
COMEDIC HERESY IN THE HUMOR OF *THE*
BOONDOCKS

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INTRODUCTION

This forum text approaches the concept of comedic heresy as a style of humor in the syndicated comic and animation series *The Boondocks*. *The Boondocks* follows the lives of two African American teens, Huey and Riley Freeman, living in a suburban home in the predominantly white community of Woodcrest, with their grandfather, Robert Freeman. The last name of the family is hardly a coincidence. The comic, written and originally drawn by Aaron McGruder, appeared as a syndicated comic from 1996 to 2006 in over three hundred newspapers.¹ The comic, having initially enjoyed very limited distribution for three years in various small outlets, made its debut in national syndication in 1999, and became both popular and controversial due to its humor, which focused on political issues and race relations in the United States. The comic was followed by an animated TV-series that ran for four seasons between 2005 and 2014 on the Adult Swim network. Both the comic and the show elicited controversy as their humor was often judged to be unsophisticated and crude.

While the focus of the *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art* is largely on comics in particular, the animated TV series also deserves attention here, since it allowed McGruder to shift from topical comic strips commenting on the news of the day² to broader, more enduring issues of race and politics in US culture. The satirical edge of the comics was rerouted to more complex issues that would have required episodic treatment in one-to-four-panel comic strips. The animated series thus also displayed the evolution of McGruder's comedic style.

In this forum text the particular style of humor espoused by *The Boondocks* is regarded as an act of cultural heresy that seeks to break through the status quo of race relations in the United States. Writing specifically on the cultural impact of *The Boondocks*, communications scholar Jennifer Heusel offers cultural heresy as a way of explaining how a comedic aspect should be understood as a particular way of signaling subversive intent against prevailing cultural, societal, and political orthodoxy.³ Cultural heresy is similar to, yet distinct from, the concept of culture jamming, which

¹ Timmerman, Gussman, and King 2012, 170.

² One of McGruder's typical set-ups for his strip is to have the characters sit in front of a TV and react to topical news or cultural commentary.

³ Heusel 2014.



is also often associated with satirical humor that seeks to undercut the established modes of representation (e. g. comedic fake news outlets criticizing feckless mainstream media).⁴

Given how strongly embedded a cultural and political orthodoxy can be, a heretical style of humor can be considered to have close affinity with social movements that equally problematize the status quo of race relations, such as Black Lives Matter. McGruder points out problems and very real discrepancies in the way that life in the black community in the US is perceived. That said, McGruder's humor is not exclusively racial, relating also to asymmetries of social and financial power in general.

The purpose of this forum text is to define the conditions for socio-political orthodoxy (i.e. the status quo) and heresy (radical change movements), and argue that the style of humor represented in *The Boondocks* can be conceptualized as an expression of the latter. Elaborated instances from two selected episodes of *The Boondocks* animation series ("The Return of the King": S1E09 & "It's a Black President, Huey Freeman": S3E01) will be used to illustrate the argument put forward in this text to provoke a spirited discussion on the nature of conservative and radical societal forces and drives being expressed through the medium of humor. The first episode relates directly to the historical persona of Martin Luther King Jr., and the latter to the election of Barack Obama. A further discussion would seek to also encompass the comic strips to expand on the scope of this argument.

ORTHODOXY, HERESY AND CULTURE JAMMING

In the context of societal orthodoxy heresy offers emancipatory critique⁵ that seeks to challenge its readers and viewers to not simply accept the status quo as it is represented, but to question it actively, to the extent of seeking to overturn the dominant representations of cultural orthodoxy.

McGruder's critique of the problems facing black culture could fall into this comedic style; ideally McGruder would like to see a more honest reckoning of the reality and challenges facing black American culture, for which purpose he was willing to re-appropriate the figure of Dr. Martin

⁴ Warner 2007.

⁵ As heresy tries to overcome the restrictions set on thinking and individuals by the orthodoxy, the critique it offers against the orthodoxy could be seen as emancipatory critique.



