Aaron McGruder’s *The Boondocks*: An Afrocentric rebellion

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Abstract

"Jesus was black, Ronald Regan was the devil, and the government is lying about 9/11."

—10-year-old Huey Freeman

In his comic strip The Boondocks, Aaron McGruder serves up, and sends up, life in the United States through the eyes of two African-American children who are full of attitude, intelligence, and rebellion. The Boondocks discusses racial bias in the media.
Introducing & Overview

Who is Aaron McGruder?

Born in 1974, McGruder was a student at the University of Maryland when he first introduced his comic strip, The Boondocks, in the school newspaper in December of 1996. By mid to late 1999, the comic strip was syndicated and appearing in newspapers across the country. In November 2005, it became an animated television series, appearing on the edgy, after-hours broadcast known as "Adult Swim" on the Cartoon Network.

What is The Boondocks?

In America these days, we aren't supposed to talk about race. We have been told to pretend that things have gotten better, that the old days of segregation and cross-burnings are long gone, and that no one needs to talk about race again because ‘we fixed that problem.’ Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Sure, the "Whites only" signs are down, but they have just been replaced by invisible ones that, if you are Black, you see hanging in front of the home-loan department of the local bank, across the entrance of the ritzy suburban mall or on the doors of the US Senate. Except for the occasional op-ed, where is the discussion of any of this in our daily newspapers? Fortunately, and hilariously, it is on the comics’ page in the form of Aaron McGruder's The Boondocks. With bodacious wit, in just a few panels, each day Aaron serves up--and sends up--life in America through the eyes of two African-American kids who are full of attitude, intelligence and rebellion.

The Boondocks focuses on a ten-year-old, politically minded Huey Freeman, who has moved with his younger brother, Riley, and their grandfather to live in the largely white suburb known as Woodcrest (Astor 1999). The comic strip and now the television show regularly
critique white conservatives, parody African American entertainers and cultural institutions, and utilize popular black vernacular language, thus winning loyal admirers and drawing fierce critics.

**The Black Experience**

*Consciousness in the Black Community*

McGruder's comic strip exposes audiences to the saga of a young Black boy who defiantly and comically confronts troubling oppositions (Moore 2003). As a result, the narrative orients readers to alternative views of society as well as the often hidden ideas that stimulate the minds of Black boys. With Huey, McGruder embeds multiple aspects of popular culture and African American discourses together in a single character. The name "Huey Freeman" signals the character's links to historical and political ideas, paying respect to the Black Panther leader Huey Newton and the widespread African American surname "Freeman," a word adopted by recently emancipated slaves or "freed men." McGruder also allies Huey with the Black Nationalist discourse of the 1960s and 1970s by giving him an afro and a militant, non-smiling disposition.

Throughout The Boondocks, Huey displays a sharp intellect and thorough knowledge of American and African American history and culture (Knopp 2001). For example, when Huey first meets one of his teachers at the all-white J. Edgar Hoover Elementary School, he reveals his knowledge of oppressive systems, his commitment to black political struggle, and his dexterous use of language. "Public educational facilities such as this are the cornerstone of the institutionalized racism that continues to oppress black people," explains Huey to the teacher and school principal. "Not only will I refuse to succumb to your brainwashing—I will dedicate
myself to the eventual elimination of this abomination to the high pursuit of learning"
(McGruder 67).

Huey's intellect and status as a preadolescent Black male distances him from many of his peers. Even his younger brother, Riley, frequently ridicules Huey for his apparently strange and geeky behavior. "Why do you think I'll ever be a goofy nerd like you?" asks Riley in one panel of the comic strip as a response to Huey's suggestion that his younger brother study the news.

In one panel, Huey pursues internet research in order to investigate his flu-like symptoms. When his grandfather suggests going to a doctor, Huey decides against it by noting that "Western medicine is too corrupted by capitalism. The goal of making money supersedes the goal of wellness—most doctors and pharmaceutical companies do not have our best interests at heart" (Datcher 2003). Huey's penchant for reading, using technological devices, conducting research experiments, and possessing specialized knowledge give him the underlying nerd power.

Modern Race Politics

In the opening episode of the televised version of The Boondocks, "The Garden Party," Huey attends a gathering attended by White people and tells them unsettling truths about two of America's presumably most revered figures, Jesus Christ and Ronald Reagan, and Huey also announces that the government has conspired to conceal information regarding 9/11. The White people respond by screaming, fainting, and violently attacking one another, a signal that Huey's truth-telling elicits horror and chaos among uppity Whites (Nichols 2002). When Huey awakes from his dream, however, he is immediately slapped across the face and chastised by his grandfather: "How many times have I told you, you better not even dream about telling white
f the truth?” The grandfather's reprimand corresponds to a long tradition within African American narratives by virtue of which youngsters receive stiff warnings and harsh discipline for disrupting the apparent rules of white society.

