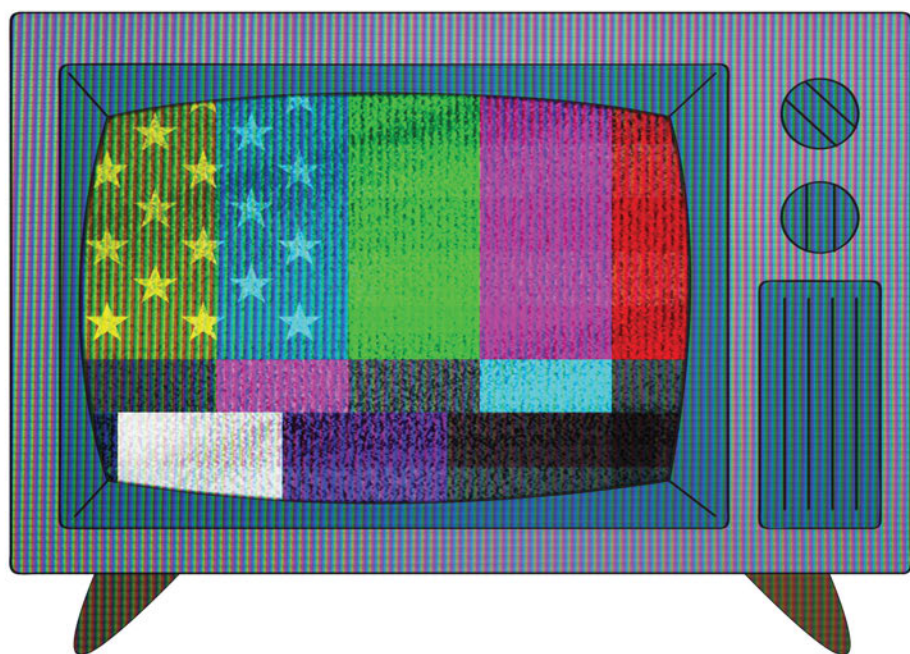


# Humor and Satire on Contemporary Television

Animation and the American Joke



Silas Kaine Ezell

The Cultural Politics of Media and Popular Culture

## HUMOR AND SATIRE ON CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION

This book examines contemporary American animated humor, focusing on popular animated television shows in order to explore the ways in which they engage with American culture and history, employing a peculiarly American way of using humor to discuss important cultural issues.

With attention to the work of American humorists, such as the Southwest humorists, Mark Twain, Dorothy Parker, and Kurt Vonnegut, and the question of the extent to which modern animated satire shares the qualities of earlier humor, particularly the use of setting, the carnivalesque, collective memory, racial humor, and irony, *Humor and Satire on Contemporary Television* concentrates on a particular strand of American humor: the use of satire to expose the gap between the American ideal and the American experience. Taking up the notion of 'The Great American Joke', the author examines the discursive humor of programmes such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *Family Guy*, *King of the Hill*, *Daria*, *American Dad!*, *The Boondocks*, *The PJs* and *Futurama*.

A study of how animated television programmes offer a new discourse on a very traditional strain of American humor, this book will appeal to scholars and students of popular culture, television and media studies, American literature and visual studies, and contemporary humor and satire.

**Silas Kaine Ezell** is Assistant Professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University, USA.

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# Humor and Satire on Contemporary Television

Animation and the American Joke

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First published 2016  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Ezell, Silas Kaine, author.

Title: Humor and satire on contemporary television: animation and the American joke /  
by Silas Kaine Ezell.

Description: Farnham, Surrey, UK; Burlington, VT : Ashgate, [2016] | Series: The cultural  
politics of media and popular culture | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015038675 | ISBN 9781472457721 (hardback: alk. paper) |

Subjects: LCSH: Animated television programs—United States—History and criticism. |  
Television broadcasting—Social aspects—United States.

Classification: LCC PN1992.8.A59 E94 2016 | DDC 791.45/34—dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015038675>

ISBN: 9781472457721 (hbk)

ISBN: 9781315587646 (ebk)

Typeset in Garamond and Century Gothic  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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*For Alexander, may you never forget how to laugh.*

# Preface and Acknowledgments

This project really began around 1990, when I first discovered *The Simpsons*. Being an early adolescent at the time, I, like many others, thought that Bart Simpson was the coolest character on television. Also like many others, I liked the program because it seemed to portray more accurately how families interacted than many other programs. Despite their animated distortions, including bug eyes, paper-sack hair, and severe overbites, the Simpsons looked more like my family than the Cleavers, Huxtables, Seavers, or Tanners. They could often be mean-spirited, sometimes cruel, to one another, but out of their ceaseless conflicts rose genuine love, appreciation, and loyalty. In addition to the family dynamic, I also craved the constant references to, and satire of, popular culture.

As I grew older, I added an appreciation of other animated programs, such as *Beavis and Butt-head*, *King of the Hill*, and *Daria*. At this time, I was aware of the impact that these programs had on me individually, but I'd never given much thought about the impact that they make on culture. It was not until I became a high school teacher that I began to think about the ways in which these programs make important contributions to culture and shape the attitudes of young people. In particular, I was teaching Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope in a satire-themed unit. As we were discussing the various grotesque functions of the body, my students would constantly remark that the scenes in Swift reminded them of various episodes of *South Park*. Because I had not watched *South Park* before, I decided to watch a few episodes to see if my students' assertions were accurate, and I found them to be quite appropriate. I then began to understand more fully that satire plays a role in shaping those who watch it. Because my students began to understand how Swift criticized his own culture through satire, they also began to reassess their own ideas through their understanding of a television show.

My classroom experience greatly influenced my field of study while I earned my masters and doctoral degrees. My thesis was a study of how *South Park* embodies the classical elements of satire. As I wrote the thesis, however, I had a constant feeling of unease. Though I believe that many elements of the show have much in common with classical satires, something also seemed different. Eventually, as I began studying American literature in more depth, I found that *South Park* is also participating in a particularly American tradition of humor and satire, as are many other animated programs.



This book is an attempt to explicate *how* these shows continue traditions established by American humorists from Washington Irving, the Southwest humorists, Mark Twain, Dorothy Parker, Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Pryor, to animated television programs. The intent is not to show a direct inspiration, though that may be the case in some instances. Instead, I want to argue that there is a particular joke that is evident in the American DNA, and just as children might not be intentionally copying their parents, they inherit the traits of their parents without even realizing it. Such is the case when examining the influence of American humorists on animated television programs. After all, when taking a cursory look at this list, it appears that the similarities between these writers and performers are few, and in matters of style and medium, this assessment would often be correct. However, below the surface, they all address a specific incongruity within American culture. Louis D. Rubin, Jr.'s "The Great American Joke" perfectly addresses this underlying similarity. If genetics were applied to American humor, then one could observe this constant trait in the most important humorists in the American literary canon. It is my hope that this study will spark debate among scholars and performers and begin a discussion on animated programs' place in the pantheon of American humor while also continuing to distinguish what is "American" about American humor.

I am also pleased that this study will be part of a series about the cultural politics of media and popular culture. As is the case with any mode of discourse, not all animated programs are created under the same conditions—each has its own agenda and method for disseminating that agenda. For example, *The Simpsons* operates on an opposing plane to the idealized sitcom families of the 1950s and 1980s. As the show has developed and writers have changed, the show has become a satire on consumer culture (in which the show participates) and political issues. Meanwhile, Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks* operates in a different tradition that openly discusses issues of race and class in American life. MTV's *Daria* explored the experience of teenagers, particularly females, who are the targets of excessive consumerism and the social warfare that is high school. Tying these shows directly to other humorous or satirical texts in the American canon reveals the extent to which our liberties and freedoms can be threatened even while its citizens continue to sing the idealistic and patriotic songs, and popular culture is a powerful lens through which we can examine the constant political and cultural negotiations between various peoples in the United States.

While I will take full responsibility for whatever is found to be wanting in this study, I want to acknowledge those who have contributed to the parts that might be perceived as apt. First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents, who allowed me to watch copious amounts of television as a child. In particular, I have fond memories of my Dad watching spoofs, such as *The Naked Gun*, while explaining the concepts of parody and satire to me and my

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

brother. My tastes in humor and music come from my Dad. My Mom provided an atmosphere of trust and understanding that also allowed me to pursue the studies that have interested me, and for that I am eternally grateful. I also want to thank my wife, Jennifer and son Alexander, for their understanding and inspiration as I have worked on this project. In particular, Jennifer has been a gracious and helpful reader of countless drafts while also watching countless episodes of animated programs.

Professionally, I am indebted to many friends and scholars. Because this project began as a master's thesis and grew into a doctoral dissertation, I want to thank my faculty and committee members at the University of Arkansas for their encouragement and comments. M. Keith Booker has been a dedicated advisor and committee chair for my work and his example as a scholar has been one that I hope to follow. Lisa Hinrichsen helped me shape and clarify my ideas concerning humor and collective memory in Chapter 3. Many thanks also to other academic mentors, such as Emily Bernhard Jackson, Charles Adams, Thomas Rosteck, and Terrence Tucker, all of whom provided invaluable commentary and direction during the crafting and revision of this project. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Department of English at Oklahoma Baptist University for their support and time. In particular, Brent Newsom and Alan Noble spent an entire summer reading drafts and making suggestions for improvements as I made revisions to the text. I would also like to extend a special thanks to Corey Fuller for designing the image on cover of this manuscript and Emily Montgomery for her steadfast work in helping prepare the document for publication. An undertaking of this kind cannot be completed without tremendous support from family, friends, and colleagues, and I want to offer you all the most sincere thanks and gratitude for your support and encouragement.

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## Chapter 1

# Irony and Incongruity in American Humor

Over the past twenty-five years, primetime animated television programming for adults has come back from the dead. In fact, these programs have ascended from upstart novelty to an established staple of broadcast and cable programming. After the 1960s saw the run of *The Jetsons* and *The Flintstones* end, many wondered whether or not animation targeted toward adults during primetime would ever again be viable. That mindset changed with the success of Fox's *The Simpsons* in 1989. After over 500 episodes of *The Simpsons* and a proliferation of animated television series designed for older audiences, doubts about animation's long-term sustainability in television programming have been laid to rest. Moreover, contemporary animated programs have become a part of the public consciousness, largely because of their use of controversial humor that engages with various political and cultural issues in the American collective conscious. Given their prominence, it now might be reasonable to assess their place in the pantheon of American humor. More specifically, it might now be the time to ask whether or not they belong in the same conversation as celebrated humorists such as Mark Twain, Washington Irving, and Kurt Vonnegut. Animated programs from *The Simpsons* to Cartoon Network's Adult Swim block of programming have drawn the attention of critics who have recently begun to recognize their parodic and satirical contributions to the postmodern landscape. However, the bulk of this critical attention is placed on the postmodern qualities of animated programs and how they fit into the history of television. This neglects to account for the ways in which they participate in a long tradition of American humor that preceded them.

Humor animated television programs are not created in a vacuum. Though animated programs may seem vastly different from their comedic ancestors in their method of displaying humor, a closer examination reveals some striking similarities. They are informed by a version of American humor that began with the first English settlers and continued to evolve as new writers added different perspectives. For this study, I will explore a particular strain of American humor and consider how the most successful animated television programs not only continue in this strain, but also adapt the strain to their distinct postmodern style. The commonalities among animated programs, the subjects they explore, and the tools they use to explore those subjects

indicate a particularly American way of constructing jokes about American life. Specifically, American humor possesses a critical, often ironic, strain that highlights the incongruity between the rhetoric that promises equality, wealth, and prosperity in American culture and the failure of America to fulfill those promises. Animated programs have taken these same jokes and put them into a different format and context. A study of how these shows participate in the traditions of American humor is important because it illustrates the flexibility of American humor and how it can move from the spoken word, to sardonic wit in the written word, to the animated series. Additionally, the function of animated programs reveals how little American humor has changed because of the continued existence of this gap between expectations and reality in American culture.

Humor is not confined to the comedic. It can appear in the most serious of works, as exemplified by Shakespeare's use of the gate porter as a source of humor in the midst of a murder scene in *Macbeth*. It can rise from physical pratfalls or complex social satire. Humor can produce a myriad of physical and emotional responses—belly laughs or a cold, knowing sneer of superiority. Laughter and humor have long puzzled thinkers and theorists largely because they are subjective. Thomas Hobbes theorized that laughter is primarily a form of cruelty by which one asserts superiority over others. Twain believed it to be one of mankind's most potent weapons against the despair of the human condition. Freud believed humor and laughter serve as release valves that jettison the anxieties that build in the human psyche, which grants humor the ability to heal psychological trauma. Others have posited humor is produced by incongruity, by identifying the way that things should be against the way things are. Thus, context becomes important in humor, because what is incongruous in one culture might be normal in another. The divergent views on the uses of humor illustrate the complexity of writing about such a topic, a complexity amplified by the accuracy of each divergent views.

The attempt to identify specific characteristics of American humor in conjunction with the aforementioned theories of humor has led to some debate. American humor is known for having certain distinguishing qualities, although this is not to say that these qualities are exclusive to American humor alone. Indeed, Joseph Boskin writes, "Humor's texts, in at least several instances, often transcend national boundaries" (*Rebellious Laughter* 2), and many cultures have thrived on the use of incongruity and irony in their humor. Nevertheless, many critics who have studied American humor acknowledge that a particularly American joke exists, one which holds the nation's origins, politics, racial and cultural diversity, and defining ideals to both playful and scathing scrutiny. Nancy Walker concedes that America's shared humor also has different factors based on the differences among Americans:

To speak of 'American' humor, then, is to assume that these factors and more have produced both themes and forms which address a particular cultural experience that is widely shared. But it is important also to acknowledge significant differences within this experience for the diversity that is one of America's distinctive qualities has in turn produced much humor expressive of these differences. (*What's So Funny?* 8)

So what, then, can we say is a definitively American trait in humor? Some, such as Christopher Morley, have argued for a more tragic definition. Morley notes that there exists "some essential hardness or sharpness of spirit" in American humor (qtd. in Dudden xv). Others, such as James Thurber, have argued that Americans "prefer the gentle to the sharp" (qtd. in Dudden xvii). A general survey of popular American humorists reveals that both men have a point. America's most popular humorists include Irving, Twain, Sinclair Lewis, Vonnegut, Jon Stewart, and Stephen Colbert, none of whom were afraid to hold up American's most cherished ideals and institutions to satire. On the other hand, Americans have also shown a capacity to gravitate to "safe," humor; for example, humorists and comedians such as Artemis Ward, Jay Leno, and, most recently, Jimmy Fallon, have enjoyed popularity specifically because their humor rarely rattles any cages.

Though both Thurber's and Morley's perspectives have merit, the bulk of critical attention on American humor investigates Morley's notion of a more cruel humor that emphasizes the incongruity between America's ideals and its reality. For example, most critics who have attempted to identify characteristics of American humor assert that American humor revels in the use of incongruity based on the overarching concepts of "the American Dream" and "American Exceptionalism," and the tendency of American humorists to deflate such notions. Anglican clergyman H.R. Haweis was among the first to note this incongruity of rhetoric and practice when he observed that "the shock between business and piety" was one of the roots of American humor (79).

Once American humor began receiving critical attention, critics would continue to develop Haweis's observation of its incongruity, though they would vary on exactly how humorists displayed it. Constance Rourke argues that the Yankee, the first uniquely American comic figure, "developed the habit of self-scrutiny" (89), which implies a recognition of incongruity. On the other hand, Jesse Bier observes that "the comedians' love-hate relationship to America is resolved either for sentimentalism or contempt, with only infrequent genuine love matches, because of the character of the national experience" (458). Many critics agree that a streak of violence pervades American humor, one which writers often used to critique the contrast between America's lofty promises and the dire reality. Observing the tendency towards violence in

American humor, William Keough suggests that much of America's humor comes from disillusioned idealism (6).

Perhaps the most direct definition of American incongruous humor was posited by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. Rubin argues that critics have often ignored American humor's importance in exposing the gap between American ideals and American realities. While he acknowledges that incongruity is present in the humor of other nations and other time periods, he asserts that America's particular brand of incongruity is unique because of its promises and rhetoric. Rubin writes,

Out of the incongruity between mundane circumstance and heroic ideal, material fact and spiritual hunger, democratic, middle-class society and desire for cultural definition, theory of equality and fact of social and economic inequality....between what men would be and must be, as acted out in the American experience, has come much pathos, no small amount of tragedy, and also a great deal of humor. Both the pathos and the humor have been there from the start, and the writers have been busy pointing them out. This, then, has been what has been called 'the great American joke,' which comedy has explored and imaged. (113)

The American joke, then, is the realization of a great irony in a nation whose most cherished document speaks of the equality of man while many of its signatories owned slaves, or a nation that idealizes the power of the common man while the rich man continues to buy influence. I argue that animated television programs can be placed in Rubin's particular definition of American humor, alongside the Southwest humorists, Mark Twain, Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Pryor.

As I embark on this endeavor, I will focus on a select few shows. With the exception of a series or two that maintained relatively short runs, the shows I have selected are among the most well-known. My reasoning for this is simple: for every animated show that has been successful, many more have failed spectacularly. The programs that have enjoyed sustained runs often tap into the public imagination, which can partly be attributed to their ability to maintain American comedic tropes. For this reason, I will focus on more recognizable series that have had successful runs while drawing national attention for their active participation in continuing the construction of "the Great American Joke." This study is also not meant to be a comprehensive catalogue involving the various trivia for these programs. Other scholars have ably provided intricate analyses covering the depth and breadth of these programs. My aim is to contextualize the overall ethos of the programs within an American tradition of humor with the use of some apt examples from each program that illustrate how these shows fit into that tradition. In particular, I will

examine the discursive critical practices of *The Simpsons* (1989-Present), *South Park* (1997-Present), *Family Guy* (1999-Present), *King of the Hill* (1997-2010), *Daria* (1997-2001), *American Dad!* (2005-Present), *The Boondocks* (2005-2014), *The PJs* (1999-2001) and *Futurama* (1999-2003; 2010-2013).

Not coincidentally, these are also the shows that have enjoyed extended runs; in fact, many of them are still on the air at the time of this writing. More importantly, in their own way these animated programs offer a more significant critique than traditional sitcoms, a critique that as Darrell Hamamoto notes, often “puts into sharp relief the irrational, oppressive, hence risible aspects of American society” (153). Certainly, early television sitcoms, and many contemporary programs, espoused a heavily veneered promise of a white American middle-class utopia. If not clinging to this vision of American wholesomeness, television today is populated by reality television programs that offer little intentional insight into the problematic issues in American culture. Many animated programs, however, seek to highlight such issues and disrupt idealized constructions of American life.

By examining animated programs’ subversive parody of more traditional television, one can already see a parallel between animated programs and American humorists of the past. Both undermine the mediated versions of reality in the popular traditional fictions of their times, and in some cases they enjoyed a measure of popularity themselves. Humorists such as Mark Twain, H.L. Mencken, and Sinclair Lewis wrote humorous work that often stood in opposition to the best-selling fictions of their eras. Certainly they enjoyed popular success, but they also stood as alternatives to sentimental fictions and dime-store novels that reinforced traditional values or provided escape in melodramatic scenarios. So too do animated programs subvert the medium that produces them, television. And their critique is not just limited to sitcoms; one can also see critiques of television dramas, talk shows, and so-called “reality” programming. Just as a segment of 19th century readers gravitated to the humor of the Southwest humorists, Mark Twain, and Ambrose Bierce instead of a popular market flooded with sentimental fiction and morality tales, so too do a large segment of viewers flock to animated television shows because of their satirical commentary.

The satirical energy of animated programs is not surprising when one examines the dominant forms of satire since ancient Greece. Ralph Rosen argues, “For every poet who sought to entertain audiences with sober and earnest perspectives on the world, it seems that there was always another just as happy to ridicule or ironize traditional pieties, or test the limits of decorum, all in the service of drawing laughter from an audience” (3). Typically, satirists put their mockery and ridicule in a form that would be recognizable to the audience, making timely parody a vital part of satire. Thus, satire has long been characterized by its mimicry of dominant genres, with satirists using parody, the imitation of a work of art, to criticize society.



Currently, for better or worse, television is among the dominant modes of entertainment in contemporary culture. Americans spend hours daily in front of the screen, making it a new hub of the family as many families eat dinner around the television rather than the dinner table. Airing on a lower tier cable network, *South Park* averages approximately three million viewers for each new episode, sometimes even reaching as many as five million (Johnson-Woods 8). Even after a 27-year run, ratings for *The Simpsons* have remained relatively unchanged at around six million viewers per new episode. Added to these ratings are the increasing opportunities for people to watch clips of these shows on the internet. In contrast, the sales figures of even the most esteemed postmodern satiric novelists pale. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* has sold approximately 10 million units (Pearson), and it has taken three decades to reach that number, and many buy the book because it is required for a class. This is not to argue that animated television shows are superior simply because more people see them or that the novel has lost its satirical power or relevance in the landscape of American humor, but rather to emphasize the tremendous influence animated satire demonstrates by its ability to manipulate the most popular medium. Originally, satire was limited to the poetic form; it then moved into theatre and the romance as those genres developed. Now American culture revolves around the television, and though animated programs are not the only source of parody and satire there, they are perhaps the most iconic.

Furthermore, American humorists have always used popular venues to dispense their humor. Twain and the Southwest humorists before him used dialect, the travel narrative, and the novel precisely because they were popular. Using these forms allowed them to critique various American institutions to a broad audience. Kurt Vonnegut relied on science-fiction motifs in his humor because the genre was becoming more popular on television and film. Because many children grew up watching animated programming on Saturday morning and after school, animation became a popular venue for satire.

The dialogue among critics who analyze animated television focuses primarily on their contributions to postmodern political and cultural satire or discussions of their significance in the history of television. The debate centers on the ability of these programs to subvert the dominant ideologies of capitalism and Christianity in America, which on some level certainly implies the tragic incongruous tradition in American humor. *Leaving Springfield*, a collection of essays edited by John Alberti, examines the extent to which *The Simpsons* provides an oppositional reading of dominant culture. Jonathan Gray also provides a comprehensive analysis of parody and intertextuality in *The Simpsons* in *Watching with The Simpsons*. Editor Robert J. Arp's *South Park and Philosophy*, Toni Johnson-Woods's *Blame Canada*, and Editor Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's *Taking South Park Seriously* all analyze how the satire and humor of *South Park*

subvert the sacred cows of American culture, while Ted Gournelos's *Cultural Studies and the Tao of South Park* combines an analysis of *South Park* with other satirical programs (*The Boondocks* among them) to evaluate the importance of such programs in the post-9/11 political landscape. Judith Yaross Lee's study, *Twain's Brand*, examines how Mark Twain's brand of humor manifests itself in contemporary culture today and uses *The Simpsons* as an example, but her analysis is limited only on one humorist's particular influence on one program. Meanwhile, more comprehensive studies of animated television provided by M. Keith Booker's *Drawn to Television*, Editors Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison's *Prime Time Animation*, and Michael V. Tueth's *Laughter in the Living Room*, all examine the satirical and humorous possibilities that exist in animated television programs.

All of the aforementioned studies are vital to explaining animated television's role in the postmodern landscape and the importance of their satire in contemporary culture. For the most part, critics agree that though animated television's post-modernity leads to slippery interpretation, it is valuable for their attempts to critique American institutions, more stringently than the typical American television sitcom, which usually abstains from making serious commentary on social issues.

As valuable as the studies are, they often ignore the ways that these shows use their platform as popular jester to subvert and criticize America's dominant institutions and visions of itself. Though a handful of articles briefly mention the similarities between these shows and those of past American humorists, no one has fully explicated the ways in which prime time animated programs follow in the commonly identified traditions of American humor. This book will begin a discussion of whether animated programs have revolutionized American humor, or if they have simply followed the same patterns of critiquing the incongruity in American life while adapting them to a new format and audience.

## The Shows

Before beginning this discussion, a brief synopsis of the animated programs in question, as well as the targets of their critiques, would be helpful. The second wave of adult-oriented animated programming began with *The Simpsons*. Produced by Matt Groening, *The Simpsons* first aired as a series in 1989 as part of the fledgling Fox Network. First and foremost, the series functions as a family comedy. Homer (Dan Castellaneta) is the father of the family, but unlike patriarchs in typical family sitcoms, Homer is clueless, childish, and often boorish and irresponsible, which establishes an ironic contrast with traditional family sitcoms. Homer's wife Marge (Julie Kavner) provides a sane

counterbalance to his buffoonish antics, which often creates tension between the two. In typical sitcom fashion, Homer and Marge have three children: Bart (Nancy Cartwright), Lisa (Yeardley Smith), and Maggie. In the show's early years, Bart (age 10) was the breakout star of the show because of his subversive antics and boyish charm. While Bart is considered an underachiever because of his poor academic performance, he is quite adept at exploiting others using his wit. Lisa (age 8) is Bart's opposite, an academic star and driven to act morally. Indeed, though she can be overly idealistic in her support of social progress, Lisa provides the moral and ethical balance to Bart's subversive deviousness. The Simpsons reside in Springfield, an "every place" city that can shrink or expand depending on the needs of an episode. The wealth of characters in the town sometimes moves the program from the realm of family comedy into political and social satire, often achieving both at the same time. Because of its edgy content, *The Simpsons*, along with other subversive shows such as *Married... with Children* (1987-1997) and *In Living Color* (1990-1994), solidified Fox as a hip alternative to the staid programming on NBC, ABC, and CBS in the 1990s. To further emphasize the contrast, Fox pitted *The Simpsons* against *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992). Though the show did not supplant Cosby's, it generated enough buzz and viewers to become Fox's flagship program.

Because of *The Simpsons'* astounding success and a television market prone to imitation, many other animated programs would fill the airwaves over the next decade, particularly animated family programs. Created and produced by *Beavis and Butthead* creator Mike Judge along with *The Simpsons* producer Greg Daniels, *King of the Hill* (1997) debuted on Fox in 1997 and focuses on the Hill family—Hank, Peggy, and Bobby, and their life in Arlen, TX. For the most part, the program revolves around Hank's (Judge) attempts to adapt to the modern world around him. Raised as a conservative Texan, Hank, who proudly works as a propane salesman, largely adheres to hard work, moral character, and plain dealing. His major conflicts revolve around his boorish, bigoted war hero father Cotton (Toby Huss) and his entertainment-obsessed son Bobby (Pamela Adlon), who dreams of being a prop comic in New York. Hank's wife Peggy (Kathy Najimi), along with his friends Dale (Johnny Hardwick), Bill (Stephen Root), and Boomhauer (Judge), provide Hank with other foils as he tries to navigate a middle road between a conservative upbringing that he has found inadequate and a progressive world that he does not quite understand.

Seth MacFarlane contributed two animated programs to the animated family movement: *Family Guy* and *American Dad!*. *Family Guy* debuted on Fox in 1999, and after it was cancelled in 2001, it came back to Fox's lineup in 2004, where it has enjoyed a loyal following and sometimes outperforms *The Simpsons* in the ratings. *Family Guy* revolves around the Griffin family. Like Homer Simpson, Peter (MacFarlane) is essentially a juvenile simpleton who is easily distracted by popular culture and his own active imagination. Peter's shenanigans are endured

by his wife Lois (Alex Borstein). In a reversal of *The Simpsons*, Peter and Lois's two older children, Chris (Seth Green) and Meg (Mila Kunis), take a backseat to perhaps the most popular character on the program, baby Stewie (MacFarlane). Unlike Maggie Simpson, not only can Stewie talk, but he can also construct complex technology and hatch diabolical schemes that often revolve around murdering Lois. Such absurd humor is at the center of *Family Guy*'s strategy, an absurdity punctuated by frequent non-sequitur gags after a character makes a reference either to popular culture or to some past family experience. To further highlight the absurdity, the rational voice of the program is the Griffin's talking dog Brian (MacFarlane), who also enjoys Martinis and NPR even while he retains the basic behaviors of a dog (playing with chew toys, marking territory). While this absurdity implies a playful incongruity, the program also engages with more controversial topics and political satire, targeting issues such as tobacco, gay and lesbian rights, religion, and politics.

On the heels of *Family Guy*'s triumphant return, MacFarlane's *American Dad!* premiered in 2005 with a different, more overtly political humor. Unlike *Family Guy*, *American Dad!* does not rely on non-sequitur quick cuts and the plots are more cohesive. The title character, Stan Smith (MacFarlane), like most other animated fathers, displays a heightened sense of stupidity. However, Stan, an agent in the CIA, is a different kind of stupid. While Homer and Peter possess adolescent qualities that render their oafishness somewhat tolerable and even charming, Stan's stupidity is rooted in his whole-hearted immersion in the standard beliefs of extreme American conservatism. Through Stan's oafishness and adherence to conservative mores, the writers of the show primarily critique the political and cultural rhetoric of the George W. Bush administration. Stan's wife Francine (Wendy Schaal) plays a similar role to Marge and Lois and accepts Stan's quirks with good nature until he pushes his schemes too far. Because of his emphasis on maintaining the appearance of the prototypical healthy conservative family, Stan's children largely disappoint him. His daughter Haley (Rachel MacFarlane), a student in community college, repudiates Stan's conservative outlook with a more progressive, idealistic political view. Stan's son Steve (Scott Grimes), who attends Pearl Bailey High School, disappoints him because he is nerdy, wimpy, and apolitical, which does not measure up to Stan's standard of manhood. Showing that *American Dad!* can stand a little absurdity, the Smith family is joined by Klaus (Dee Bradley Baker), a German operative whose brain has been implanted into a goldfish by the CIA, and Roger, an escaped alien who stays with the Smiths because Stan owes him a life-debt. Even though the stronger political content has been toned down after the end of the Bush presidency, *American Dad!* still often critiques social and cultural positions held by conservatives on the War on Terror and gay and lesbian equality.

Even though the animated family has been a most successful format, many other animated programs have achieved success by deviating from it. In 1997,

Trey Parker and Matt Stone created *South Park*. They continue to write, produce, and provide the majority of the voice work for each episode, while Parker directs every episode. The show mainly focuses on the misadventures of Stan Marsh (Parker), Kyle Broflovski (Stone), Eric Cartman (Parker), and Kenny McCormick (Stone), four fourth graders in rural mountain hamlet South Park, Colorado, but *South Park* also revolves around the entire town and the various crises that descend upon it from week to week. The series is currently in its 18th season on Comedy Central, a cable network with which Parker and Stone have a symbiotic relationship: they needed the fledgling cable channel to air their brand of “tasteless” humor because no broadcast network would do so without significant censorship, and the immense success and popularity of the show solidified Comedy Central’s status as an up-and-coming cable channel. The show has become a phenomenon because of its willingness to critique numerous religious, cultural, and political shibboleths via satire. Furthermore, Parker and Stone’s critiques are enhanced by their ability to write, animate, and produce an episode in a relatively short time, sometimes as little as six days. Because of this quick production schedule, the show is often one of the first to react to cultural, political, or religious controversies.

Debuting on MTV in 1997, *Daria* focuses on Daria Morgendorffer (Tracy Grandstaff), a smart, perceptive, but cynical young lady trying to understand her role in the context of her high school, which she considers shallow and unenlightening. Aided by her partner in alienation, Jane Lane, Daria uses her droll intellect to criticize the idealized icons in the American high school, from jocks, to cheerleaders, to fashionistas. While the program does provide some glimpses into Daria’s family life, whose dysfunction largely stems from her parents’ inability to communicate with their children because of high-stress jobs, the school is the main setting of the program. Daria is often considered an outcast because of her personal emphasis on education and critical thinking, while those around her are hypnotized by notions of popularity, trendiness, and wealth. The tension created by Daria’s adversarial relationship with her peers and superiors creates the space for cultural, and sometimes political, satire, particularly focused on idealized high school life.

Co-created and co-produced by Matt Groening and David X. Cohen, *Futurama* debuted on Fox in 1999. It was cancelled in 2003, but newer, slightly edgier episodes reappeared on Comedy Central in 2010. Probably the most unusual among animated programs, *Futurama* is set in the year 3,000 in New New York City. The program pulls from many television genres, such as the workplace comedy and romantic comedy, but it primarily parodies the tropes of science-fiction programs, particularly *Star Trek* (1966-1969). The main characters work for Planet Express, a delivery company owned by scientist inventor Hubert Farnsworth (Billy West), whose advanced age prevents him from being extremely successful as either an entrepreneur or a scientist. The

program is framed from the perspective of protagonist Philip J. Fry (West), who is cryogenically frozen in 1999 and awakens 1,000 years into the future. Before he was frozen, Fry was a rather obtuse and inept pizza delivery boy, which makes him qualified to be an inept delivery boy at Planet Express. Other characters include Leela (Katey Sagel), a tough, attractive one-eyed mutant who ironically serves as the captain and pilot of Planet Express's delivery ship; Zoidberg (West), an incompetent doctor from the lobster planet Decapod 10; bureaucrat Hermes Conrad (Phil LaMarr), a limbo-loving Jamaican who also enjoys mundane tasks such as filing and stamping; and Amy Wong (Lauren Tom), the intern at Planet Express. Perhaps the most interesting character on the show is Bender (JohnDiMaggio), a trash-talking, hard-drinking subversive robot that works at Planet Express. The futuristic setting provides the writers with many opportunities to satirize contemporary issues, particularly issues of waste and global warning, since Earth is frequently threatened by neglect. Indeed, New New York was simply built on top of New York, where an entire mutant underclass resides.

Issues facing African-Americans in the American landscape were held to close scrutiny in two programs: *The PJ's* and *The Boondocks*. *The PJ's* debuted on Fox from 1999-2000, while its final season aired in 2001 on the WB Network. The show focuses on the world of Thurgood Stubbs (Eddie Murphy), an African-American superintendent of the Hilton-Jacobs projects in an unspecified large city. *The Boondocks* has been a part of Cartoon Network's "Adult Swim" block of adult animated programming since 2005. An adaptation of Aaron McGruder's controversial comic strip, the program focuses on the Freemans, an African-American family that moves from inner city Chicago to the suburb of Woodcrest, in which the multilayered tensions faced by African-Americans are exacerbated by their residence in a mostly white city. Because these shows comprise the entirety of Chapter 4, I will provide a more detailed synopsis of these programs at that time.

While many more excellent animated programs could be included in this study, I chose these programs because they consistently use incongruous humor to challenge American ideals. Furthermore, rather than discuss these shows individually, I will be discussing them, along with the examples of other American humorists, in the context of the particularly iconic American ideals they attack so well. Providing a larger context for the humor and satire evident in animated programming reveals that there are various ways to tell the same joke. Perhaps more importantly, the similarity of these shows to other American humorists further reveals a uniquely American way of handling incongruity in humor. Essentially, there is a common joke in the American DNA, and animated programs have inherited the ability to tell it, even if they might look different than their ancestors.

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## Chapter 2

# Frontiers, Suburbs, Politics, and Poop: Setting, Episodes, and the American Carnavalesque in the Southwest Humorists and Animated Television Programs

An aspiring doctor is told by his superior to cup a large African-American woman's sternum to alleviate her symptoms. Because he has only reached the letter *C* in his anatomy guide, the apprentice doctor is befuddled, and he mistakenly believes that the sternum is located on the woman's posterior, as if the human body were laid out like a naval vessel. Though both the young doctor and especially the woman are uncomfortable, he presses on and does his duty. This scenario seems ripped from an episode of *South Park* or *Family Guy* because it is so inappropriate and absurd. However, it is actually a scene from Henry Clay Lewis's short story "Cupping on a Sternum," published in popular sportsman and hunting magazine *The Spirit of the Times* in 1845. The scene illustrates the tendency to rely on ironic misunderstanding and grotesque humor in American humor and serves as one of the many similarities shared between the antebellum Southwest humor and the humor of animated television.

If humor is passed down from generation to generation, with each new incarnation putting a unique, contemporary spin on an old joke about American life and culture, then it seems perfectly reasonable to examine the ways in which the recent manifestation of animated television shows follow in the footsteps of Southwest humor, also referred to as native humor, a movement that many critics suggest is the first distinctly American style of humor and a forerunner for the realism movement in American literature (Clark and Turner 2-4). In particular, both movements emphasize divisive partisan political conflicts, American market economy, and American religion as primary sources of humor in American life. To critique these conflicts, both movements rely on unique settings that expose the incongruity between American ideals and the realities of American life. In addition to their settings, both employ non-linear storylines with intense action to illustrate that though there is sound and fury in everyday American life, few of these inherent conflicts are solved, but instead



transferred to the next story or episode. Furthermore, both rely heavily on the use of what Mikhail Bakhtin defined as the carnivalesque, which revels in the physical functions of the human body and the triumph of market culture over dominant culture.

However, the Southwest humorists and animated programs put a uniquely American spin in their uses of the carnivalesque, examining what happens when the marketplace becomes among the dominant forms of discourse in the nation. Thus, both genres use similar tools to accomplish their goals of critiquing American concerns such as crass commercialism, an unstable and violent market culture, and the elevation of ne'er-do-wells and confidence men to positions of social prominence. Like Southwest humor, animated television series often use graphic violence in their jokes, elevate the picaresque character, rely on the absurd while maintaining an ironic realism at their core, and explore the changing expectations of manhood within their culture. Altogether, both movements use these strategies to provide a critique that exposes the incongruities of American economic, religious, and political life. Though both movements make particular use of the carnivalesque, which has been a feature of satire since the ancient Greeks, they also shift their use to address particularly American problems. Bakhtin argues that Rabelais uses the language of the marketplace, dirty jokes, and folklore to offer an alternative to oppressive religious ideology, which is not quite as applicable to the American experience because of the conflicts between religious piety, capitalism, and democracy. By 1835, the marketplace had come to dominate America as the seeds were sown for America to move from a rural to an industrial economy. The Southwest humorists, such as Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, George Washington Harris, and Henry Clay Lewis, were among the first to consider the consequences of America's reliance on market culture and its influences on religion, politics, and the American dream. As years passed, other writers such as Mark Twain, Sinclair Lewis, H.L. Mencken, and Ishmael Reed would voice similar concerns in their humor. Animated television series also expose the dangers of market culture and its influences on the public sphere. In short, both movements interrogate what happens when the language of the marketplace becomes dominant, a concern particularly felt in the United States, a relatively new nation that is largely defined in its myths and stories by its economic systems, which claim to allow upward mobility for the "common man," as much as its political systems.

