense of dignity and respect, that believes in dialogue and in progress, and that refuses to submit to a dichotomist logic. An “us” that looks at the mess within, and tries to make sense of it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Rabbi Igaël Gurin-Malous for recommending that I watch the series *Dear White People*, when I was looking for inspiring representations of the University campus. His initial suggestion led to my participation in a conference on campus fiction at the University of Naples “L’Orientale” (in May 2018), and then to this contribution in a very different format.

<sup>2</sup> See Jensen and Framke.

<sup>3</sup> Even a cursory list of movies and TV series set on campus would be inevitably limited (even if we exclude the iconic genre of high school drama). Among many possible titles, see for example the critically acclaimed film *Goat* (2016), directed by Andrew Neel and based on the homonymous memoir by Brad Land (2004).

<sup>4</sup> A few months after the show premiered on Netflix, on October 27, 2017, the Daily

Show hosted Roy Wood and Eric Lott to discuss appropriate and inappropriate Halloween costumes.

<sup>5</sup> See McFarland.

<sup>6</sup> The history of world literature is obviously rich in instances when a writer “appropriated” a narrative beyond his or her own “cultural identity”, from long before Shakespeare appropriated the narrative of two Italian teenagers in love.

<sup>7</sup> See Poniewozik.

## Works Cited

- Abdel-Magied, Yassmin. “As Lionel Shriver made light of identity, I had no choice but to walk out on her.” *The Guardian*. 10 Sept. 2016. <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/10/as-lionel-shriver-made-light-of-identity-i-had-no-choice-but-to-walk-out-on-her>>.
- Adichie, Chimamanda N. “The Danger of a Single Story.” *TED Talk 2009*. 14 June 2018. <[http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)>.
- Awkward, Michael. “Appropriative Gestures: Theory and Afro-American Literary Criticism”. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York UP, 2000. 331-38.
- Framke, Caroline. “Netflix’s Dear White People digs into everyday racism, and it’s sharp – and funny – as hell.” *Vox*. 30 Apr. 2017. <<http://www.vox.com/culture/2017/4/28/15424110/netflix-dear-white-people-review-season-1>>.
- Hurston, Zora N. “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” *Negro: An Anthology*. Ed. Nancy Cunard and Hugh D. Ford. London: Continuum Press, 1996.
- Jensen, Jeff. “Dear White People: EW Review.” *Entertainment Weekly*. 28 April 2017. <<http://ew.com/tv/2017/04/28/dear-white-people-ew-review/>>.
- Johnson, Kjerstin. “Don’t Mess Up When You Dress Up: Cultural Appropriation and Costumes.” *Bitch Magazine*. 25 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.bitchmedia.org/post/costume-cultural-appropriation>>.
- Lott, Eric. “Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy.” *Representations* 39 (1992): 23-50.
- *Love and Theft. Black Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993.
- McFarland, Melanie. “‘Dear White People’, listen up: This is the Conversation Starter about Race You’ve Wanted.” *Salon*. 27 Apr. 2017. <<http://www.salon.com/2017/04/27/dear-white-people-listen-up-this-is-the-conversation-starter-about-race-youve-wanted/>>.

- Poniewozik, James. "Review: 'Dear White People,' the TV Version, Improves on the Strong Movie." *The New York Times*. 27 Apr. 2017. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/27/arts/television/dear-white-people-netflix-review.html>>.
- Shriver, Lionel. "I hope the concept of cultural appropriation is a passing fad." *The Guardian*. 13 Sept. 2016 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/lionel-shrivers-full-speech-i-hope-the-concept-of-cultural-appropriation-is-a-passing-fad>>.
- Travers, Ben. "'Dear White People' Review: Justin Simien's Netflix Series Sets the Standard for Movie-to-TV Adaptations." *Indiewire*. 13 March 2017. <<http://www.indiewire.com/2017/03/dear-white-people-review-netflix-tv-show-premiere-sxsw-1201791350/>>.
- Zoller Seitz, Matt. "Netflix's 'Dear White People' Is a Feat." *Vulture*. 27 Apr. 2017. <<http://www.vulture.com/2017/04/netflix-dear-white-people-review.html>>.