Luther King Jr.⁶ The civil rights struggle led by Dr. King relied heavily on the ideal of equality, which is perhaps why McGruder chose to use his figure to deliver his own message. Given the revered status of Dr. King, utilizing his persona as a platform would amount to heresy.⁷ However, Heusel and other commentators have pointed out that the revered status of Dr. King has in fact been appropriated for the “post-racial” orthodoxy.⁸ In other words, the radical side of Dr. King has been marginalized in favor of a canonized figure of “consensus and conciliation.”⁹

When comedic heresy targets the socio-political orthodoxy, the style of humor is inherently political. A serious argument being couched in entertainment is by no means a new phenomenon in the United States,¹⁰ as audiences are attracted to humorous situations because they anticipate an “affective payoff”¹¹ for dealing with serious matters in a way that is not entirely serious. Popular culture as political commentary stands a high chance of fostering “accidental” knowledge acquisition.¹² Comedic heresy can include this positive payoff, as it undercuts the orthodoxy that more diverse audiences also on some level recognize.

While humor can be utilized to “transcend recurring arguments or patterns because messages with humor can get people to laugh at contradictions as a way to accept their existence,”¹³ heretical humor or satire might arguably be less interested in motivating the acceptance of this existence, and more in challenging it. In other words, “while there is the possibility of reaffirming the stereotypes in this process, there is also the promise and possibility of creating a perspective that while not eliminating the stereotypes or their history, does hold out hope for moving beyond them.”¹⁴ At its best, satire and humor built on race relations can effect “a liberating sabotage of the past’s hold on the present.”¹⁵

⁶ Lee 2006.

⁷ Especially as McGruder had MLK use the n-word several times, to which many in the African American community took offense, see Heusel 2014.

⁸ Heusel 2014; Terry 2018.

⁹ Terry 2018.

¹⁰ Baum 2002.

¹¹ Young 2008, 122.

¹² Feldman 2013.

¹³ Meyer 2000, 329.

¹⁴ Tinnerman, Gussman, and King 2012, 171.

¹⁵ Carpio 2008, 15.



This established representation of for example race relations in the United States is what we characterize as the orthodoxy. In short, orthodoxy can be understood as the dominant set of circumstances of the moment. Orthodoxy is exemplified in “common sense,” and it often fits in the understanding of the world as is held by those in a position of relative power. In this form orthodoxy can be understood as nearly synonymous with hegemony, or hegemonic representations. As such, it is often in the interests of the (hegemonic) orthodoxy to secure its position, for example by pre-emptively defusing critique and legitimizing its existence and power structures.¹⁶ Orthodoxy seeks naturalization through its practices and institutions, making agents complicit in it. Accordingly, orthodoxy entails conservatism, as change would endanger the status quo. Orthodoxy is the currently prevailing hegemony, but it is by no means eternal; it is, in fact, constantly assaulted by competing worldviews, which appear heretical to the hegemony. In other words, the normal state is a contest between heresy and orthodoxy.¹⁷ A powerful form of heresy can overturn the previous hegemonic orthodoxy and become installed in its stead.

Within this chosen perspective, heresy is the primary mode of attacking orthodoxy. Heresy seeks to delegitimize orthodoxy and deny it its reason for existence. Heresy, to put it bluntly, finds the orthodoxy unjust as it directly serves the limited interests of those who reproduce the notion of orthodoxy. In so doing heresy often ends up also attacking those agents who either have a stake in the preservation of the orthodoxy, or are so captured by it that they do not truly appreciate the possibility of alternate – and definitely not of better – social arrangements. We should note that being labeled a heretic does not so much mean rejection of the orthodoxy as it does being rejected by the orthodoxy. Comedic (or satiric) heresy can therefore be understood as reactive rejection of the orthodoxy’s implicit or explicit claim to authority and, in so doing, enabling new perspectives.¹⁸

When it comes to heresy against the media orthodoxy, professor of political science Jamie Warner sees satirical programs like *The Daily Show* as an instrument of culture jamming, i. e. of using mainstream techniques in a form of rhetorical sabotage, creating and disseminating “dissident interpretations of current political events, potentially jamming the transmission of the dominant

¹⁶ Howard 2010, 321–323.

¹⁷ Kurtz 1983.