### **The Southwest Humorists and Animated Programs: Humor Sprung from a Polarized Cultural Landscape**

Before discussing the specific works of the Southwest humorists and animated programs, a description of the political and cultural atmosphere

that shapes both genres is important because it establishes the American style of humor born out of disillusionment of idealism. The Southwest humorist tradition encompasses the antebellum South from the early part of the 19th century until The Civil War. The movement is thought to have begun around 1831 with the publication of Augustus Baldwin Longstreets's *Georgia Scenes*, a collection of tales about life away from the main arteries of American culture. The book was lauded by critics, including Edgar Allan Poe, for realistic depiction of the frontier, its use of grotesque imagery, and its inclusion of regional dialect. Moreover, the offbeat characters and dangerous content provided an alternative to the overly sentimental or stuffy transcendental works that defined the period. Soon after *Georgia Scenes*, other writers such as George Washington Harris, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, Henry Clay Lewis, and Johnson Jones Hooper published stories that provided similar content from different locales, with each author pushing the boundaries of good taste in his own way. Many of these stories were published in sporting magazines nationwide; the most famous of these publications was William T. Porter's *Spirit of the Times*, which provided these writers with an outlet that could reach a niche audience. The movement was immensely popular among buyers, but perhaps not as well received from the arbiters of cultural and literary taste in America, who balked at grotesque violence in the tales. Brom Weber notes that quite often the established literary elite simply ignored these tales and considered them beyond the pale of respectable literature (x). The movement even touches a nerve with some contemporary critics; Edmund Wilson opines that George Washington Harris's *Sut Lovingood* is "the most repellent book in American history" (qtd. in Martin 101). These stories came to be characterized by violence, the grotesque, animalistic imagery, dialect and performance, and a tendency to use the political climate of the frontier to comment on the political climate of the nation leading up to the Civil War. They first appeared in newspapers and magazines and served as a chronicle of the issues that people, particularly those on the frontier, faced in their day to day lives (Weber xxvii). Once the war ended, the issues addressed in these tales became largely obsolete. The characteristics of frontier humor then found their way into the writing of Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, and other humorists of the late 19th century.

Though the stories themselves appear to be homespun, simple folk humor, the politics that shaped these narratives were volatile. Slavery continued to divide the nation; additionally, the economy was undergoing a market revolution that clashed with the plantation-based economy of the Southern frontier. Not only was the Southwestern frontier filled with Southern gentlemen looking to establish their own fiefdoms, but also Yankee peddlers and enterprising capitalists looking to take advantage of the chaos that the frontier provided. A few of the writers were themselves transplants from the North or of

Virginian and Carolinian stock who sought to take advantage of the financial promise of the new territories; others lacked the opportunities or the tools to be upwardly mobile even in the frontier environment. John Mayfield notes that most lacked a specific place in Southern and Northern cultures (xxiii). What they found on the frontier was a haphazard imitation of the established mores in the “proper” South and the market culture of the North. Longstreet, a Southern Democrat, turned to the institutions of education, law, and politics, and settled in quaint Augusta. Hooper and Baldwin went to Alabama to seek planting opportunities. While in pursuit of these endeavors, they wrote for newspapers and magazines. Mainly, they wrote what they observed—the shady, theatrical life that existed on the frontier, complete with seemingly uneducated poor white land squatters who took life one nickel at a time, and of course the existence of slavery, an institution that many of these writers supported. The setting provided ample material for knee-slapping yarns and funny stereotypes of hillbillies and alligator-men, and certainly those characters abound in their stories. Nevertheless, beneath the surface of joviality lies anxiety about what the future has to offer, particularly the explosion of market culture and capitalism influenced by the industrial revolution.

The Southwest humorists wrote during the thirty years before the Civil War; in addition, they also wrote during an intense political struggle between the two dominant parties in American politics, the Jacksonian Democrats and the upstart Whigs. Jackson’s policies allowed men without property to vote and generally granted them more mobility in the marketplace, much to the Whigs’ dismay. Jacksonians also remained conservative in their desire to social progress in industry, though they encouraged the move westward, while the Whigs were open to many methods of social advancements.<sup>1</sup> The Jacksonians’ conservatism was largely an attempt to consolidate their power, an endeavor that brought them great success. While the Whigs argued amongst themselves, the Jacksonian Democrats won the majority of the elections. Many of the Southwest humorists, such as Hooper, Baldwin, and Thorpe, were of Whig persuasion, coming from aristocratic families (even if many were in a financial death rattle). Therefore, many historians and critics, beginning with Kenneth Lynn, argue that those writers of Whig persuasion use educated, cultured “gentleman observers” to form a *cordon sanitaire* between themselves and the uneducated, uncouth characters they come across (Piacentino 15; Smith 53). Nevertheless, the portrayal of these rough characters, whether in playful jest or biting satire, exposed the inherent contradiction in America’s Constitution and its

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1 Among the issues that divided both parties was slavery. Many among the Whigs supported abolition, but others wished to maintain the status quo. The Democrats of the time supported slavery. Mayfield notes that many writers supported the institution of slavery, or at least tolerated it as part of their everyday lives.

economic system. Of course, some humorists, like Longstreet and Harris, were staunch Democrats, and both use gentleman observers in their works as well. Most likely, the writers affiliated with both parties were equally baffled at the theatrics and chicanery that the new economic climate produced, as evidenced by the wildcat evangelists and opportunistic confidence men who are mocked in many of these stories. Furthermore, with the exceptions of Longstreet and Harris, many of the writers were not connected with their politics to the extent that they were unwilling to confront the foibles that they observed on the frontier. In essence, regardless of their political affiliation, writers of the Southwest tradition developed very similar strategies to illuminate their critique of frontier life, such as setting, non-linear plot structure, and the carnivalesque, to give voice to their distinct political critiques.

Critics have delineated the connection between Southwest humor and its influence on other movements in American humor. Arguing that variations of the Southwest humorists persist into the 20th century, Hamlin Hill notes that their humor “has not been so much lost as misplaced...[contemporary humorists] simply channeled most of their activities into different lines of communication which continued to reach the popular audience” (91). Hill found the appropriation of Southwestern humor in the works of Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and even J.D. Salinger. Ed Piacentino also supports the strong connection between popular culture and Southwest humor, noting that its influence can be found in the work of Ray Stevens, Harry Crews, Jeff Foxworthy, newspaper comics, and so-called “ruralcoms” like *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962) and *Green Acres* (1965) (22-23). He writes, “Permutations of Old Southwest humor are likewise spread in the United States’ mass media, an indication of the extent to which the storytelling style of this humorous tradition has permeated American popular culture” (22). Indeed, *The Enduring Legacy of Old Southwest Humor*, edited by Piacentino, examines the movement’s vast influence on popular culture. However, missing from this collection of essays (even though it was published in 2006) is an analysis of how animated television programs might bear similarities to writers like Longstreet and Harris. Other critical work on native humor and animated television has not corrected this lapse. Even while many animated programs may lack a direct connection to the South or hillbilly humor (with the exceptions of *King of the Hill* and possibly *South Park*), they occupy similar spaces in the public estimation and employ similar strategies to parody, satirize, and laugh at American culture. More importantly, both movements illustrate how little America’s humor and the targets of its humorists have changed.

Of course, it would be presumptuous to suggest that animated programs owe their entire existence to the Southwest humorists. Like frontier humor, animated programs are products of their own particular culture, and though the political climates are very similar, they are not identical. Nevertheless, they

employ similar strategies to respond to their respective political climates while using different methods to employ those strategies. Both movements make use of the carnivalesque, but they apply it uniquely to fit the parameters of their respective cultures. Though the political and economic climate that influences animated television series is not identical, several similarities can be identified. Animation has been a staple in American popular culture since the early 20th century, and its prominence as politically viable parody and satire has grown steadily. Though satirical elements can be found in animated forerunners like *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*, the debut of *The Simpsons* on the Fox network in 1989 opened the door for animated series that engaged actively with politics and the importance of television in our everyday lives, leading Jonathan Gray, et al., to observe that “perhaps no single [program] is as important in creating the televisual space for the satire TV boom as *The Simpsons*” (25). Much like *Georgia Scenes* did for Southwest humor, the success of *The Simpsons* opened the floodgates for other animated programs. The Fox Network became much like *The Spirit of the Times*, an avenue for creative minds such as Matt Groening, Mike Judge, Greg Daniels, and Seth MacFarlane to produce edgy programs such as *King of the Hill*, *Family Guy*, *American Dad!*, and *Futurama* on the network. Other outlets, mostly on the increasingly relevant cable market, produced a bevy of other successful programs: MTV with *Beavis and Butt-head* (1993-1996; 2011) and *Daria*, Cartoon Network with *The Boondocks* and other Adult Swim programs, and Comedy Central with *South Park* and a *Futurama* reboot (2010-2013). The sharp critique provided by these programs provides an alternative to the saccharine, non-threatening humor dispensed by the majority of television sitcoms. Much like the contemporaneous questions about the Southwest humorists, animated television programs exist in a nether-space of respectability, between those who laud them as important commentary on the state American life and those who dismiss them as a pastiche of toilet humor for college-age nihilists.

As easy as it can be to dismiss these programs as vacuous filth that fails to encourage active political involvement, they react to a political atmosphere defined by partisan news coverage available 24 hours a day (ironically, the parent company of the most partisan of these organizations, Fox News, is also responsible for airing the programs that criticizes it most harshly). The politics that necessitated the criticism of the Southwest humorists is not so different from what necessitates the criticism of animated programs. Like the Whigs and Democrats, most citizens are inundated with the partisan politics dominated by the Democrats and Republicans, with both sides often arguing from untenably extremist positions that leave people seeking real solutions baffled, as represented in each animated program. Furthermore, the marketplace has undergone a radical shift with the advent of cable television and the internet, which simultaneously and ironically empowers and cripples those who seek to

arm themselves against the rich and powerful. Though we may not be on the brink of a Civil War, we do seem on the brink of a great sea change (not necessarily apocalyptic; after all, life did continue after the Civil War), and like the Southwest humorists, animated programs document life leading up to those changes.<sup>2</sup>

Like the writers of Southwest sketches, the politics of those who produce animated programs are not cut from the same cloth. Animated television in its second incarnation arrived while a debate of values between the so-called “Red States” and “Blue States” began to reach fever pitch. Indeed, one can argue that Seth MacFarlane’s critiques of religion-influenced conservative politics in his series *Family Guy* and *American Dad!* cannot exist without the turmoil created by bickering conservatives and liberals during the George W. Bush administration. Judge’s *King of the Hill* and Trey Parker and Matt Stone’s *South Park* cannot exist without a continually absurd politically correct movement that often attempts to repress progressive dialogue on important issues. Regardless of a particular program’s politics and ideology, the creators and writers of animated series seem as baffled by the tenor and theatrics of the political landscape and the marketplace as they are about political ideologies themselves. Though many animated shows follow (consciously or unconsciously) the tenets of the Southwestern style of humor, the times in which they are produced necessitate a different usage of these conventions. Nevertheless, their focus on market culture and divisive politics mirror that of the Southwest humorists.

### **Places, Times, and People: A Deflating of Expectation in American Humor**

Any discussion of the similarities between these two distinctly American movements should begin with their similar use of setting and episodic structure. Both attach significance to their settings in their commentary on American culture. The emphasis on setting in both movements is of vital importance; many of the stories by the Southwest humorists take place on the frontier, the manifestation of the American dream in the 19th Century. Brom Weber writes that “Frontier life influenced the form of its humor as well as its nature” (xxii), meaning that the frontier defined virtually every facet of their existence, including their humor. In response the romanticized

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2 Indeed, Ron Brownstein’s recent book on American politics is entitled *The Second Civil War: How Extreme Partisanship Has Paralyzed Washington and Polarized Americans*. While a bit sensationalist, the title does speak to the deeply conflicted sides in contemporary political dialogue, or lack thereof.



frontier, they exploded the romantic notion of man taming the wild with his natural sensibilities in order to create a promised land that guarantees upward mobility, prosperity, and independence. Instead, their portrait is much less flattering with their emphasis on the violence, theatrics, and theft in the less settled areas of America. For the humorists, the frontier represents a space for con artists, religious zealots, and politicians to grab a financial foothold. Most animated programs take place in a setting that has come to symbolize the promise of America after World War II: suburbia. In many sitcoms from the 1950s to today, life in the suburbs has been portrayed as a utopian space where racial, economic, and cultural disturbances do not occur. Animated programs subvert this utopian rhetoric by destabilizing the space with problems that other sitcoms ignore, such as corrupt and/or incompetent leadership. Thus, both movements seek to deromanticize the myths created by other texts about the frontier and suburbia.

The Southwest humorists wrote about life on the fringes of genteel society on the American frontier. The frontier setting of Georgia is indispensable to Longstreet, as indicated by his work's full title: *Georgia Scenes, Characters, Incidents in the First Half Century of the Republic*. The title implies that the frontier is a fraction of a larger republic. Though the scenes illustrate that Georgia has a life and culture of its own, it is still swayed by the larger happenings of the United States, and Longstreet is particularly interested in the violence of the American political system and the burgeoning market culture. "The Gander Pulling" opens with a detailed description of four towns' respective views on states' rights and federal rights, which indicates the extent to which these small towns could be influenced by larger political conflicts. Nevertheless, many of the stories in the collection portray the emphatically violent and unromantic life on the frontier. After an eloquent treatise on state and federal rights at the beginning of the story, participants from four towns come together to pull the head off a poor, unsuspecting gander. Oddly, this violent act brings the four towns together in a way that political debate does not. Through these acts, Longstreet emphasizes the tendency to settle political disputes with shows, spectacles, and sometimes violence instead of rational discussion or compromise. Ultimately, nothing is accomplished, but a good time is had by all. Other stories in Longstreet's collection, "The Fight," "The Shooting Match," and "The Horse-Swap" among them, all depict the shady dealings and physical violence that had come to define the real frontier, as opposed to the "noble savages" in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* tales.

Hooper, Lewis, and Harris all follow Longstreet's example with some variations. In *Georgia Scenes*, the state of Georgia and its environs serve as the centerpiece of the collection. Conversely, in the work of Hooper, Lewis, and Harris, respectively, the individual characters of Simon Suggs, Madison Tensas, and Sut Lovingood take center stage, and each author pays attention

to how the individual character negotiates the frontier. Hooper's Suggs and his motto—"It's good to be shifty in a new country"—epitomizes the rise of confidence men in the newly settled lands of Alabama. Captain Suggs achieves his success and fortune at the expense of others, not on genuine merit. He prides himself on his victories against the Indian tribes surrounding the village, yet he wisely never fights them. Furthermore, in "Captain Suggs Attends a Camp Meeting," Suggs pretends to have found religion so that he can steal the money from the offering at a religious camp meeting. Here, market culture and religious spectacle are virtually inseparable as Suggs adopts the language of religion to swindle the camp meeting, which has also adopted the language of religion to take money from the poor folks on the frontier. Lewis's swamp doctor, Tensas, observes the violence, poverty, and confidence games that occurred on the Mississippi and Louisiana frontier. Harris's Sut Lovingood, like Suggs, cons his way through Eastern Tennessee. Virtually everyone in Sut's environment is taking part in an elaborate performance to bolster individual wealth, though Sut seems to be the only one aware of it. Of this more realistic depiction of the frontier, Christopher Morris writes that "while romantic writers North and South waxed philosophical about the human character and soul in an increasing commercial world...it was left to the humorists...to present more realistic images of the market revolution" (12). Though each writer sets his stories in a different locale, they critique similar facets of the larger American culture, from the theatrics associated with market culture to the violent, dangerous frontier populated with con men and shady characters.

Likewise, the settings of animated television shows are indispensable for the humorous commentary they provide. But instead of the frontier, these shows use suburbia as the setting for their critique. Though *The Simpsons*, *The Boondocks*, and *South Park* center on the relationships within the family, the settings of each show grants them both more latitude to comment on politics and culture. For example, one can argue that *The Simpsons*—with all its ancillary characters like Mayor Quimby and Kwik-E-Mart employee Apu, and its landmarks like the nuclear power plant and Springfield Elementary School and Springfield Gorge—is more about Springfield functioning as a microcosm of America than a show about the family. As Kurt Koenigsburger notes, "The plastic limits of Springfield circumscribe American social relations in their entirety" (41). The town also provides the writers and producers with opportunities to critique market culture.

A multitude of *Simpsons* episodes revolve around opportunities that can potentially fulfill the promises of wealth and happiness in American suburbs. In "Marge vs. the Monorail" (14 January 1993), the citizens of Springfield can use three million dollars to improve their town. Rather than using it to reinvest in their local shops as Marge suggests, they fall for huckster Lyle Lanley's (Phil



Hartman) catchy song that plays on their desires to unlock the promises of the future with technology in the form of a monorail, even though the monorail is discovered to be faulty.<sup>3</sup> That Lanley can seduce the town of Springfield with his song so easily speaks to the gullible nature of consumers in market culture. Often, such gullibility is exploited by corporations to enhance business for their own endeavors. In “Lisa the Skeptic” (23 November 1997), a new mall plays on the religious beliefs of Springfield by planting an angel for students to find on an archeological dig. Like Suggs’s con, the mall’s marketing specifically combines America’s odd kinship between religion and economics. The episode, and the program, thus acknowledges the close ties and tension between American market culture and religious culture first recognized by British writer H.R. Haweis in the 19th century (Clark and Turner 2).

In addition, Aaron McGruder uses the mostly white suburb of Woodcrest as an oppositional viewpoint for his African-American protagonists, making it a primary source of conflict and critique. Undeniably, *The Boondocks* would not have the same material for subversion were it set in a large, more culturally diverse city like New York or Chicago. McGruder clarifies, “White people are the backdrops in most black Americans’ lives. It’s just that simple” (171). The Freemans’ interaction with these settings often exposes the cruelty of market culture in contemporary America. For example, in “The Block is Hot” (12 March 2006), young Jazmine DuBois (Gabby Soleil) sells her lemonade stand to corporate villain Ed Wuncler (Ed Asner) so she can buy a pony, but Wuncler instead exploits her labor by making her work long hours with no breaks.<sup>4</sup> After Huey arranges a protest to highlight the cruelty of Jazmine’s working conditions, Wuncler puts on a theatrical display to promote his own “cruelty free” lemonade while riding in a horse drawn carriage. He subsequently shuts down Jazmine’s lemonade stand and does not give her the pony she worked so hard for. The episode is virtually a lesson on global economics, in which products are made by cheap labor to furnish the promise of the suburban lifestyle. The value of “The Block Is Hot” is that McGruder places the unethical practices of corporations that exploit cheap labor in the suburb itself, confronting the inhabitants of Woodcrest with the labor it takes to produce the goods they consume.

Regarding *South Park*’s use of the suburban setting, Alison Halsall writes that the show portrays “suburbia as a site of hypocrisy, rampant ignorance, supercilious sanctimony, and spectacular irreverence” (23-24). The Christmas episodes, particularly those involving Mr. Hankey (Parker), expose the extent

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3 In many ways, Lanley is an homage to Harold Hill from *The Music Man* (1962), who is himself reminiscent of the confidence men in Southwestern sketches.

4 Wuncler’s name is a clear allusion to the Oncler in Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax* (1971), who is also an enterprising con man.

to which economics and religion are combined in American culture. To be sure, producer Groening's use of Springfield, McGruder's use of Woodcrest, and Parker and Stone's portrayal of South Park are not identical to a writer like Longstreet's use of place. Animated programs do not seek to achieve a realistic portrayal of suburban spaces as much as exposing the American myth of the happy, middle-class suburban family as false. Nevertheless, artists of both conventions use idealized American settings as an important tool in commenting on American romantic myths.

Because many Southwest humorists emphasized location to such a great degree, linear plot was deemphasized. Of course, the lack of linear plot can also be attributed to the publishing practices of the era (many stories were published in newspapers or serials before being collected in book form). Whatever the case may be, works like *Georgia Scenes*, *Sut Lovingood* (1867), and *Simon Suggs* (1852) have an episodic structure rather than a clear linear narrative. Though a character may reference a past event or two stories may fall into the same plot line, the majority of stories in these collections stand alone. Because of the lack of a sustained plot, the characters are not developed as fully, which gives the writer more leeway to use the characters to lampoon various modes of thought. Noting this tendency not only in *Sut Lovingood*, but in much of Southwest humor, Brom Weber writes, "Though sketched with incisive detail, these characters are usually broad portraits of a human trait or a social institution, sometimes both" (Harris xxvi). Characters, such as Wirt Staples, Sicily Burns, and Parson John Bullen, all symbolize larger character types like the outlaw, the beautiful flirt, and the hypocritical clergyman. In *Georgia Scenes*, Longstreet creates memorable, yet static, characters like Rancy Sniffle, who has come to be recognized as the epitome of "white trash." Furthermore, if any characters recur in these tales, they often remain the same age and retain the same characteristics. Using this method, 19th century writers took advantage of their episodic structure and character types humorously to draw attention to conflicts on the frontier because the focus was not on a linear plot, but on how these character types interacted with their settings.

The episodic structure of animated television is similar to that of the Southwest humorists. In addition to the fixed locale in animated programs, the characters also remain the same age. Since *The Simpsons* debuted over 27 years ago, all the characters have remained the same: Homer still works at the power plant, Bart and Lisa remain in the same grade, and Maggie continues to suck on her pacifier. Other animated shows have followed suit. In 18 seasons of *South Park*, the children protagonists have only moved from third grade to fourth grade. In the middle of *King of the Hill*'s 13 year run, Bobby Hill moves from Junior High to High School. Thus, any change that occurs in the universe of animated television is miniscule. Michael V. Tueth suggests that the non-linearity of animated television shows makes them more subversive (143). The non-

linear nature of setting and character allow these shows to draw characters who are distinguished, but they can also stand for character-types and social attitudes. In *The Simpsons*, Lisa Simpson fills the role of liberal intellectual, Bart is the underachieving picaro, and Homer is the buffoonish everyman. In *South Park*, Cartman plays the role of selfish bigot, Mr(s). Garrison the neurotic who stays in a state of emotional crisis and split personality. In *American Dad!*, Stan Smith embodies the right wing political ideals embraced by the Bush administration. The uses of character types enhances the satire of both movements especially because audiences focus less on character development and more on how the characters interact within the plot.

Though the use of character types in animation is similar to the Southwest humorists, the motivations appear to be different for each. In Southwest humor, the purpose for including such characters was to give an accurate portrayal of life on the frontier, thus privileging a discourse of more realistic portrayals over the romanticized texts that defined much of the period. Indeed, many critics note that writers like Longstreet and Harris helped pave the way for the realist movement because of their use of dialect and a stricter adherence to the laws of nature.

No one could claim that animated television strives for a realistic portrayal of its characters in this manner, with the exception of the characters in *King of the Hill*, all of whom would fit quite well in the Southwest tradition because of their use of dialect and their status as blue collar, lower to middle class social position. However, other programs do not strive for such realism; after all, *Family Guy* features a talking dog and *American Dad!* boasts a talking goldfish. Nevertheless, Jason Mittell argues that animated programs can be classified as realistic not because they adhere to the physical rules of everyday life, but because they expose the fallacies of idealized sitcom tropes and offer a more three dimensional view of how families interact with one another (qtd. in Thompson "Hank Hill" 44). Even though animated characters are in many instances exaggerated character types drawn to reflect absurd physical dimensions and behavior, they must maintain some connection to reality in order to connect with audiences (even seemingly schizophrenic characters like Peter Griffin). Furthermore, like the Southwest humorists' privileging of more realistic discourse over sentimental fiction, animated television programs privilege their discourse over that of traditional television programs. In this sense, animated television may be more in the vein of Menippean satire, but one could also place Southwest humor in that same category because both lack the strict adherence to form that would be expected in other types of satire. Ultimately, one can argue the similarities in both genres' use of setting, episodic structure, and character types are more than coincidence; certainly, the structure provides artists with the versatility to critique various facets of American culture.

## **The American Carnavalesque in Southwest Humor and Animated Television: Subversion of Dominant Culture through Language and the Grotesque**

The most recognizable characteristic in both movements is their consistent use of carnivalesque humor. In his *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin outlines the characteristics of the carnivalesque as evidenced in the works of French writer François Rabelais, and Bakhtin bases his views on the traditions of the medieval and Renaissance carnival. For Bakhtin, the carnival was intended to be a subversive act: a time of licensed debauchery, a transgressive time when the boundaries of authority and peasantry were inverted. Bakhtin suggests that the carnival is driven by the language of the marketplace, a focus on the grotesque bodily lower stratum and its regenerative qualities, its triumph of the low over the high, and the unified, festive laughter of the common people over authority. Yet, this laughter is often ambivalent because once the carnival ends, the oppressive system is restored; thus, the carnivalesque somewhat reinforces that which it critiques. However, Bakhtin also saw the carnival as a festive cleansing ritual that provided regeneration. Its presence is necessary to suggest that there is no closed system; without carnival, there is no possibility of change or difference, and most importantly, no subversion. Though the principles of the medieval carnival of Rabelais cannot be applied directly to American culture, many of its features are transmuted and thus recognizable. For the Southwest humorists, the use of outrageous language, grotesque humor, and leveling reflected the harsh life on the frontier by privileging the dialogue of the backwoods yokels as much, if not more, than the often privileged East Coast elite. For animated television programs, the mind-numbing banality of suburbia necessitates joyous carnivalesque laughter. Indeed, both movements are indicative of the revelry and sheer fun that Bakhtin has in mind.

The language of the carnival was predicated upon insult and vulgarity; it challenged people to be as offensive as possible. For the solemn language of romanticism and transcendentalism in early 19th century America, the rough language of the frontier provided a counterbalance, even while writers in this tradition still critiqued the glorification of the marketplace. Indeed, no trend in American literature quite captures the language of its particular marketplace like the Southwest humorists. Beginning with Longstreet, these writers sought to reflect the speech, action, and character of the Southern village and marketplace. In fact, Longstreet prepares his readers for the stark contrast between the language of his characters in *Georgia Scenes* and the language expected of literary characters:

I cannot include these introductory remarks, without reminding those who have taken exceptions to the coarse, inelegant, and sometimes ungrammatical

language, which the writer represents himself as occasionally using; *that it is language accommodated to the capacity of the person to whom he represents himself as speaking.* (3-4)

The italics belong to Longstreet, as if extra emphasis on the importance of capturing the language of his subjects were needed. Longstreet delivers on his promise to capture the native Georgian as he behaved in his own habitat. In the opening story of the collection, “Georgia Theatrics,” Hall, the narrator and representative of the privileged middle-class “gentleman observer,” stumbles upon what he thinks is the beginnings of a brawl. He observes the men threatening one another with coarse language: “Yes, I kin, and am able to do it...the fight’s made up and let’s go at it — my soul, if I don’t jump down his throat and gallop every gitterling out of him, before you can say ‘quit’” (4). Before Hall can intervene, the fight is already won by a teenage boy. Hall threatens to bring the boy to justice for his “iniquity” against his fellow man, but the boy, angered by Hall’s hastiness corrects him: “you need n’t kick before you’re spur’d. There a’nt nobody there, nor ha’nt been nother. I was jist seein’ how I could ‘a fout” (5). After realizing the boy has been playing both roles in his reenactment of a scene at the courthouse earlier in the week, Hall is left dumbfounded at the exchange that has just taken place. Longstreet’s scene perfectly captures Bakhtin’s conception of the carnivalesque. In this tale, Longstreet implies a triumph of the language of the marketplace over the language of authority. By all rights, Hall, the gentleman observer, speaks the language of authority and carries himself as a pillar of the community, yet the language and outright theatrics of the boy renders Hall powerless to do anything. Though Longstreet seems uncomfortable with the boy’s triumph, he nevertheless illustrates the power that the language of the marketplace can yield. Therefore, the argument can be made that the language of the market place has supplanted the traditionally language of authority in this story, and this triumph can be observed in the rest of *Georgia Scenes*.

The value of market language over formal language only intensified as more writers began utilizing the Southern dialect. In “The Big Bear of Arkansas,” Thorpe sets his narrative on a Mississippi River steamboat departing from New Orleans. The narrator emphasizes the significance of this setting: the steamship is a vessel that brings people together from different states, education levels, and professions. From the moment he bursts onto the scene, Jim Doggett takes over the rest of the narrative. He begins by stating his frustration with New Orleans; appropriately, his frustration centers on the use of language. Because Doggett confuses the city usage of game (wild meat) for recreational games (Doggett proudly states that poker is the game in Arkansas), the city dwellers call him green. Using language to establish his authority to the city dwellers, Doggett says, “...perhaps I am...but I arn’t so

at home” (Thorpe 11). The narrator then cedes the rest of the narrative to Doggett, who boasts to his listeners (from Indiana, England, and Illinois, among many other places) about Arkansas’s prodigious wild life and his epic slaying of “the big bear of Arkansas.” In his use of language, he does not fear sharing too much information for his captive audience. When he goes out to hunt for the bear, he stops to defecate (20). After shooting the bear, he becomes “tripped up by my inexpressibles, which either from habit, or the excitement of the moment, were about my heels...” (20). After Doggett concludes his narrative, he leaves “his auditors in a grave silence” (21), which illustrates the powerful effect of his tall tale. By allowing Big Bar to dominate the narrative, Thorpe gives legitimacy to Big Bar’s story, and though Doggett was green at the beginning of the story, the powerful effect of his coarse language and storytelling grant him authority over his audience, though they appear outwardly more authoritative.

Of all the characters in the Southwest humor movement, George Washington Harris’s Sut Lovingood captures the triumph of marketplace language best. Indeed, George, the gentleman narrator, only appears in a few paragraphs in each story, and allows Sut to narrate his own tales of vengeance, hijinks, and destruction. M. Thomas Inge asserts that Harris empowers Sut “to recount his own pranks and tall tales in his own person, in his own language, and from his own viewpoint” (89). Where Longstreet never gives control of his narration to the various backwoods characters in *Georgia Scenes*, Harris is more than happy to cede control of his narrative to Sut. Thus, the Southwest movement’s writers’ granting of more authority to their antiheroes strongly suggests the amount of power that the language of marketplace wielded in 19th century America, particularly the frontier.

Sut’s language is anything but genteel, often insulting both George and the unfortunate victims of his pranks. In “Blown Up with Soda,” Sut calls a Northerner “a cussed, palaverin, onion-eatin Yankee peddler—all jack-knife and jaw...” (39), which illustrates the elevation of Sut’s simple language over the “palaverin” language of the Yankee. It also incorporates the oaths and billingsgate that Bakhtin finds as evidence of the carnivalesque in the works of Rabelais. Furthermore, Gretchen M. Martin points to a specific passage in “Eaves-Dropping a Lodge of Free Masons” that illustrates Harris’s privileging of the language of the marketplace over the language of authority (104-105).

At the beginning of the story, George, the language of authority, attempts to begin a story using the official language of history in his description of Knoxville many years ago: “Then its history, crime unveiled, the glorious defence [sic], the powerful prosecution, the eloquent ‘charge,’ the tears of sorrow, the flashes of wit; but like the sturdy old Courthouse itself, they belong to the past” (Harris 58). As George continues with his romantically inflated narrative, Sut grows impatient with his method and castigates him for trying



to “put us all asleep wif a mess ove durn’d nonsence...I’ll talk hit all off in English” (59), which indicates that Sut’s language of the marketplace is true English. Sut also accuses George of being drunk in his musings; Martin argues that Harris equates Romantic language with drunkenness, elevating Sut’s simple language over George’s contemplative prose (105). Thus, Harris, like Thorpe and Longstreet, illustrates Bakhtin’s notion of privileging the language of the marketplace in a distinctly American setting.

Animated television also employs the language of the marketplace to subvert the language of authority represented by educational, government, and religious systems in American culture, often with the use of boisterous characters who are not afraid to speak bluntly. They also hurl insults and foul language toward those in power. Beginning with *The Simpsons*, animated television characters consistently use coarse, offensive, or colloquial language to subvert authority and therefore unsettle the social order in accordance with Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. Bart Simpson, the picaresque Simpson son, uses purposefully disruptive phrases, such as “I’m Bart Simpson. Who the hell are you?” and “Eat my shorts,” as one of his many tools to subvert his parents, teachers, and especially his principal. In this sense, *The Simpsons* continues the American tradition of reversing the roles of adults and children; instead of parents wielding wisdom and authority as is the case in countless sitcoms that preceded *The Simpsons*, the children are often more intelligent and cunning than the adults, a strategy also employed by Mark Twain with Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Other animated programs such as *South Park*, *Daria*, and *The Boondocks* have employed a similar strategy. Thompson writes of *South Park*, “Throughout the series, the adults and the authorities...muck things up, and the kids—though indignant at adult incompetence—try and patch things together” (“Good Demo” 222). One can argue that this reversal is simply another manifestation of the carnivalesque, and language is a powerful tool in the subversion of the traditional authorities in contemporary American culture.

*Futurama* also gets involved with the carnivalesque language of the marketplace with Bender, a trash-talking, working-class bending unit who gleefully insults almost everyone he meets. Like Bart, Bender’s frequently used catchphrases, such as “Bite my shiny metal ass!”, are intended to be subversive to those in charge of him. Often his insults and sketchy behavior put both him and his crew in uncomfortable situations, but sometimes his flouting of authority puts him in positions of authority. Though Bender’s hijinks seems worthy of dismissal, it is important to remember that he is positioned on the show as a minority figure, and his coworkers often exploit him. Several episodes involve plots where Bender is slighted, becomes angry, insults people, and somehow ends up in charge. In “Fear of a Bot Planet” (20 April 1999), Bender is indignant that robots are not granted positions of

authority, nor do they have the ability to compete with humans. Instead, they live lives of servitude. Picking up on his prescribed role, Bender says, “Admit it, you all think robots are just machines built by humans to make their lives easier.” When he has to make a delivery to Chapek 9, a planet inhabited by human-hating robots, he becomes a celebrity after calling for the death of all humans. After Bender reluctantly turns Fry and Leela over to the robot authorities, they are sentenced to a fate equal to robots on Earth: “they will perform tedious calculations and spot-weld automobiles, until they become obsolete and given away to an inner-city middle school.” However, they learn from the Robot Elders that they will actually be executed, with Bender serving as executioner. Unwilling to kill his friends, Bender tries to alleviate the fears of the elders by emphasizing the haplessness of humanity, using insults to do so: “Humans are no threat to us. They are stupid, putrid cowards.” Bender’s status as exploited robot is also addressed in “Proposition Infinity” (8 July 2010), in which he begins dating Planet Express’s intern Amy. Many of the coworkers, especially Professor Farnsworth, disagree with their pairing and eventual desire to marry because he believes that robots and humans should not mate. To block their marriage, the professor attempts to pass legislation that will make unions between humans and robots illegal. The episode is a clear, and sometimes clumsy, treatment of debates concerning same sex marriage that have divided Americans for the past twenty years. Clumsy though it may be in spots because of its simplistic depictions of the arguments, it is also important to note that Bender is again used to represent a minority repressed or exploited by the dominant culture, in this case homosexuals.

Because he is coded as both a minority and an exploited worker, Bender’s triumph signifies a more American use of the carnivalesque. Instead of Bender’s coarse language serving as a critique on religious oppression, Bender’s language and actions subvert a market economy’s exploitation of the working class. Thus, like the peasants in carnival or the frontier storyteller, the language of insult becomes a keystone in the construction of Bender’s identity, which allows the writers of *Futurama* to comment on important issues involving racism and the exploitation of the working class.

*South Park* employs offensive language as a means of challenging dominant positions in the cultural, religious, and political spheres. In fact, Parker and Stone’s willingness to use shocking and vulgar language serves as one of the most identifiable traits of the show. In the sheer joy of listening to foul language and insults, the show compares favorably to Harris’s *Sut Lovingood*. While the boys are waiting on the bus, they often use curse words, billingsgate, and innuendo—the first word of the series is “goddammit,” and one episode (“It Hits the Fan”) uses the word *shit* 165 times; indeed, the whole episode revolves around the use of the word, as indicated by a counter that tallies the number of times the word is used. Furthermore, the episode satirizes the marketing of edgy



content on network television dramas such as *NYPD Blue*.<sup>5</sup> They insult one another with epithets, frequently get into fights, and challenge the long-standing beliefs of their families. The inclusion of offensive language is not merely for shock factor, though sometimes it is a contributing factor. Ethan Thompson asserts that the language of the show “articulates an alternative, unofficial, offensive language—a carnivalesque response to the official discourses that are brought under scrutiny as the sitcom’s necessary disrupting ‘situation’” (“Good Demo...” 222).

In addition to emphasizing the language of the market place, both the Southwest humorists and animated programs also emphasize the base functions of the body and the corruption of the Vitruvian man. Of course, the grotesque comes in many shapes and sizes, and it is used by different writers for different ends. According to Bakhtin, writers of the medieval and early Renaissance, more so than any other era, used the grotesque to “liberate the world from all that is dark and terrifying...All that was terrifying in ordinary life is turned into amusing or ludicrous monstrosities” (*Rabelais* 47). Rabelais best exemplifies this type of laughter in the introduction to *Gargantua and Pantegruel*, where he writes,

For my book: all you will find is laughter:  
That’s all the glory my heart is after,  
Seeing how sorrow eats you, defeats you.  
I’d rather write about laughing than crying,  
For laughter makes men human, and courageous. (6-10)

In his analysis of Rabelais, Bakhtin contrasts the medieval tendency to use the grotesque to defeat fear with laughter with the post-Renaissance tendency to use the grotesque to provoke fear or lamentation.

In American literature, some writers, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, employ the grotesque to symbolize the inherent darkness and corruption of man. Though their usage may be humorous, the humor produces a sneer rather than a grin. On the other hand, the Southwest humorists and animated television programs use the Bakhtinian grotesque body, which revels in bodily functions and the body’s askew proportions.

Bakhtin writes that the purpose of the grotesque is “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” (qtd. in Dunne 7). He further asserts that the grotesque was a vital tool for writers like Francois Rabelais, who used it to portray carnivalesque scenes of revelry that brought the powerful clergy to the level of the plebian. Important to Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque and the

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5 “It Hits the Fan” was inspired by the hype surrounding *NYPD Blue*’s use of the word *shit*. Afterward, the show was hailed for its artistic triumph, which led to an even stronger marketing campaign for the program.

grotesque is that the laughter celebrates and builds rather than destroys. This distinction is important because it differentiates between a constructive use of the grotesque, as represented by Rabelais and a destructive use, as represented by Jonathan Swift, who used the grotesque to condemn the lowliness of man. A constructive use of the grotesque encourages regeneration, and the Southwest humorists and animated television programs put a uniquely American spin on this regeneration by combining it with violence. Thus, the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque is about fun, and no doubt Southwestern humor and animated television provide their audiences with grotesque images that inspire laughter rather than sneers. Even so, important criticism and satire lie beneath the façade of fun and revelry, making use of the grotesque body, bodily functions and scatology, violence, and the regeneration that the grotesque brings.