**Controversy**

In October of 2001, McGruder came under verbal assault by newspaper conglomerates for his comic strip because it questioned nebulous patriotism after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. On October 5, 2001, McGruder’s comic strip featured one of the Black characters, Huey, telephoning the FBI to report a perceived connection between the September 11 terrorist attacks and the 1980s Reagan-Bush administration. Boondocks’ Huey went so far as to suggest that Ronald Reagan and the CIA trained Osama bin Laden and that the current Bush administration covertly funded the Taliban. As a result, the Boondocks comic strip was pulled from many major newspapers.

In the ninth episode to air from his series, The Boondocks, Aaron McGruder’s “The Return of the King” (2006) is one of many of the artist’s controversial episodes, yet it stands out because of the criticism it received among mainstream media outlets and civil rights leaders.

When questioned by Nightline news anchor Cynthia McFadden about his decision to arm MLK with the “N-Word,” McGruder defiantly remarked, “King is disappointed in the world and with his people. By the end of the show, he is driven to the point where he has to use it. The points are there, and they justify the language.” In a follow-up story on ABC News Online, various cultural critics critiqued the comic artist, perceiving him as ahistorical and naïve about the consequences of his MLK representation. William Jelani Cobb, a professor of history at Spelman College in Atlanta, told ABC, “I think Aaron McGruder did something with Martin’s
Aaron McGruder’s *The Boondocks* character without really thinking about or understanding who Martin Luther King was. To portray him as a depressed old man, calling people niggers . . . it was offensive. Martin was a philosopher.”

Another interviewee, Mark Chapman, a professor of African American studies at Fordham University, shared that The Boondocks’ viewers “have no historical reference on which to base the meaning behind the [N]-word.” In response to such criticism, McGruder commented in a later interview: “I just wish we would expand the dialogue and evolve past the same conversation that we’ve had over the past 30 years about race in our country . . . I just hope to expand the dialogue and hope the show will challenge people to think about things they wouldn’t normally think about, or think about it in a very different way.”

Soon after the Nightline feature and the airing of “Return of the King,” the Reverend Al Sharpton publicly denounced the episode in media outlets as grossly inappropriate and as a bad representation for young adults, especially because of McGruder’s decision to have his MLK character gratuitously use the N-word. Sharpton asked for a public apology from Cartoon Network executives, a request that neither the network nor McGruder obliged. Instead, the network released the following statement: “We think Aaron McGruder came up with a thought-provoking way of not only showing Dr. King’s bravery but also of reminding us of what he stood and fought for.”

As one might expect, the media hype concerning the episode and ensuing protest led to an increase in ratings and in the show’s visibility. In 2005, it ranked twelfth among the top fifty cable shows and maintains the distinction of being the highest-rated series premiere in the first
five years of the Cartoon Network. In spite of Sharpton’s protest, in 2006, McGruder won the prestigious Peabody Award for Broadcasting for his “Return of the King” episode.

**Works Cited**

Astor (1999): McGruder's comic strip, which focuses on black characters in mostly white suburbia and includes candid discussion of race, has amassed more than 200 clients in under six months.

BRANDS: Aaron McGruder talks about his comic strip the boondocks and his latest book, "A right to be hostile".


Datcher (2003): features Aaron McGruder and his comic strip work, The Boondocks. The Boondocks is a wry political strip about Huey Freeman, an angry Black kid who moves to the suburbs.

Knopp (2001): Boondocks has always been controversial and some of the 250 newspapers that carry the strip have begun to censor it after the September 11,2001 terror attacks in the United States.

Leader-Picone (2014): Satire and the challenge of African American leadership in the boondocks and the white boy shuffle.

McGruder (2006): The state of the American Black man

Moore (2003): Aaron McGruder's right to be hostile

Nichols (2002): McGruder has got plenty of laughs at the expense of the Bush administration and its polices. What McGruder did not know, however, was that unlike Garry Trudeau in the Watergate era, he and his preteen characters would challenge a popular president and his policies with little cover from allies in the media or Congress.

Nichols (2002) : September 11, Aaron McGruder's cartoon character Huey Freeman has been the mass media's most biting and consistent critique of the war and the Bush administration's foreign policy. In conversation, McGruder discusses how he dealt with events surrounding September 11 in his strips.


Simpkins (2001): The strip charts the lives of Huey and Riley Freeman, two African-American kids who are taken from their idyllic ghetto-fabulous existence on Chicago's South Side to
live with their grandfather in the suburbs. In conversation, McGruder discusses the controversy that the comic strip has caused.

Stein (2012). The black politics of newspaper comic strips: Teaching Aaron McGruder’s the boondocks

Swanigan (2012): Aaron McGruder critiques the effects of the frontier mentality and future-based thinking in the African-American communities, using his child characters to shed a complicating light on often-simplified concepts such as the suburban dream, school integration, and the 'color line' itself.


Tucker (2014). Blackness we can believe in: Authentic blackness and the evolution of aaron McGruder's the boondocks.

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