¹⁸ Tinnerman, Gussman, and King 2012, 171, 173.



political brand message.”¹⁹ This is a conceptualization of culture jamming that bears close resemblance to that of heresy, and to how *The Boondocks* relates to racial issues in socio-political context. It is possible for socio-political commentary delivered through the vehicle of humor to endow entertainers with the roles of blasphemers, who refuse to take claims favoring the status quo seriously.²⁰ In the case of racial heresy in particular, it bridges the gap between racial ideology and humor that has resulted in part “because of a tendency to restrict public discourse on issues of ethnicity and race to polite but ultimately disengaged exchanges that suppress true feelings.”²¹

For McGruder himself, the comic strip shows a sharpening of his heresy, naming not the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001 as his point of radicalization, but the change in national discourse that followed, when “[j]ournalists stopped being journalists. All this cheerleading started.”²² He adds that by observing these issues, his comedy started to write itself, and he became a political cartoonist. McGruder’s heretical swipes at patriotism, however, were not unproblematic: the comic was often pulled from circulation out of fears of offending the nation’s sensibilities. Once radicalized, however, the heretical voice would spread from one field of cultural commentary to another.

POST-RACIAL HERESY AND ORTHODOXY IN “THE RETURN OF THE KING”

As political comedy, *The Boondocks* offers political commentary about events and social and cultural underpinnings that may be omitted from the usual cycle of political debate, emphasizing the African American experience in particular. Of course, the animated show could not react to topical events as immediately as the syndicated newspaper strip could, which would suggest that *The Boondocks* as a television series could take aim at more overreaching, even systemic issues with more expansive treatments and thematic emphasis than the comic strips. This is why, for this forum text, we will primarily discuss the comedic heresy expressed in the animated series, rather than the more reactive and specific instances covered in the topical comics.

¹⁹ Warner 2007, 19.

²⁰ Jones, Baym, and Day 2012, 37–38.

²¹ Entman and Rojecki 2000, 160.

²² Braxton 2004.



In both terms of topics and form, *The Boondocks* arguably sees itself within the American comedic context as an outsider, and thus it feels entitled to criticize its cultural hegemony. In *The Boondocks* this question is delivered notably through Huey Freeman, who is depicted as a child. Thus the perceived innocence of children is co-opted for delivering heresy, as children are understood as speaking truth to power without concepts of censorship, which are later socially learned. This is evidenced by *The Boondocks'* unwillingness to immediately share the assumed ideals underlying its fictional narratives. The fictionality of the show is very visible in the episode "The Return of the King," where instead of being murdered, Dr. King was shot and fell into a coma and woke up in the year 2000. While controversial, the episode won the Peabody Award in 2006.

The resurrection of Dr. King in the animated episode marked a clear departure from the distanced – even alienated²³ – memory of Dr. King described in the comics;²⁴ alienated in the sense that Dr. King's message has been largely reduced to a ceremonial remembrance of something that used to be. Typically references to Dr. King in the comics were related to Martin Luther King Day, a national holiday in the United States, or the celebration of Black History Month in February.²⁵ The animated episode, presenting a walking and talking Dr. King in 21st century world, emphasized this disconnection.

The episode's implicit references to Dr. King's famed "I have a dream" speech make fictionality strongly present. Literary scholar Henrik Skov Nielsen and his colleagues note that the original speech itself operated as a fiction where "today's dream is imagined as tomorrow's reality, and King asks his audience to see today's inequality through the lens of the imagined racial equality of the future."²⁶ In her discussion on orthodoxy and heresy, Huesel discusses the form and idea of Dr. King's "beloved community,"²⁷ which could be interpreted as a sort of social justice utopia,

²³ Riley Freeman does not even know who Dr. King is, despite being given ample hints at school. When asked which King suggested one should "turn the other cheek," Riley answers "Rodney King," an infamous subject of police brutality, "accidentally" doubling down on his heretical ignorance (McGruder 2003, strip 4, p. 49).

²⁴ McGruder 2003, strips 2–4, p. 49 and strip 1, p. 50.

²⁵ McGruder 2003, strip 2, p. 53 and strip 2, p. 251; McGruder 2007, strip 1, p. 24.

²⁶ Nielsen and Walsh 2015, 68.