Though many critics laud animated television for its use of the grotesque, it has existed in many forms with its earliest instances appearing in Greek satire. The use of the grotesque in different cultures indicates a subversion of the dominant ideologies of a particular place and time. For example, Rabelais uses the grotesque to subvert religious oppression; Swift uses the grotesque to critique English domination of the Irish. In American humor, the grotesque is used to critique the dominant ideologies of democracy, capitalism, and religion. This American incarnation of the grotesque began with the Old Southwest humorists. Michael Dunne writes of the humorists' use of the grotesque thusly: "the Southwest humorists often depicted characters and physical incidents that 'nice people' didn't talk about...These characters and incidents challenge 'nice people' so insistently because they force readers to acknowledge the corruptible body..." (7). The rugged frontier provided an appropriate setting for writers to depict the imperfect human body. One can see this leveling in Longstreet, Thorpe, and Harris. Longstreet's iconic description of white-trash instigator and financial opportunist Rancy Sniffle certainly qualifies as grotesque:

This diet had given to Rancy a complexion that a corpse would have disdained to own, and an abdominal rotundity that was quite unprepossessing...His shoulders were fleshless, and elevated; his head large and flat; his neck, slim and translucent; and his arms, hands, fingers and feet were lengthened out of all proportion to his frame. (35)

*Sut Lovingood* contains copious instances of grotesque leveling by emphasizing the outrageous proportions of the body. For example, note Harris's description of religious zealot and hypocrite, Parson John Bullen, who also represents market culture in his desire to swindle townspeople using the language of religion: "He weighed ni ontu three hundred...an' his belly wer 'bout the size and color ove a beef paunch, an' hit a-swingin out frum side to side" (88). Sut, ever challenging authority figures in his life, humiliates Bullen by dropping

lizards in his pants while he preaches a sermon. Sut's outwitting of Bullen and other representatives of evangelical religion indicates a revolt against religious ideology and its ties to capitalism.

Perhaps the best example of the grotesque body, its functions, and its subtle hints of regeneration can be found in Harris's "Sut Lovingood's Daddy, Acting Horse," which critiques the glorification of theatrics in American market culture. In the story, the Lovingood's family horse dies, leaving the family without an animal to pull the plow the field. To solve the problem, Sut's father decides that he should do the horse's work and pull the plow, but Sut notes that he seems to relish the part because he was "a-studyin how to play the character of hoss, perfectly" (7). Harris paints an almost absurd picture of Sut's father as he attempts to plow in the field: he insists on wearing a bridle, moving only on Sut's command and spur, and jumping obstacles as a horse would. Of course, the plowing does not go smoothly; they disturb a hornet's nest, and the hornets chase Pap to the creek, where he leaps off a bluff into the water, all while maintaining his equine character. Sut cannot resist the opportunity to add to his father's humiliation: "if you's done washing yourself, and has drunk enough, le's go back to our plowin" (10). To escape his father's wrath, Sut runs away. However, Harris takes one more opportunity to show his reader the grotesque body of Sut's father, who is suffering the effects of an allergic reaction after his encounter with the hornets. A traveler reveals Pap's condition: "A pow'ful curious, vicious, skeery-lookin' cuss he is, to b'sure. His head am as big as a washpot, and he hasn't the fust durned sign of an eye—just two black slits" (12). Sut ends the story with a toast to his father, who he has not seen since the incident.

The story meets virtually every component of Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque. Sut tells his story with flair to a mostly rapt audience. The imagery of the story is humorous, ridiculous, animalistic, and grotesque. In the midst of the laughter, however, is ambivalence. The incident causes Sut to take an extended leave of absence from home, and he is not anxious to return. He at times seems both admiring and ashamed of his father's behavior in the story. The goal of Dad's antics is an attempt at regeneration, since it is spring and the crops will soon be ready for harvest. Milton Rickels argues that Dad's fart while kicking and pawing at Sut's mother also alludes to French folklore: "It asserts vigorous animality, his preparation of land for planting, and thus celebrates his own rite of Spring" (162). While Rickels certainly has a valid point, one cannot ignore that this regeneration is incomplete; the story ends with an even more grotesque image of Dad's swollen head after his equestrian adventure. The picture that Harris paints is no doubt grizzly, and his message exhibits some uncertainty about market culture. Mayfield argues that Dad deserves his fate because he is a poor example of a father and a husband (117); indeed, the only thing he seems to be good at is playing horse. Mayfield writes that "Dad's acting horse

can be interpreted as market behavior—another worthless attempt to make something out of nothing—and Sut is fed up with it” (117). Yet, as fed up as he may be, Sut does not deny to the traveler that he is his father, which indicates a reluctant acceptance of his father’s foolishness and an acknowledgment of his own tendency to devolve into foolishness in moments of crisis; Sut calls his father “King fool,” while he is simply a “natural born durned fool.” Ultimately, Sut decides to wash his hands of his father and have a drink, wishing “luck to the durned ole fool, and the hornets too...” (13). Sut’s toast provides a festive regeneration of its own, as if to say, “We’re all fools, so let’s just drink,” but still the ambivalence remains. Thus, Harris illustrates the leveling of man by literally reducing the human body to an animal. Furthermore, the use of the grotesque also casts a poor judgment on the American authorities of fatherhood and market culture. Rather than providing the wealth and prosperity of American Exceptionalism, they are instead sources of disappointment.

Henry Clay Lewis’s “The Day of Judgment” also employs the grotesque as a means of subverting authority, particularly American religion. In this case, the grotesque image revolves not around the human body, but in the violent, grotesque treatment of animals in a critique of religion and market culture. Lewis begins the story by having his swamp doctor narrator, Madison Tensas, explain the frequent smallpox scares that occur on the Louisiana frontier. Realizing that the most recent rash of smallpox is actually the measles, Tensas seizes the opportunity and commits a “pious fraud” by charging the inhabitants of the village for a vaccine to protect them from harm. After profiting from the fears of his patients, Tensas meets an old friend at a tavern, where they indulge in too much alcohol. They learn about a camp meeting, where its attendees “were on the lookout for the day of judgment, which some theological calendar had figured up for this year...” (61-62). Lathered with courage from drinking, Tensas and a group of friends decide to humiliate them by playing a practical joke in which they dress up in white sheets and descend upon the village with torches. The grand finale of the practical joke includes setting a mule (a horse being unavailable) on fire to symbolize the apocalypse and bringing it with them. The fanatics at the camp meeting predictably panic as Tensas observes, “Supplications for mercy, screams of anguish, prayers and blasphemies, horror-stricken moans of the converts...swelled on the wind” (64). The mule dies a grotesque death in the joke as he descends the mountainside ablaze, but his participation results in the ultimate upheaval of social order, in which a group of drunks wreak havoc on the established religious authority. Though there is no explicit example of regeneration in the story, one can argue that the regeneration is implied because it turns a subject of religious fear (the day of judgment) into laughter. The particular target of Lewis’s satire is the flimsy and hypocritical faith of American frontier religion. The religious campers maintain a holy,

pious posture until they are threatened, then they turn to blasphemy. Tensas's grotesque prank thus serves as a comic leveling of American religion.

Like Longstreet, Harris, Thorpe, and Lewis, animated television programs like *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy* achieve a comic leveling through the use of the grotesque. However, animation differs in that it has the advantage of actually confronting the viewer with grotesque images. The animator can draw a cartoon that can gorge more beer, grow outside the bounds of human possibility, and exaggerate the functions of the body. In its use of what I will call, for lack of a better term, the hyper-grotesque, animated television shows may actually build on those of literary prose. For example, in a *South Park* episode entitled "Butt Out" (3 Dec. 2003) director Rob Reiner is drawn to grotesquely large proportions, to the point that he cannot get out of his limousine without the aid of butter. Furthermore, throughout the episode he is seen gorging himself with more food than one man can possibly eat. Reiner appears in the episode because he is attempting to ban smoking in all restaurants in Colorado because cigarettes are unhealthy. More broadly, the episode is a satire on American celebrity politics. Throughout *South Park's* run, they have consistently satirized celebrities who seek to impose their own moralities on all Americans. To be sure, the show often views behavior like Reiner's as a sort of liberal religion that seeks to proselytize others into their way of thinking. By drawing Reiner as caricature, they achieve a levelling of Reiner's supposedly moral crusade by highlighting the hypocrisy of Reiner's campaign against smoking for health reasons when Reiner himself is ostensibly unhealthily overweight.

*South Park* also attacks more traditionally conservative Christian shibboleths with grotesque imagery. The episode that best illustrates Parker and Stone's willingness to use the grotesque is "Bloody Mary" (7 December 2005). The episode begins with Randy Marsh, Stan's dad, being arrested for drunk driving. As punishment, a judge sentences Randy to attend Alcoholics Anonymous, where he learns that his alcoholism is a disease. Happy to use his new disease as an excuse, Randy confines himself to a wheelchair and shaves his head as though his disease were equivalent to cancer. He eventually learns of a miraculous statue of Mary that bleeds from its anus. Randy decides to travel to Bailey in the hopes that this miracle will cure him of his disease. After having the blood grotesquely squirted on his face, Randy becomes sober only to have The Pope declare that the statue is not a miracle because they realize the statue is bleeding from the vagina ("Chicks bleed out of their vagina all the time," he says), which drives Randy back into the abyss of his alcoholism. Eventually, Stan has to remind his father that he did not need a miracle to "cure" him, he just needs to exercise some will power and have the confidence that he can defeat his habit. Though the premise is outrageous and highly offensive and grotesque, the message of the episode, which primarily targets Alcoholics Anonymous and other "self-help" organizations that remove the responsibility of the "self" and

relies on outside sources, is very critical of contemporary society, in which every defect in character can be attributed to some “disease” that requires a “miracle” cure, or a religious culture that sees the image of the Virgin Mary in a grilled cheese sandwich as a miracle. Therefore, the episode uses grotesque imagery to critique what Parker and Stone perceive as a superficial reliance on faith and religion in contemporary American society. While not necessarily levelling religious faith, it does deflate the tendency of religious practitioners to rely on fad miracles without thoughtful action.

Beyond skewering celebrities religious institutions, the most obvious examples of the grotesque physical body in animation are fathers such as Homer Simpson (*The Simpsons*) and Peter Griffin (*Family Guy*). Each is grotesquely fat. Peter and Homer occupy the mantle of clueless, infantile man of the house, and their obesity can be seen as a commentary on the neglect of responsibility, as both are often depicted consuming large amounts of food while remaining ignorant of what is happening around them. In this regard, Peter and Homer share some commonalities with Sut Lovingood’s hapless father. Valerie Weilunn Chow notes, “Homer...is an indiscriminate consumer, voracious to the point that he will risk his life by eating...sushi cut from a poisonous blowfish” (110). Peter’s consumption of food rivals Homer’s. In “McStroke” (13 January 2008), Peter downs 30 hamburgers in one sitting. Both instances indicate critiques on the American phenomenon of consumption, from fast food products, to cars, and even to television programs. Homer and Peter’s lack of responsibility continues the inversion of authority that begins with the language of children like Bart, and even echoes Sut Lovingood’s depictions of his own father and other authority figures he encounters. While the children are capable of intellectual thought and action, the father figures are primarily concerned with the body.

At the same time, in the spirit of the carnivalesque, they are often celebrated by fans and critics alike for their ability to both embrace and subvert our expectations of fatherhood. Indeed, Peter and Homer’s lack of parenting skills subvert family television sitcoms that depict the father as flawless, dedicated, and most importantly, thin. *Family Guy* explores this theme in “He’s Too Sexy for His Fat” (27 June 2000), in which Peter undergoes liposuction and becomes an even worse father and husband (if that’s possible). Of course, the episode contains rampant pop cultural references and irreverent humor that audiences expect from the show, but the episode also touches on issues of body image, and in addition to Peter’s and Chris’s grotesque bodies, shows infant Stewie having a rather orgasmic experience with meatloaf reminiscent of *When Harry Met Sally* (1987).

Moreover, the episode lightly critiques the desire in American market culture to celebrate consuming large quantities of food products while remaining thin in the process. At the beginning of the episode, Lois complains about the high



price of vegetables, which leads her to adjust her shopping to “instant stuffing or instant mashed potatoes.” Noticeably missing from the shopping cart in the scene are vegetables, which indicates the paradox of eating healthily in America when healthier foods are expensive while processed foods are cheap. Meanwhile, consumers are bombarded with advertisements promoting a thin build as a desirable body-style in today’s culture.

The main plot of the episode commences when Chris becomes self-conscious about his weight, which leads Peter to help him diet and exercise. After making little progress, Peter takes Chris to a plastic surgeon for liposuction, but Chris opts to continue his diet and exercise routine. Peter takes advantage of the opportunity and has two hundred pounds of fat removed. Meanwhile, infant Stewie, in an attempt to make the dieting Chris jealous, gorges himself with desserts and begins to resemble Chris and his father’s former rotund appearance. After a second round of plastic surgery, Peter is admitted to Quahog’s beautiful people’s club (which includes perks like not having to wait in line), and he also begins neglecting Chris and his attempts to lose weight. Hoping to motivate Chris by giving him a goal to achieve, Peter takes him to a beautiful people’s club meeting, but abandons him when the president says they cannot allow Chris in because of his obesity. After Lois berates Peter for his neglect, he storms out and drives his car off a cliff after he becomes enamored with his reflection in the rear-view mirror. Rather than becoming horribly disfigured, Peter lands in a tub of lard (which he drinks) and ends up looking like his old self again. The episode ends on a somewhat ambiguous note. Of course, everything is reset to normal as is customary on television: Peter is obese again, Chris remains relatively unchanged, and Stewie returns to his normal size. Peter apologizes to Chris, but after Lois says she thinks Peter has learned a valuable lesson, he quickly replies, “Nope,” and the episode quick-cuts to the credits.

Though the episode appears to follow the contemporary cultural view that thinner is better, it ends up celebrating Peter’s return to obesity while also showing that being perfectly thin does not necessarily make for a better parent or a better person. It embraces Peter’s grotesque body and rejects his perfect one while satirizing America’s fascination with becoming thinner. Thus, the episode explodes the notion of the perfect father in the perfect family and, oddly, presents the audience with a reading in which thinner is not always better. The grotesque bodies of Peter and Homer are both the instruments of subversion and the target of the critique of the American family and the post-modern American marketplace that encourages voracious consumption but small waistlines, not so different from the critiques of hypocrisy that the Southwest humorists offered for their own particular culture. At the same time, the episode levels both the trend to consume and the trend to stay fit as dishonest ploys meant to drive mindless consumerism.

In addition to the use of the grotesque body, animated programs also offer a wide variety of scatological references and bodily functions. Like Rabelais and the Southwest humorists, these references often hint at regeneration. Of the regenerative nature of excrement, Bakhtin writes,

Excrement was conceived as an essential element in the life of the body and of the earth in the struggle against death. It was part of man's vivid awareness of his materiality, of his bodily nature, closely related to the life of the earth. (*Rabelais* 224)

Virtually every episode of *South Park* makes some reference to excrement and involuntary bodily functions. Many episodes also display a similar awareness of the regenerative abilities of feces, though they often display this awareness irreverently. Only one character need be analyzed to get an idea of *South Park*'s promise of poop. Mr. Hankey, a talking piece of feces and one the most popular characters on the show, is the best example of Parker and Stone's use of excrement as a means of social critique and regeneration. Allison Halsall argues that the "confrontation with the undesirable, the vulgar, and the grotesque elicits the visceral reaction that Parker and Stone long for" (34). Mr. Hankey figures prominently in five episodes, and each instance of Hankey's characterization presents a different authority that Parker and Stone seek to subvert.

In "Mr. Hankey, the Christmas Poo" (22 December 1997), the town's festive holiday play is threatened when the citizens take offense at one another's religious beliefs, which results in the school having to remove any reference to religious figures or customs. Trying to help, Kyle suggests using Mr. Hankey, who visits children with high fiber, as an alternative. Of course, no one believes him and his friends commit him to an insane asylum. However, after Chef mentions him, the townspeople begin to believe in Mr. Hankey, making him spring to life and regenerate the town's celebration of Christmas.

As usual in *South Park*, the episode takes swipes at the marketing of Christianity and Judaism during the holidays, particularly Christmas. Mr. Hankey's replacement of icons like Jesus, Santa Claus, and the Christmas tree suggests many different critiques. On one hand, by positioning a talking turd alongside holiday icons such as Santa Claus, Rudolph, and Frosty, Parker and Stone strongly suggest that the excessive marketing of Christmas icons is a pile of crap. On the other, the episode critiques overly sensitive political correctness from all who practice religion, and the suggestion that even a talking piece of dung could unite everyone is quite a positive thought, even if it is laced with irony.

In his remaining episodes, Hankey furthers the show's critique of consumer culture. In "Chef's Chocolate Salty Balls" (19 August 2003), Hollywood descends upon South Park after Robert Redford decides to corrupt another mountain town with Hollywood culture. Mr. Hankey even becomes a star in a Hollywood



film after producers bid for the rights to his story. Of course, eventually Tom Hanks ends up being cast as Mr. Hankey. However, Kyle, incensed that his town is now literally covered in Hollywood's waste, makes an impassioned plea for the industry to leave South Park alone. Mr. Hankey washes the filth of Hollywood's corruption away in a rush of human waste in a scene that parodies Disney's *Fantasia* (1940). Although Mr. Hankey does not appear in "Merry Christmas Charlie Manson" (9 December 1998), he still figures prominently. Mr. Hankey, now popular because of his star turn in the film festival, appears at malls at Christmas time. Once repulsive to the adults, Mr. Hankey's sudden popularity lightly satirizes our tendency to accept anything as long as it makes money, but it also stresses that market culture seeks to co-opt trends that are borne in earnest. Once again, the program uses grotesque imagery to lash out at American capitalist culture; it uses the grotesque to criticize the market place itself.

In "A Very Crappy Christmas" (20 December 2000), the children are disappointed because the town lacks Christmas spirit, which is judged primarily by the amount of presents consumers buy. Instead, people focus on "unimportant" things like spending time with family and being nice to one another. The boys seek Mr. Hankey for help, but learn that he now has a family and no one has seemed to notice that he has gone away. After Mr. Hankey agrees to help, he gets his children (or his "nuggets" as he calls them) involved. To convince his son of his importance as a piece of poop, Mr. Hankey explains the regenerative cycle of droppings to his despondent son in a rousing parody of *The Lion King* (1993). He even sings his child Cornwallace a song called "Circle of Poo," which explains the regenerative power of dung:

Everything that lives on earth poos in some way,  
And that's how the cycle happens each and every day.  
Just look at the green, green grass and the birds up in the sky  
It's all here because of poo and I'll tell you why.

Though intentionally silly and gross, the song parallels the critique of the episode. The spirit of Christmas only returns after the town begins to consume, thus suggesting a strong theme of consumption and waste throughout the entire episode. Once again, Hankey brings back the spirit of Christmas, but this regeneration also occurs with more underlying critique of market culture. Specifically, it notes the failings of authority figures who deemphasize the importance of family and community during the holidays in favor of buying presents, which gives children a skewed sense of priorities.

In "Red Sleigh Down" (11 December 2002), Parker and Stone use Mr. Hankey to critique the American government. Mr. Hankey joins forces with Stan, Kyle, Cartman, Jesus, and Santa Claus to bring an American Christmas to Iraq in a parody of action films from *Black Hawk Down* to *The Matrix*.

Beyond the pop cultural pastiche, the episode can also be read as a critique of President Bush's policy in Iraq, as these symbols of religious and secular commercialism are used in an attempt to Americanize Iraq. At the same time, the episode, and the show itself, reinforces American market culture by participating in it with the sale of Mr. Hankey merchandise and its self-reflexive acknowledgement as a product. Thus, the show, with its use of a talking piece of poop, achieves the ambivalent laughter of the carnival because "it asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (qtd. in Johnson-Woods 76). Whereas Rabelais uses the carnivalesque to mock and revive the religion that defined his culture, the Southwest humorists and animated television programs mock and revive the market culture, religions, and government authorities that have come to define American life.

Of all the distinctly American facets of humor, the Southwest humorists and animated programs revel in the use of carnivalesque the most. Certainly, others, such as Bierce, Twain, Vonnegut, and Barthelme, have used it, but not with the same zest as artists in these two movements. Furthermore, they use it to criticize many of the same strains in the American experience: commercialism, market culture, violence, and religious and cultural hypocrisy. They use joyous laughter, market place language, and grotesque images to highlight the failings of American culture instead of bitter laughter. It is difficult to measure the extent to which animated television series are directly influenced by the stories of the Southwest humorists. Often episodes are written by a team of writers, and the education level of many of the creators of the series suggests some knowledge of the tradition. Nevertheless, even if there is no direct influence, that these series follow many of the tenets of the first uniquely American humor movement implies that many of the conflicts that defined America still exist today in different shapes, while the humor that Americans use to critique American culture has also remained largely the same, if a bit more animated. "Native humor," Hamlin Hill suggests, "with all its established forms and techniques, flourishes most significantly in such media as radio, television, the phonograph record, the cartoon, and sub-literary writing" (91). Though Hill's writing predates the second advent of adult animated television, one could certainly argue that he would include these series in his list of where one can still find the fundamental characteristics of Southwestern, or native, humor. Thus, delineating the very similar strategies of these two movements reveals distinctly American satirical humorous and satirical strategies to address distinctly American problems.

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## Chapter 3

# No Laughing Matter: The Relationship between American Humor and American Collective Memory

According to the kids of *South Park*, it takes 22.3 years for a traumatic event to become funny (“Jared Has Aides,” 6 March 2002). Nevertheless, the show and other animated shows also clearly demonstrate that traumatic events can become humorous far sooner than two decades. Indeed, *South Park*’s topical satire and short production time have allowed it to spoof national tragedies such as Hurricane Katrina and the terrorist attacks of September 11 soon after the events took place. When examining the shaping and reshaping of American history and collective memory by artists, however, many trauma theorists tend to examine cultural texts that portray traumatic events in a tragic and somber tone, such as memorials, museums, and “serious” literature. That is not to say that some texts that reflect traumatic memory are completely without humor, but their main purpose is not to generate the laughter of their audiences.

While many American writers assess the woes of the nation’s history using tragic themes, American literature is also populated with texts that use humor and the comic as a means of pacifying tensions caused by history, collective memory, and their complications. When commenting on problematic recollections of the American past, in fact, humor is a favorite tool for many American writers. For example, in “Rip Van Winkle,” Washington Irving uses humor to comment on the profound change that occurred when America transitioned from colony to sovereign nation. Mark Twain sets *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Pudd’nhead Wilson* in the antebellum South as a means to comment on both American slavery and enduring racist attitudes after The Civil War. Writers such as Kurt Vonnegut, E.L. Doctorow, and Ishmael Reed have followed in their footsteps by challenging the popular collective memories of periods such as World War II, the Industrial Age, and The Jazz Age. Certainly, the humor in these texts is often violent, sometimes cynical, but they are nevertheless important to collective memory because they use humor to bring the untidy portions of America’s past into sharper focus. While some audiences might ignore or despise a tragic, iconoclastic exposure that challenges the incongruity between

American collective memory and the actual history, they will more likely listen if that exposure is clothed in humor.

Continuing in this tradition, animated programs also use humor to address historical and contemporary national traumas and to offer a humorous, often satirical viewpoint that shapes and reshapes our culture's collective memory. Shows such as *South Park*, *The Boondocks*, *Family Guy*, *American Dad!*, *King of the Hill*, and *Futurama* use biting satire, scatological humor, violence, and social commentary to critique both contemporary events (such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, racism, and Hurricane Katrina) and import, nation-defining historical events (such as the Vietnam War, slavery, and The Holocaust). In addition to providing criticism of contemporary culture, animated television series use laughter in a politically conscious way to engage the collective memories of the United States. Sometimes, they open their texts to interpretations that attempt to assuage the anxiety caused by these events; other times, the shows purposely complicate memories to remind viewers that many issues remain unresolved. Animated programs thus construct political comments on contemporary and long-standing national traumas. For this reason, they are very valuable to the American collective memory because they at the very least continue the dialogue on important historical events in American culture as did humorists before them; and, like Irving, Twain, and Vonnegut, they reconceptualize America's collective memories and histories. With the exception of a few sitcoms (*All in the Family*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, and *Roseanne*, for example), live action television comedy rarely explores controversial ground where history and cultural memory are concerned, often maintaining the status quo as a means of acquiring more viewers. Conversely, animated programs destabilize memory and history, often playfully exposing the errors of popular history and sentiment while offering alternative readings of historical events.

### What Is Collective Memory? I Forget...

Before discussing how these shows reshape collective memory, a few theoretical questions must be answered. What is collective memory? How do entertainment and popular culture fit into the paradigm of collective memory? In addition, what role has humor played in shaping collective memory and relieving the tension caused by controversial cultural experiences? Maurice Halbwachs was one of the first critics to construct a theory of collective memory. He defined collective memory as memories of catastrophic or life-changing events that are common to all people in a given culture and shaped by the institutions of family, religion, and class (Johnson 35). Collective memory functions as a coherent narrative, a shared image, of a culture's past that explains its present ideologies and predicts its future course. For example, if a culture holds a collective view of

superiority over another, then that culture's collective memory of past conflicts with the other will reinforce that narrative. The function of collective memory is very much like a snapshot mediated from a subjective point-of-view. It cannot represent the totality of an event; it can only visually represent a fraction of the whole. Nevertheless, the space represented in the photograph still leaves telling clues about the event itself. If the picture is taken outdoors, one can see how the sky looks that day or what the people in the photograph are wearing. If the picture is taken indoors, people in the same community or family might know the exact location based on the surroundings. Like photographs, collective memory gives shape and narrative to our shared experiences; it shapes what we know about an event and how we perceive it. Quite often, the narrative of the memories is meant to bring some type of closure to a catastrophic event and assimilate it into a greater narrative.

However, because of the development of technology, theories of collective memory have undergone a major shift since Halbwachs articulated his definition. With the rise of popular culture, mass media, and the internet comes a dramatic shift in how collective memory is formed and transmitted. George Lipsitz conducted one of the earliest studies on how popular culture shapes collective memory. Lipsitz posits, "Rather than signaling the death knell for historical inquiry, electronic mass media make collective memory a crucial constituent of individual and group identity in the modern world" (viii). He goes on to argue that popular culture can either reinforce dominant ideology or ideally it can connect its audiences to the past while providing hope for the future (20). Lipsitz supports his assertions with analyses of television sitcoms from the 1950s that illustrate their underlying subversion of dominant ideology. Writing of *Mama*, he reasons that "the serial nature of television situation comedies...inhibit[s] premature closures. Narrative devices that fix meanings in other media leave them unstable and subject to revision on television...it is also possible that [*Mama*] exposed contradictions conducive to resistance to those institutions" (96). While Lipsitz's assessments of sitcoms must be adjusted when considering animated programs because of their subversion of the domestic sitcom, his analysis is vital because it acknowledges the ability of popular culture and television to connect meaningfully with history even if it is a supposed agent of dominant ideology. Rather than dismissing television as a cultural device, Lipsitz recognizes that in spite of its commercial connections, television still performs the same basic functions as other art forms.

Other critics have followed in Lipsitz's footsteps. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins edited an extensive collection of essays that interrogate mass media's role in shaping history. One such essay, written by Steve Anderson, argues that "American television has sustained an extremely active and nuanced engagement with the construction of history and has played a crucial role in the shaping of cultural memory" (20). Animated television shows

participate in this phenomenon by not only shaping events of the past, but also by shaping events of the very recent past that will soon become subject to historical revisions. In the same collection of essays, Philip M. Taylor suggests that television has replaced the newspaper as history's first draft and is a valuable resource of writers, novelists, and authors, though it has some flaws because of the quick turnaround required to break news (257). But television programs, especially shows willing to address controversial social issues, also serves as a first draft of how a major event will be remembered. Thus, if television news is history's first draft, then animated television comedy also helps shape the feelings and attitudes aroused by public events and provides a starting point for discussion.

Even though critics have begun to recognize television and popular culture's contributions to collective memory, Alison Landsberg further argues that popular culture provides what she calls a "prosthetic memory," which allows those who did not experience an event or a group's history directly to understand it. She reasons that "capitalist commodification and mass culture have created the potential for a progressive, even a radical, politics of memory" with the power to "change a person's consciousness, changes that ultimately might enable ethical thinking and the formation of previously unimagined political alliances" (Landsberg 143). Landsberg's assessment gives popular culture much more credit than previous critics. In her estimation, not only can popular culture present an alternate view of history, but it can give those who did not specifically live experiences access, allowing them to change behavior.

Evidently, many critics believe that popular culture can be a positive influence on collective memory and subvert dominant ideology, but what of humor specifically? With the exception of Lipsitz, very few critics specifically address humor and comedy's effectiveness in addressing collective memory and history. *A Decade of Dark Humor* boasts a collection of essays that analyze humor's role in shaping both the memory of and the debate about the September 11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nevertheless, few critics analyze the effectiveness of animated television programs in subverting historical representation and collective memory, and those who do only discuss it casually. However, Paul Lewis analyzes the role of American humor in times of great cultural conflict. Though he does not particularly address collective memory and briefly mentions *The Simpsons*, his analysis of American humor and its desire to inflame, subvert, subdue, and mock speak to its political nature. History and events in collective memory are often subject to political spin and the value of jokes about traumatic national events is often judged based on the audience's political proclivities. Lewis argues that "the killing joke" has become a weapon of choice in America; humor that seeks to divide rather than unite (8). Such humor is often based

on violence and is laced with dogma and rigidity. Going beyond mere satire, the conflicted humor of America, Lewis asserts, is a reflection on America's divisive politics in the past twenty years. Though my argument suggests that animated television programs largely play a positive role in their subversion of historical events and the shaping of current events, one cannot ignore moments when shows value divisiveness over unity. The dividing line between constructive satire and needless, shallow ironic invective can sometimes be razor thin, and animated television shows often find themselves on both sides of that line.

### **American Humor's Relationship with Collective Memory in Literature**

Long before animated programs, American writers have used humor to shape and reshape collective memory regarding important historical events and the political/cultural fallout from those moments. In fact, Nancy A. Walker suggests that expressing the incongruity between the perceived and the reality is one of the first identifiable traits of American humor (8). Humor has been one of American artists' most reliable tools in undercutting the utopian rhetoric associated with America and its promises. Humor complicates this collective perception by revealing a different picture. Washington Irving was among the earliest writers to use humor in his fiction as a means of commenting on and shaping the collective memory of America. Though commonly misread as a children's fable, his iconic *Rip Van Winkle* (1819) examines the effect that the American Revolution had on its citizens. In essence, it is a story about remembering and forgetting. The eponymous main character goes to sleep when King George III was still the undisputed ruler of the colonies and wakes up to see his image in the village replaced with George Washington and a population that has eradicated any friendly connection to England. Van Winkle reminds the villagers of their shared past when he reappears after his slumber. Howard Horwitz argues that Irving establishes Van Winkle as "an allegorical figure, representing the transition of the new nation from colony to independent nation...whose identity is inchoate because their relation to past traditions and to the newer institutions and forms of exchange is unsettled" (38). Rip is therefore able to remind the people of his village what they once forgot. Though on its surface the tale appears to be comic with Rip's desperate attempts to escape his fate as a hen-pecked husband, Irving also uses multiple narrators in the story to help "people reimagine [America's] past and thus its future" (44). While many Americans were attempting to write England out of the nation's collective memory in an effort to establish a uniquely American culture, Irving's protagonist serves as a reminder of the country's origins by confronting them with the past.



Writing sixty years later, Mark Twain would make a career of attempting to reshape America's collective memory of slavery and racism. *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) are both set in the antebellum South, and both novels seek not only to portray the cruelty of slavery, but also highlight present injustices. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) uses a historical portrayal of medieval England as an allegory of the post-reconstruction South in an attempt to question the linear narrative of slavery and the rosy view of racial equality espoused by both the North and the South (Gillman 10). Susan Gillman writes, "Of our major U.S. authors at the end of the nineteenth century, none is more identified with the struggle to claim the national memory of slavery than Mark Twain" (8). Forest G. Robinson adds, "the complex dynamics with his moral dilemma [being complicit with slavery as a child]—one that he has shared with and expressed for many Americans—register quite clearly in his major writings" (2). Clearly, Twain was a writer obsessed with history and the molding of collective memory to fit cohesive narratives for the present. He was also acutely aware of attempts to eradicate history that did not fit into the rosy ideology of America, particularly slavery.

Though his writings could sometimes veer into the tragic, Twain's best weapons in exposing false consciousness are humor and satire. One need only think of the Shepardsons and Grangerfords in *Huckleberry Finn* to find Twain using humor to critique history. Huck's description of their feud is laced with humor, particularly the visual image of both sides laying down arms for church only to resume their feud even after hearing a sermon on brotherly love. The feuding families pride themselves on their link to history through their names and honor, but Twain reveals them to be petty, ridiculous hypocrites who use that name to subject others to a tortuous institution. *A Connecticut Yankee* sets up a humorous contrast between the archaic, corrupt society of Arthurian civilization and the "advanced, enlightened" contemporary society of narrator Hank Morgan. Though the contrast is grounded in humor, Twain does not allow his audiences to get too comfortable with themselves as he subjects The Gilded Age to scrutiny. In the chapter entitled "Freemen!," Twain's Morgan discusses the small farmers of Camelot and the abuse they suffer at the hands of the nobility. Morgan speaks of the freemen as if they have no American analogue and highlights the barbarity of what he calls "the gilded minority" (*Connecticut Yankee* 84). Yet, Morgan's description of their living conditions closely mirrors the living conditions of African-American "freemen" in the contemporaneous post-reconstruction South:

They were freemen, but they could not leave the estates of their lord or their bishop without his permission. . . . they could not sell a piece of their own property without paying him a handsome percentage of the proceeds, nor buy a piece of somebody else's without remembering him in cash for the privilege; they had

to harvest his grain for him gratis, and be ready to come at a moment's notice, leaving their own crop to destruction by the threatened storm; they had to let him plant fruit trees in their fields, and then keep their indignation to themselves when his heedless fruit gatherers trampled the grain around the trees...(85)

Though these conditions do not replicate exactly those of African-Americans in the post-Reconstruction South, Twain certainly seems to be drawing a parallel between the “freemen” of Camelot and the “freemen” of the South, many of whom were still tethered to Southern plantations economically even after being freed politically. Twain, like many other humorists, also uses violence to critique collective memory. The novel ends on a note of extravagant violence, with Morgan electrocuting Camelot's knights in an epic final battle. In essence, the ending obliterates fanciful historical representations of medieval England and The Gilded Age. Consequently, Twain constructs a darkly humorous past to satirize the follies of the present while challenging the collective memory of slavery and reconstruction.

In *Pudd'head Wilson*, Twain revisits the corruption of the antebellum South to critique the debate over the civil rights of African-Americans in the mid-1890s. Though Twain's humor is decidedly darker and borderline tragic, he still uses humor to crystallize his grievances. The primary source of humor in the novel can be found at the beginning of each chapter in the excerpts from Wilson's calendar. Wilson's dark one-liners—such as “April 1. This is the day upon which we are reminded of what we are the other three hundred and sixty-four” (111)—illustrate Twain's sardonic view of human nature, a criticism which he makes quite clearly throughout the novel. Twain again brings to the surface a forgotten history, one of miscegenation and the subjugation of another person's will and freedom. Indeed, Twain was a writer who had trouble escaping his own history and guilt over his complicity in the mistreatment of African-Americans, and his fiction and essays, though built on his reputation as a humorist, sought to make sure that no one else escaped. Gillman suggests that we begin to place Twain “in the rank of the historians...whose histories are open-ended, open to change, and insist upon the ongoing responsibility of actors in the present to act on the behalf of the past which they have yet to redeem” (36-37). No matter where we place Twain's histories, one cannot deny that his work legitimized the use of humor and satire to confront America's rosy account of its own history.

Other American writers, such as Kurt Vonnegut, E.L. Doctorow, and Ishmael Reed have continued to use humor in their critiques of history and memory. These writers follow Twain's use of humor to condemn atrocities such as war and racism. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Vonnegut makes use of bitter irony and absurd humor to convey his objections not only to World War II, but all war. Vonnegut challenges the collective memory of World War II as “the great war” by showing the underbelly of the American cause and drawing attention

to an event that could serve to shame America, the firebombing of Dresden. Christina Jarvis calls Vonnegut's depiction of the war the "Vietnamization of WWII" (96) because it makes complicated the clean, heroic narrative of World War II expressed in film and literature. Thus, Vonnegut both challenges the popular history of World War II and critiques the contemporary problem of glorifying war excessively.

In *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Reed uses humor to rewrite history from a uniquely African-American perspective while challenging traditional "Antonist" history, which seeks to undermine and subjugate. In the novel, the so-called Jazz Age, which Reed calls Jes Grew, is not simply the rise of a musical style and culture, but another battle in the war between the monotheistic Antonists and the polytheistic representatives of HooDoo. Reed contends that the powerful, mostly white cultural arbiters, represented by the shadowy Wallflower Order, seek to undermine the rise of Jazz because they see it as a threat, mostly perpetrated by African-Americans to the American way of culture. For Reed, these conflicts extend beyond American history all the way back to the ancient Egyptians, and he spends around thirty pages outlining these conflicts in a parody of an elaborate conspiracy theory, which Reed takes seriously. Reed succeeds in distorting the official memory of the Jazz Age by including an impressive array of historical footnotes; he further confuses it with his playful tone in explaining the history of conflicts between Antonists and HooDoo. Sharon Jessee contends that Reed "uses humor to critique Western concepts of self and identity. By signifying on the sign of seriousness, Reed chips away the conventions of unity and coherence from the sphere of identity formulation..." (127). Humor thus becomes an important tool in the restructuring of collective history and identity in Reed's novel. In his other novels, Reed presents collective memory from a different perspective, from the perspective of those who often have little voice in the shaping of collective memory. Like Irving, Twain, Vonnegut, and Doctorow, Reed succeeds in using humor and satire as a means of challenging the ways in which collective memory is shaped by dominant ideology.