²⁷ Huesel 2014. Dr. King notes that lasting improvements also necessitate concrete resources: "The changes [so far] are basically in the social and political areas; the problems we now face – providing jobs, better housing and better education



where post-racial social relations would be reality. In self-serving political rhetoric, this utopia is often depicted as already reached, a notion that *The Boondocks* challenges.

For the orthodoxy a radical figure like Dr. King is dangerous, as his personality allows for a platform of heresy, for example in his opposition to the Vietnam War at a time when popular support for the war was of crucial interest to the orthodoxy of power in the United States.²⁸ After his death Dr. King's legacy has been excessively reinterpreted and reappropriated to suit new social and political agendas,²⁹ reducing him from a social activist to an ideal or idol, with his rhetoric reduced to something that is read about, as opposed to something that still depicts and challenges social reality.³⁰

Heusel remarks how heresy became a necessary tool to "expose how postracial acculturations of MLK's iconography and the beloved community narrative are devoid of MLK's dynamism."³¹ Professor of sociology at Georgetown University Michael Eric Dyson comments further: "[Dr King] has been made into a metaphor of our hunger for heroes who cheer us up more than they challenge or change us."³² In the heretical reimagining of Dr. King in *The Boondocks*' "The Return of the King" his figure finds his heretical voice both in social and linguistic terms: while Dr. King deplores the state of the civil rights struggle – and doing so, notably, from the pulpit³³ – he also overtly uses "the n-bomb," which was upsetting for many African American audience members.³⁴ In other words, *The Boondocks* sought to jolt the viewer out of complacency, and out of the understanding of MLK as a quiet, distant figure.

Comedic heresy takes the part of social activism here and denies the orthodox line which holds that Dr. King's goals have already been met, and that the United States as a nation has transcended racial divides. In contemporary US society, with mounting tensions between the police and black communities due to systemic tendency towards egregious police brutality, this

for the poor throughout the country – will require money for their solution, a fact that makes those solutions all the more difficult" (King 1986, 321).

²⁸ King 2016.

²⁹ Bostdorff and Goldzwig 2005, 684–685.

³⁰ E. g. Dyson 2000, 4; King 2016.

³¹ Heusel 2014, 24.

³² Dyson 2000, 3.

³³ Tinnerman, Gussman, and King 2012, 181.

³⁴ Heusel 2014, 24, 26, 33.



heresy seems very aptly placed. To summarize the problem of (progressive) heresy being reappropriated by the (conservative) orthodoxy as a vehicle for the perpetuation of the status quo, the canonized form of Dr. King is “devoid of the dynamic characteristics necessary for addressing current racial and economic challenges in light of past achievements and failures.”³⁵

The Boondocks episode emphasizes that the dream is unrealized, and that Dr. King’s speech has been largely co-opted by the status quo to cover for very real – nonfictional – problems in contemporary society. Instead, the episode in the animated series deconstructs the speech and figure of Dr. King to what McGruder offers as a radical and revolutionary heretical message – truer to Dr. King’s original form. *The Boondocks* seems to argue that whatever damage its claimed disrespect has done to the idol of Dr. King is offset by the ongoing damage done to Dr. King through his idolization. Contextualizing the key heretical moment of the episode, Huey remarks that “Dr. King looked out at his people and saw they were in great need. So he did what all great leaders do: he told them the truth, but not just any truth, he told the ugly truth that gets people angry.” Engaging in heresy on a topic this sensitive, then, is no joke: McGruder emphasizes that most of what he writes about is not actually funny to him, but extremely serious.³⁶ At the end, however, the entire episode is revealed to be a figment of Huey’s imagination but, as he notes, “it’s fun to dream.”

POST-RACIAL HERESY AND ORTHODOXY IN “IT’S A BLACK PRESIDENT, HUEY FREEMAN”

In our second example, the represented orthodoxy can be exemplified by the oft-claimed “end of racism” with Barack Obama’s election as President of the United States in 2007. It should be pointed out, that even though McGruder’s attention had started to shift from the comic strip to the animated series, the strip still extensively covered the 2004 presidential campaign between George W. Bush and John Kerry, siding with the Democratic nominee, but finding the whole contest rather meaningless and Democrats as a party utterly feckless.³⁷ Without a cause or conviction, heresy finds no effective ground to argue from. The 2007 election was only covered by

³⁵ Heusel 2014, 26.