E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) begins with a nostalgic remembrance of the turn of the 20th century that reinforces the false sense of collective memory associated with that time (which is odd because a cursory reading of the works of Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce would suggest that times were not so flush). He writes, "Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900s...Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in the summer. Tennis racquets were hefty and the racquet faces elliptical. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants" (3-4). However, Doctorow goes on to use heavily ironic humor to peel away that nostalgia and reveal the incongruity of the collective memory. His narrator reveals Teddy Roosevelt, "the great

conservationist,” to be an avid hunter who takes frequent safaris (112). He also exposes the harsh conditions of African-Americans, women, immigrants, and children in the early twentieth century, which many who wistfully desire to return to “a simpler time” in history tend to forget. In one moment of dark humor, the narrator says that “Employers liked to think of [child laborers] as happy elves” (39), exposing American’s dependence on child labor in the early 20th century. Even though Doctorow’s narrative appears to be bordering on the same catastrophic course as those of Twain and Vonnegut, *Ragtime* eventually ends on a utopian note, which itself illustrates the tendency to forget the atrocities perpetrated by Americans in the so-called Golden Years. One could read this utopian ending as a hopeful wish for the future, but it is more likely that Doctorow crafts such a tone-shifting ending to explain how collective memory whitewashes the harsh condition of times past. Thus, Doctorow uses humor not only to critique historical representations, but he also presents a utopian alternative that illustrates how easily unpleasant memories can be erased.

In addition to revealing censored history, these writers, along with a vast catalogue of other American writers, use humor as a salve for its injuries. If legislation and tragic and “serious” literature cannot cure ills, surely humor plays a role in relieving the anxieties caused by its injustices. Mark Twain attempted to assuage the anxieties of The Gilded Age and Reconstruction by confronting it with humor. To make sense of not only the firebombing of Dresden, but of war in general, Vonnegut constructs an absurd, sometimes humorous subplot about time travel and aliens in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Sara Blacher Cohen suggests that humor thrives in times of great anxiety, such as The Civil War, The Great Depression, and World War II (1). Beginning with Irving and continuing with culture today, humor has been a valuable weapon in acknowledging the shortcomings of American collective memory. Their humor oftentimes is what makes the irony of the American dream bearable because it is often the only weapon of those who are not allowed to achieve it.

### **Animated Television Programs' Relationship with Collective Memory**

Just as American writers use humor to modify popular memory, so too do animated television programs. Rather than diving into tired arguments about what is and is not literature, it is more important to discuss how these shows perform similar functions in different formats for different audiences. Certainly, animated television is a product of its time and environment and therefore goes about addressing problems with a different kind of humor. Nevertheless, these programs also point their cameras at cultural events and take funny pictures of them for the masses, often subverting what many

believe to be true. Like a photograph, they do not, nor can they, represent every facet of American culture in totality, but their presence and their success do reflect a loud voice in contemporary society—a voice that uses the carnivalesque, dark humor, and irony to reshape collective memory. Sometimes, the shows attempt to use laughter to reduce the anxiety caused by historical incongruity. However, Paul Lewis asserts that “not all humor reduces anxiety and not all anxiety-reduction is beneficial” (7), which indicates that humor can sometimes complicate and critique reasonable discourse. Lewis finally acknowledges that “it seems as though humor, or some versions of it in some situations, has persuasive force” (168), and these shows have used their persuasive force to help shape and reshape collective memory. Like American humorists before them, animated programs provide a vital function by complicating history and memory and exposing its false myths.

Though American writers use humor as a major tool in critiquing American collective memory, animated television programs gravitate toward a different kind of humor. Where Twain and Vonnegut might emphasize darker humor, animated shows such as *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, and *Family Guy* emphasize playfully ironic, often irreverent humor. One could argue that these series’ tendency to approach potentially controversial topics from a more irreverent, humorous perspective weakens their ability to critique dominant ideology’s shaping of collective memory.

Nevertheless, each show performs a similar function in critiquing collective history and memory because they destabilize the collective myths endorsed by dominant ideology, thus allowing the shows to step in with their own respective critiques. Certainly, they do not veer toward tragedy, but instead toward Mikhail Bakhtin’s conceptions of the carnivalesque and Menippean satire. The carnivalesque, as discussed in the previous chapter, refers to a period of celebration when a leveling occurs between a culture’s privileged citizens and impoverished masses. The period is characterized by laughter, the grotesque, and anarchy. Bakhtin argues that though the carnival is a time of revelry, the leveling of classes indicates its importance as a form of social critique. Though it appears to be fun and games, the critique has its own gravity that is every bit as vital and serious as tragic representations of atrocities. Likewise, animated programs appear to be a string of empty pop cultural references and scatological jokes, but the subtext reveals more subtle critiques, ones which can be read as serious judgments, though they are clothed in humor.

Animated television programs also demonstrate their importance by fulfilling the characteristics of Menippean satire. Bakhtin outlines fourteen characteristics of the menippea, but I will only focus on a few for the purposes

of illustrating the significance of animated television's use of humor, to present alternate views of American collective memory:

1. The comic element is greater in the menippeia in comparison with other forms of social criticism such as the Socratic dialogue, invective, and vitriol.<sup>1</sup>
2. It has freedom from historical and memoir forms, meaning that it need not be true to history. Certainly, the histories created by popular American humorists are also not true to history according to those who have the largest hand in shaping it. The whole point in approaching history for these humorists is to subvert the official historical account and replace it with a more conceptually true history.
3. Most importantly according to Bakhtin, the menippeia creates extraordinary and fantastic situations to test a philosophical idea(s).<sup>2</sup>
4. Finally, the menippeia is "journalistic," or timely and based on the issues of the day. Bakhtin's fourteen characteristics greatly aid in narrowing the scope of the ever-changing genre of satire (*Dostoevsky* 94-97).

The last item illustrates how animated shows might be very different from humorists of the past. While engaging with history and collective memory, animated shows also have a large hand in shaping collective memory, often competing with dominant ideology to shape current events. Because some animated shows are produced within a short time frame, they are able to comment on events of national importance very quickly. For example, instead of addressing 9/11 many years later, *South Park* was able to address after only a few months, *The Boondocks* within a few years. Thus, animated television has the potential to subvert historical accounts before they become history. They have the same capacity to critique as both the novel and the opinion/editorial or even the comic and political cartoon.

Animated shows have addressed many events prominent in the nation's collective memory, and it is important to remember that not every program approaches an event in exactly the same way. Animated programs comment on cultural traumas such as slavery, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the treatment of Native Americans, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina. Therefore, I would like to discuss such events and analyze how each show subverts, or possibly reinforces the collective memory of these events in the tradition of American literature.

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1 Bakhtin does not denigrate the comic's ability to critique culture—it only goes about its critique differently than socially conscious tragic humor.

2 Though the scenarios in animated television shows seem ridiculous, they quite often explore issues such as history and collective memory.

### Animated Programs and Slavery

Much of American history and memory is defined by the nation's practice and eventual abolishment of slavery. Therefore, it only makes sense that many cultural texts are still looking to find meaning for this stain on American history. To be sure, so-called neo-slave narratives, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, have sought to redefine the tragedy of the institution for a new generation. While Morrison's work has a tragic bent, some have tried to bring meaning and redefine slavery by using humor and comedy. *The Boondocks* is perhaps the best example of an animated show that uses such humor to address slavery's place in American collective memory. "The True Story of Catcher Freeman" (28 January 2008) involves Granddad, Uncle Ruckus, and Huey all give conflicting accounts of a legendary escaped slave and Freeman ancestor Catcher Freeman (Donald Faison). The episode begins with a parody of a movie trailer in which the major events of Freeman's life are summarized, complete with dramatic action sequences, melodramatic dialogue, and a blood-pumping score. However, the "trailer" is interrupted when it is revealed that Granddad is telling the story of their Great-Great Grandfather. The audience is then taken back to events as Granddad tells them via flashback. As Granddad elaborates on his story, it indeed has all the makings of a big-budget, action-adventure film that Hollywood would produce in a "based on actual events" biopic. Granddad even notes that Freeman was "The greatest black man who ever lived. He was Malcolm X, Nat Turner, Barack Obama all rolled into one," which sounds like a script pitch. According to Granddad's account, Freeman, an escaped slave who frees other slaves, conspires with Velma (Crystal Scales), a slave on the plantation of the evil Colonel Lynchwater (Jeff Bennett), to kill the master and escape to freedom. However, their plan is foiled when Tobias (Donald Faison), a house slave, learns of the plan and reports it to Lynchwater. A battle ensues in which Lynchwater holds Velma at gunpoint and threatens to kill her unless Freeman calls off his revolt. Freeman then retrieves his sword and decapitates Lynchwater. Tobias threatens to shoot Freeman in retaliation, but Velma shoots him before he gets the chance.

Granddad certainly means well in his account of Catcher Freeman, but his version of the narrative lacks veracity. Furthermore, it illustrates the fetishization of history. Granddad's story clearly reflects a tendency to make history "interesting" by exposing it to big-budget action sequence and the requisite love story. Thus, the episode openly parodies, and even satirizes, pop historical film such as *Pearl Harbor* (2002). Furthermore, Granddad's audience is unimpressed with his version of events, particularly Riley, who says that according to Granddad, every branch on the Freeman family tree is someone famous. Indeed, Granddad's narrative does not seem to be entirely true, with anachronistic references to Batman and Catcher's martial arts abilities equally emphasized with important historical figures such as Nat Turner and Malcolm



X. In any event, the reaction of Granddad's audience speaks volumes about his story. Huey is skeptical (as always) but is willing to give well-meaning Granddad the benefit of the doubt, while apolitical Riley believes that Granddad is making up "this whole 'SLAVERY' thing."

Though Granddad's versions of Catcher's life seem to be a stretch, the self-loathing Uncle Ruckus intrudes on the Freemans to give his outlandish version of the Catcher Freeman story. According to Ruckus, slavery was a magical time when the glorious white man provided his slaves with room, board, and great food. Because Ruckus often sympathizes with the white man, his version of Freeman's story illustrates the show's satire of white America's tendency to mitigate its violent, oppressive past by presenting the supposed benefits of its atrocities. According to Uncle Ruckus, Catcher Freeman was not an escaped slave, but an escaped slave hunter because, as the twisted Ruckus reasons, "Who better to catch a nigga than a nigga." The visual rhetoric in Ruckus's version of events becomes especially important because the African-Americans, and Catcher especially, are portrayed as animalistic primates and lacking basic intelligence as indicated by the use of extreme close-ups and grotesque images of slaves that grunt, drool, and speak in monosyllabic utterances. To ensure that Catcher will not thwart their plans, the slaves send Velma to seduce Catcher so the slaves can accomplish their goal to supplant Lynchwater. They descend on Lynchwater's plantation not in defiant glory as depicted in Granddad's narrative, but as a brood of bloodthirsty zombies. Oddly, Riley, who did not appreciate his Granddad's lionized version of the courageous Catcher earlier in the episode, fully embraces Ruckus's version by admiringly exclaiming, "He's so gangsta," after Catcher jumps out of the water to capture an escaped slave. Granddad and Huey realize that Ruckus's story is complete nonsense.

However, Huey, after doing research on the Internet, finds out the "true" story of Catcher. Tobias, the house slave who betrayed the rebellion of Granddad's narrative, turns out to be Catcher Freeman himself and Lynchwater's child via an affair with one of his slaves. Instead of Granddad's heroic portrait or Ruckus's animalistic portrayal, Tobias Freeman was against the revolt because he wrote the first screenplay and wanted Lynchwater to help him sell it. Freeman was indeed in love with Velma, but she rejected his advances because she was more preoccupied with finding freedom. In the final confrontation with Lynchwater, Freeman intends to shoot Velma to protect his relatively cushy life as a house slave, but shoots Lynchwater by mistake. Instead of rocking the boat, Huey notes that Freeman decided it was "best to side with the winning team" and pretends that he intended to shoot Lynchwater all along, thus establishing him as a hero and winning the approval of Velma. Upon hearing the actual historical account, Granddad and Ruckus both leave in disgust after having their narratives thwarted. Meanwhile, Riley attempts to tell his own Catcher Freeman story, in which Freeman had "three

hundred hos and drove a Bentley Cooper with 24-inch rims and machine guns mounted onto the hood,” but before he has the chance to elaborate, the episode ends.

At its core, the episode implies that people create their own histories to make sense of their own conceptions of the world, which illustrates the complexity of collective memory. There are many layers of complexity that are not overtly discussed in this episode, but important points are implied nonetheless. For example, the audience finds out that not all the Freemans are unmitigated heroes. They also learn that the Freemans are descendants of a white plantation owner (though not much is done with this information). Granddad exaggerates his story to inflate the importance of the Freeman name. The family narrative removes any aspect that would bring shame, such as Tobias’s ignoble behavior in revealing the planned slave revolt to Lynchwater.

More than that, however, McGruder seems to be critiquing postmodern “historical films” that remove historical complexity from their narratives in favor of perpetuating myths of the American narrative or reshaping history to suit the politics of the one who writes it. Granddad’s cinematic narrative reduces the hardships of African-American slaves to melodrama, in which *Catcher’s* life follows the hero’s narrative with the loose ends tied. His satire of these clean narratives is indicated by McGruder’s visual and tonal parody of movie trailers and the subsequent cinematic action with quick cuts and a dramatic score while describing Freeman’s exploits. Instead of telling a historically relevant story that reveals the flaws of all the characters involved, Granddad has reduced the narrative to a canned Hollywood action flick that would be consumed and discarded by its audiences. Uncle Ruckus’s version perpetuates negative stereotypes of African-American slaves and similarly reinforces his worldview that all good in the world is provided by whites while blacks seek to undermine all the good provided by white culture. Meanwhile, Riley’s account, though very brief, illustrates the tendency to ignore accuracy in history in order to make it more palatable to a contemporary audience. Riley’s version disengages from history entirely, which indicates a more postmodern view of collective memory that Huey attempts to correct. Instead of shaping his own narrative of *Catcher’s* life, Huey, ever the iconoclast, shatters both Ruckus’s and Granddad’s perspectives, leaving them unable to make sense of the new narrative. Because it is the truth, they dismiss it entirely, which might be writer Aaron McGruder’s method of satirizing the difficulty in changing collective memory. The episode certainly does little to change the views of Riley, Granddad, and Ruckus, which indicates hopelessness in the face of distorted history. Nevertheless, using humor as a tool, “The True Story of *Catcher Freeman*” acknowledges popular culture’s role in complicating collective memory and reveals how postmodernism may empower individuals to fabricate their own histories that suit their own political ideals.

In addition to *The Boondocks*, *The Simpsons* also explores the issue of slavery in “The Color Yellow” (21 February 2010). The episode, which conspicuously aired during Black History Month, revolves around Lisa’s quest to find one good Simpson (which proves rather difficult throughout the series, as this is not her first attempt) on the family tree for a class project. While rummaging through the attic in search of family heirlooms, Lisa stumbles upon the diary of Eliza Simpson, in which she learns that her ancestors were slave owners. Here, the episode delves into a bit of tongue-in-cheek humor; after Homer learns that his family was descended from slave owners, he obliviously notes, “For once, the Simpsons were in management.” Lisa also finds out that Eliza intends to set her first slave, Virgil (Wren T. Brown), free. After helping Virgil escape from his owners, however, the journal that Lisa reads turns to dust. Lisa and Marge then go to the library, where they find a book called *Mabel’s Recipes*. The book informs them that Eliza and Virgil make it home by posing as circus folk. However, convincing Hiram, who looks and acts like Homer, proves difficult...until Virgil offers him one of his “wheel-cakes.” Hiram (Homer), ever the sucker for a good donut, agrees to offer asylum to the runaway slave. With this new information, Lisa exclaims, “Our family has heroes,” believing that the diary provided closure to the events.

However, when Lisa presents her findings to her class during a Black History Month presentation, Milhouse exposes her tale as a lie, using his great-great-great-great grandfather’s diary as evidence. From Milhouse’s diary, Lisa learns that Eliza fails to stand up to Colonel Burns, Virgil’s owner, when he looks for them at the Simpson’s residence. Hiram eventually gives Virgil up and shatters Lisa’s hopes of having good ancestors. The final narrative piece of Virgil’s story comes from Abraham Simpson, Homer’s father. He reveals that things ended pretty well for Virgil. When Burns goes to the shed to find Virgil, Mabel, Hiram’s wife, uses a shotgun to give her and Virgil time to make an escape to Canada. She stays with Virgil every step of the way to Canada, and as they journey together, they fall in love and marry. Virgil, having no surname, takes Mabel’s Simpson name, thus revealing that Virgil, not Hiram, is the patriarch of the Simpson family and that the Simpsons are 1/64th black. Asked why Grandpa never revealed this before, he answers by admitting that he is from a generation of racists. This revelation answers many questions for the Simpson family; according to Bart, it explains his coolness, Lisa, her smooth jazz, and for Homer it explains why he earns less than his white coworkers.

The episode illustrates the show’s attempts to engage in history and collective memory, and the portrait of the Simpson family’s ancestors is not altogether glowing, so the episode is not without its own layers of complexity. The episode also tones down its humor to focus on the moral implications of the story, thus making *The Simpsons’* approach to historical narratives and slavery different from *The Boondocks’*. In any event, both episodes attempt to engage in dialogue, and

sometimes challenge the dialogue, of accepted American collective memory. Thus, “The Story of Catcher Freeman” and “The Color Yellow” are descendants of the postmodern neo-slave narratives made popular by authors like Ishmael Reed and Toni Morrison.

Both also appear to be humorous examples of Landsberg’s concept of prosthetic memory by opening a dialogue on an historical event that an audience has not experienced firsthand. According to Susan V. Donaldson, the neo-slave narrative seeks to rewrite the erased history regarding slavery. The whitewashing of slavery was at its zenith with the publication and subsequent popularity of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (268-269). Regarding the importance of surfacing forgotten history, Donaldson quotes slavery historian Walter Johnson’s assertion that we should seek to clarify “the history of slavery, the terrible interdependence of master and slave, of destinies implacably opposed and yet hopelessly intertwined” (qtd. in Donaldson 281). Lisa’s discovery uncovers a very important interconnected event blotted from the Simpson family history out of shame just as Huey uncovers the true history of his ancestors. In both episodes, the truth is much more complex than the fictions used to cover them up. One does not see this engagement with history and memory quite so often in most sitcoms in which unpalatable and incendiary content are often avoided. Both episodes therefore use humor to interrogate the collective perception of American history and connect with their audiences on a more political and historical level. Rather than simplifying history, both episodes open up the complications of historical conflict while seeking a more accurate narrative, even if that search results in a less flattering views of their families.

### **South Park, Anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust**

Some animated series also address ubiquitous events in the non-American collective memory, such as anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. Since the show’s inception, Kyle, a Jewish boy meant be somewhat representative of Stone, is constantly berated by the cruel epithets of South Park’s number one bigot, Cartman (Cartman himself presents a problem with productive laughter that I will address later). Parker and Stone use humor to investigate what it means to be Jewish in a culture that constantly promotes anti-Semitic stereotypes. In “The Passion of the Jew” (31 March 2004), Kyle goes to watch Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), a supposedly “historically accurate” portrayal of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, at Cartman’s bidding. Upon seeing the film, Kyle begins to feel bad about himself because of the way the Jews treated Jesus, prompting him to denounce his own heritage. However, after he realizes that he is being manipulated by Cartman, who dons a Hitler costume and rallies a group of unwitting Christians to help him exterminate the Jews,

Kyle adopts a different interpretation, calling it a “snuff film” that takes pleasure in suffering while blaming an entire race for a crime. Ultimately, cooler heads prevail after everyone realizes that a film by Mel Gibson—an apparent anti-Semite who spends much of the episode begging Stan and Kenny to torture him—about the crucifixion of Christ might not be the most reliable of historical representations. On one level, like *The Boondocks*, the episode asks its audience to consider the source before being seduced by a historical film. However, Parker and Stone’s critique of Gibson might be more damning because he exploits his audiences’ religious beliefs with violent sensationalism.

The episode further suggests that focusing on the death of Christ instead of his teachings leads to unhealthy stereotypes. South Park’s priest, Father Maxi, even tells Kyle that the crucifixion of Christ is not prominent in comparison to the rest of his life, saying “the Passion was done as a performance piece back in the Middle Ages to incite people against Jews.” Though the episode uses some questionable tactics and stereotypes in doing so, it makes a bold statement against the anti-Semitism that still tears the fabric of Western culture. It also humorously exposes the manipulation of collective memory by filmmakers like Mel Gibson to suit his own stereotypes and prejudices.<sup>3</sup>

While “The Passion of the Jew” employs stereotypes and caricatures in American collective memory to critique the constructions of such stereotypes, other episodes use what many might consider objectionable images of the Holocaust. After all, even serious representations of the deplorable event are many times considered tasteless and exploitive. In “The Death Camp of Tolerance” (20 November 2002), Parker and Stone parody *Schindler’s List* (1993), even changing to black and white coloring after the boys enter a death camp. James Berger would call this episode a third-generation representation of the Holocaust, a generation in which images of the Holocaust “enter comic books, pornography, movies about Vietnam, avant-garde experimentation, and postmodern parody” (xvi); however, these works do not necessarily address the Holocaust itself, only using a pastiche of images. Berger thinks lowly of many of these uses, deeming them irresponsible uses of a terrible event, especially since many of the artists using these images were not directly connected to it. Thus, Parker and Stone’s use of Holocaust imagery and parody in this episode begs for an examination. A quick summary and analysis of the episode reveals that the parody of death camps is not an example of the “blank parody” that defines Postmodernism according to Fredric Jameson—Parker and Stone evoke these images to make a point. However, whether or not they should use such images to make their points is certainly debatable.

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3 The episode actually aired nearly two years before Gibson’s now infamous anti-Semitic tirade after an arrest for a DUI.

In “The Death Camp of Tolerance,” the boys are labeled intolerant because they do not approve of the classroom demeanor of their homosexual teacher Mr. Garrison (Parker), who is trying to get fired by the school so he can sue them for discrimination against his lifestyle. Because Stan, Kyle, and Cartman are considered insensitive to others because of their complaints about Garrison’s outlandish behavior, they are taken to the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, California. When they continue to criticize Mr. Garrison, who shoves a gerbil up teaching assistant Mr. Slave’s backside, the boys are sent to the Death Camp of Tolerance, where they are starved and forced to fingerpaint pictures of diversity. Of course, the boys, except Cartman, do not really need the training, but in this politically correct environment, to point out flaws in the foolish actions of others is considered an attack on their basic human rights. Here, the episode enters familiar territory for the series, which frequently lampoons political correctness and values free speech.

By putting the boys in a death camp setting, Parker and Stone are suggesting that the politically correct movement and the call for tolerance of everyone and everything are forms of oppression themselves. The episode seems to pose a fundamental question: What is the difference between someone who proscribes a certain lifestyle and another who espouses tolerance, but ultimately curtails the opinions of large groups of people? Much of the series is a critique of militant political correctness. Parker and Stone criticize a tendency by many, as Mr. Garrison says in another episode, to “preach tolerance and open-mindedness all the time, but when it comes to middle America, you think we’re all evil and stupid yokels who need your political enlightenment” (“Trapper Keeper” 15 November 2000). In this case, the episode argues that tolerance being forced upon people is itself a form of intolerance.

The explicit comparison of those who run the camp of tolerance with the Nazi regime is a somewhat irresponsible comparison and the parody distorts the suffering of the Jewish people, yet the parody and satire does make a clear point. Viewers must ask themselves whether or not humorously using a dark moment in history, even if clothed in a parody of a popular contemporary film, to comment on contemporary politics is worth it. *South Park* is known for pushing the envelope by constructing such parallels, which itself has some value because it brings the issues of both the parodied event and the satirical target into a dialogue. Whether one finds (or should find) the show’s use of death camps humorous is certainly debatable, but by using the images of a horrible event humorously, the episode strives to make important observations about the pervasiveness of postmodern relativistic thought in which all behavior is rationalized. Those who focus too much on the parody might miss the practical commentary offered by the episode, much as those who focus on Twain’s seemingly objectionable use of language and dialect in *Huckleberry Finn* miss his larger criticisms of slavery and racism. To be sure, Twain’s work carries more



literary weight than *South Park*, but both illustrate that the use of taboo materials sometimes provides a shock to the audience, thereby making the critique more memorable, but also more polemical.

### Animated Programs and the Vietnam Era

Many animated series also address the political turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s, though each series seems to focus on a different facet. Both *King of the Hill* and *American Dad!* examine the psychological turmoil caused by the Vietnam War, while *Futurama* consciously engages with the politics and memory of former President Richard Nixon. *King of the Hill* devotes an entire episode to examining the aftermath of the Vietnam War, particularly the psychological damage done the American combatants both “in country” and at home. “Unfortunate Son” (10 March 2002) focuses on the way that Vietnam veterans are remembered compared to World War II veterans. The episode begins with Hank attempting to collect a propane bill from the Arlen VFW, which is months behind on all their bills. After the VFW fails to raise the necessary money with a garage sale, Hank suggests to his father Cotton that they allow the Vietnam veterans to join. Because the World War II veterans believe that the Vietnam veterans are an embarrassment, they are reluctant to grant them admittance. Moreover, at a picnic arranged for the veterans of each war to meet, the two sides clash over their perceptions in the collective memory. While the World War II veterans revel in their war experiences and their standing in the collective memory, the Vietnam veterans are battle-scarred, sensitive, and despondent because they do not enjoy the same status as the World War II veterans. Cotton and Topsy’s gleeful reenactment of their slaughter of Japanese soldiers trigger the Vietnam vets’ Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (P.T.S.D.), causing them to chase Cotton and Hank through the woods. Eventually, they corner Cotton, which forces him to acknowledge that they outsmarted him; Cotton also acknowledges that they did their best in the Vietnam War. Upon hearing his compliment, the Vietnam vets stand down and state that a compliment and a pat on the back was all they wanted to hear from other veterans and the public. Thus, the episode seeks to enact some sort of resolution to the tensions between the perceptions of World War II and the Vietnam War. Additionally, it addresses through gentle parody and humor the media’s and general public’s portrayal of the Vietnam War.

The commentary provided by *American Dad!* in “In Country...Club” (27 September 2009) is not quite as clear. Steve is provided with an opportunity to sing the national anthem in front of veterans, which excites his father Stan. However, after hearing Steve’s Michael Jacksonesque performance of the anthem, complete with vocal runs and unnecessary pauses, Stan makes it his mission to help train Steve for his task. After failing in teaching him to sing



a more traditional anthem, Stan decides that Steve cannot sing the anthem successfully until he understands the purpose behind the anthem. Since Steve is too young to fight in wars, Stan takes him to a Vietnam War reenactment at the Langley Falls Country Club. Here, the episode turns into a parody of both war reenactments and various films depicting the events of the Vietnam War. Steve is provided with the task of keeping watch over his camp, but he fails, resulting in the capture of Stan by the (fake) Vietnamese. Steve then experiences the horrors of war as he sees his fellow soldiers endure a throat slashing (using a red Sharpie), being burned alive (using an orange-colored spray painter), and being blown up by a grenade (pine cone). He eventually finds his father, who is being tortured by Roger the Alien (trying to procure the home pay-per-view code), and rescues him from certain reenacted death.

These experiences were supposed to help Steve sing the anthem, but when fireworks are set off before his performance, he begins to suffer the effects of P.T.W.R.S., or Post-Traumatic War Reenactment Syndrome, according to the doctor. Here, the parody turns to popular post-Vietnam film *First Blood* (1982), as Steve is harassed by the Country Club staff. One employee tells Steve “the war is over,” to which Steve responds, “for you maybe,” as the camera tracks them moving forward. This scene parodies one between John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) and the town sheriff (Brian Dennehy) at the beginning of *First Blood*. Steve eventually takes a hostage in the caddy shack and Stan has to talk him down. Realizing that he has pushed his son too far, Stan allows Steve to sing the anthem his way. The episode ends with Steve singing an even more audacious anthem than he did at the beginning of the episode, after which Stan claims that Steve is his neighbor’s son.

On the surface, the episode seems to lack political vigor in favor of maintaining a pastiche of Vietnam War movies. Nevertheless, the episode touches on how audiences believe that war reenactments and films can be a substitute for real war or accurately portray what it means to be in battle. Steve’s absurd development of a real disorder through a simulated event critiques the idea that one can truly learn from simulated events, such as war reenactments, fantasy camps, or even film and television parodies. Though “In Country...Club” does not quite commit to a clear political commentary as “Unfortunate Son,” its value can be found in its parody and satire of historical films depicting the events in Vietnam and of ordinary citizens who participate in war reenactments to live vicariously through those who fight in real wars. Stan believes that participating in a mock war can instill the proper sense of patriotism in his son, which will help him sing the national anthem with more passion. According to Stan and his patriotic ethos, history and historical reenactment become simply coercive tools for installing his narrow sense of patriotism, not tools to connect Steve to his humanity. His failure in this quest implies that such narratives and reenactments do little to

connect people to the real experiences of war, but such narratives are instead a spectacle designed to reify patriotism.

Perhaps the harshest critique of the Vietnam era is produced by *Futurama's* constant parody and satire of former president Richard Nixon. In *Futurama's* universe, every president's head is preserved in a jar, and each one is sentient. However, Nixon (Billy West) appears to be the only presidential head still itching to get back into the political game. The first major appearance of Nixon's head is in "A Head in the Polls" (12 December 1999), in which he purchases Bender's body so that he can successfully campaign for presidency of Earth. The episode makes many references to Nixon's most egregious gaffes during his presidency, such as his bombing of Cambodia and the Watergate scandal. His subsequent acts include secretly plotting to destroy all of the robots and orchestrating aggressive wars on other planets. In another episode, when pathetic Planet Express employee Zoidberg seeks refuge in his planet's embassy, Nixon suggests, "Let's storm the place...without my prior knowledge," openly satirizing Nixon's denial of any knowledge of the Watergate scandal. Indeed, most of the episodes in which Nixon appears portray him as a power hungry, corrupt force in Earth's government.

*Futurama's* depiction of Nixon has very telling implications in terms of collective memory. It is interesting that the producers and writers chose to use Nixon as a recurring character rather than creating a fictional president. The show's decision to include such a polarizing figure might encourage audiences to contemplate Nixon's political career, exile, and eventual return to prominence (if not reverence). His appearances also provide the show with opportunities to lampoon conservative mores.

Historian Thomas J. Johnson conducted a study that attempted to quantify the rehabilitation of Nixon's image after his resignation. Johnson posits that media portrayal of Nixon's post-Watergate affairs and travels have helped to make him more the elder statesman than many ever thought he would be (190-191). Furthermore, upon his death in 1994, more attention was given to his positive influences as a politician and unofficial American ambassador than to his scandals. Nevertheless, five years after his death, *Futurama* reintroduced the corrupt and curmudgeonly collective image of Nixon for public consumption. Though it lacks the dramatic impact of the popular Nixon expose *Frost/Nixon* (2006) and the savage portrayal in Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1987), the comedic impact is quite significant. If the media revised Nixon's image in the collective memory to improve his perception, *Futurama* attempts to re-revise the rosy portrayal of one of more scandal-ridden presidents in the nation's history.

In each of these episodes from these respective series, writers, like American humorists of the past, invite their audiences to think critically about American history and collective memory along with the media's role in shaping them by

invoking specific people and events. That they treat these events with humor should not lessen the critical impact provided by these series.

### **Animated Programs' Ability to Shape Collective Memory**

Not only do animated programs address events in the distant American past, but one can also view the shows as catalogues of major historical events in recent American history. To be sure, if television is the first draft of history as noted earlier, these shows are among the first to shape collective memory (Taylor 257). Each show features episodes that address issues of national trauma, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11 and Hurricane Katrina. However, some might argue that a show's depiction of these events takes place too soon after the actual trauma. James Berger warns that we should take critic Slavoj Žižek's advice and avoid the "over-rapid historicization of trauma" because "historical traumas take longer to heal than most political institutions are willing to accept" (Berger 29). Conversely, I would argue that once a major known historical event occurs, it immediately becomes subject to political spin from a multitude of angles. In such cases, it is necessary for those who are willing to critique culture to speak out and bring another voice to the dialogue. Though they may do so with animation and carnivalesque humor, shows like *South Park* and *The Boondocks* both provide this function for those who are disenchanted with American politics as they stand now.

*South Park's* episode on 9/11, "Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants," (7 November 2001) stands as one of the show's best examples of how Parker and Stone use humor to help address national trauma. Airing only weeks after the tragic events, the episode reflects the fear, anger, nationalism, and ambivalence that Americans experienced during the time immediately following the attack. The episode focuses more on the national implications and reactions to the attacks and leaves the pain and suffering of those who experienced the attacks firsthand to someone more capable, which is appropriate since the attacks themselves and the devastation that they caused are not funny. Nonetheless, Parker notes that the staff felt that they should do an episode on the attacks because of the show's reputation for addressing controversial topics: "If any show would do it, we would just talk about what happened...we can't not [address] it" (DVD Commentary 5.9).

The episode begins, like many others, with Stan, Kyle, Cartman, and Kenny waiting for the school bus; however, the twist in this episode is that they are all wearing gas masks, except social outcast Butters (Stone). So he can protect himself from a supposed terrorist attack, Butters has to hold his breath until he can reach safety. When they reach school, the last student in the classroom has to seal the room shut with a hermetically sealed door that looks

more like the entrance to a bomb shelter than a classroom. Such instances of hyperbole in the episode illustrate the fears that the nation had after the attacks, especially with the anthrax scares that swept the nation only weeks after 9/11. One could easily argue that this facet of the episode is simply a use of what Freud calls “gallows humor,” humor which posits laughter as form of nervous apprehension. However, by using these humorous events to show the fear, Parker and Stone also seek a connection with their audience that uses laughter to assuage fear by exaggerating the lengths to which a distraught public will go to feel a sense of safety—many audiences probably laugh at the jokes because they realize that their hysteria might be exaggerated. Though the episode pokes fun at these fears, it does so delicately and considerately.

Parker and Stone also use humor to reflect the anger that the nation felt toward Osama bin Laden. The episode features a parody of Warner Brothers’ “Merry Melodies” cartoons featuring Bugs Bunny. In the parody, Cartman, who normally represents deviant and contemptible behavior, plays the protagonist Bugs Bunny role to a caricatured Osama bin Laden’s Elmer Fudd after the boys are accidentally shipped to Afghanistan. The inept bin Laden falls for Cartman’s gags, which include dressing as an Arab seductress riding on a camel (though bin Laden seems more interested in the camel), posing as a director for one of bin Laden’s videos, and pulling down his pants. Throughout the scene, Parker and Stone depict bin Laden as a gibberish-speaking simpleton, reducing his character to a harsh stereotype.

Carrying the parody to the end, Cartman disposes of bin Laden by blowing him up in the typical *Looney Tunes* fashion. The reference to *Looney Tunes* is important, as it highlights two prominent features in American humor: caricatured stereotypes and casual, destructive violence. Certainly, the show’s portrayal of bin Laden coupled with other portrayals of Arabs in films like *Team America: World Police* call into question the productivity of such portrayals. As Booker notes, on the surface, it might appear that the show unfairly caricatures the Arab community by such portrayals, much like *Looney Tunes* and other popular cartoons employed racist caricatures of Japanese and Russian people during World War II (148). However, the caricature of bin Laden is not the only portrayal of Arabs in the episode. Cartman’s cartoonish tussle with bin Laden is countered by the depictions of the Afghani children, who are portrayed as thoughtful and honorable. These divergent portrayals mirror a scene earlier in the episode in which Wendy corrects Cartman on the exact enemy in the current war. Cartman, ever the racist, believes that all Arabs are alike and worthy of condemnation; Wendy, however, provides a voice of reason by noting that many Arabs are good people and this war is against terrorists. The caricature of bin Laden in this episode is similar to those of other buffoons that have been targets of derision in *South Park*, from Rob Reiner to Jonathan Edward. While the episode therefore reduces bin Laden to a stereotype, his actions appear to be

the motivating factor instead of his race. Such a depiction is important because 9/11 saw a jostling for position over how these attacks should be perceived, with some even impugning the entire Arab community over the acts of a few extremists. This episode's clear distinction between terrorists and Arab citizens seeks to correct such erroneous connections in the collective memory.

Cartman's confrontation with bin Laden also mimics the outlandish violence of the *Looney Tunes* cartoons, which themselves follow in a tradition of violence in American humor. From the violence of frontier characters like Sut Lovingood and Simon Suggs, to Hank Morgan's mass electrocution of Arthur's knights in *A Connecticut Yankee*, massive violence is often the solution to the nation's problems in its humor. "Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants" continues in this tradition, though its exact commentary on such violence is unclear. Certainly, this parody seeks to relate to its audience's outrage toward bin Laden. In this respect the episode performs wish-fulfillment for those who wanted the responsible parties to pay for their crimes. However, *South Park* also satirizes television's tendency to provide quick answers and the military's often destructive solutions to national problems. The episode's somewhat open ending, which acknowledges the United States' tarnished foreign reputation, hints that while killing bin Laden is what everyone wants, it will not necessarily solve the country's problems. In fact, bin Laden's death in 2011 did not end the threat of terrorism against Americans at home or abroad.

Finally, this episode also acknowledges the nationalism and ambivalence concerning America's role in this attack. The episode recognizes the sweeping sense of patriotism following the attacks as virtually the entire town of South Park is draped in American flags, but it also critiques naïve loyalty and flag-waving patriotism. When the boys are shipped to Afghanistan, they meet their Afghani doppelgängers, and their subsequent friendship serves as a symbol of United States foreign relations, particularly with Arab nations. As opposed to bin Laden's oafish depiction, the Afghani kids' voices are provided by actual Afghani speakers and their language is a real Afghani dialect (DVD Commentary 5.9). Stan, Kyle, Kenny, and Cartman begin their relationship with their doppelgängers by sending them a dollar, which serves as a satire of charities designed to help Americans fix the problems of war-torn nations by literally throwing money at it instead of thinking about the underlying, more complex solutions to such problems. Feeling somewhat insulted by the gift, the Afghani children respond by sending them a goat because, as Stan's analogue says, "if you send us something, we must send you something in return." After the boys are shipped to Afghanistan in an attempt to return the goat, they fight with the Afghani boys about America's role in worldwide politics.

In this conflict, Stan and Kyle, the ethical filters of *South Park*, are content assuming that everyone loves America because that is what they are told on television and in school, very much mirroring the viewpoint perpetuated by the

Bush administration and national media that Americans are loved throughout world. However, the Afghani boys inform them that one-third of the world hates America. When Stan asks why, one boy responds, "Because you don't realize that one-third of the world hates you!" The Afghani boys' poor living conditions, American planes constantly and randomly bombing their houses and favorite play spots, and the revelation that American is not well received cause Stan to question America's role on the global stage. The episode makes it clear that America is not completely innocent in Middle Eastern politics, a sentiment that was hard to find in the months directly following September 11. Chris Lamb notes that the attacks changed the rules of engagement for political cartoonists particularly. Those who were once willing to openly critique foreign policy and President Bush drew cartoons that were swept in the more dangerous rhetoric that ignored America's role in foreign politics in the months directly following the attack (4-5). Though Parker and Stone do not criticize Bush in this episode, they do invite their audiences to evaluate America's perception of itself versus its perception abroad.

However, the episode ends on a note of nationalism, as Stan says, "If you don't want to root for your team, then you should get the hell out of the stadium." Before this statement, however, Parker and Stone acknowledge the complexity of rooting for your team as Stan also admits that America has some problems. The episode tempers the nationalistic tone with an acknowledgement of America's sometimes deserved dubious status among other nations. By refusing to reinforce the popular domestic view of the United States as the unmitigated protagonist in the global theater, the show invites its audience to question America while also acknowledging the devastation of the attacks. Parker and Stone thus use humor to display the ambivalence that many in the nation felt and to problematize the rampant "patriotism" that followed the terrorist attacks. Ted Gournelos notes the episode does little to settle the problems revealed by the terrorist attacks: "[*'Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants'*] does not respond to the treatment of a norm or an event in order to negotiate it, but instead reframes the debates or rhetoric that set the agenda surrounding the event" (*The Tao of South Park* 213-214). Through its use of humor, "*Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants*" refuses to address the attacks of 9/11, but instead attempts to renegotiate and to interrogate nationalism while assuaging the nation's fears and supporting its anger after the events. In so doing, it was one of the first shows to establish the American cultural response and to reflect the emotional tenor of the nation after 9/11, thus demonstrating animated programs' ability to shape their audience's collective memory.

Parker and Stone also use humor both to criticize and to provide comic relief in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in "Two Days Before the Day after Tomorrow" (19 October 2009). The episode is structured around a parody of Roland Emmerich's sensationalistic *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004),



a film that exaggerates the effects of global warming for dramatic effect. Beginning with Stan's accidental destruction of the world's largest beaver dam in neighboring Beaverton, Colorado, the ensuing flood threatens to wash away both Beaverton and South Park, but everyone automatically assumes that the flood is caused by George Bush, Al Qaeda, or global warming. The episode criticizes the media for their coverage of the events, from misreporting the number of deaths from the floods to using sensational headlines that simply exploit the suffering of others without offering any real solutions. At one point, when Stan earnestly asks if anyone is going to help the victims on the rooftops, his Dad, Randy (Parker), responds by saying, "That's not important right now. What's important is figuring out whose fault this is." Though this line is humorous, it is also a critique of both news organizations and politicians who were using their face-time to blame everyone from the President to Al Qaeda to global warming for the floods in New Orleans. In this case, the humor helps because it exposes those who used this tragedy to further their political agendas while putting the focus back on those who were most important, the victims. Rather than actually attempting to heal or "work through" the trauma, this episode diagnoses the problem presented by postmodern media, which sensationalize tragedy to bolster ratings, and those in government who use such tragedies for political gain.

"Two Days..." continues Parker and Stone's questioning of global warming and its short-term impacts, a topic that has indeed become a part of our nation's dialogue. In their comedic treatment of this phenomenon, they do not necessarily doubt the existence of global warming; after all, they also satirize Republicans who deny that global warming exists. Instead, they interrogate the sincerity of those who promote it sanctimoniously while displaying an underlying hypocrisy. No episode displays Parker and Stone's wariness more than "Smug Alert" (29 March 2006), in which Kyle's family buys a hybrid car. After buying the car, Kyle's father Gerald (Stone) begins to give citations to people who still drive gas-guzzling SUVs. The impending smugness from their purchase produces a smug cloud that threatens to intersect with the smug produced by George Clooney's 2006 self-congratulatory Oscar speech and the smug cloud from the capital city of smug, San Francisco.

Real events prompted Parker and Stone to confront this issue. In the commentary for the episode, Parker tells a story about a dinner that he attended with many Hollywood powerbrokers. One guest was bragging about her purchase of a new hybrid. When Parker confronted her on her use of a private jet, she said, "We have to set an example for the little people" (DVD Commentary 10.2). Such attitudes are worth exploring in comedic form, as Parker and Stone do so well in both "Two Days..." and "Smug Alert." By treating these issues with humor and satire, they expose the hypocrisy of those who promote what should be a good cause. Humor critic Paul Lewis sees the



worth of this use of comedy, writing, “I treasure the role of humor, satire, and derision in mocking and assailing appropriate targets: people, policies, and ideas” (70). In these particular episodes, the show is helpful in diagnosing a breakdown in the dialogue because of the hypocrisy on both sides of the political continuum.

Like *South Park*, *The Boondocks* also has an episode depicting the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, though McGruder approaches the tragedy from a different point of view. Instead of creating a parallel event in a fictional town as *South Park* does in “Two Days...”, “Invasion of the Katrinas” (10 December 2007) addresses the aftermath of Katrina directly. Furthermore, “Invasion of the Katrinas” did not air until 2007, some two and half years after the actual events. Politically, the episode investigates the forgotten history of Katrina and the evacuees who are still affected, yet no one seems to care because a new batch of stories has entered the cycle.

As with many other issues, McGruder acknowledges the complexity of the disaster by noting the discrepancy between talk and action. Even the title of the episode references the title of a science-fiction film in which unwanted, parasitic invaders descend upon a quaint, comfortable town, which plainly suggests that those affected by the storm are dragging their feet to reestablish their lives. At the beginning of the episode, Granddad receives a phone call from his long, lost cousin Jericho Freeman (Cedric the Entertainer), whose very large family was forced to evacuate New Orleans after the levees broke. As Granddad ignores the phone call, he bemoans how poorly the victims of the flood have been treated and how everyone has forgotten about them. While giving this insincere heartfelt speech, Granddad finally swipes the phone away so he will not have to talk to his cousin. This brief scene illustrates the lip service that people paid to helping victims of the flood, but either did little to help or helped begrudgingly. Though this scene is intended to be humorous, it is also a commentary on how quickly the United States can consume tragedy, only to toss it aside when the next seemingly apocalyptic event occurs. Essentially, our 24-hour news cycle has relegated many disastrous events to the status of a television talk show. At the times of the events, we see the people affected by them on screen, we feel empathy for them, and we decry the injustice done the victims, but then the tragic events leave the social consciousness once the next cycle begins. There is often little extended follow up in the television news media, and when there is, many of the update stories that we see on television are those of restored New Orleans in the case of Hurricane Katrina. Referring specifically of television talk shows, James Berger writes, “Merely being on television for fifteen minutes cannot change the social relations and definitions that give values to some lives and not to others” (165). Though Berger is citing talk shows, this statement also reflects the nation’s short-attention new cycles, which McGruder criticizes so well in “Invasion of the Katrinas.”

In addition to addressing the amnesia of our televisual culture, McGruder also criticizes the collective selfishness of humanity. Eventually, succumbing to emotional appeals of guilt, Granddad begrudgingly allows Jericho and his family to stay with them. As Jericho's family show themselves to be lazy and abusive of Granddad, Huey, and Riley's hospitality, Granddad finally quits paying his bills so Jericho's family will leave. However, this strategy does not deter Jericho as his family becomes the houseguests who will not leave. At this moment, Huey, the narrator of the episode, states that "the gauntlet was thrown in the battle of the selfish versus the lazy." Eventually, the family leaves after almost destroying Granddad's home, and after promising to "break off" a piece of his FEMA check to Granddad, Jericho pretends that the check was denied him because of improperly filed paperwork. Finally, no one is redeemed in this nihilistic episode that not only studies contemporary selfishness in times of need, but a more timeless sense of selfishness that permeates the age of capitalism. McGruder uses comedy and humor to expose a critical flaw in the human condition and our current perception and commodification of history in late capitalism.

Certainly, the use of humor throughout American literature has been prone to criticism. Many question the value of joking about events like slavery, war, and mass murder because of the terrible nature of the events. Others believe that humor provides a release valve for repressed tension. Still others believe that humor gives people the courage to overcome fear by making the target of the joke appear ridiculous. When telling jokes and using humor to discuss tragic events, the joke can sometimes be misconstrued by a heterogeneous audience. For example, though Mark Twain detested racism, his works are banned in some schools because they are perceived as racist because of his use of racial epithets in an effort to reflect accurately the dialogue of his characters. Furthermore, the problematic ending of *Huckleberry Finn* and the rising action of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* lead to many questions about Twain's commitment against racial prejudice, or at least his execution in making those statements. As previously noted, using humor to comment on tragedy is a delicate game of risk and reward, and the morality of laughter at tragedy largely depends on personal taste and decorum.

### **The Dangers of Using Humor to Critique Collective Memory**

I have defended animated programs' vital space in the cultural memory of America because it uses humor to diagnose, to reflect, and sometimes help to repair damage created by national traumas, or uses satire to expose deficiencies in our culture. They also reveal that often people use "history" and collective memory to perpetuate American myths. Ultimately, these shows are essential to the cultural dialogue because they provide a voice that often challenges the status quo. However, there are three caveats to my position that I must address.

First, one must call into question the use of postmodern parody in these programs. Do audiences even recognize the satire, or do they simply watch the shows for the *Star Wars* jokes and references to popular culture? Second, these shows also often employ ethnic and racial slurs and crude, often tasteless, humor in their social satire, which raises the question, "Can humor that hurts truly heal trauma?" Third, even if audiences do notice the satire and recognize the use of crude humor as beneficial, does it really do anything to help improve social conditions?

One can easily criticize animated programs for their use of postmodern parody, thereby rendering them less effective. Fredric Jameson defines pastiche as postmodernism's version of parody. He writes, "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language" (17). Indeed, these shows cannibalize texts from various pop cultural and literary texts. In the middle of episodes, audiences might be treated to a random *Star Trek* or *Mortal Kombat* joke, or a whole episode could be based on Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. This cannibalization has led many critics to view the shows as "blank parody" because the shows themselves become commodities selling other pop cultural commodities to audiences.

From an audience standpoint, this philosophy has merit since not everyone watches these animated shows for political commentary. To delve into a personal example, a family member's favorite episode of *South Park* is "Tsst" (3 May 2006) not because of the cultural commentary criticizing cookie-cutter nanny shows that promise simple solutions to the complex problems of parenting, but because it parodies one of his favorite shows: *The Dog Whisperer*. If there are more people who watch these shows without examining the satire beneath the surface, then the ability of these shows to comment on national collective memory is indeed hindered. However, these shows are not built solely on post-modern parody; in fact, many of the shows are overtly political and often engage controversial topics, often more controversial than most dramas. Though they may have a few laughs along the way at the expense of popular culture, these shows are also among the few on television that mock the incongruity of American life. In fact, their parody of sterile sitcoms and their facile representations of modern life, which tend to ignore history, have made them a valuable social corrective for the past twenty-five years. They use postmodern parody to expose the foibles of their audiences and politics of dominant culture. Douglas Rushkoff notes that beyond the antics of many animated television shows or other works of popular culture lay sophisticated social commentary (101). Though their status as popular culture icons can sometimes distort the politics of the shows, they still provide a similar function that popular writers like Irving and Twain delivered for their audiences by inviting their audiences to think differently

about the dominant narratives regarding impactful events—they just provide it using a different method.

In addition to their uses of postmodern parody, these shows' ability to use laughter to correct political wrongs is questionable because they make extensive use of ethnic jokes and cruel humor. In *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict*, Paul Lewis argues that American humor is torn between two extremes of laughter. The first is what he calls "Freddie" or "Killing" jokes. Derived from Freddie Kruger's cruel jokes in the midst of his victims' suffering in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, "Freddie" humor is humor that laughs *at* someone. Lewis contrasts "Freddie" laughter with what he calls "Norman" or "Healing" laughter. Named for Norman Cousins, who supposedly healed himself by using laughter and "large doses of vitamin C" (71), "Norman" laughter eschews any attempt to make someone "the butt" of a joke. Lewis acknowledges that most American comedic endeavors lie somewhere in the middle of this continuum. Animated programs are further examples.

First, the shows make ethnic, racial, and homophobic jokes that many would find offensive. Certainly, *South Park* thrives on its use of inappropriate stereotypes and ethnic slurs. For example, particularly troubling is the character of Eric Cartman, the town's sociopathic, neo-fascist bigot. Though Stan and Kyle are the show's moral centers and largely provide the authorial voices of Parker and Stone, Cartman has somehow emerged as a fan favorite. The appeal of Cartman's popularity presents a familiar problem in American television, most notably the cantankerous, bigoted Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor) in *All in the Family*. Cartman essentially feeds off the suffering of others as he constantly berates Kyle with "Jew" jokes and Token with "Black" jokes. In numerous commentaries, Parker and Stone note that Cartman is the character that people should avoid emulating. Cartman's popularity presents a troubling question for *South Park*: Do audiences laugh *with* Cartman because they identify with his views, or do they laugh *at* him simply because he represents the stupidity of racial prejudice?

The answer to this question largely depends on the viewer, which is troubling. Lewis cites a study by Thomas Ford and Mark Ferguson, which "supports the conclusion that being exposed to disparaging jokes about disadvantaged subgroups can move listeners already prejudiced against these groups toward a greater tolerance of discrimination" (15). Such conclusions were also drawn by Neil Vidmar and Milton Roakeach. In their seminal research on the perceptions of Archie Bunker in *All in the Family*, they found that portraying Bunker as a "lovable bigot" in a satirical effort is "more likely reinforcing prejudice and racism than combating it" (46). Therefore, even if the use of cruel humor in these shows is satirical, an audience member who hears Cartman rant about "Jews," *The Boondocks*' Uncle Ruckus rave about "niggers," or *Family Guy*'s Mort Goldman's stereotypically Jewish portrayal

might mistake these jokes designed to criticize racism as an endorsement of it, especially if they already have prejudicial tendencies. In “Is It Okay to Laugh at *South Park*?”, Catherine Yu, who concludes that it is “okay” to laugh depending on your preexisting moral outlook, articulates the problem very well:

None of this is to say that one can’t be immoral when laughing at *South Park*. If one were to endorse malicious attitudes or hurtful intentions for the sake of being hurtful, for example, phthonic amusement would be immoral. We wonder, perhaps, how someone who really is racist would respond to *South Park*...Can the person who is really racist see past their maliciousness in this way? (28)

The answer to Yu’s question is most likely “no”; in fact, the racist person would most likely see the joke as an affirmation of his or her beliefs. Thus, the criticism that the cruel humor of these shows negates the positive effects has some credence.

Conversely, the cruel and often violent humor of these shows also allows the shows to address issues that would otherwise remain remarkably absent from cultural debate. Lewis suggests that satire “requires an ethical filter, but this should not eliminate it as a weapon that can be wielded against injustice and folly” (70). The debate then centers on whether or not these shows contain such an ethical filter to show audiences examples of positive behavior. For example, despite the antics of Twain’s secondary characters such as the Duke, the King, and Tom Sawyer in *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck and Jim serve as strong ethical filters that promote friendship, equality, and justice in the novel. Similarly, beyond the edgy humor and blue jokes, animated programs possess very strong ethical filters. In *South Park*, Parker and Stone are careful to keep Stan and Kyle from participating in the hysteria that sometimes envelopes the rest of the town. Though they make mistakes and occasionally act like the 4th graders they are, they also consistently provide a sane, rational counterpoint to the lunacy espoused by Cartman and typically gain the upper-hand on him at the end of each episode. Likewise, McGruder’s Huey is indeed iconoclastic as he challenges authority figures, but he also possesses a strong sense of morality and fairness when he interacts with individual characters. Meanwhile, Lisa provides the ethical filter for the Simpson family, Hayley for the Smith family on *American Dad!*, and Brian on *Family Guy*. These protagonists and secondary characters provide the moral backbones for their respective shows that highlight the silly viewpoints held by more ignorant characters—viewpoints that the creators, writers, and animators wish to criticize. Speaking specifically about *South Park*’s selection as Peabody Award winner, Horace Newcomb, Peabody Awards director and noted television critic, defends the use of cruel humor to make social commentary, stating

We see it as a bold show that deals with issues of censorship and social and cultural topics. My line on *South Park* is that it properly offends everybody by design and by doing so it reminds us all that it's probably a good idea to be tolerant. (qtd. in Curtis and Erion 118)

Though the humor of the shows has great potential to be misconstrued in the wrong hands, I would argue that the shows do more good in discussing taboo topics in American culture than harm.

Finally, even if it is acceptable to laugh at these shows, does their humor and satire really make a measurable difference in culture? This question has long plagued writers and scholars of satire and humor. The only answer that I can give is largely the same clichéd answer that many others give: Though the tangible, visible effects of satire may not be seen, the fact that there are writers and artists willing to challenge dominant culture constitutes a victory within itself. Lewis astutely writes, "...it seems as though humor...has persuasive force" (168), while also noting that little empirical evidence exists to support humor's role in changing behavior. These shows are marketed for a young adult age group that is reasonably well-educated and interested in creating a better future (as evidenced by references to fantasy and science-fiction). One could argue that this marketing is orchestrated by networks to maintain the status quo, and there is merit in that. However, the creators and writers also have the power and potential to influence their viewers against those interests, and the staying power of animated programs suggests their value to culture. For their part, Parker and Stone and McGruder deny the effects that their respective shows have on culture. Parker and Stone consistently use self-deprecating rhetoric to understate the impact of their show. In an interview, McGruder declares, "This is just a show. It's really just a funny and inappropriate show" (qtd. in Wapshott 44).

Despite the protests of their creators, *The Boondocks* and *South Park*, and other animated shows, do make a difference in American culture, though they may not "change the world" in an observable way. First, they wrestle with American collective memory, often in iconoclastic fashion. For example, *The Simpsons* often explores the hero worship of the founding fathers through its portrayal of beloved Jebediah Springfield, who Lisa learns is a fraud and a thief in "Lisa the Iconoclast" (18 February 1996). Jebediah is clearly meant to be an allegory of George Washington in this President's Day episode, which demonstrates these programs' ability to challenge popularized myths regarding our collective memory of historical figures. Lisa faces an interesting quandary after her discovery—expose Jebediah as a fraud, thus shattering the town's collective memory, or continue in its cover up. She ultimately decides that people need such myths, which speaks to the frailty of our own constructions of history and memory. Though Lisa does not expose Jebediah, the episode still makes

an important statement. The episode's acknowledgement that history books and collective myths lie engages audiences on a far more intellectual level than the typical sitcom and even most television dramas. After conducting a survey of fans' responses to the episode, Vincent Brook concludes that "American television viewers are not only being asked whether they want to be a millionaire but are also being forced, at least on some level, to weigh the consequences of supporting the myth of family, community, and country" (193). This episode, and these programs, asks audiences to think critically and historically through their use of humor, parody, and satire, thus providing vital functions of laughter and instruction. Paul Lewis ultimately champions the power of such critical humor. He writes that jokes play a vital role in culture because they "remind us that dangers can be denied, concealed, and/or revealed in humor and that this can matter at times as much as life itself" (154). Beginning with *The Simpsons*, animated shows have revealed the dangers of forgetting history and revising collective memory through their humor.

These shows present a particularly intriguing phenomenon in American culture because though they attempt to address national traumas in a way that promotes social improvement, they are also controversial and use humor that might not promote healing. Even so, I would argue that the positive effects of these shows outweigh the negatives. Like many other American humorists and satirists of the past, they try to strike a delicate balance between nihilism and utopian hope in a noble attempt to throw out the bathwater while keeping the baby. Whether they succeed or not in doing so is certainly open to debate, but tangible success or lack thereof should not be as important as providing a space where laughter triumphs over pain and hypocrisy, because 22.3 years may be too long to hold in the laughter.



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## Chapter 4

# African-American Multiculturalism in *The PJs* and *The Boondocks*

In addition to providing a humorous, satirical view of the venerated concepts of history, economy, and location, American humor also reflects the differences between diverse groups in American culture. Nancy Walker writes that “the diversity that is one of America’s distinctive qualities has in turn produced much humor expressive of [ethnic and cultural] differences” (*What’s So Funny?* 8). In early American history, ethnic humor was one of the means by which dominant white culture maintained its superiority. Nevertheless, in underground arenas, ethnic humor took a different course—it at once mocked the supposed superiority of the dominant group while keeping a critical eye on the discursive political opinions held within the oppressed group. In particular, African-American humorists and satirists can especially tell “the Great American Joke” because they have often been denied the privilege of partaking in “the American Dream,” making the tragic gap that Louis Rubin writes of even more pronounced, more incongruous from the African-American perspective. As a result, African-Humor humor has developed as a clear subset in the Great American Joke as African-Americans have had to fight for freedom in the land of the free.

African-American humor has long provided the dual function of critiquing white culture, but is also “directed at African-Americans and focuses on their follies as well” (Watkins 569). The best African-American humorists, such as Rudolph Fisher, George Schuyler, Langston Hughes, Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, and Dave Chappelle, have maintained this dual vision. Mel Watkins further asserts that “African-American humor can be seen as a shadowy comic vision that satirizes America’s main body” (*Real* 569). Darryl Dickson-Carr refers to such novelists and entertainers who present this comic vision as multicultural because of their ability to cast a critical eye not only on their places in a white-mediated world, but also on the conflicts within the African-American community itself. Undeniably, the best African-American humorists in both writing and performance are able to synthesize a comic “double vision,” in which they express “[their] outrage at oppression in critical attacks on the system, while unmasking the pretenses of [their] fellows” (Nichols 107). However, in the past century, this humor has often come at a price for those who use it because the dual nature of the humor ultimately stings both white

and black audiences. Thus, the comic exposure of white and black shibboleths often results in controversy that manifests itself in the public eye.

As television became a dominant medium of discourse, it was only natural that these conflicts would transfer into depictions of African-Americans in the news and on scripted television. In *Watching Race*, a study of black sitcoms from the 1980s and early 1990s, Herman Gray divides the depiction of African-Americans on television comedy into three categories: assimilationist, pluralist, and multiculturalist (85-91). Assimilationist series include African-American characters, but ignore the political and sociological implications of race in their deployment of those characters (86). Pluralist programs have predominantly African-American casts and make some effort to explicate the African-American experience, but ultimately the problems they face largely mirrors those of white sitcoms and ignores the sociological implications of racial tension between white culture and African-American culture (87).

According to Gray, pluralist programs, while valuable in breaking down barriers in Hollywood, also “construct a view of American race relations in which conflict, tension, and struggles over power...depend on the logic of a cultural pluralism that requires a homogenous, totalizing blackness...incapable of addressing the differences, tensions, and diversities among African-Americans” (88). Conversely, multicultural programs are those that construct African-American experiences “at the very center of [their] social and cultural universe” (Gray 89). Instead of pandering to the perceptions and wishes of white middle class audiences, multicultural programs explore the various tensions and relationships within the African-American community that allow “viewers, regardless of race, class, or gender locations, to participate in black experiences from multiple subject positions” (Gray 90).

For this chapter, I would like to argue that animated programs *The PJs* and *The Boondocks* adopt a multicultural perspective through their ability to simultaneously expose new forms of racial tension and oppression and their willingness to critique the various tensions among African-Americans in contemporary political discourse. Even though the medium is vastly different, both of these animated programs are significant because they continue the multicultural dialogue established by African-American humorists of the past by presenting their own shadowy comic vision that emphasizes the incongruity between American ideals and the American experience. Furthermore, the criticism and controversy generated by each program largely mirrors those faced by other African-American comedies in literature, performance, and television.

Little academic research has been done on both programs' contributions to and continuation of African-American humor. Virtually no scholarly work has been done on *The PJs*, while *The Boondocks* has received some scholarly attention from Avi Santo, who focuses on the African-American viewership of the program, and Tia Tyree and Adrian Krishnasamy, who argue that

the comic strip upon which the program is based follows in the traditions of African humor specifically. Rex Krueger also analyzes the program's transition from comic strip to animated series, while Ted Gournelos analyzes *The Boondocks* as a multicultural program in his study of *South Park*, in which he argues that the program is influenced by the post-9/11 political and cultural landscape. Therefore, to help solidify some of my points, I have used sources from scholars who have written specifically about African-American humor and television. Mel Watkins (*On the Real Side*) conducted the first comprehensive volume that explicates the development of African-American humor in the nation, arguing that it satirizes the *body politic* of America (569). Dickson-Carr (*African-American Satire*) conducts a comprehensive study in the African-American satirical novel from slavery to today. Dickson-Carr argues that several prominent issues faced by African-American satirists involve the construction of racial identity. In commenting on the construction of racial identity, these writers were not simply focusing on racism, but on the fundamental premises that allow racism to exist. Dickson-Carr also argues that these satirists further address a crisis in Black leadership and political ideology. In order to take ownership of their own experiences, many African-American satirists felt that a radical leftist message was necessary to prevent their art from being co-opted by white patronage while others maintained a conservative stance. Finally, Herman Gray's *Watching Race* outlines similar strategies by African-American producers on television, particularly in his construction of assimilationist, pluralist, and multiculturalist programs. The trends established in all three of these very important works is the tradition of duality in African-American humor that looks outward and inward, often courting controversy in the process. An analysis of *The PJs* and the *The Boondocks* reveals such duality in African-American animated programs.

*The PJs* aired on Fox from 1999-2000 while its final season aired in 2001 on the WB Network. The primary executive producers behind the project were star comedian and actor Eddie Murphy, veteran *Simpsons* producer Steve Tompkins, and *In Living Color* producer Larry Wilmore. The show focuses on the world of Thurgood Stubbs (Murphy), an African-American superintendent of the Hilton-Jacobs projects in an unspecified metroplex. Stubbs largely does a decent job of maintaining the building even though he is constantly beleaguered by the apathetic Department of Housing and Urban Development (from here referred to as H.U.D.), complaining tenants, and an out-of-date building. Even so, Stubbs is given to fits of laziness and is at his most comfortable when lounging in his recliner with a 40oz. malt liquor and *Wheel of Fortune* on the television. Stubbs is portrayed as uneducated (he did not finish high school); moreover, he often appears ignorant of complex political and cultural issues. Nevertheless, he takes pride in his heritage and community, and despite his blunders and occasional selfishness, he usually acts in the best interest of his

tenants, whether it is restoring an old movie theater or creating a recreation center in an abandoned suite.

Stubbs is married to Muriel (Loretta Divine), who serves as a voice of reason on the program. Unlike Thurgood, she is well educated, informed, and is thus more qualified to fight on behalf of her community. Other important characters include Bebe, Muriel's sister, who is driven more by the promise of easy money than her sister, which results in a lack of political awareness outside of her own immediate needs. She is married to Jimmy Ho (Paul Chan), a Korean immigrant who identifies with the African-American plight—a recurring joke is Jimmy's constant complaints about whites keeping him and his brothers down.

Other tenants include Mrs. Avery (Janet Du'Bois), Sanchez, Garcelle "The Haiti Lady," Calvin, Juicy, and Smokey. Mrs. Avery is an old woman who has retired from a career as a grifter. Sanchez is a Cuban immigrant who speaks through an electronic voice box after losing his vocal cords due to excessive smoking. Garcelle appears to be a legitimate Haitian voodoo priestess, though the other tenants do not take her seriously. Calvin and Juicy are both ten-year-old children who represent a hopeful future for African-American youth. Calvin is precocious and typically behaves ethically, though he is prone to playing hooky from school. Juicy is less gifted, but is a skilled cook, probably because he is the primary caregiver for his obese, shut-in parents. Besides Thurgood, Smokey is probably the most well-known and controversial character on the program. A recovering crack addict, Smokey is constantly seen in the building's hallways and the projects sewers looking for a high to replace crack.

These vastly different characters interact in an oppressive environment that is largely unique to African-Americans. Furthermore, the politics of the show are presented from a particularly African-American perspective. It exposes the unequal treatment of African-Americans and reveals the variety of political viewpoints within the African-American community and emphasizes how such viewpoints often clash in times of turmoil and conflict.

*The Boondocks* has been a part of Cartoon Network's "Adult Swim" block of adult animated programming since 2005. The program focuses on the Freemans, an African-American family that moves from inner city Chicago to the mostly white suburb of Woodcrest.<sup>1</sup> McGruder's political viewpoints are primarily filtered through Huey, an afro-sporting ten-year-old revolutionary. Named for Black Panther Party cofounder Huey Newton, Huey is politically aware and spends his time reading and engaging in African-American political endeavors. He abhors all stereotypes of his people whether they are mediated by white culture or black culture; indeed, Huey spends many episodes trying to thwart the efforts of B.E.T. to destroy black people by perpetuating African-American

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1 Different sources cite Woodcrest as a suburb of different cities, including Chicago and Washington D.C.

stereotypes. Because of his intellectualism and political motivation, he is often criticized by other characters for being cynical and morose.

Try though he may, Huey's causes are beset by the antics of his family and other denizens of Woodcrest. Granddad, though politically active in his youth, mainly wants to sit in front of the television and dream of white women. Huey's brother Riley, age eight, displays acute political awareness himself, but he is more enamored with the "gangsta rap and hiphop" culture than he is with advancing the social standing of African-Americans. Other interesting characters include the pathetic "Uncle" Ruckus (Gary Anthony Williams), who is so beaten down by institutional racism that he becomes a self-loathing black man who longs for the return of Jim Crow laws and slavery, and Tom DuBois (Cedric Yarbrough), Woodcrest's District Attorney who is married to a white woman. Both of these characters are largely viewed as "Uncle Tom" type characters who are traitors to their race and subservient to white culture, though it seems that Tom DuBois is presented as a decent character who can be unfairly judged amongst his own people for his complicity in the white system; instead, he seems more clueless than malignant with his liberal Democratic tendencies. The different political motivations of these characters reveal a complexity in McGruder's views on racial relations, suggesting that the contemporary plight of African-Americans results not only from years of institutional racism by whites, but also from fractures from within the African-American community. Instead of addressing these very serious issues with the use of drama, McGruder uses comedy and laughter to promote his agenda.

Even though *The Boondocks* directs much its critique toward the underlying injustice in an economic, political, and cultural system still dominated by white interests, the show devotes as much, if not more, attention to the political and cultural discourse within the African-American community itself, often satirizing popularly held viewpoints. African-American commentators have both applauded and lamented McGruder's "airing of dirty laundry" (Ball) or "speaking about the house business" (Hopkinson) of the African-American community. Jerry Ball notes that as uncomfortable as McGruder's satire can be, his show is one of the last avenues of truly political African-American discourse in the pop cultural landscape, which is now defined by media conglomerates that serve the interests of mainstream culture.<sup>2</sup>

Both programs first continue a dialogue established by African-American humorists on the evolving nature of racism in America. Specifically, they illustrate how racism has evolved from a war of position to a war of maneuver. Until the Civil Rights movement, African-Americans mainly fought what Michael Omi and Howard Winant referred to as "a war of position," in which African-Americans

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2 Though *The Boondocks* is produced by multimedia conglomerate Sony, Ball's point about the show as a center of African-American discourse is reasonable.

fought for Constitutional rights. One of the most valuable weapons in this war was humor because humor distinctly highlights the absence of freedom and individual rights for African-Americans in a nation that claims equality.

### ***The PJs and The Boondocks: Drawing Attention to New Forms of Racism***

During the slavery period, the public humor of African-Americans was veiled in metaphor while the private humor unmasked their anger at social injustice. The best-known tales illustrating their cloaked humor came from Joel Chandler Harris's collection about Brer Rabbit's constant trickery of Brer Fox, in which the wily, supposedly inferior Rabbit gains the upper hand on the supposedly superior Fox. The use of the beast fable cleverly serves as a metaphor for African-American's feelings for their white masters. Though whites claimed intellectual superiority, the animal trickster stories, which evolved from African folklore, deflate such superiority—that this subversion often eluded the understanding of white audiences only added to the irony. This reversal becomes the basis of African-American satire on white America

After slavery, the rules of engagement changed for African-American humorists. Though they were no longer slaves, they were still relegated to an underclass and subject to simplistic stereotypes by both overtly racist entities and supposedly enlightened whites. In addition, African-American comic traditions were simplified and coopted by white performers and audiences to perpetuate white superiority. While granted more latitude to unleash their anger and satire, humorists still had to subdue their criticisms and employ veiled metaphors. In particular, indirection became an important strategy that African-American humorists used to voice their critiques by talking around them, often using metaphor and irony to do so (Tyree and Krishnasamy 36-37). Yet, numerous examples of African-American satire expose racial inequality through means other than slavery.

After the Civil Rights movement, African-American comedians were able to remove their masks and challenge the racial injustice they encountered more directly. While Dick Gregory was among the first to perform his iconoclastic routines for white audiences, Richard Pryor emerged as an icon who challenged the constructions of race and power in America. Watkins argues that Pryor “was the first African-American stand-up comedian to speak candidly and successfully to integrated audiences the way black people joked among themselves when most critical of America” (562). Indeed, Pryor's comedy, influenced by folk traditions, is important not only because of his honest, biting content, but his authentic delivery, which can be seen in stand-up comedy today and vocal performance in television programs.



The acceptance and popularity of comedians such as Pryor and those influenced by him (Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, and Dave Chappelle) once again changed the rules of engagement for African-American humorists wishing to expose racial inequality. Their success combined with battles won in the Civil Rights movement gave rise to a belief that the racial barriers in America were a thing of the distant past, a sentiment echoed in the election campaigns of conservatives, particularly Ronald Reagan. These campaigns often ignored that though they gained freedom and equality by the letter of the law, African-Americans were still victims of racism because the dominant political and economic entities remained firmly in the hands of whites. Thus, cases of overt racism gave way to more insidious forms, which are often couched in socio-economic and political terminology. Herman Gray notes that during this transition, "Blackness was not a category requiring structural adjustments for the disadvantages of historic and systematic group disenfranchisement and social inequality. Rather, like other 'differences,' blackness was a minor facet of the larger American story of ethical richness and incorporation" (19). One could transcend race if properly indoctrinated into white values, while those who remained poor were still coded as black. Darnell Hunt further explains,

In place of explicit references to the black body and the use of overtly derogatory terms like 'nigger,' we are now more likely to find the casual use of code words like 'crime,' 'welfare,' and 'quotas' to invoke images of a black culture that breeds dangerous, lazy, and ignorant blacks. Whiteness, in contrast, has become an unspoken proxy for goodness. 'Good' schools and 'good' neighborhoods are 'good' directly in relation to the present of whiteness—the more the better. (4)

This rhetoric extends to television, where most of the owners, producers, and directors of sitcoms, dramas, and news are still predominantly white.

To respond to these new threats, Omi and Winant suggest that African-Americans have gone from fighting a war of position to a "war of maneuver," in which African-Americans have to constantly defend themselves against the newer agents of racism, such as economics (Dickson-Carr 165-166). African-American humorists have combated this recoding of race with a return to irony, parody, and indirection in combination with more outspoken critiques of the ideology that underpin racist thoughts. Much of this new critique has come from popular African-American produced television sketch shows *In Living Color* and *Chappelle's Show*. *The PJs* and *The Boondocks* would offer their critique of white culture and the economic neglect of African-Americans in this new form of cultural hegemony by adopting similar strategies, but they would both use animated television.

*The PJs* accomplishes its critique by virtually removing white presence from its setting. Instead, the Hilton-Jacobs projects are inhabited by a multitude of

other marginalized cultures from countries such as Mexico, Haiti, Korea, and Jamaica. The absence of white characters in this setting serves as an implicit critique of a nation that fails to provide equal opportunities to all its inhabitants. *The PJs* relies on a unique animation style to enhance the critique provided by its setting. *The PJs* is unique among animated programs because it uses stop-motion "foamation," first used in the popular California Raisin ad campaign of the 1980s. Therefore, the series relies on hand-constructed miniature sets, which provide a more three-dimensional view of the grimy streets, dirty hallways, dilapidated structures, and rusty automobiles that permeate the living conditions of those who have no opportunities beyond living in the projects.

The show's satire on the underlying economic racism that pervades the post-Civil Rights era is evident because the primary oppressor of the projects is not an identifiable figure or law, but a government program that ostensibly exists to help them. In the series, H.U.D. represents the transition from physical oppression to economic oppression. In virtually every episode, Stubbs must request new supplies or materials for his building and is often rejected because of the organization's policies. Often, the receptionist derives pleasure from rejecting Stubbs' requests, enthusiastically screaming "NEXT!" after summarily dismissing his claims. The H.U.D. receptionist and committee are also encased behind a large barrier that obscures their physical appearance. Though the barrier is presumably for their safety, it also symbolizes the institutional barriers placed in front of not only African-Americans, but other minority groups as well. In addition, the writers put ironic slogans on the marquee when showing wide shots of the H.U.D. building that illustrate their attitudes toward those who live in government housing; for example, in one episode, the slogan states, "H.U.D.: Keeping you in the projects since 1965," which references the transition from overt racist policies to economic neglect after the Civil Rights movement. In another episode, the marquee reads "Too little, too late," a critique of the bureaucracy's tendency to put urban poverty on the backburner. Though these marquees are only on screen for a moment to establish setting, they are important to the program's satirical aims because they illustrate a political and economic awareness beyond making jokes at the expense of urban poverty and the failure of a mostly white government to provide meaningful opportunities for those mired in crime and poverty.

"Robbin' H.U.D." (1 August 2000) perhaps makes the most direct critique of negligent government policies that directly affect inhabitants of the projects. After the water filter breaks in their building, Stubbs requests a new one from H.U.D., but they respond by saying that the tenants are only allowed one master water filter per year and they have already received theirs nine months ago. The all-white H.U.D. board summarily dismisses Stubbs's request even though the part itself only costs \$.39, which illustrates the extent of neglect and the tendency to hide behind bureaucracy instead of helping those in need. Stubbs

demonstrates this awareness when he addresses the board; he states that a new filter would represent "...hope. Hope that our government respects us enough to treat us like human beings." Even Stubbs's passionate plea is not enough to change the board's mind, and they unanimously vote to reject his request behind their protective screens that provide anonymity, which further illustrates how racist policies have become institutionalized and anonymous, written by no one individual but coded to target specific groups.

In response, Stubbs leads the tenants on a march against H.U.D. to get justice, but the march is quickly thwarted, perhaps illustrating that old tactics against unequal treatment are no longer valid. The H.U.D. receptionist also informs the mob that they are out of water filters anyway. After being knocked out by gas dispensed by H.U.D. security to end the protest, Stubbs sees an opened vault revealing dozens of new water filters. Speculating why H.U.D. has lied to them, Stubbs reasons that "a \$.39 part is worth more than a man's life."