³⁶ Braxton 2004.

³⁷ McGruder 2005.



the animated series, which took a distinctly heretical tone when it came to the first black president.

The orthodoxy, by definition conservative in nature, seeks to undercut further calls for reform or progressive policy by claiming that, surely, the goal has already been reached. If an African American man can become president, then this must be taken as clear indication of the post-racial maturity of the United States. This is a dangerous assumption, glossing over several persistent and institutional problems relating to race relations in the United States, such as the comparatively extremely high incarceration rates of black men.³⁸ In the foreword to Michelle Alexander's book, Cornell West argues that the so-called Age of Obama can be characterized as a time when racial symbols breached political surfaces, but sometimes only to keep covered the systemic problems of both black and poor communities still devastated by mass unemployment, social neglect, and police surveillance.³⁹

The language of colorblindness is often understood as a step forward, as post-racial progress, but critical scholars again argue that it is in fact an expression of disinterest: "We recognize that mobility may be difficult, but the key to our collective self-image is the assumption that mobility is always possible, so failure to move up reflects on one's character."⁴⁰ In theory, perhaps, colorblindness is a fine idea, but not while established structures of racial discrimination exist.⁴¹ The illusion of mobility is leveraged to create legitimating camouflage to the socio-political orthodoxy, while it frustrates the heretical observer.

In the episode "It's a Black President, Huey Freeman" McGruder demands that the audience reflect on what, truly, has changed for the better; while Obama's electoral victory is a momentous occasion, it has neither stopped nor rewritten history.⁴² Critical scholars have warned against interpreting advancements especially in race issues in the United States too positively – individual advancements have to be read in the context of enduring systemic injustice.⁴³ In this, the episode attacks the complacency and conservatism of orthodoxy head-on. McGruder's heresy suggests

³⁸ Alexander 2011; Roediger 2008.

³⁹ West 2011, x.

⁴⁰ Alexander 2011, 13.

⁴¹ Roediger 2008, 180.

⁴² Kang 2010.

⁴³ Roediger 2008.



that the celebration of Obama's electoral victory by white Americans was, to them, a celebration of the end of racism, and the end of white guilt. Alexander further comments that the current "system of control depends of black exceptionalism; it is not disproved or undermined by it."⁴⁴ In other words, while the election Obama was highly symbolic, it could not turn back decades of institutionally embedded social practice.⁴⁵ Seeking to be perceived as a unifying, rather than a polarizing figure, President Obama signaled his willingness to work with the orthodoxy. As a political move it was an understandable one for a mainstream politician, but at the same time it lessened much of the potential for heresy or radicalism that had been attached to Obama's candidacy.

This explains why in the episode Huey comments upon seeing people celebrating Obama's election as the birth of a new era in a frustrated and lackluster way: "what is the point of talking if no one understands?" Huey expresses a deeper understanding of the social issues plaguing the black community that are not – and cannot – be offset by the inauguration of just one man. Indeed, Obama can be accepted by the orthodoxy – as long as he does not directly challenge it – because his success can be represented as proof of the impartiality of the system and the equality of potential. Decidedly going against this view proffered by the orthodoxy, Huey Freeman, the self-proclaimed black freedom fighter, finds nothing to celebrate in Obama's inauguration.

With the benefit of hindsight from the year 2018, this attitude appears accurate, if not prescient. The mass protests against entrenched police violence from which people of color suffer disproportionately signaled that Obama's election and two terms did not radically alter race relations and power dynamics in the United States. To enter political office in the United States demands a de-radicalization of any African American, considering how often Obama – a senator and a law professor before his campaign – still had to distance himself from any such affiliations as president.⁴⁶ The struggle of the Black Lives Matter movement, which proposed the heretical message that, in the culture and experience of everyday life in the US, black lives accounted for very little, was met furiously by the status quo, from which screeching proclamations that "All

⁴⁴ Alexander 2011, 14, 248.