Thus, instead of relying on more protests to obtain a water filter, Stubbs relies on the help of corrupt probation officer Walter to assemble a team to break into H.U.D. and steal the water filter. Upon entering the vault where the water filters are stored, the crew discovers hundreds of rolls of premium toilet paper, an apparent rarity in the projects. Instead of taking what they need in the water filters, the crew gets greedy and steals the toilet paper as well. Because of their greed, they trigger the H.U.D. office's security system and are spotted by the police, but are able to escape capture. From this point, the episode becomes a parody of films such as *A Simple Plan* and *Dead Presidents* (the robbers also don white face paint), in which a collection of protagonists commit a robbery and vow to split the shares equally, only to turn on one another. Recognizing the greed of the tenants and fearing prison time, Stubbs decides to destroy the evidence. When he is cornered by federal authorities and angry tenants, Stubbs is forced off the roof of the building and sustains massive injuries.

After Stubbs is bedridden from his injuries, the Chairman of H.U.D., Alfred Sours, pays him a visit in an attempt to persuade Stubbs against seeking damages or speaking to the press. The scene is a parody of the final scene in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, in which a government official, while maintaining an apologetic tone and even feeding Alex his food, attempts to persuade Alex to keep his controversial treatment quiet to avoid public scandal and outrage against the policies of the government.

The parody here is appropriate because Sours acts as though he understands the unjust policies that led to Stubbs to take action; he even states that "H.U.D.'s 35 year policy of depriving people in the projects of their basic human necessities, while admirable in theory, was perhaps a bit short-sighted, not to mention illegal." Here, the episode's writers make a direct critique of the unequal treatment given to those in government housing. Stubbs has a chance

to expose the injustice, but he instead takes a bribe by Sours. After Stubbs agrees not to reveal H.U.D.'s unjust policies, Sour "upgrades" his services by allowing his building new water filters twice every 36 months instead of once a year, an even worse bargain than at the beginning of the episode. The episode's ending critiques politicians who pay lip service to improving living condition in impoverished neighborhoods while maintaining the same stringent policies that have existed for decades. Furthermore, they offer ancillary and ultimately worthless promises to tenants to keep them from exposing the injustice.

Through the characterization of H.U.D. as a soulless, uncaring bureaucratic entity, the writers of *The PJs* follow in the tradition of African-American humorists who have used parody and satire to critique the neglect of the basic human rights of African-Americans and other minorities, thus exposing the tragic gap between the American ideal and the American experience. For example, folk narrative "Swapping Dreams" illustrates the ludicrous perception of Black souls and heaven. In the narrative, trickster figure Ike and Massa both have dreams about attending the other's heavens. In Black Heaven, Massa says he sees "garbage, some old torn-down houses, a few broken-down, rotten fences, the muddiest, sloppiest streets I ever saw, and a big bunch of ragged, dirty Negroes walking around" (*African-American Humor* 29). Ike responds by recounting his dream of White Heaven and observes that "de streets wuz all ob gol' and' silvah, and dey was lots o' milk an' honey dere an' putty pearly gates, but dey wuzn't uh soul in de whole place" (29). This brief humorous exchange illustrates the irony that slaves used to deflate the grand illusions of their masters. The master believes he has superiority because his vision of Black Heaven reinforces his world-view, one that holds African-Americans as subhuman and unworthy of anything of value. Ike's response captures the irony of Massa's vision. First, the contrast of the living conditions in both heavens reflects the disparity of living conditions created by white values and interests. "Robbin' H.U.D." has certainly updated this theme by emphasizing the economic power over cultural and political power; nevertheless, it illustrates the continuation of such disparity in living conditions and outlines the cause using irony and parody. Finally, it illustrates how this new form of racism has taken its root in economic conditions and rhetoric instead of the color of one's skin as Darnell Hunt's analysis indicates, making instances of racism less overt, but present nonetheless.

Though its setting is vastly different from *The PJs*, one can find similar critiques in McGruder's *The Boondocks*. The show's suburban setting combined with its animation style set the tone for the series' satire on white control, even if the issue is not directly addressed in every episode. Of the animated programs discussed in this study, *The Boondocks*'s Japanese anime-inspired animation is the most sophisticated. Rex Krueger notes that the series' appropriation of anime allows the program to maintain a cinematic style while providing the freedom to

defy the laws of physics in its fight sequences (320-321). Furthermore, the use of anime, with its clean, sharp lines and rather sanitized environment, fits well with the atmosphere of the suburban paradise of Woodcrest. Since anime often depicts worlds of fantasy, the use of it in *The Boondocks* to depict a mostly white suburb suggests that the entire suburban construct is a white fantasy world. The Freeman's presence in Woodcrest is an intrusion of this fantasy world that forces its inhabitants to face real social, cultural, political and racial issues, which ironically casts the Freemans as a threat.

This use of setting recalls Schuyler's *Black No More*, in which an African-American protagonist injects himself into a largely white setting to reveal the buffoonery of white culture and how it behaves toward African-Americans. *Black No More* targets overtly racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. The plot of the novel centers on Max Fisher, an African-American hustler who takes advantage of a controversial procedure that turns blacks into whites. Upon becoming white, Max changes his name to Matthew Disher and infiltrates The Knights of Nordica, a fear-mongering white establishment that uses religion and science to assert the superiority of the white race, though the organization seems to know little about science or religion. Posing as an anthropologist and able to use scientific rhetoric to garner the support of the Knights (of course, they have no clue about anthropology), Fisher succeeds in exploiting their irrational fears. The satire here builds on trickster tales, which deflate white superiority and mock fears of racial integration.

*The Boondocks*'s first episode, "The Garden Party" (6 November 2006), follows along a similar line of critique, but updates Schuyler's satire to include underlying economic oppression. The episode first establishes that the Freemans are out of their element; they are working class African-Americans who find themselves in the rich, predominantly white suburb of Woodcrest because Granddad uses the inheritance from Huey and Riley's deceased parents to buy a house in the suburbs. Granddad moves them there to "expand [their] horizons. There's a new white man out here. He's refined. For example, did you know the new white man loves gourmet cheese... You give the meanest white man cheese and he turn into Mr. Rogers." Granddad's viewpoint illustrates the views of many who believe that America has largely become post-racial. Of course, Granddad displays that he might not totally believe this because he chides Huey for telling white people the truth about Ronald Reagan, Jesus, and 9/11 in a prophetic dream at the beginning of the episode. Though Granddad is willing to entertain the idea of a new white man, Huey understands that "you can't tame the white supremacist power structure with cheese."

The interactions that follow Huey and Granddad's discussion advance the critique. In the next scene, banker Ed Wuncler arrives in a black luxury sedan. Likely named for the villain in Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*, Wuncler functions as the primary antagonist of the series and symbolizes the ideals of white capitalist

control over all minorities; however, he dominates Woodcrest not with an iron hand, but with business. His visit to the Freeman home illustrates the new form racism faced by African-Americans. After ringing the doorbell, Wuncle hands his business card to Granddad. Upon being invited inside, Wuncle notes that his family founded Woodcrest 170 years ago and that he owns the bank that finances the house; thus, he is very selective about those who live in his neighborhood. The scene is set up to express Wuncle's concerns that the Freemans are African-Americans. Instead, Wuncle asks if Granddad is a homosexual or affiliated with any "Arabs of terrorist descent," indicating the latest threats to white superiority in conservative discourse. After Granddad assuages Wuncle's fears, Wuncle invites the Freemans to a Garden Party in honor of his grandson's return from Iraq. At the garden party, Wuncle notices Granddad's nervousness around him and asks him, "Do I make you nervous, *Free Man*?" Ultimately, the episode ends with Granddad and Wuncle toasting to a sunset, giving a sense of closure the tension provided throughout the episode.

Judging from the surface of the final scene, it would appear that Granddad is correct about the new white man and that Huey's reservations are slightly paranoid, yet their interactions throughout the episode perfectly illustrate the show's critique of implicit racism. First, as his car is pulling up, Huey sets the scope of his toy gun on him to illustrate the underlying threat he represents. When Wuncle hands his business card to Granddad, the camera angle shows profile shots of Wuncle on the outside of the home and Granddad on the inside, with the wall clearly separating each man from the other, which illustrates the show's position that barriers still exist between whites and African-Americans. This barrier is only reinforced when Wuncle asserts his dominance by noting that he owns the loan on the Freeman's house. Wuncle displays his dominance again at the garden party by separating the words in Granddad's last name into "Free Man," with a slightly threatening tone. Granddad realizes this dominance by behaving with excessive politeness toward Wuncle that is not indicative of Granddad's usual irreverent attitude. Finally, Wuncle notes he likes Granddad because he is "old school." This statement seems innocent enough, but "old school" is also open to the interpretation that Granddad realizes his place next to Wuncle. Further accentuating this dominance, we learn throughout the series that Granddad played an active role in the Civil Rights movement, which makes his subsequent kowtowing to Wuncle more significant because it illustrates McGruder's critique of the Civil Rights generation abandoning the fight for African-American rights. Thus, even though Wuncle makes no overtly racist comments, he stresses his dominance through economic terms rather than physical differences.

The episode further critiques white culture when the scene shifts to the garden party, where the predominantly white audience hears Huey's criticisms



of white culture. After the audience reacts with applause, Huey realizes that rich white people no longer understand or acknowledge racism or racial humor; all they will do is laugh, applaud, and comment on how intelligent and well-spoken Huey is. The scene critiques the tendency of white culture to miss the underlying critique in African-American comedy. With the acceptance of controversial comics such as Pryor, Murphy, Rock, and Chappelle, many white audiences react to the controversial content without processing the underlying criticism. Ted Gournelos links Huey's efforts to an engagement with "post-9/11 political and racial politics" by asserting that "...*The Boondocks* rel[ies] on a sophisticated understanding of political corruption with the desire to expose the hypocrisy and insufficiency of those in charge with protecting us from corruption and abuse of power" (244–245). Certainly, Gournelos presents a strong case for his assertion; nevertheless, the history of African-American humor has been predicated on exposing the hypocrisy of whites in their treatment of African-Americans.

Such critique of the hypocrisy of "enlightened racism" can be found in African-American humor dating back to the Harlem Renaissance, particularly Rudolph Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho* (1928). The target of this critique is embodied in Agatha Cramp, a rich, white philanthropist and patron of the Black Arts Movement. In the novel, Cramp and her fellow philanthropists attend parties in Harlem to observe the culture, but her motives seem less than altruistic. Cramp's underlying racist views are teased out by Fred Merrit, a mulatto attorney who Cramp believes is white. In their conversation Cramp, under the pretext of helping elevate African-Americans, confides that she believes their culture to be primitive, illustrating that her interest in helping is motivated more by a "white man's burden" than altruistic benevolence or equality. Upon observing white people dancing in the same style as African-Americans, Cramp remarks with horror, "Disgusting, isn't it?...How can hope to help these others [African-Americans] if we set so poor an example ourselves?" (qtd. in Watkins 126). Here, Fisher ironically exposes the racist ideals of those who claim to take an interest in the uniqueness of African-American culture, but scorn the intricacies of that culture. Therefore, they remain unconcerned about the forms of racism that still exist.

Huey understands this racial dynamic at the garden party all too well. If anything, the patrons at the party are even more unaware of the developing racial tensions than Cramp in Fisher's novel. When Huey voices serious criticisms about the continuing practices of white oppression, or Uncle Ruckus performs an openly racist song about the Freemans, the underlying sobriety behind both completely escape the audience, and they maintain their obliviousness by simply continuing their applause. Huey realizes their applause is motivated by their lack of awareness of the African-American struggle because their wealth inoculates them from truly understanding it, which makes them immune to the cares of



others. The episode thus criticizes white culture, particularly privileged white culture, as clueless to the racism faced by African-Americans because their wealth and privilege shield them from the struggles of lower class minorities, a criticism that dates back to Schuyler and Fisher.

If anything, the difference between the satire of Fisher and Schuyler and that of McGruder is that Schuyler and Fisher imagine scenarios where their protagonists can win in their ideological battles against white oppression. In both *Black No More* and *The Walls of Jericho*, the African-American protagonists ultimately succeed in their endeavors and fool the white antagonists. Conversely, "The Garden Party" (and many other episodes of *The Boondocks*) contains a more open ending in which the conflicts established are not clearly resolved. The difference might lead one to conclude that McGruder's satire connotes hopelessness. However, the difference in endings might very well illustrate the transition from a war of position to a war of maneuver. The war for position for writers is more direct because racism against African-Americans was clearly evident in laws and practice; thus, scenarios for winning these battles are easier to imagine because the goal was to change openly stated policies. Because instances of racism are less evident, such battles are more difficult to win. Huey hopes that his criticisms will shock and anger his audience, but these are the tactics of a war of position. After his audience simply laughs with him, he realizes that his job is more difficult. Thus, not only does McGruder's satirize targets similar to Schuyler and Fisher, he also updates the evolving nature of similar conflicts.

Ed Wuncler does not appear in every episode, but he appears in those in which McGruder wishes to criticize white corporate America. Though the criticism of white oppression is more subdued in "The Garden Party," McGruder critiques Wuncler's economic oppression of African-Americans in "The Itis" (22 January 2006). The episode parodies *Soul Food* (1997) and lampoons the dietary habits of African-Americans. However, McGruder also uses this parody to indirectly critique the exploitation of African-Americans through business and food. The plot revolves around Wuncler's use of Granddad's highly addicting and unhealthy soul food cooking to lower the property rates at government-owned Meadowlark Park by introducing lower class clientele. After lowering the property rates, Wuncler would then buy the property at a reduced price and develop it with his own corporate interests.

The parody of *Soul Food* and Wuncler's investment in Granddad's restaurant are indirection for a critique of the popular theory within the African-American community that the government and white corporate interests introduced crack to African-American neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup> After eating a fried burger on a Krispy

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3 Whether such charges can be verified is irrelevant to this study. McGruder clearly alludes to this theory by drawing a parallel between Granddad's soul food and crack throughout the episode.

Kreme donut known as “the Luther” (named for the late Luther Vandross, known for his plump build), Riley even mentions, “this is what crack must feel like,” drawing a clear parallel between Granddad’s soul food and crack. Furthermore, Granddad’s soul food is revealed to be highly addictive and destructive both on a small and large scale.

The critique leveled at white corporate interests is two-fold. First, business practices that use African-Americans as pawns are criticized. Wuncler at first appears to be giving Granddad his own restaurant to help his friend, but in the end, Wuncler is seen looking proudly at his new real estate development in the now run-down Park after Granddad’s business fails. To Wuncler, Granddad’s needs and wishes are not important—he is only a means to an end.

Second, the episode also draws attention to the dietary habits passed down from generation to generation in African-American culture. Included in Granddad’s many decadent menu offerings are chitterlings (pig intestines), pig’s feet, pig knuckles, and pig tongue, all fried in pig lard and smothered with cheddar cheese. Noticing the destructive nature of the food being served at the restaurant, Huey, a devout vegetarian in the series, tries to undermine its success by showing its waiters literature that encourages healthier eating lifestyles. When Granddad confronts Huey, Huey cites what the food has done to the neighborhood. He notes that the restaurant was originally surrounded by a coffee shop and a day spa, but is now surrounded by a liquor store and a Foot Locker, which underscores the degradation of a once vibrant community park. Granddad responds by saying that the food is part of the culture, and Huey concludes that the culture is destructive. At which point a cook lectures Granddad on how this food became so prominent in African-American culture: “All African-American slaves had to eat was the parts of the pigs the slave masters wouldn’t eat, but that was a survival technique. They didn’t really have a choice. I don’t think people are really supposed to eat this stuff, or not so much.”

McGruder’s emphasis on passing down unhealthy eating habits and the introduction of liquor and drugs into African-American neighborhoods continues in a long tradition of African-American humor that critiques whites for the living conditions they produce. During the slavery period Frederick Douglass outlines this disparity in the darkly humorous “We Raise De Wheat,” a verse from *My Bondage and My Freedom* that makes these conditions clear:

We raise de wheat, dey gib us de corn;  
 We bake de bread, dey gib us de crust;  
 We sif de meal, dey gib us de huss;  
 We peal the meat, dey gib us de skin;  
 And dat’s de way dey takes us in.

We skims the pot, det gib us de liquor,  
An' say, "Dat's good enough fer a nigger. (qtd. in Watkins 44-45)

In this episode that relies on ironic humor, McGruder creates a link between the practices of whites in slavery and segregation, illustrated in Douglass's verse, and whites in the corporate era, illustrating that white corporate interests still leave a large number of African-Americans at a distinct disadvantage. In "The Itis," McGruder acknowledges that significant improvement has been made, but true equality is still elusive for many African-Americans because of the business practices of a white majority.

McGruder's critique of white culture can also be seen in Wuncle's grandson, Ed Wuncle III (Charlie Murphy). Ed III is drawn as a caricature of George W. Bush and wears a chain emblazoned with a large *W* to further draw a comparison between them. Like Bush's ability to avoid service in Vietnam in the Texas Air National Guard, Ed III is able to escape serious combat in Iraq because of his social position and is promptly sent home. Ed III, along with his co-conspirators Gin Rummy (Samuel L. Jackson), who is a caricature of Bush's Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and sometimes Riley, is a connoisseur of hip-hop culture who often commits violent crimes from robbery to kidnapping throughout the series, yet Ed III is never arrested because of his wealth and connections. Even though he possesses the intelligence of a rock, his grandfather confidently proclaims that he will one day be the president of the United States, further implying his connection to George W. Bush.

Moreover, McGruder uses Ed III and Rummy as a critique of the tradition of minstrelsy and blackface, practices which coopted rich African-American traditions and turned them into caricature. In *The Boondocks*, McGruder applies reverse minstrelsy. Ed and Rummy both adopt the mannerisms and language of black culture, but their coopting of such iconic behavior is revealed to be inauthentic because there are no consequences for their actions because of Ed III's connections. Thus, their desire to "act black," is revealed to be a sham and the characters are rendered ridiculous. To cement this ironic reversal of minstrelsy, Ed III and Rummy are voiced by African-American actors Charlie Murphy and the iconic Samuel L. Jackson. Essentially, McGruder allows these characters to use their voices to do whiteface in their caricature of white culture's attempts to coopt African-American culture.

Though cloaked in parody and references to popular culture, the satire in both these animated programs illustrates a clear evolution in the struggles that African-Americans face in American culture. Rather than simply arguing that a post-racial society exists, both shows reveal that racial equality is still very much a work in progress. Therefore, they provide a very important

function that African-American humorists before them provided: bringing awareness to racial inequality in American culture.

### **The Use of Multicultural Humor in *The PJs* and *The Boondocks* to Reveal Fractures within the African-American Community**

As important as a critique of evolved racism is, multiculturalist African-American humor moves beyond merely exposing white oppression. To win the war of maneuver, such humor also adopts an Afro-centric view of history and culture rather than allowing images of blackness to rest solely in the hands of white mediators. Until the early 20th century, such a multicultural perspective proved difficult to maintain because African-American life and culture was publicly defined by white culture. Often, slaves were depicted as servile, simple-minded, and prisoners of their own physical desires. Above all, they were often characterized by their happiness and laughter, which at once relieved and scared white people. The vaudeville shows and minstrelsy, which were an integral part of white popular culture until the middle of the 20th century, portrayed African-Americans as nothing more than clowns and buffoons.

Once African-American humorists and satirists gained more control over establishing their own visions of their culture, they ran into a few problems: 1) Crafting the satire so that it would be read by its audiences as satire—not a reinforcement of white prejudices. 2) Much of their art and jokes was still mediated in white venues. Beginning with the Harlem Renaissance, African-American writers would begin to reveal the various political and cultural ideologies within the African-American community itself. As much as George Schuyler attacks white supremacist organizations in his satire, particularly *Black No More*, he devotes as much attention to critiquing African-American political outfits such as the NAACP and the “Back to Africa” movement. Darryl Dickson-Carr notes that “Schuyler’s satire is directed...toward all civil rights or other African-American-centered organizations that, while supposedly working on behalf of African-Americans, enjoy enormous profits and luxury at the expense of their constituencies and seem to yield scant results...” (65). Even while struggling to remain unified in the face of oppression from whites, African-American satirists were quick to use humor as a critique against the offensive behavior within their own community.

As African-Americans expressed critiques with greater freedom beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, Pryor often depicted characters from the lower strata of the ghetto in his routines. What separates Pryor’s portrayals from those of early television sitcoms or early film is the level of authenticity he brought to his act. As controversial as Pryor’s act could be, one of his greatest gifts was his ability to use storytelling as a tool to find the common denominator in

the human experience. When he tells stories about his youth and the ghetto characters that populated it, he emphasizes the underlying social causes that drive people to such actions. Watkins writes that “Pryor gave substance to types that were outcasts even in the ghetto. And despite the comical cast he often gave them, overall there was an aura of truth about his characters” (*Real* 559). Pryor transcended racial stereotypes in his comic routines and revealed the humanity underneath. His performances opened the door for more authentic African-American portrayals in literature and popular culture.

Such performances of Afro-centric ideology do not often translate as smoothly into television. Gray emphasizes the complexity of television and the interaction between producer, text, and audience; he notes that “the progressive, reactionary, and contradictory character of a program...is historically and socially determined rather than politically guaranteed by the text” (9). As a result, it is important to examine not only the text itself, but how it is scheduled, marketed, and sold to advertisers. More often than not, many programs are marketed toward middle-class whites, leading Gray to contend “that television representations of blackness operate squarely within the boundaries of middle-class patriarchal discourses about ‘whiteness’ as well as the historical racialization of the social order” (9).

Though the opportunities for African-Americans in the production/ownership side of entertainment are not abundant, many African-American shows depict the culture with more depth, thereby challenging the stereotypes and uneven characterizations provided in predominantly white sitcoms and showing the depth of the African-American experience in the United States. Gray asserts that these programs are multicultural because they reflect the multifaceted views within the African-American community, as opposed to assimilationist and pluralist programs, which offer a more monolithic view of African-Americans. The best examples of multicultural shows include *A Different World* and *Frank’s Place*. The same is true of animated programs. Though African-Americans appear in many animated programs, only a handful have been produced by African-Americans, with *The PJs* and *The Boondocks* being the only two to reach sustained success. Both programs make an effort, with varying degrees of success and failure, to challenge and subvert long-held stereotypes depicted in other television shows and culture in general. *The PJs* and *The Boondocks* both celebrate the diversity within the African-American community while also satirizing its various foibles.

In addition to satirizing economic racism, *The PJs* also reveals the various discursive political viewpoints within the African-American community. In “Let’s Get Ready to Crumble” (27 June 2000), the tenants of the building are offered the promise of economic growth in their neighborhood. When wrestler-turned-Senator Deke “The Physique” Van Owen (a caricature of wrestler-turned-governor Jesse “The Body” Ventura) learns of the deplorable living

conditions in the Hilton-Jacobs neighborhood, he takes action by proposing to build a sports arena (The Nell Carter Big Astrodome) in the neighborhood to increase jobs, thereby decreasing crime and poverty. The only drawback to Van Owen's plan is that it will require the tenants of the building to vacate their building to make room for a parking lot. The tenants are happy about the change because they will all be relocated to apartments out of the projects. The only tenant unimpressed is Thurgoode, who harbors a grudge against Van Owen because Van Owen ended Thurgoode's pro wrestling career by integrating professional wrestling. Thurgoode feels that though the integration of pro wrestling provided opportunities and fame for African-Americans, it came at the expense of the league that African-Americans worked hard to build and nourish—the new sports arena poses a similar threat. He lobbies to stop construction partly because of his grudge, but he also believes it will erase the community, as quarrelling and dysfunctional as it can be, that the tenants have built despite the lack of help or interest from the government. Ultimately, the tenants decide to refuse Van Owen's project and remain where they are, opting to take pride in the community they have built instead of the tenuous promise of a better life.

The episode draws attention to two strong socio-political viewpoints held within the African-American community in response to promises made by government and politicians, both of which are justifiable in the context of the episode. The tenants hold that any opportunity for better jobs and a better future would be worth uprooting the community they have worked so hard to build. Undeniably, the plan seems to give them a viable future and would create jobs in the projects, which makes the sacrifice worth it. However, much is unknown about the specifics of the proposal, which indicates that the deal might not be everything it promises. Who gets the jobs created? Probably not the tenants because they will be scattered throughout the city, which leads one to question whether Van Owen's proposal would constitute a new source of revenue for the tenants or if the arena will simply relocate the economic divide in the city. Who makes the money from the arena? Van Owen proposes to build the stadium using surplus funds from the state government. When the tenants reject his plan, he uses the money to renovate his mansion, which indicates that his plans for the money are less than noble. Understandably, the unknowns of the plan give Thurgoode doubts about the proposal's supposed benefits.

Despite his ulterior selfish motives, Thurgoode understands the importance of community. His reasoning is somewhat nostalgic and it reflects viewpoints voiced by some African-Americans that their communities were better off during segregation because it forced African-Americans to take pride in their own ventures, such as school, banks, and businesses (Santo 253). Avi Santo summarizes this nostalgic tendency as an attempt to “resolve the tensions” between “material wealth...and community solidarity” (253). Obviously, one can find large problems



with such a sentiment. Nevertheless, "...Crumble" poses a curious scenario for Thurgoode and his fellow tenants, which pits the wish for equal treatment and economic opportunity against a justified distrust of government and white upper and middle-class interests. Even though Thurgoode's position for opposing the arena is poorly argued, nostalgia for their community and a distrust of government compel the tenants to reject Van Owen's proposal. Therefore, both political viewpoints presented in this episode are a once understandable and a bit shortsighted, and the episode expresses different ways of thinking in the African-American community, in contrast to one-dimensional signs of "blackness" in assimilationist and pluralist programs. *The PJs* does not ignore these difficult choices or the causes of such unequal treatment.

*The PJs* also positions itself as a pluralist program by parodying genres that present flat portrayals of the projects and sites of urban decay. Like other animated programs, parody is the engine that drives *The PJs*, and like those other programs, its parody can sometimes lack a satiric thrust. Nevertheless, one can also argue that the show's use of parody forms a critical dialogue with programs that present negative, hopeless portrayals of the projects and the hopelessness of those who live there. One such example can be found in "The Last Affirmative Action Hero" (29 August 2000), in which the tenants learn that their building will be used as the primary filming location in Jackie Chan's new movie. Thurgoode opposes the movie at first because of the disruption it causes, but he and the other tenants are persuaded by the promise of being cast as extras in the film. However, when they learn that the only African-Americans in the film, which is titled *Hellhole 2: The Land That Hope Forgot*, are gangsters, pimps, and drug addicts, the tenants are outraged because of the film's use of negative stereotypes of the projects. The director responds by making Thurgoode "technical advisor" to assuage the neighborhood's concerns, but when Thurgoode tries to advise the director on presenting the projects in more depth, the crew seduces him with free Hollywood merchandise and gives him the perks that he associates with movie stars. After Thurgoode redoubles his efforts to remove negative stereotypes, he gains an unlikely ally in Jackie Chan, the film's star, who welcomes Thurgoode's input. The director, however, continues to ignore Thurgoode's advice and proceeds to depict the projects as a wasteland riddled with crime, poverty, and addiction. After viewing the rough cut, Thurgoode laments that "the projects are a bad enough place to live without making it look like a bad place to live." He resolves to destroy the film negative before it can be copied and released to the public. When Chan confronts him, Thurgoode explains that films like this ignore the positives of his community as the scene cuts to the tenants casually tending to their rooftop gardens (made in an earlier episode) and Calvin and Juicy playing basketball. After realizing the damage caused by such negative images, Chan helps Thurgoode destroy the negative.



This episode is largely a parody and satire of Hollywood's equation of African-American images with poverty and crime and attempts to open a discourse on some of the positive images and stories that can be found in the projects. Certainly, this episode, and the series, does not hide instances of crime and poverty from its audience, but the show also presents the viewer with a somewhat utopian community that thrives in spite of the economic and racial oppression they face. Though this episode, and others, is reliant on parody, the underlying satire invites the audience to think about the representation of African-Americans in popular culture.

Whereas *The PJs* emphasizes the unity among its characters even as they fight, *The Boondocks* bares the various conflicts within the African-American community for all to see. Many critics, both white and African-American, have complained about McGruder's gratuitous use of "the N-word" by African-American characters throughout the series. Certainly, the use of the incendiary word invites controversy, but McGruder has often emphasized that he wants to write dialogue based on what he hears in every day conversations with friends and family (Wapshott 44). Furthermore, he has stated that he wishes to move beyond the semantic discussion revolving around one inflammatory word and focus his attention on real problems facing the African-American community, such as "self-hatred, narrow thinking and bad TV-watching habits, among other issues" (Robinson).

In *The Boondocks*, McGruder provides a forum that emphasizes the African-American experience, and many episodes expressly provoke his African-American audiences to confront issues that affect the community. McGruder does not often provide easy answers for the problems facing African-Americans, nor does he necessarily claim to be a spokesperson for the entire race (McGruder 187). However, his characters speak different voices that dialogue with one another on important political and cultural events. Even though this dialogue does not include all viewpoints (strong African-American female characters are noticeably absent), the program perfectly fits Gray's assessment of multicultural programs that "represent question of diversity within blackness more explicitly, and frequently, and as central features of the programs" (Gray 91).

So, how does McGruder install such diverse world views and opinions in his program? Generally, multicultural programs often use a recognizable social institution as a public space to explore diverse issues. *A Different World* is set at an African-American university, *Frank's Place* a restaurant. *The Boondocks* uses the institution of the family, even if the Freeman family is somewhat nontraditional, with Granddad providing for his two grandsons. Avi Santo writes that in *The Boondocks*, "the institution of the family becomes the space for exploring potential solidarity across classed and generational lines, while pointing both to their shared commonalities and the contributions and limitations offered by all sides" (269). McGruder acknowledges that he uses the generation gap between

Granddad and his grandchildren as a means of exploring the supposed fissure between the Civil Rights generation and the Hip Hop generation; McGruder calls it “the Bill Cosby thing,” in which older African-Americans fear that younger African-Americans are squandering the opportunities won in the Civil Rights Movement (McGruder 199).<sup>4</sup> In his discussion of *The Boondocks*, Santo primarily refers to the Freemans in his discussion of family, but one might also include Tom DuBois and Uncle Ruckus into the Freeman family since they are frequent visitors.

Each character in this family represents a different facet of the African-American political and cultural community. Huey is educated, progressive, and often revolutionary leader reminiscent of African-American leaders, primarily Malcolm X (whose poster hangs on his wall). He completely understands that the underlying Anglo structure is mostly to blame for the plight of African-Americans, but he also holds his community to a higher ethical standard and strongly implies that his people have failed to live up to the promises offered by the Civil Rights Movement. Riley represents the fascination with the Hip Hop and Rap culture, particularly those who glorify making money, committing violent acts, and exploiting women. Though acutely aware of the plights facing African-Americans, his fascination with the images presented to him in media have motivated him to be driven by his own ambition rather than act on behalf of his community. Granddad often represents the older generation of African-Americans who struggled to gain equality during the Civil Rights Movement. However, he also appears to exaggerate his role in the struggle and seems to be out of touch with the current generation. Tom DuBois, the Freeman’s neighbor, represents full assimilation into the white world, punctuated by taking a white wife. Though his assimilation leaves him open to scathing satire, McGruder often uses him to explore conservatism within the African-American community. Furthermore, while his views are sometimes parodied, his success in the white world is not necessarily scorned. Uncle Ruckus is a completely different matter. Ruckus is an exaggerated, self-loathing African-American who longs to be white. To explain his blackness, he claims to have a skin condition called *revitaligo*, which makes his skin darker, or as he describes the disease, “the opposite of what Michael Jackson has.” Ruckus remains fully invested in white interests and is deservedly the object of ridicule on the program. He often uses racial epithets against African-Americans, which allow the show’s writers to engage in controversial content. Ruckus is what Ethan Thompson calls a “mock

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4 It should be noted that Bill Cosby has since been accused of rape by multiple women, which has shattered his credibility to speak to any moral issues facing the African-American, or any, community. However, during the first three seasons of *The Boondocks*, he was seen as a credible voice within the African-American community and many of his views are subject to satire in the program.

intolerant” character; such characters are common in television satires and can be traced all the way back to Archie Bunker (“I’m Not Down with That” 41). Beyond the controversy, however, Ruckus represents McGruder’s critique of African-Americans who have simply accepted the inequality that faces them every day. In various episodes, these family members disagree, often fight, but ultimately the program adopts a unified stance, even if those disagreements remain unresolved. The use of the extended family in *The Boondocks* allows McGruder to reveal varying African-American viewpoints on current cultural and political issues in African-American popular culture.

Throughout the series, McGruder is a merciless critic of African-American entertainment in popular culture. His satire is often directed at contemporary Rap and Hip Hop artists who focus on “money and bitches” in their music. Moreover, *The Boondocks* also criticizes fans of such music, and the program suggests throughout that many African-American consumers allow performers a large amount of moral and political leeway instead of holding their heroes to a higher standard. One can see this tension clearly in the program’s second episode, “The Trial of Robert Kelly” (13 November 2005), in which McGruder uses the R. Kelly sex scandal to explore what African-Americans are willing to accept from their cultural heroes (McGruder 178).

When popular singer R. Kelly is put on trial for lewd sexual acts with a minor (including urinating on her), many African-Americans attend the trial both in support of and in opposition to his behavior, clearly illustrating the generation gap in African-American culture. On one side, a group of young protesters, including Riley, are crying against the perceived racial injustice in R. Kelly’s arrest and trial. Outside the courthouse, they are having a block party packed with music, barbecue, and alcohol. Opposing R. Kelly are older, literary African-Americans, drawn in the images of intellectual activists Julian Bond, Cornel West, and Dick Gregory, who want to see R. Kelly imprisoned for his crimes. Though the episode appears to privilege the older generation’s perspective (even Huey is hopeful that Kelly will be convicted), the depiction of these elder statesmen of African-American rights reveals them as out of touch with the current generation.

Though the episode pokes fun at Gregory and his fellow protestors by depicting them as stuffy and pompous, McGruder’s satire in this episode is directed more strongly toward members of the African-American community who see Kelly’s prosecution for promiscuous acts with a minor as racial persecution. Huey and Riley are interested in the trial for different reasons. Huey believes that Kelly is guilty, but he is more interested in his brother’s reaction coupled with the reaction of Kelly’s legion of fans. Riley, on the other hand, is interested in the trial not necessarily because he believes in Kelly’s innocence (he reasons that if the young lady did not want Kelly to urinate on her, she would have moved out of the way), but because he does not want to miss Kelly’s next

album because the controversial singer would be serving prison time. Kelly's other supporters offer similar sentiments. When a reporter asks one lady why she is supporting Kelly in his time of need, her simplistic, shallow response is "Because he good," which implies that being talented is reason enough to break established laws and violate cultural mores, or, as Krueger notes, Kelly's supporters believe that "Being 'good' in an artistic sense becomes an appropriate substitute for doing 'good' in a moral sense" (317). Others hail him as a political hero on the level of Martin Luther King Jr. or Nelson Mandela. None of Kelly's supporters take the time to evaluate what Kelly's actions imply about him as a person—they just want him to keep making good music.

Eventually, tensions rise amongst the protest and a full-scale brawl erupts in front of the courthouse between R. Kelly supporters and his opposition. In this scene, the tensions in the generation gap within the African-American community erupt into physical violence, a scenario that occurs quite often in *The Boondocks*. This violence underscores the immense conflict between middle-class African-Americans who blame poorer African-Americans for the perpetuation of negative stereotypes in popular culture. One thing is certain—where *The PJs* relies on community unity to send its multicultural messages; *The Boondocks* often relies on violent outbursts to reveal underlying conflicts.

The tension develops when the trial begins inside the courthouse after Kelly's defense attorney (Adam West) claims that his client is being unfairly targeted because he is African-American. To gain favor with the African-American jury, Kelly's defense attorney draws attention to prosecuting attorney Tom Dubois's white wife as evidence that Tom dislikes his own people and hails R. Kelly for being interested in his "African-American sistas." Even armed with a videotape in which Kelly is identified by his appearance and social security number, Dubois cannot effectively prosecute Kelly because the defense attorney has characterized him as a traitor to his race. Eventually, the defense attorney's final piece of evidence is Kelly's NAACP Image Award nomination certificate, which solidifies his importance to the African-American community, thus making opposition to him tantamount to racism. His attorney further reasons that Kelly's nomination scares white people because of the positive change he can effect in the African-American community (even though most of his catalogue consists of songs about sex); thus, the establishment wants him behind bars. He concludes that "maybe R. Kelly did urinate on this woman, but America urinated on R. Kelly, and if you put this man in jail, America will urinate on you." Even before the judge makes his ruling, the defense attorney plays a Kelly song on a portable stereo and the courtroom (including the judge) breaks out into raucous celebration, completely ignoring the victim of the crime (though she did not seem to mind Kelly's lewd acts in her testimony).

The scene is a vicious satire in which McGruder and episode co-writer Rodney Barnes satirize the political shallowness of some members of the

African-American community. McGruder would elaborate on this critique in episodes featuring fictional rappers Gangstalcious and Thugnificent, who try to maintain an anti-intellectual image and encourage the same image in their fans. The satire in “The Trial of Robert Kelly” is directed as much at his audience as it is Kelly himself. While Kelly’s supporters are earnest and well-meaning in their defense of the singer, McGruder also implies that their outrage is misplaced on a talented clown who does little, if anything, to further the African-American cause. The same satire is directed at young people, both white and African-American, who attempt to emulate rappers.

In a scene that perfectly encapsulates the show’s controversial language and critique of African-American culture, McGruder’s indignation at the trial is voiced by a fed-up Huey. Having seen enough of the glorification of R. Kelly, Huey rants,

What the hell is wrong with you people? Every famous nigga that gets arrested is not Nelson Mandela. Yes, the government conspires to put innocent black men in jail on fallacious charges, but R. Kelly is NOT one of those men. We all KNOW the nigga can sing, but what happened to standards? What happened to bare minimums? You a fan of R. Kelly? You want to help R. Kelly? Then get some counseling for R. Kelly. Introduce him to some older women. Hide his camcorder. But don’t pretend the man is a hero...And stop the damn dancing. Act like you got some goddamned sense!

Huey’s speech falls on deaf ears as the courtroom, led by Riley, rekindles the celebration, leaving Huey to lament that he “did battle with ignorance today, and ignorance won.”

In this scene, McGruder touches on many sensitive issues that are developed in other episodes throughout the series. In addition to the use of the n-word, Huey’s speech implies that an accurate sense of justice within the African-American community is missing amongst many of its members, particularly the hailing of any African-American man incarcerated by police as a victim of injustice. By extension, he critiques blind loyalty to race without questioning whether loyalty is warranted by particular individuals. Certainly, the controversial statements within Huey’s speech speak to McGruder’s reputation as an iconoclast in the African-American community.

Furthermore, such jokes evoke feelings of discomfort similar to the jokes of Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, or *Chappelle’s Show*, but does the show come back to embrace the positive aspects of the African-American community? Had Huey’s speech ended the episode, one could reasonably criticize *The Boondocks* as being guilty of the same African-American middle-class snobbery that defines what many see from out of touch cultural icons such as Cosby, who ignore some of the larger structural flaws that poorer African-Americans face. However, Huey

notes that even though he is “vexed by the behavior of [his] own people”, he also emphasizes that “they’re our people, and you’ve gotta love them regardless.” As Huey says this, the episode cuts to images of Huey and Riley (on opposite sides of everything) walking together; Granddad giving Uncle Ruckus a ride home even though they spend most of the episode arguing about perceptions of race; and Tom DuBois greeting his family after a tough day in court. Such images underscore the positivity of the message within the episode and throughout much of the entire series by understanding that members of the same family and community will often fall on opposite sides of important issues, but at the end of such hard days, they can still coexist as a family despite those differences. Thus, amid the satire and the controversy, the program makes an attempt to bridge gaps even as it critiques various viewpoints among African-Americans.

In addition to satirizing African-American popular cultural icons, McGruder also parodies the controversy over the African-American use of the n-word in “The S-Word” (21 January 2008). In the episode, Riley and Granddad attempt to extort money from Riley’s elementary school for emotional damage after Riley’s teacher calls him “the N-word,” though Riley hardly seems traumatized because he performs a “celebratory booty dance” at the prospect of winning millions in a settlement. The episode begins as a direct parody of an incident in Louisville, KY, in which a white junior high English teacher told one of his African-American students to “sit down, nigga.” In fact, the news segment that begins the episode is virtually the same as a special report by WHAS TV in Louisville. In both, the teacher cannot understand the appropriate context for use of the word.

In the episode, McGruder examines “the N-word” and its effects by all who speak it. Riley’s teacher, Joe Petto (Fred Willard), claims to use the word “nigga,” a term of affection in African-American popular culture, not “nigger,” the offensive racial slur. Petto also claims that Riley himself constantly uses it in class; therefore, he believes that it has a term of camaraderie, but he also admits his confusion over when it might be acceptable to use the word. Through Petto’s confusion, McGruder opens a critique over whether or not the word should be used, especially if it has reached the point that an elderly third grade teacher believes the word has become an accepted expression in certain contexts.

When the parody of the Louisville incident ends, McGruder uses the fallout to monitor the different responses the word provokes in the African-American community. The first response seems to be opportunistic. To help score a jackpot settlement from the school district (apparently not realizing that public school budgets are virtually non-existent), Granddad enlists the help of Reverend Rollo Goodlove (Cee-Lo Green), who appears to be a cross between civil rights legend Al Sharpton and flamboyant performers who use inflammatory media events to promote themselves. True to form, Goodlove appears to be more interested in grandstanding for the press while promoting



his new B.E.T. sitcom, which appears to be a rip-off of *The Cosby Show* without good writing. Through Goodlove, McGruder satirizes community leaders who seem more interested in basking in media attention than actually correcting societal injustices. Like Schuyler's *Black No More*, "The S-Word" questions the extent to which self-promoted African-American leaders really care about furthering the cause of African-Americans. McGruder suggests that "leaders" like Goodlove are only interested in helping the Freemans as long as it generates publicity for their own endeavors.

After Goodlove's settlement offer is rejected, Goodlove takes Granddad and Huey on a whirlwind media tour, where different people give varying opinions on when the word can be used. Goodlove contends that "I think it's wrong for anybody to use the word 'nigga' at any time"; however, a second later, he uses the word when taking a phone call from Jesse Jackson. Huey, serving as the voice of reason, questions whether one can monitor the usage of the word: "the problem with restraining speech is who gets to set the rules? If it's only ok to say it at a certain time or place, who gets to decide at what time and what place? Bill Cosby?" At which point, a fictional Cosby (Kevin Michael Richardson), in a separate news report, says "Yes!! As a matter of fact I get to set the rules about what is appropriate to say and not appropriate to say." These divergent viewpoints illustrate the vast difference of opinion of the use of the inflammatory word amongst African-Americans (though the episode makes it abundantly clear that other ethnicities, especially whites, should never use the word). Some recommend banishing the word completely, as the NAACP attempted to do in a symbolic funeral for the word in 2007. Others glorify its use in culture and hail it as another example of taking what was intended to be an insult by white culture and changing it into a term of affection.

Huey's voice of reason and insistence on a more nuanced analysis go unheard as the Freemans and Goodlove participate in television news show debate panels in order to assign blame. Goodlove and the Freemans go on talk show after talk show, but largely have the same circular debate that really achieves nothing. Furthermore, news channels stoke the controversy by inviting controversial conservative demagogue Ann Coulter (Jill Talley) to applaud the teacher for having the courage to stand up to Riley, whom she identifies as a hoodlum and a thug on television. However, Coulter's ultra-offensive, conservative shtick also turns out to be an act for television, as she appears on each show to help Goodlove in his cause. Ultimately, the bad guys in this episode are the television news channels that seize upon the opportunity to gather viewers while talking heads like Coulter and Rev. Rollo Goodlove scream at one another without really advancing debate about the usage of "the N-word," the damage it causes, or anything of substance.

The episode comically interrogates the myriad of ways in which "the N-word" may or may not be offensive and the ensuing confusion the word



causes because it is both taboo and a major part of the African-American lexicon in contemporary culture. Thus, the episode seems to imply that, sadly, real progress over the usage of the word becomes stifled by both questionable and simplistic politics and a quest for ratings. Huey makes this point clearly when he warns Granddad that “you can’t go hustling controversy for profit... You’re messing with forces you can’t control.”

*The Boondocks* parodies and satirizes other topics in African-American culture, such as homophobia in the rap community, the tendency of African-American television programs to reinforce negative stereotypes in its programming, and the absence of genuine Afro-centric ideological content in contemporary hip hop. Even though the jokes are edgy, sometimes offensive, a theme of unity also pervades the program even in the midst of controversial content and inappropriate jokes. Furthermore, McGruder frames his satire from a particularly African-American viewpoint, refusing to adopt the middle-class, white gaze into his critique—he does not care what white people think of the show or his criticisms. This discursive position is vital because it distinguishes his criticisms of black culture from those of the previous generation, such as *Cosby*. Fair or not, many perceive that *Cosby*’s criticisms of African-American youth in the 2000s have failed to account for the still striking dearth of genuine opportunities for poor African-Americans to succeed. Instead of acknowledging these injustices, *Cosby* typically focuses on sagging pants and improper English usage. Thus, the criticism of *Cosby* and his peers is perceived to incorporate a white middle-class sensibility. In contrast, the criticisms leveled at African-American culture in *The Boondocks* do not suggest that youth adopt such sensibilities, especially since the white characters on the program are the most immoral. The show’s criticisms implore African-Americans to capitalize on the struggles of the Civil Rights movement by being more educated and active in building a stronger future for those who are still victims of injustice. Like the comedy of Richard Pryor and Chris Rock, *The Boondocks*’s criticisms attempt to provide a greater social consciousness among African-Americans.

In addition to parody and satire of African-American cultural tastes, *The Boondocks* also qualifies as a multicultural program that critiques African-American politics and leaders in the nation. Indeed, the show provides a forum in popular culture for African-Americans to discuss important political issues as they perceive them. The aim of *The Boondocks* is not necessarily to speak for the entire community or prescribe a particular solution, nor is it McGruder’s expectation that the entire community will agree with his assessments. However, the show does provoke debate within African-American culture. Certainly, not every episode makes a grand political statement, but those that do make a large impact on the political debates involving African-American audience members of the show. Avi Santo suggests that the show reinforces “the potential—especially for marginalized groups—for popular entertainment to serve as an alternate

space for political engagement” (266). However, Santo also warns this space can “limit dialogical opportunities” when discussion forums are hijacked by populist impulses (253). The show’s politics are also limited by the seeming despair of writer Aaron McGruder by the show’s third season. While early episodes of the program imply a revolutionary impulse, later episodes adopt a tone of resignation, even if such a tone still sparks political debate.

The best illustration of McGruder’s revolutionary scope in the early seasons of the series is “Return of the King” (15 January 2006), which solidifies McGruder’s complex view of contemporary black politics as well as his revolutionary, iconoclastic, and multicultural impulses. Airing on Dr. Martin Luther King’s 77th birthday, the episode imagines that instead of dying in 1968, King simply slipped into a coma for 32 years. When he awakens and sees the apparent political apathy of many African-Americans, he despondently asks Huey, “What happened to our people?” Huey’s response indicates the void in African-American leadership left by King’s premature death when he tells King, “I think everyone was waiting on Martin Luther King to come back.” The next day, Huey must convince King, who has lost hope, to continue making appearances and to get out of his room and “keep fighting for freedom and justice this minute.” This scene is important because it shows Huey actively attempting to change the tide for African-Americans and through his leadership inspiring others, an attitude that will change in later episodes.

By and large, the episode humorously expresses a need for a genuine leader to emerge in the African-American community who will speak out concerning the injustices done to African-Americans by continuing white oppression. To help restore political awareness, King and Huey establish a black political action party to discuss strategies, but when King hires an urban promotions firm to spread the word about the party, the forum for the future of the black cause devolves into a club scene, which includes “the hustler preachers, the rapper truce, and a fight.” The satire of the episode is not gentle, as McGruder strongly implies that without strong leadership by civil rights activists like King, African-Americans are now driven by wealth, materialism, and misplaced ambition. When King sees what his people have become, he chastises them and their values, punctuated by his use of the word “nigga” fourteen times in the speech. King finally resigns himself to the current state of his people and moves to Canada, passing responsibility to Huey to continue the African-American struggle.

This episode stirred controversy from African-American civil rights activists Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson because of King’s use of the “n-word” while describing the attitude and behavior of African-Americans as reflected by networks like B.E.T., films like *Soul Plane* (2004), and rap artists. The episode’s comically direct confrontation with these issues produces an uncomfortable smile for those who watch. However, at the end of the episode, King’s speech

motivates African-Americans to become more socially conscious—Robert Johnson apologizes for his B.E.T. network, NBA players use their popularity to influence politics, and angry African-Americans descend upon the White House to decry the abuses of the government. Their actions after King's chastisement culminate in the election of Oprah Winfrey as the nation's first black president in 2020. This ending reflects hopefulness and a willingness to imagine a better future for African-Americans. Even though McGruder tells "the painful truth that hurts people's feelings," he still entertains the dream of political action for his viewers.

Oddly enough, when this episode first aired in January of 2006, a leader of the African-American community emerged with Barack Obama's election to the United States Senate. Obama's vast popularity and emphasis on hope and change led to his election as President in 2008. His rise to the presidency largely generated an atmosphere of good feelings and provided hope that African-Americans would take a great step toward true social and economic equality. Among the black community, McGruder was one of the few commentators who expressed reservations about the Obama era, not necessarily because of his politics, but because the message and the hype were beginning to outweigh the substance by the end of his 2008 election. McGruder voices these concerns in the Season 3 premiere of *The Boondocks*, "It's a Black President, Huey Freeman" (2 May 2010).

The episode takes the form of a documentary, directed by Werner Herzog (voiced by Werner Herzog), that documents Obama's election campaign, victory, and inauguration. Since this episode aired nearly two years after Obama's election campaign, it is in a unique position to provide a postscript to the media coverage and how those affected by the campaign feel after Obama had more than a year in the White House. The episode is only tangentially about Obama the candidate and politician—it takes a few subtle jabs at Obama's decidedly centrist politics, such as his position on taxes, corporate bailouts, and troop withdrawals from the Middle East. It also satirizes the conservative media's demonization of Obama as a "Muslim, socialist, anti-Christ" as evidenced by his association with leftist figures, including Jeremiah Wright and "domestic terrorist Huey Freeman."

While the preceding issues are important to the message of the episode, the episode really shines in its satire of the African-American community's embracing of Obama and the rhetoric of his campaign. Obama serves as a projection of the characters' deeply held beliefs and political commitments. Of course, in true multicultural fashion, McGruder emphasizes that African-Americans support Obama for different reasons, and the extended Freeman family is no exception. Granddad supports him because he believes it signals the end of the Black struggle; indeed, at the election party, he announces as much while telling his guests that he hopes they "have enjoyed the wine,

cheese, and freedom that I have struggled so hard for.” Yet, Granddad has not actively supported the Obama campaign by donating to its funds, although he does sport an unlicensed t-shirt that he bought at a car wash. Riley supports Obama because he believes that having a black president will give him *carte blanche* to break laws and disobey authority. If he gets in trouble, all he will have to do is call “Obeezy” and he will take of it. Tom DuBois supports him because he largely supports his Democratic sensibilities. Herzog even observes that DuBois is a less powerful, less successful version of Obama. Tom’s white wife Sarah likes him because he is “fit...to lead,” which implies that she mainly supports him because he is attractive and is interested in trading up her marriage with Tom for a marriage with Obama. The Freeman’s neighbor rapper Thugnificent initially does not know that an African-American is favored to win the presidency, but once he realizes it, he joins the Obama celebrity bandwagon to give himself greater exposure while remaining largely ignorant of politics.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the funniest part of the episode is a parody of singer Will.I.Am’s all-star tribute to Obama; in the episode, Thugnificent joins Will.I.Am to perform a celebrity tribute to Obama called “Dick Riding Obama,” which satirizes various celebrities’ fawning adoration of Obama.

These various viewpoints function as satires of the media frenzy that surrounded Obama’s election campaign and inauguration. Specifically, the satire is directed at members of the African-American community who supported Obama without really understanding his political positions. Instead, his supporters either assumed that his election signaled the end of racism or liked him simply because he is African-American. Meanwhile, celebrities were hoping to capitalize on his popularity without examining his politics. McGruder implies throughout the episode that such positions are shallow and will only lead to disappointment when their ideas of what Obama represents turn out to be erroneous. In this sense, the episode is a sobering look at “Obama-mania” and gives a measured response that challenges the commonly held political perspectives within the African-American community. As a result, the episode still maintains a multicultural voice and does not abandon viewing these issues through a black lens.

Nevertheless, Huey’s reaction to the campaign also implies McGruder’s wilting political drive to offer up alternative visions that offer a sense of unity even in the midst of disagreement. Huey’s response to Obama as a politician is not necessarily offensive. When Herzog asks him, “As a black, African-American negro, are you merely excited, or extremely excited that everything is going to change forever?” Huey’s response?: “Eeh.” Unlike his other Woodcrest citizens, Huey’s political awareness keeps him from confusing campaign rhetoric with

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5 The interview in which Thugnificent learns of Obama’s campaign is taken verbatim from an interview involving real-life rapper DMX.

actual politics and the prospect of genuine change, which is a fair point expressed by many African-American pundits throughout Obama's actual campaign, such as Tavis Smiley, Jesse Jackson, and McGruder himself. When asked about Obama's promises of hope in his campaign, Huey responds by emphasizing that "Hope... is irrational." When an Obama supporter asks him how he feels about an African-American becoming president, he simply responds, "Meh." Huey's response is greeted by a barrage of jeers from African-Americans, which critiques the atmosphere created by irrational hope by turning those who do not jump on the bandwagon into heretics and traitors to their race.

However, instead of mobilizing a rally as he does in "Return of the King" or imploring his people think more deeply as he does in "The Trial of Robert Kelly," Huey refuses to take direct action and instead vows to leave the country if Obama is elected because he believes it signals the end of the real possibility of change for African-Americans in America. Social critic Natalie Hopkinson criticizes McGruder's choice, noting that Huey never threatens to leave while George W. Bush blundered his way through his presidency (Hopkinson). However, I would critique Huey's choice to leave for a different reason. Huey does not threaten to leave during the Bush presidency because he senses that most African-Americans mostly disliked Bush's policies and provided them with a common enemy, which made the community more politically aware. The ascension of Obama to the presidency closes off political debate because many have now been enveloped in a cloud of false consciousness as a result of the beliefs of people such as Granddad that his election largely ends the struggles of African-Americans.<sup>6</sup> Huey realizes that this is simply not the case, but instead of challenging this issue directly, he chooses to retreat, which leaves the African-American community without a strong political voice.

Huey's attempt to leave the country is unsuccessful because he cannot get a ride to his flight. The episode ends with a postscript that takes a look at the Woodcrest's perception of Obama a year later, with most of the community taking a decidedly different attitude toward Obama, which largely reflects Obama's slumping approval ratings after his first year in office. Granddad no longer supports him because Obama raised his taxes, Riley no longer supports him because he "works with the Feds" (thus ruining his street credibility), and Thugnificent no longer supports him because he believes he has done his part by "getting the nigga elected." Thus, it seems that Huey's statement on the irrationality of hope has proven accurate. Asked for his final thoughts by Herzog, Huey reemphasizes, "Yeah, I'm retired," indicating that he has no

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6 We have seen in the cases of Trayvon Martin, the Ferguson riots, and the Baltimore riots that Obama's election has clearly not erased racial tension in the United States, which makes McGruder's recognition of this fact early in his administration prescient.

interest in taking political action of any kind. If we take Huey as a spokesperson for McGruder, the implication here is that McGruder has decided to tone down the political commentary. The rest of *The Boondocks*'s third season largely reflects this sentiment, as its focus is mainly on popular culture rather than politics, and while the *The Boondocks*'s critique of pop culture is funny, its status as a multicultural program depends on its ability to expose racism and the divisions within African-American culture within the political arena as well as the cultural. If McGruder has indeed recused himself from commenting on African-American politics, then the African-American community has lost one of the last multicultural voices in not only animated television, but all scripted television.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Consequences of Iconoclasm for African-American Humorists**

McGruder's apparent distancing from his overtly political ideology illustrates that African-American humorists often stand on the precipice of danger, particularly when combined with satire. If shows and acts are not cancelled, the criticisms received from the African-American community for joking about African-American plights have led many humorists to abandon valuable multicultural projects that illustrate the duality of American life. For example, in the 1960s, criticism from within the African-American community of Langston Hughes's brilliant Jess B. Semple essays led him to quit writing them. Hughes's critics asserted that Semple's mannerisms and language reinforced negative stereotypes and that Semple was not politically aggressive (Watkins 424). George Schuyler's more strident satires, both as a younger revolutionary and an older conservative, left him a virtual outcast in both the mainstream and African-American communities in the last years of his life. Regarding Schuyler, Ishmael Reed, no stranger to controversy himself, wrote of Schuyler's perception among the African-American community as an Uncle Tom specifically, but also mentioned the plight of the African-American satirist: "African-American writers with an independent vision are often consigned to obscurity...the black critics demand that they respect the current cultural trend of the moment" (xii-xiii). Thus, the consequences for using jokes to

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7 Though *The Boondocks* did return for a 4th season in 2014, McGruder was not involved in its production because Sony executives were unhappy with McGruder's slow pace in writing a new season. McGruder created and wrote episodes for a live action series called *Black Jesus* in 2014, and though it does provide some cultural commentary, the consistent cultural and political commentary that defined *The Boondocks* is absent in *Black Jesus*.



present a multicultural perspective were established the moment that African-American writers could present such views.

Once television burst onto the scene in the 1950s, the problem of African-American depictions in humor became even more prominent. Ironically, a show that featured an all-black cast would change the course of African-Americans on television, some might say for the worse: *Amos 'n' Andy*. Based on the popular radio program performed by two white men (Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll) and heavily influenced by the minstrelsy tradition, the television version hit the airwaves in 1951 and quickly reached the popularity of the radio program. The show lays the foundation for the difficulties in evaluating African-American portrayals among the African-American community. As Darnell Hunt suggests, words like “positive” and “negative” do not quite capture the intricate interaction of production, writing, acting, viewing (17). For example, *Amos 'n' Andy*, was widely viewed and mostly well-liked by blacks (*Real Watkins* 201; Hunt 18; Gray 76). Watkins even argues that the African-American performers were able to transcend the white writers’ and producers’ stereotypes and reveal the more authentic principles that have defined African-American humor for generations (*Real Watkins* 201). Yet, the NAACP feared that such portrayals would damage the ability of blacks to advance in society and fought to have the show cancelled after four seasons despite enormous ratings and positive reviews from much of its African-American audiences.<sup>8</sup> Thomas Cripps argues that the underlying motivation for the NAACP, and other organizations that criticized the program, was to protect the image of the African-American lower class, and their goals “lie in the shifting goals and rising hopes of the postwar black leadership” (50). Although the program in many ways represented progress, the extra political and cultural weight that an African-American text carries among the African-American community result in a relatively shortened shelf life, and *Amos 'n' Andy* experienced criticism (both fair and unfair) for its use of humor.

The controversy over *Amos 'n' Andy* would have a profound impact on the portrayal of African-Americans on television that can still be felt today. Though *The PJs* attempts to subvert stereotypical images of African-Americans and open a dialogue of African-American concerns, it did not escape criticism for its own use of negative African-American stereotypes. Part of these concerns are legitimate, but part of *The PJs* use of character types might also be characteristic of American satire that often reduces characters to type while adding layers of texture as the series progresses. Ironically, from the very first screening, *The PJs* courted controversy for its own use of stereotypes. Film director Spike Lee proclaimed that the program is “hateful...toward black people” and wondered

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8 The show would continue to air in syndication for over a decade after its cancellation.



why Murphy would involve himself in such a project (qtd. in Pierce). Other African-American organizations, most notably Project Islamic H.O.P.E., decried the consumption of alcohol by African-American characters, specifically citing Thurgood's consumption of 40 oz. malt liquor (Hontz 5). Reviewer Ray Richmond noted the show's "script that stains all of those trailblazing graphics with a collection of doltish black stereotypes" (67), including a crack-head named Smokey. Such concerns echoed those of *Amos 'n' Andy*.

While Eddie Murphy remained silent against the criticism, African-American co-executive producer Larry Wilmore, also known for his work on *In Living Color* (another controversial show criticized for negative African-American stereotypes), *The Daily Show*, and his own *The Nightly Show*, responded to the criticism citing his own experiences and the license of satire and parody to defend the humor on *The PJs*. Wilmore notes "many of these characters grew up next to me" (qtd. in Williams A12). Cast member Janet Du'Bois (Mrs. Avery) asserts that many of these characters are also exaggerated versions of people she grew up with (Pierce). Wilmore further argues that satire and comedy are easy targets, and even suggests that such portrayals of crack-heads and alcoholics would win awards in drama programs. Wilmore adds that "Richard Pryor did every one of these characters in all of his routines. Every single one of them, and he has always been applauded for it and cherished for it" (qtd. in Pierce). Ultimately, the producers and actors assert that the characters are exaggerations of real-life figures and critics who decry such depictions are overly sensitive. Producer Nelson George of *The Chris Rock Show* attributes the strife not so much to race as much as generational strife amongst African-Americans, noting that

Middle-aged or older blacks still have very strong feelings that certain images should not appear on TV and in movies at all, because they think toying with stereotypes plays into racism — they 'give comfort to the enemy,' as the saying goes.... Younger black performers [like Murphy and Rock] are tired of being spokespeople for their race. They just want to be funny. (qtd. in Tucker)

Though many critics have varying opinions over the controversial images in *The PJs* and the fractures within the African-American community, one thing remains clear: the controversy over negative stereotypes have changed very little since *Amos 'n' Andy*, and George's comments reveal similar conflicts to those that doomed *Amos 'n' Andy*. However, while *The PJs* certainly trades in controversial stock by addressing thorny issues such as racism, it would be grossly unfair to accuse the show of the same irresponsible characterization in early African-American shows. *The PJs* certainly focuses on impoverished African-Americans and indeed uses controversial images much like *Amos 'n' Andy*, yet the show also makes active political commentary, even in throwaway jokes (Thurgood

observes in one episode, “You can see from here where the city services end!”), over the policies that have created their living conditions. The characters display an awareness that is not explored with any depth in many African-American comedies and are certainly not explored in assimilationist or pluralist programs. When pushed, the members of Thurgood’s community push back, which illustrates a clear alternative to accepting victimization.

Furthermore, the characters develop and move beyond mere stereotypes, contrary to Lee’s assessment after watching only three episodes (though such a war of words certainly helped garner the show some attention). Even though Thurgood has a propensity to drink his malt liquor, he is also proud of his community and defends it when it is threatened, even if he is a bit inept. The producers compare him to Texan Hank Hill for his ability to consume large amounts of alcohol while maintaining his daily responsibilities, but a more appropriate comparison might be Homer Simpson. Homer spends much of his time at Moe’s Tavern drinking, lacks intelligence, and is prone to fits of anger, but he is also devoted to his family in times of crisis, traits that are often emphasized instead of his consumption of alcohol. The criticism that Thurgood receives versus the criticism that Homer receives might be a result of racial coding on television and the sensitivity to stereotypes that can doom promising African-American shows. The other example, Smokey, appears to be more worthy of criticism, but even his character is developed to provide critique of the results of poverty in the projects. Often, Smokey is depicted performing tasks that require significant intelligence, from car repair to advanced engineering. On the surface, such jokes seem like an odd contrast used to produce a cheap laugh. However, one might read such instances as a commentary on the potential ruined by poverty and inequality. Smokey might well be a person of advanced intelligence who does not have a chance to put it to use, and because of an unjust system that does not provide him any realistic opportunity of advancement, he suffers from addiction.

The show’s criticism of white culture, combined with its characters, stunning animation, and politically-charged critique of African-American culture, makes *The PJs* a multicultural program by Gray’s criteria. Moreover, displaying such awareness makes the program a participant in the long line of African-American humor that has highlighted African-American culture. The show addresses the same concerns, uses similar humor, but provides it in different formats and contexts. Like other multicultural programs such as *Frank’s Place* and *South Central*, *The PJs*, after a very promising start in 1999, had a relatively short run. A number of factors contributed to its untimely cancellation in 2001. First, the production time took nine months and was somewhat expensive, which made Fox and the WB, its two networks, hesitant to commit to the show long-term. After a spectacular Sunday premiere, Fox moved the show, along with *King of the Hill*, *Futurama*, and *Family Guy*,

to Tuesday nights, which was a ratings black hole for Fox until the debut of *American Idol* a few years later. While Fox's Tuesday ratings increased with its animated block, the marked decline in *The PJs* ratings in comparison to its Sunday night numbers coupled with high production costs and criticism of its use of stereotypes led Fox to cool on the program and cut its promotion. Furthermore, Fox began airing new episodes during summer, which proved to be the death knell for the show's life on the network. Eventually, the Fox network allowed *The PJs* to move to the fledgling WB, where it fared well, but not well enough for the cash-strapped network to make a long-term commitment. Thus, even with numerous Emmy nominations (including three wins), *The PJs* only lasted three seasons, a relatively short life for a show with such a talented cast and generally positive audience reception. Furthermore, the other animated shows that debuted during that season with similar fanfare were given much more time before cancellation (*Family Guy* and *Futurama* were cancelled in 2003; both were eventually brought back). While other factors certainly contributed, it seems that the combination of its racially-charged controversy among African-American viewers and its expensive budget made *The PJs* a greater risk, which is a fate suffered by other multicultural programs. While it may be unfair to say that the show suffered a short run solely because it told jokes that criticized African-American culture, one could certainly argue that it was a major contributing factor.

If *The PJs* knocked at the door of controversy and racially-charged and politically motivated humor, *The Boondocks* kicked the door down. *The Boondocks* third season was supposed to be its last, but Sony went forward with a fourth season without the input of show creator Aaron McGruder. The fourth season lacked the gravity of McGruder's commentary and shifted the focus from Huey to Granddad, though the season still addressed some important concerns. Though the fourth season saw some of the show's strongest ratings, there have been no signs to indicate a fifth season. If the fourth season was the show's last, then Gray's uneasiness about the vitality of truly multicultural shows continues. Like *The PJs*, *The Boondocks* could only survive for 30+ episodes and four seasons. However, the reason for *The Boondocks'* departure from television is slightly different. Unlike *The PJs*, *The Boondocks* received tremendous support from its production companies, Cartoon Network and Sony. Furthermore, in its four seasons, the program built a relatively small (compared to network animation) but loyal following and was Adult Swim's most highly rated original program.

Some reports submit that McGruder no longer felt comfortable with his role as African-American spokesperson, and Huey's stance in "It's a Black President, Huey Freeman," appears to echo that sentiment. The last two paragraphs of his statement about his absence from *The Boondocks*, Season Four also intimates McGruder's uneasiness with controversy:

What has never been lost on me is the enormous responsibility that came with 'The Boondocks' -- particularly the television show and its relatively young audience. It was important to offend, but equally important to offend for the right reasons. For three seasons I personally navigated this show through the minefields of controversy. It was not perfect. And it definitely was not quick. But it was always done with a keen sense of duty, history, culture and love. Anything less would have been unacceptable. As for me, I'm finally putting a life of controversy and troublemaking behind me with my upcoming Adult Swim Show, 'Black Jesus.' ('Aaron McGruder Bids...')

Certainly, the last remark is somewhat ironic since the mere concept of *Black Jesus* has the potential to be controversial, though the show has proven to be rather tame compared with *The Boondocks*. In any event, McGruder's apparent ambivalence about shifting his comical view to avoid controversy suggests an entirely different reason for the premature cancellation of truly multicultural programs and constitutes an entirely new danger of African-American humor, laughter, and satire in the public sphere. Lack of network support is still an important reason, but it does not explain the end of *The Boondocks* or other successful multicultural programs like *Chappelle's Show* and *In Living Color*, which floundered despite strong ratings and network support.

Perhaps the expectations of multicultural programs become an unbearable burden for writers. Not only do writers like Chappelle and McGruder have the pressure of producing a watchable program, but they also must meet the multifaceted expectations from various sectors within the African-American culture without slipping into uncomfortable stereotypes when seeking to exploit them. This is a burden that mainstream shows like *South Park* or *The Simpsons* simply do not have to face. The Wayans Brothers (of *In Living Color*) responded by emphasizing silly parody in their film endeavors, such as *Scary Movie* and *White Chicks*, or into safer family comedy. Chappelle responded by ending his controversial but brilliant show and returning to stand-up. Bambi Haggins notes Chappelle's recognition of the dangers that such humor faced: "Chappelle recognized the possible dangers inherent in comedy that challenges cultural, social, and political sensibilities and questioned whether his comedic discourse...was progressively becoming more open to [mis]interpretation" (234). After the ending of *Chappelle's Show*, *The Boondocks* was largely perceived to be the show's primary inheritor. Thus, that the program has enjoyed a similarly short, tumultuous run suggests burdens and dangers of presenting multicultural comedy. McGruder has seemingly responded to these burdens and dangers by limiting his satire to popular culture in general, or perhaps leaving the show altogether.<sup>9</sup>

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9 The 4th season of *The Boondocks* continued without McGruder's input as creator, writer, and producer. Oddly, this reinforces my point because the reviews of the 4th

Both *The PJs* and *The Boondocks* are important animated programs because they act as public forums in which African-Americans can view problems that speak to their own particular perception of American life. Both programs do indeed function as what Herman Gray calls “crucial sites and expressions of struggles” (89). Certainly, both programs have generated controversy and received criticism not only from white audiences, but from African-American audiences for their supposed use of negative stereotypes and their criticisms of African-American culture. Nevertheless, both have also proven themselves important among animated programs in voicing concerns of continuing racism in American life and the apparent apathetic response by a new generation of African-Americans, even if the satire of both shows sometimes divides African-Americans among socio-economic lines and disrupts the solidarity within the black community. That these animated programs can draw such diverse criticisms and intense discussion indicates that they actively invite audiences to confront issues of racism and oppression in a supposedly post-racial society. Therefore, both programs do what African-American humorists before them have done: they identify ever present racism and critique the various political and cultural ideals within the African-American community, thus highlighting the diversity and incongruity within American life.

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season are mixed at best, with many critics lamenting the series’ stooping to simplistic racial stereotypes without a clear satirical target. Most fans and critics note that Huey ceases to be the focal point of a unified view; instead, the season mainly focuses on Granddad’s various attempts to avoid bankruptcy.

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## Chapter 5

# The Unkindest Cut: Animated Television and Postmodernism

### Part of the Solution, or Part of the Problem?

Up to this point I have argued for the ways animated programs have followed in the traditions of American humor. Primarily, I have examined the common themes and perspectives that bind together American humorists from a multitude of places, genres, and time periods. The best American humorists provide a comic shadow of American life by critiquing the very institutions on which America defines itself, whether it is capitalism and the market culture it produces, the tragic gap between the promises made by America's foundational documents and the reality, America's tendency to whitewash its history, or the use of humor to critique the presence of racial tension and oppression. I have argued that rather than springing from nowhere, animated programs continue in these critiques of American culture. However, another important element in American humor is the audience's perception of the humorous work's authenticity in addressing the aforementioned concerns. If a work seeks to lay claim to a truth about an American injustice, should they operate by the same rules as other texts? To wit, are the humorists themselves sometimes complicit in the very acts that they critique? For example, if Mark Twain excoriates American capitalism in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, is not he complicit in that system as an aspiring entrepreneur himself? Therefore, an important function in the American humorist's arsenal is the ability to promote authenticity by critiquing the system from within. For this chapter, I would like to discuss the methods that animated programs have used to comment on their restrictions from within, particularly in their resistance to their own commodification and the rejection of commercial culture, their use of intertextuality to carve out a discursive ideological space to provide their unique satire, and their use of irony to address American concerns. In so doing, these programs are not so different from American humorists from previous eras, who have had to create an ideological space for critical commentary that transcends the expectations of their genre and audience. The critique offered by these artists criticizes the commodification of art in American culture as they legitimize their own artistic expressions. While these programs in many ways are responding to their own status as postmodern art in a consumer driven society, they also participate in



this endeavor in order to legitimate the importance of their humor, which is a practice employed by past American humorists.

One cannot ignore that animated television programs and their humor are also largely influenced by the relatively recent trends of the postmodern period. Many of the best and worst attributes of the postmodern permeate each of these programs. Critics often focus on three postmodern trends when discussing animated television programs: their commodification, their parody, and their use of irony. Animated television is influenced by a postmodern environment in which art has become mass produced by large conglomerations. It is no secret that, though contemporary consumers have a seemingly infinite amount of viewing channels that provide niche programming, those channels are also owned by a very small number of media conglomerates, which limits the amount of choices. Therefore, the texts produced by such conglomerations are often perceived as disposable products to be consumed and discarded with little reflection by the audience, with commerce being the engine that drives the text instead of artistic expression. With so many choices, many texts in popular culture often rely on self-referentiality and intertextuality with other pop cultural texts. As a result, postmodern texts sometimes lack historical context and focus on the ever-present instead of participating as part of a larger historical narrative; these texts are more often considered games for those “in the know,” in which consumers are rewarded for recognizing the many references to other pop cultural artifacts. Another common charge against postmodern texts is that they often provide critiques that promise controversy by being willing to leave no sacred cow untipped, only to offer an interpretation of current events that can be construed as post-ideological at best and cynically nihilistic at worst. Permeating this atmosphere of free play and spectacular parody is a sense of irony that opens animated programs to a multitude of meanings.

Many of the leading critics of the postmodern era seem to agree on the aforementioned characteristics that define the period. However, discussions of the function of artistic endeavors and the ability of some postmodern texts to transcend their limitations and have a truly subversive effect have led to differing conclusions. Some argue that these texts are part of a concerted effort to reinforce and perform bourgeois mores for audiences, largely keeping consumers distracted from societal injustices and their own entrapment in capitalist ideology. Though they make exceptions in some cases, critics such as Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton strongly criticize postmodern texts as products of what Adorno and Horkheimer defined as the Culture Industry.

Other critics, such as Linda Hutcheon, Jim Collins, and Douglas Rushkoff, have argued that some postmodern texts are able to perform important social critiques even while embodying postmodernist characteristics. Hutcheon asserts that the best postmodern texts critique the functions of postmodernism from within because texts “cannot escape implication in the economic...and

ideological...dominants of [their] time" (xiii). Rushkoff likens subversive ideas in pop cultural texts to a virus that undermines the credibility of the establishment while seeming to reinforce dominant ideologies (Rushkoff 9). Collins notes that the intertextuality in postmodern texts exemplifies the differences amongst postmodern texts, which leads to texts that privilege particular discourses over others (41). Matt Russell argues that even though the irony used by programs can result in negativity, "it is the perfect way to deflate that kind of overblown political language and extreme conviction that's usually designed to give the appearance of substance..." (Russell). Indeed, these critics argue that such texts' postmodern characteristics are exactly what make them able to critique dominant culture because they critique from within as participants, which brings me back to animated television programming.

Animated programs embody many of the characteristics of postmodernism. They are commodities that make millions of dollars for their networks in both advertising dollars and ancillary merchandising. They are highly intertextual, parodic, and self-referential, often to the point that some episodes contain parodies within parodies. Within this framework, irony becomes a major tool of animated programs in their commentary on current political events. Indeed, the use of unstable irony in these programs has led critics to criticize programs such as *South Park* and *Family Guy* as post-ideological and nihilistic in their ability to use carnivalesque humor to display an ultimately cynical, politically noncommittal outlook. Some critics have charged that even though these programs offer the promise of addressing controversial topics or satirizing current events, they often leave such critiques unfinished or open-ended. As with postmodernism in general, animated programs have also had their defenders who champion their ability to provide a discursive field for issues facing their respective audiences. Television has become a more interactive space in the sense that fans can discuss episodes in forums, with such forums delving into discursive political, social, and cultural topics.

So which is it? The answer probably depends on the particular expectations of what television programs can and should perform. If the expectation of critics is that these programs will be subversive enough to spur a socialist or cultural revolution, then they will probably be disappointed. Indeed, I would apply Booker's assessment of *South Park* to other animated programs: they are satirical and parodic in their purpose—not treatises on specific political actions (151). However, if the expectation of critics is that in the mindless sea of reality television and overtly biased news coverage exist programs that offer resistance for their audiences, then I would argue that animated programs provide such resistance.