⁴⁵ David Roediger (2008, xi-xii) writes that "[r]ace defines the social category into which peoples are sorted, producing and justifying their very different opportunities with regard to wealth and poverty, confinement and freedom, citizenship and alienation, and [...] life and premature death."

⁴⁶ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor makes a more vocal indictment by stating that "[t]he Black political establishment, led by President Obama, had shown over and over again that it was not capable of the most basic task: keeping Black children alive" (2016, 152).



Lives Matter” soon rang loud. The latter slogan reinterpreted the Black Lives Matter movement’s message that “black lives should matter too” as instead meaning that “only black lives matter,” thus casting the heresy in the most damnable light. The All Lives Matter countermovement was specifically a restatement of the status quo that defuses the critique of heresy.

Finally, the campaign and subsequent election of Donald Trump in 2016 showed that socio-political progress is not linear, and when the status quo is upset, heresy can be mounted on both sides. Trump’s version of heresy could be described as “reactionary,” considering that political commentators like Ta-Nehisi Coates have pointed out that Trump’s electoral victory would not have been possible had he not been preceded by an African American president.⁴⁷ In other words, while Trump’s rhetoric is heretical in nature, it is contextualized as a response to previous heresy, and thus in favor of the orthodoxy of white supremacy in the US. Trump’s presidency is, in fact, “All Lives Matter” made concrete.

DISCUSSION

It seems clear that achieving social acceptability is not the goal of *The Boondocks*, even though it might eventually succeed in attaining acceptability as orthodoxy changes and adapts to incorporate the critiques voiced through heresy. These power structures are not, after all, fixed, though they are durable and show high resistance to change. To bring about change, comedic heresy requires a disavowal of easy escapism in favor of self-reflection and critical thinking through popular culture. While some voices might argue for a more prudent approach, especially when it comes to dealing with race,⁴⁸ such careful navigation seems anathema to effective heresy. Heresy is not interested in “opening a dialogue” or any similar form of discursive domestication, understanding inherently that suppression or redirection of heresy is in the interests of the orthodoxy. Heresy contests the political space to criticize the orthodoxy’s control of and through discourse. However, that dialogue may open as a byproduct of heretical critique.

Thus the critical scrutiny performed by scholars like Alexander or Roediger of the argument over the existence of true colorblindness in the US is fraught with controversy: in the ears of those who have sincerely attempted to establish an orthodoxy of social support over decades of social

⁴⁷ Coates 2017.

⁴⁸ Rossing 2014, 302.



programs specifically aimed – or at least interpreted by their promoters as aiming – to reduce discrimination, arguments that claim the continued existence of discrimination both politically and economically is the very definition of heresy. We should thus understand, once again, that heresy can attack the carefully built self-image of quite a few social and political actors, who will, quite naturally, respond to heresy with ire.

The Boondocks delivers its heretical messages because McGruder assumes – very plausibly – that other societal actors co-opted into the orthodoxy would have little interest in doing so. Instead of branding heretical interventions in popular culture as cynical, they should perhaps be recognized as idealistic, pointing out acute points of social and racial problems in a way that is more accessible to some audiences than traditional sources of political commentary. While the power of satire to facilitate and guide political learning is too broad for this forum text, it is nonetheless worth considering.

The Boondocks animated series should be treated as an extension – if not an expansion – of a particular brand of cultural heresy that McGruder began with his syndicated comic strips. The transfer between media shows how cultural heresy displayed in comics can gain a foothold in popular culture and gather power in the form of controversy and attention, audiences and acclaim. This forum text has situated *The Boondocks* – comic strip and animation – within a hopefully growing body of culturally heretical works and illustrated the value of cultural heresy as a way of looking at competing works of cultural hegemony. Although McGruder has since discontinued his work on the comic strip and the subsequent animation, *The Boondocks* elaborates on the relations of class and race in the United States. One potential direction – too extensive to be covered here – would be to investigate how *The Boondocks* represents the accessibility of other culturally salient artifacts, such as the American Dream, to African Americans. With US orthodoxy on matters of race as deeply embedded as it is, and with *The Boondocks* having pulled few punches, the litany of McGruder's heresies remains to be read in full, but read it must be, for it has much to teach.



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