Writing of satire on television, Gray, et al., assert that "satire TV today enjoys a privileged space from which to jab and prod the establishment" (28). Though "jabbing and prodding" sounds fairly insignificant, it also provides

evidence that collections of writers, producers, and audiences acknowledge and reject the mores fed to them on mainstream television; they provide a forum of free thinking on important social issues. Whether or not they spark directly identifiable social change remains debatable, but that these programs provide challenges to dominant narratives in contemporary culture and even counter such narratives with utopian elements is evident. Thus, I would argue that animated programs oftentimes intentionally provide the opportunity for subversive readings and thought in their programs. Though animated television is susceptible to the trappings of the postmodern means of distributing texts, such as their existence as commodities, their reliance on parody, intertextuality, and irony, they nevertheless succeed in critiquing postmodern ideologies by exposing the constructions of postmodern texts, discourses, and rhetoric in their parody and satire. As critics like Hutcheon, Rushkoff, and Collins argue about subversive postmodern texts in general, animated series largely succeed in critiquing postmodern constructions of commodity exchange and intertextuality by embodying the conventions of the very texts they critique, thus providing a needed criticism of the milieu that allows such constructions. Animated programs are able to transcend the limitations of their marketplaces to critique contemporary discourse through the use of irony and incongruity, much like American humorists before them have done.

### **If Only Six People Own Everything, Who Truly Has a Voice?**

That animated programs are commodities in the postmodern televisual marketplace is undeniable. First, they are the epitome of niche programming, often catering to the coveted 18-49 year old male demographic. Furthermore, their very existence is made possible by the glut of Saturday morning cartoons of the 1960s and 1970s, which were influenced themselves by the popularity of *The Flintstones* on primetime television. Contemporary animated programs are also lucrative in merchandising and advertising circles. *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy* all make millions in merchandising ranging from t-shirts to video games; *South Park* alone generated \$500 million in licensed merchandising from 1997 (the show's first season) to 2002, and their merchandise routinely outsold licensed products for rock bands like Metallica and films like *Star Wars* (Johnson-Woods 63-68). Characters from *The Simpsons* (Butterfinger; MasterCard; Burger King) and *Family Guy* (Wheat Thins) have become valuable pitchmen for seemingly random products. One might conclude that because of such lucrative advertising deals, animated programs lose their effectiveness as subversive voices because they are complicit in the grand schemes of mass media corporations. While he does not completely discount the cultural and

subversive value of animated programs, Allen Larson provides a sober reminder of television's relationship with commerce:

While on the surface the animation boom might seem to suggest a breakdown in the hegemonic authority that US network television's genres, conventions, and articulative structures ostensibly once held, a closer look finds the same phenomenon reflective of the arguable reality that, for all of their almost imperceptible vastness, the culture industries have never been more coherently organized, more unitarily orchestrated, or more efficiently harmonized than they are at present. (70)

Based on Larson's assessment, we can be reasonably sure that the primary networks continue to rely on animated television programs because they are good for business and can result in a veritable bonanza in merchandising if the program strikes a chord with key demographics.

So does this negate all hope of genuine satire and subversion because of these programs' ties with marketing and merchandising? Not necessarily. Often, the marketing of ancillary products and the production of the show itself are functions performed by different entities. For example, Comedy Central commissions Hamilton Projects to handle the distribution of *South Park* merchandise, and for their part, Parker and Stone claim that they have little to do with either planning or profiting from the ancillary products (Johnson-Woods 10-11). Such separation of the creative and marketing arms is important because the writers of animated shows are not necessarily writing to sell their merchandise, since others handle that. Ancillary products, which include t-shirts, novelty items, etc., are not typically the primary motivation for the writing and animation staff, but they can indicate the influence that their commentaries have on American culture. Of course, network pressure certainly exists for animated programs to remain viable so that the networks can continue reaping profits from licensed products. After all, the networks own the copyrights to the shows, not the creators. However, creators, writers, and producers hold some leverage because the auteur quality of animated television fuels fan expectations. For example, Comedy Central owns *South Park* and could continue producing the show without Trey Parker and Matt Stone, but fans would likely quit watching the show without the primary creative sources, or at the very least they will recognize that the show is not the same product. One should not discount such creative leverage so easily.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Recently, this assertion was put to the test. As previously noted in Chapter 3, *The Boondocks* aired a fourth season without any contribution from creator Aaron McGruder. It should be noted that the first few episodes scored the program's highest ratings, but the ratings reverted back to its normal numbers afterward. However, virtually all

Thus, how writers and producers respond to such freedom and pressure becomes important in gauging whether or not animated programs subvert the ideals they seem to reinforce. This attempted subversion is hardly limited to the postmodern. Because of its sometimes satirical intent, one of the primary functions of humor, especially in an American culture in which most things are for sale, has been to negotiate the means of its production in order to provide subversive social, cultural, and political critique. Perhaps the best example of the negotiation between distribution and subversion is William T. Porter's *The Spirit of the Times*, which was a magazine designed for upper-class, mostly Northern, subscribers with an interest in the outdoors. The expectation of those writers providing stories would be to cater to their vision of those who inhabited the South. However, writers for the publication, such as Thomas Bangs Thorpe, George Washington Harris, and Henry Clay Lewis, were able to embed critiques of Northern culture in their writing through the ineffectual "gentleman observer." Mark Twain also used his fiction and comic brand to subvert the expectations of his readers. Judith Yaross Lee argues, "Mark Twain's brand of humor shows that the processes associated with postmodernism began a century earlier than most theorists have thought" (179). As an enterprising businessman and social satirist, Twain was able to skewer the mixing of business and art because of his wealth of experience. Because of his dissatisfaction with his publishers, Twain began his own printing press to control his products more tightly. In his literary career, after transcending the local color movement in the West and becoming a part of the eastern literary establishment, he still satirized both the wealthy Yankees who helped make him famous nationwide and the Southerners of his roots in works such as *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Lee uses a segment from *A Connecticut Yankee*, in which Hank Morgan's knights wear sandwich boards advertising soap, as an example of a text that brings awareness to its status as a commodity, yet uses self-reflexivity and a parody of a contemporaneous soap advertising campaign to critique the practice of gross commercialization of products (17). Similarly, Kurt Vonnegut used the growing popularity of the science-fiction genre to tell stories that subvert man's obsession with scientific progress, space exploration, and warfare in *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. While the means of distribution and subversion are different in the postmodern era and in television, the tension between the two has been evident among many American humorists.

On the subject of animated television and corporate conglomeration, one must examine how animated programs resist or repudiate their own commodification, their relationship with their corporate parents, and/or their critique of commodification in the entertainment industry in general. Shows such

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reviews, both formal and informal, concede that the season lacked McGruder's spark and the show suffered as a result.

as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Daria* go to great lengths to parody their own commodification and critique their relationship with the networks that air them and consumer culture. How do animated programs resist their commodification and expose the marketing stratagems of massive conglomerations and the networks that air them? *The Simpsons* resists its own relationship with its own marketing and corporate partners by parodying television executives who are only concerned with capturing youthful demographics. Additionally, the show distances itself from corporate sibling Fox News with satirical parodies and direct assaults on the credibility of the conservative news organization.

Perhaps the most apt example of *The Simpsons*' resistance of its own production and commodification is "The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show" (9 February 1997). The episode originally aired in 1997 and interestingly marked the 167th episode, surpassing *The Flintstones* for the most episodes of an animated program. The broadcast date is also important because at this point, *The Simpsons* was beginning to face questions about its continued long-term viability.

"The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show" is largely built on the program's self-awareness as a corporate product. As is the case in many other episodes, the writers use the animated, violent *Itchy and Scratchy* to parody and satirize the research and marketing of television programs. When the ratings for *Itchy and Scratchy* decline, studio executives threaten to cancel the show unless the writers can make it a viable product again. To generate ideas, the producers gather a focus group, in which Lisa declares that "There's nothing wrong with *The Itchy and Scratchy Show*...But after so many years, the characters just can't have the same impact they once had." After the producers summarily dismiss Lisa's input, writers are told by studio execs to add a new character, one with "attitude" and "edge," common buzzwords in promoting new characters or programs. Along with a reluctant group of writers (whose likenesses are based on the writing staff of *The Simpsons* at the time the episode was produced), the network executives shoehorn a dog with attitude name Poochie (voiced by Homer) into *The Itchy and Scratchy Show*. Poochie is dressed in youthful, "urban" clothes and uses supposedly hip words designed to be catchphrases, which will no doubt appear on coffee mugs and t-shirts. Whereas Itchy and Scratchy's violent rows reflect an organic relationship (even if it is extremely violent), Poochie's presence is a clear intrusion that simply does not fit with the aesthetic of the show. Bart, Lisa, and the other fans see the episode for the gimmick that it is, which credits viewers of *The Simpsons* with media savvy and intelligence. The episode even prompts the famous "Worst. Episode. Ever" review from Springfield's Comic Book Guy, which eventually grew into a catchphrase of its own. After the unmitigated ratings and critical disaster, Poochie is "sent back to his home planet" after only one episode.

Certainly, the episode is a bit self-indulgent in its criticisms of both greedy studio executives and discontented fans who nitpick every detail of the



program, but it is among the finest of many in which the writers actively reject the intrusion of economics upon the work of social commentary. Indeed, the social commentary of the episode warns audiences about the dangers of commodification in television. Robert Sloane argues that “on its own, the episode does not make any grand statement about the political effect of the show” (149). While this statement might be true about traditional politics, the episode makes a very important statement in the politics of its own artifice, cultural perception, and marketing, and it has much to say about the conflation of capital and art in the postmodern period. Until *The Simpsons*, many television programs (especially sitcoms) firmly maintained a “fourth wall” and ignored obvious changes necessitated by economic concerns, such as the introduction of new characters and other changes meant to juice the ratings of a stagnant show. Instead of sweeping the demands and changes forced by the economics of television under the rug, *The Simpsons* exposes such strategies in “The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show.” Audiences now expect to see shows resist their own commodification and acknowledge their own existence as television products, even in live-action programs such as *The Office* or *30 Rock*, but *The Simpsons* was among the first programs to wrestle with its own status as a product so overtly. Furthermore, while the network executives see *The Simpsons* as a cash cow, the writers of the show see themselves as artists trying to tell a story, which is important because it signifies that though networks wield a tremendous amount of power, writers still have agency. “The Itchy, Scratchy, and Poochie Show” is one of many examples in which the writers reassert that agency.

In addition to actively resisting its own commodification as a product and emphasizing its importance as an artistic creation, *The Simpsons* also repudiates the politics of the Fox Network, particularly the conservative Fox News. The first salvo was fired by *The Simpsons* in 2003, when the writers parodied the sensationalistic news crawls on the right-leaning news service. Included on the news crawl were headlines such as “Do Democrats cause cancer?” and “JFK posthumously joins the Republican Party.” Creator Matt Groening claimed that Fox News executives threatened a lawsuit against Fox Entertainment, which would have been a groundbreaking case. However, Fox News contradicted Groening’s claims and emphasized that the matter was taken care of in house (Byrne). Regardless of what really happened, the episode must have struck a nerve because the writers were asked to refrain from imitating the news crawl in future episodes because it might be confused with real news. Even though the crawl was gone, *The Simpsons* still managed to include digs at Fox News’s expense. Some episodes included an aerial shot of a Fox News helicopter hovering around Springfield with satirical slogans printed on the aircraft’s body, including one slogan that read, “Fox News: Not Racist, but No. 1 with Racists.” The most recent slight against Fox News occurred at Fox’s 25th Year Celebration. After a re-airing of a classic episode, the writers expressed gratitude and well



wishes for all of their fellow employees on a screenshot that read “We still love you, Fox.” However, the card had an asterisk, which stipulated that their gratitude and well wishes did not include Fox News. Even those who agreed with such sentiments were slightly rankled because they felt that the celebration was not an appropriate venue. Fox News pundits, especially Bill O’Reilly, have also accused the show of “biting the hand that feeds them” (Ng).

Though such criticisms may seem slight, they also disturb the seemingly tight control conglomerates have in the dissemination of their products. Rushkoff argues that the show’s writers “encourage us to question the ways institutional forces are presented to us through the media and urge us to see the fickle nature of our own responses” (300). One could just as easily argue that these divergent politics emphasize the reach and grasp of conglomerates, able to coopt the voices of various political ideologies. However, such strategies of pitting political opposites against each other cannot be in Fox’s best interest. Even if the show’s willingness to critique an organization under the same corporate umbrella might mean more money under that umbrella, it also destabilizes the ideological control employed by the vastly influential Fox News. *The Simpsons* explores its seemingly contrary relationship with Fox News more deeply in “You Kent Always Say What You Want” (20 May 2007), in which Lisa and Springfield news anchor Kent Brockman discover that Fox airs liberal programming to rack up network fines that are then redistributed to conservative Fox News to use for donations to conservative causes. Such a critique signals the dangers of conglomeration in the hands of an all-controlling media czar like Fox’s Rupert Murdoch. Thus, by providing an avenue for oppositional readings, *The Simpsons* resists its own commodification and its relationship with its own network.

Like *The Simpsons*, *South Park* also maintains a critical stance against its own status as commodity and consumer culture. First, *South Park* pokes fun at its own commodified status in the capitalist market with its creation of a new character named Towelie, who first appears in “Towelie” (8 August 2001). Parker and Stone created Towelie in the hopes that people would realize the lameness of the character and resist its commodification (Johnson-Woods 66). Stone notes in the DVD commentary for the episode, “...in the way that shows create characters to sell t-shirts, let’s create the lamest character ever and base it on a towel.” They even create a fake commercial in Towelie’s debut episode that gives consumers the choice of either buying “I Love Towelie” or “I Hate Towelie” t-shirts, further critiquing the method in which merchandisers make their money whether or not the new character succeeds. Thus, *South Park* continues *The Simpsons*’ meditation on adding new characters to generate buzz and expand marketing revenues.

Furthermore, through Towelie, Parker and Stone slyly critique the erroneous perceptions of their program not only from moralist critics, but also from their very own marketing executives. Just as the fictional executives of *The Itchy*

& *Scratchy & Poochie Show* think that audiences will respond to a “proactive” dog with “edge” and “attitude,” Parker and Stone show their audiences what marketing executives think of them with Towelie. Towelie is the embodiment of what many critics think of *South Park*’s fans—he is irresponsible and addicted to drugs. By creating a character that fans are meant to reject and criticize, Parker and Stone are also rejecting the notion that all their fans are unmotivated slackers who would rather get high than get a job.

In addition to criticizing its own status as commodity, *South Park* also mercilessly criticizes commodification in television and film in general. In “South Park Is Gay” (22 October 2003), Parker and Stone take aim at the metrosexual fad popularized by shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. The episode criticizes such fads’ dominant ideology and their ability to co-opt subcultures and market them to the masses. In this case, television coopts the trends of the gay lifestyle and sells them to consumers. Thus, an entire community’s identity is packaged and sold to those who criticize such lifestyles as immoral.

They also satirize the vapid “spoiled heiress” trend set by the likes of Paris Hilton in “Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Playset” (1 December 2004). In this episode, Parker and Stone lament the celebration of people who market themselves as tramps and endorse products that promote the same behavior in young girls. The episode includes an advertisement for the Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Playset, which includes a video camera with a night vision filter, play money, a cell phone, and sixteen hits of ecstasy while the jingle in the background states, “Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Playset—Show everyone what a slut you are.” Wendy Testaburger, Stan’s sometime girlfriend and class know-it-all, refuses to follow the fad, and tells her parents,

I’m growing concerned about the role models young women have in today’s society. It seems that lewdness and shallowness are being exalted while intellectualism is looked down upon. I think young women are being marketed to by corrupt amoral corporations.

Her dad responds by saying, “We’ll get right on that sweetheart. You want to watch *The Price Is Right*?” This sequence illustrates Parker and Stone’s criticism of corporations and how they market products in a way that stifles intelligence and critical thought, particularly in females. Furthermore, the parents’ response is not to address the problem, but instead to ignore it and replace it with other forms of escapism offered by media conglomerations, such as game shows.

*South Park*’s most striking critique of television marketing and its attempts to subjugate its viewers is “The Ring” (11 March 2009), which satirizes the purity rings worn by Disney’s popular pop group The Jonas Brothers as a ploy to sell sex to young girls. Purity rings were a big fad at the making of the episode, and The Jonas Brothers were one of the biggest proponents that young children

wear them to symbolize a pure lifestyle free of sex, drugs, and alcohol. However, as the episode clearly demonstrates, Disney also uses those purity rings to sell sex to girls. The episode parodies real life events involving The Jonas Brothers that illustrate the use of sexual innuendo to market their acts. For example, the episode shows the Jonas Brothers asking their preteen, female audience if they want the trio to “spray you with our white foam.” Though the scene seems gratuitous and exaggerated, the actual Jonas Brothers would often spray their fans with white foam from fire hoses during their concerts. The episode also parodies the group’s use of a promotional poster, in which the fans hands are close to the group members’ crotches. The Disney executive in the episode, Mr. Mouse (a clear parody of Mickey Mouse), even says, “You see, if we make the posters of little girls reaching for your junk, then you have to wear purity rings, or else Disney Company looks bad.” Such scenes in the episode critique the extent of mass media conglomerates’ reach and their willingness to exploit both artists and consumers.

In addition, the episode uses intertextuality, parody, and satire to underscore the extent to which false images are marketed to young children and their parents to give the illusion of “wholesome” entertainment while still selling sex to them. The use of the wholesome Mickey Mouse drives the critique of the episode. Though he sounds like the happy mouse of the early Disney cartoons, Mr. Mouse is actually a tyrant who is not opposed to using violence if anyone attempts to derail his plans. When the Jonas Brothers threaten to remove their purity rings because they are uncomfortable with selling sex to little girls, Mickey beats one of the brothers to a pulp. After he finishes beating the brother, he tells the brothers to “go out and make me some god damned money!” The beating symbolizes the extent to which Disney owns their performers and not only robs them of their individuality, but also exploits them physically. However, the episode also satirizes the consumers who fall for such obvious ploys to sell sex to children. When Stan, Kyle, and Cartman try to foil The Jonas Brothers’ concert at Red Rocks Amphitheater, Mickey goes on an extended tirade, in which he emphasizes that Christians will continue to buy what he markets to them because they are “too fucking stupid to realize that I’m selling sex to their daughters. I’ve made billions off of Christian ignorance for decades.”

The show thus reveals the various levels of commodification. While they certainly do not deny their own show’s status as commodity, the show’s writers also maintain remarkable transparency about how they feel about their characters’ status as marketable products. Additionally, *South Park* is one of the few programs, animated or otherwise, that provides a free venue for fans to watch their entire catalog of episodes online, instead of providing only purchasable DVDs for their fans (though they are still available for purchase for fans who want them). Such gestures illustrate that the show’s creators, producers, and even executives are not driven purely by financial considerations

and limits the extent to which the program is commodified. Though the show certainly does not deny its own status as cultural product that is marketed, it is willing to critique the commodification of competitors' own agendas in mass media money grab and explicate the moral quandaries of such agendas.

Of the networks dependent on the exchange of style, music, image, and culture as saleable commodities, MTV is perhaps the most reliant. It is then ironic that the channel was often targeted in *Daria*, a program that aired on MTV. Before discussing *Daria*'s subversion of MTV's marketing strategies, MTV's evolution in the televisual landscape is necessary. Since its inception, Douglas Rushkoff notes that the channel has been charged by critics for its "further commercialization of an already too commercialized music industry" (*Virus* 127). When Rushkoff postulated his theory of popular culture releasing subversive so-called media viruses in the dominant body politic of America, he saw MTV as one of the primary agents through which subversive ideas are planted. Certainly, he does not deny the commercialization involved in the transfer of nontraditional mores into homes, but he does argue that music videos have the potential to contain subversive content unbeknownst to the corporate executives at Viacom, MTV's parent company. However, Rushkoff also published his book in 1994, when MTV's programming was still very much reliant on music videos. As a result, his positive perception of MTV seems somewhat reasonable given the amount of variety, particularly of non-traditional genres from heavy metal, to grunge, to rap, that populated its video rotation. Furthermore, Rushkoff's reading of animated program *Beavis and Butthead* as an added agent of subversion against popular perceptions of MTV's viewing audience adds credence to his theory that MTV once could be perceived to have true subversive potential.

However, by 1997, MTV's programming began what proved to be a permanent shift away from videos during peak viewing hours (Katz 5). Though the channel is still somewhat dependent on music to sustain its image, most of the programs now are reality television shows, game shows, or vapid scripted programming. Furthermore, in 1997, MTV also began showing fewer videos from artists that were not part of the mainstream, which were once a vital cog in the channel's subversive efforts (Richmond 6). Instead, the channel began catering to the tastes of the mainstream with teen-pop acts such as Backstreet Boys and NSYNC leading the way, and MTV's *Total Request Live* serving as a forum where teens could celebrate popular trends in the mainstream. Such a shift could also be seen in *The Real World*, MTV's popular reality program that debuted in 1992. Whereas the first three seasons explored the discursive political and cultural ideals held by a diverse, strikingly normal-looking group of Americans, by season 5 the program began to devolve into a series of parties and sexual liaisons amongst a cast that began to look more like a collection of models.

Amid MTV's shift to more carefully crafted marketing that catered to mainstream tastes, the channel also aired *Daria*, an animated program about a character who is the very antithesis of all that was perceived to be cool and popular. A spinoff of *Beavis and Butthead*, *Daria* focuses on Daria Morgendorffer, a smart, perceptive, but cynical high school girl who must navigate the trappings of high school popularity and the vast hyper-commercialization of the teenage experience. Perpetually clad in a green casual coat with a mustard yellow shirt, black skirt, combat boots, glasses, and a non-trendy haircut, Daria is not a typical target audience member for MTV. On her journey through what she perceives as an insipid teenage existence, she does find some allies. Most notably, Jane Lane, an artist, befriends Daria on her first day of school and they bond over their disgust at their classmates. Jodie, an African-American female who equals Daria's intellectual capabilities but is also more active in school functions, provides an important voice that recognizes the same flaws around her, but endeavors to find ways to be active nevertheless. Pitted against Daria are the common icons of high school popularity. Her perkier, popularity-driven younger sister Quinn, jock Kevin, and cheerleader Brittney all serve as icons of popular teen markets, no doubt the kinds of teens that have been increasingly targeted in MTV's new programming strategy. The adults are not much help: Daria's parents are more focused on their demanding jobs in law and advertising than helping Daria in any meaningful way, English teacher Mr. O'Neill means well but lacks a strong backbone when faced with challenging problems, and Lawndale High School principal Mrs. Li is more focused on marketing the school to corporate interests than the lives of her students. Daria is often considered an outcast for valuing education and critical thinking, while those around her are hypnotized by notions of popularity, trendiness, and wealth. Kathy M. Newman notes that the show directs frequent assaults at "the suburban world, critiquing capitalism, public education, consumer culture, the obsession with weight and beauty, and the pressures on teenagers to achieve" (202). It therefore seems as though *Daria*, both the show and the character, contrasted sharply with MTV's move toward an even greater mainstream appeal to teenage consumers.

In addition to *Daria* providing a strong feminine voice in the mostly male-dominated landscape of animated television, the show solidifies the show's critique of the exploitation of youth culture, an exploitation for which MTV often provides the drumbeat. The show's repudiation of such tactics can be seen most clearly in "The Lost Girls" (24 March 1999), in which an essay written by Daria draws the attention of a teen magazine editor from New York, Val. Moved by the essay, Val wants to spend a day with Daria at school to live a day in the life of an everyday teen. However, she seems more interested in perpetuating her image as an in-style teenager (even though she is in her mid-thirties) while conducting market research on the popular teens in school. Her

desire to appear young is further emphasized by using slang words such as “jiggy,” “whack,” and “icky.” Her coopting of teen trends resembles that of corporate executives in *The Simpsons* who emphasize key words in an attempt to capture the youth market. In many ways, Val represents the new MTV strategy of targeting popular teens with disposable incomes. Once Val learns that Daria is unpopular, she begins to seek the popular teens’ input instead of Daria’s and ultimately abandons Daria completely when Daria criticizes Val’s market-driven, faux-youth approach as dangerous and hurtful to teenage girls instead of empowering them.

Dialogue that satirizes corporate strategies occurs throughout the episode, and each instance criticizes the new apparent marketing strategy that MTV began employing only a few years earlier. When Val asks Daria to explain what “edgy” is to her parents, Daria’s response, delivered in her typical deadpan style, is that “*edgy* occurs when middle-brow, middle-aged profiteers are looking to suck the energy, not to mention spending money, out of the quote-unquote youth culture. So they come up with this fake concept of seeming to be dangerous when every move they make is the result of market research and a corporate master plan.”

Later, when Val takes questions from other students, Jodie asks, “Don’t you think Val could try harder to present a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, less brain-dead point-of-view to enlighten girls instead of just marketing to them?” Val’s response is to ask Jodie whether or not green nail polish is “edgy” or “icky.” Both of these instances criticize much of MTV’s marketing, which steadily began marketing music and trends toward middle-class consumers. The episode ends with Val admonishing Daria for her intellectual outlook in a magazine editorial, in which Val concludes that “unenthusiastic, unpopular, cynical D[aria] just doesn’t understand how great it is to be a teen. In fact, she may be the anti-teen.” Yet, she is a leading character on a network virtually built on perpetuating images of the “typical” teen. Daria thus embodies the exact opposite of the image that MTV wishes to perpetuate—the popular, pretty, perky teen. Therefore, in many ways, *Daria* subverts the overall mission of MTV’s marketing strategies and provides resistance to simply acquiescing to the demands of commodity culture. While the show does not resist its own commodification as overtly as *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, its opposition to the principals its channel stands for provides an opportunity for fans to read the program as critical of the guiding principles of the channel that airs it.

Animated programs must walk a fine line regarding their own status as commodities in the post-modern marketplace and their desire to critique the very marketplace that makes them successful. At a press conference for his controversial animated series *The Boondocks*, writer and executive producer Aaron McGruder admits the challenges facing animated programs that wish to promote subversive ideas: “...once you decide to go into this business...



you have to sometimes go into business with some unsavory corporations. The alternative is that you just do it in your basement and just have it be something your family and friends enjoy” (201). Certainly, the advent of YouTube and online videos might make an underground animated program more likely, but McGruder’s point remains fairly indicative of the challenges that animated programs face. In order for people to see their critiques, they must negotiate the demands of those who distribute their message and the advertisers who fund them. Rushkoff’s media virus analogy explains how post-modern texts can critique culture by maintaining an ironic distance from its satirical target, whether it is an animated program’s own commodification, its relationship with its corporate partners, or its critiques of market culture in general. As seen from the previous examples, these viruses can be planted by postmodern texts with some degree of success.

### **Infinite Parody and Bricolage—Empty? Or Something More Substantial?**

In addition to commodification, or perhaps even a byproduct of it, many postmodern texts rely on intertextuality and parody as they become a virtual collage of references to popular culture texts and icons. Even in its earliest forms, animation has cannibalized various images from high and low culture. For example, the title of the first cartoon with synchronized sound, Disney’s “Steamboat Willie” (1929) refers to a Buster Keaton silent film, *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928), released one year earlier, which itself was influenced by a popular song from 1911. Over a decade later, Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940) would combine a classical score performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra with animation. Suffice it to say that animation is a genre that greatly lends itself to parody, intertextual play, and pastiche because it is not held to the same expectations as “live action” film and television. Indeed, audiences even expect animation to provide a cultural game in addition to telling a story. One can see such strategies in contemporary animated programs, perhaps to an even greater degree. The titles of episodes often refer either to contemporary works of popular culture or more traditional literature. For example, *The Simpsons* have episodes titled “The Italian Bob,” “Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington,” “Bart of Darkness,” and “Moaning Lisa” (other series use similar titles). Furthermore, the episodes in question do not necessarily parody the works they are named for, and might even parody completely different works altogether. Most episodes engage in parodies of both popular and obscure movies and television while inundating their audiences with dozens of pop cultural references per episode.

The apparent increase of such intertextuality in postmodernism has caused consternation and disagreement among critics and scholars. Fredric Jameson



contends that “the advanced capitalist countries of today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm” (17). The result of such heterogeneity results in what Jameson calls “blank parody,” which loses its ability to critique effectively because texts are so wrapped in presenting a pastiche of images borrowed from other texts, past and present. While Jameson expressly acknowledges that such parody and intertextuality can sometimes have passion and humor, the absorption of rebellious impulses in the capitalist market robs the parodic energy from postmodern texts, which makes them part of the spectacle in “the absence of any great collective project” (18). Writing about *The Simpsons*, Duncan Stewart Beard notes similar concerns: “while the satiric intent of the show is, at times, less than subtle, its overall open-endedness often leaves ample space for diverse viewer interpretation” (277). Thus, some critics imply that postmodern television, and animation, becomes something of a Rorschach test for audiences to apply their preconceived notions, and the proliferation of intertextuality gives viewers multiple starting points from which they can attach their own ideals.

Whereas Jameson sees little room for postmodern texts to use parody effectively, Jim Collins contends that competitive intertextuality is one of the hallmarks of postmodernism; he writes, “The constant jockeying for position in which individual discourses provide their own cultural hierarchies and texts define themselves over and against other forms of discourse...necessitates a new conception of ‘intertextuality’” (43). Collins’s conception is predicated on the idea that the sudden widespread literacy of the 17th and 18th centuries created a market for the commercialization of literature. As a result, writers found themselves defending their art against other commodified forms in their genre. One motivation for the self-reflexive and intertextual defense lay in establishing a niche in the market. However, another motive lay in legitimating their work as art and the supreme discourse among their peers, not just a consumer product. Collins contends that this process only intensified in the late 20th century as the lines between “high” culture and “low” culture have blurred. In addition, Collins notes that in their desire to gauge how popular culture sublimates audiences, critics have failed to analyze how “texts position themselves in relation to other texts,” particularly those of similar genres (43). Thus, when analyzing the intertextuality and parody of a postmodern text, one must identify how a program signifies its own importance not only as a commodity, but also as a legitimate work of artistic expression in comparison with other texts of similar or different genres. An important aspect of American humor is the ability of humorists to distinguish their form of humor from another, often with the intent of legitimizing their brand. Moreover, this kind of intertextuality allows for texts to claim an artistic veracity—a nobler attempt to arrive at truth-telling—that is found lacking in the work that is referenced.

These rhetorical strategies are not confined to the postmodern, however. In her discussion of Mark Twain's use of branding his humor, Lee notes that branding "serve[s] three distinct but interrelated function: *denotation*, to name a good or service; *differentiation*, to distinguish one from another; and *connotation*, to symbolize a set of associated ideas" (9-10). Lee's assessment of Twain's branding is very similar to Collins's notion of intertextuality as competition. Through parody, many American humorists clear spaces for their own forms of discourse over others. Certainly, a large part of this effort revolves around procuring a market, but the branding of humor is often an artistic statement. Most notably, throughout Mark Twain's literary catalogue, he parodied the romance popularized by Sir Walter Scott and the sentimental fiction that were among the bestselling pieces of his lifetime. While one might find his tone to be playful in Huck's assessment of the fictional Emmeline Grangerford's sentimental art and poetry in *Huckleberry Finn*, his assessment of Sir Walter Scott in *Life on the Mississippi* is more scathing: "He did measureless harm; more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote" (208). Twain's parody of romantic and sentimental literature is an indictment of the genre's inability to capture reality; instead, romanticism distorts the truth, and Twain's parodies are meant to provide clarity. In a letter, Twain wrote that the end and aim of my ambition is to be authentic—is to be considered authentic" (qtd. in Lee 34), which he thought more important than being funny or humorous. Twain's contrast with and disdain toward romantic literature is captured in his attempt to be authentic, which allows him a greater claim to the truth of the human existence in his performances that romantic works negate.

In addition, Twain also clears a space for his humorous discourse in "How to Tell a Story," in which he attempts to distinguish the American brand humor from that of European nations: "To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, is the basis of American art, if my position is correct" (184-85). Twain demonstrated a keen awareness of how his humor was perceived by the public, often insisting that his audiences laugh for the right reasons. In "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," the story that minted his reputation, Twain repurposed a popular narrative in Western mining camps and infused it with his own brand of humor. Twain therefore relies on parody of both popular romantic forms and established modes of humor to reveal the value of his own brand not just for the purpose of selling it to the masses, but also to underscore his efforts in arriving at the truth through his art.

Modernist-era writers Dorothy Parker and Nathanael West, both of whom relied heavily on humor and satire, also distinguish the importance of their works through the use of parody and intertextuality. Parker, through her short, witty poems and polyphonic monologues, distinguished herself as a working professional writer in contrast to brooding verse of Modernist poets such as

T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In “Oh, Look—I Can Do It, Too: Showing That Anyone Can Write Modernist Verse,” Parker writes a parody of Eliot’s verse—including the lines, “Outside, a thin gray rain, / Falling, falling hopelessly, / With a dull monotony of meaningless sound, / Like the voice of a minister reading the marriage service.” (qtd. in Guriel 67)—in order to highlight what she perceived as the melodrama that failed to capture the essence of Modern life. Instead of morose, less structured verse, Parker often confined her poetry to strict meter, but conveyed in that meter was a castigation on the male-dominated world of her time. “Parker’s unique comic style, sharp witted and carefully crafted,” Julia Boissoneau Hans asserts, “helped define American humor in the early 20th century just as it reflected the changing mores of the time” (114). To some degree, Parker was able to accomplish both of these feats through her ability to distinguish herself as a unique voice through the use of parody and intertextuality.

Nathanael West also uses parody and intertextuality to express what he perceives to be the truth of Modern existence in *A Cool Million*. *A Cool Million* appropriates both Voltaire’s *Candide* and the myth of American optimism and hope outlined in the novels of Horatio Alger. His mocking of *Candide* can largely be seen as an admiration of Voltaire’s work, but West replaces Voltaire’s Enlightenment-era concerns of religion and aristocracy with American culture’s wrestling with democracy and capitalism. In the novel, Lemuel Pitkin, in search of the American Dream of wealth and freedom, is instead preyed upon by loan sharks who spout Alger-like aphorisms. West’s satire on Alger’s stories, especially since the book was written during the Great Depression, exposes the falsehood in the Alger myth while proclaiming the truth of the rich benefitting at the expense of the poor in American capitalism.

Certainly, one could argue that parody and intertextuality are more pervasive than they have been in previous centuries, but one can still see the impulse within postmodern texts to define themselves against other texts, often with the attempt to make a claim of artistic superiority. Specifically, animated programs also define themselves against other television programs, both animated and live action, in order to privilege their mode of discourse over others. Sometimes, programs reference other texts to pay homage to a forerunner in the genre. Other times intertextuality differentiates one program from another, and often the world of animated programs can become quite contentious, particularly among contemporary programs wishing to establish their mode of discourse as superior. One can see such positioning in perhaps the three most popular and influential animated programs in the past two decades: *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy*.

After 26 seasons (at the time of this writing), *The Simpsons* is now considered the standard by which other animated programs are measured. In fact, the program has such considerable clout that it is difficult to imagine

a time that the program was not such a constant in the American televisual landscape. Nevertheless, as an upstart program, the intertextual references in *The Simpsons* often sought to distinguish the program as both a different kind of family sitcom and animated program. The series is primarily set in Springfield, which shares its name with setting of 1950s family sitcom *Father Knows Best*. The traditional family sitcom of the 1950s would be re-dressed in the 1980s with programs such as *Growing Pains*, *Full House*, and even *The Cosby Show*, in which middle-class families reinforced middle-class values. Since *The Simpsons* often seeks to explode the saccharine depiction of family in the traditional sitcom, the writers set up an intertextual discourse with such programs in order to privilege their vision of family over others'. Instead of the wise, devoted father of traditional sitcoms, *The Simpsons* counters with Homer, whose first two loves might be beer and donuts. Instead of the squeaky-clean all-American boy, *The Simpsons* presents Bart (anagram of brat), whose favorite phrases include "Eat My Shorts" and "I'm Bart Simpson, who the hell are you?" Instead of a family that remains stable and united, the Simpsons electrocute one another. Booker notes that the program's "most important satire and parody are aimed at [the family sitcom] genre" (48). Such parody legitimates *The Simpsons*'s conception of the family over other discourses by exposing the blatant artifice on which traditional family sitcoms are constructed. From its earliest forms on *The Tracy Ullman Show* to its continuing intertextuality with the family sitcom, the show has underscored its difference from other forms in the family comedy genre.

*The Simpsons* also acknowledges its debt to other animated programs that have preceded it, particularly *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*, by frequently referencing them in episodes. One of the earliest and most memorable references to *The Flintstones* occurs in "Marge vs. the Monorail." In an early scene before the introduction of the plot, Homer's drive home from work parodies the title sequence of *The Flintstones*, including the iconic song with the lyrics changed to "Simpson. Homer Simpson. He's the greatest guy in history..." Another reference that more clearly acknowledges *The Flintstones* as an important animated pioneer occurs in "*The Simpsons* 138th Episode Spectacular" (3 December 1995), in which host Troy McClure (Phil Hartman) calls the Simpsons "America's most popular non-prehistoric cartoon family." Such references establish *The Flintstones* as an important influence on the tactics used by *The Simpsons*, including *The Flintstones* own use of intertextuality to establish their own relationship with other network programming in the 60s. Even so, Megan Mullen notes, "it is also clear that these techniques [intertextuality] are much more developed in [*The Simpsons*]" because it boasts a greater satirical edge than that of *The Flintstones* (74). That edge, however, might not even exist without the blueprint established by *The Flintstones*, and *The Simpsons*' frequent references to the program underscores the importance of that blueprint (75).

While *The Flintstones* served as an important influence, *The Simpsons* succeeded on its own terms and broke new ground, not only as an animated program, but as a television series. In typical television fashion, every original, groundbreaking program spawns a movement that includes innovators and imitators. Therefore, *The Simpsons* has also engaged in intertextual dialogues with other programs in which the original seeks to defend its territory against other animated programs. Often, their references to other animated programs can be an admiring stamp of approval. For example, their brief references to *South Park* suggest a positive appraisal of the program. In “Bart of War” (18 May 2003), Bart and Milhouse want to watch the controversial program, but Marge refuses to let them do so because of the adult content. In this very brief reference, the writers differentiate their show from *South Park*. That they have an admirer in Bart suggests that *The Simpsons* recognize *South Park* as a valuable program. Nevertheless, because Bart cannot watch it suggests that the shows are different—while a child Bart’s age could watch *The Simpsons*, *South Park*’s humor is beyond the pale for a 10 year old. Therefore, even while expressing admiration, the writers also acknowledge that comparison between the two shows might not be as apt as many would assume.

Even though the intertextuality of *The Simpsons* sometimes embraces challengers, their parodic gaze can also take a more critical turn, particularly when that gaze meets Seth MacFarlane-produced programs *Family Guy* and *American Dad!*. The references to *Family Guy* have not been as reverent, though the creators and producers insist that mutual respect exists between the staffs of both programs. Be that as it may, the rhetoric of the *The Simpsons*’ references to *Family Guy* can be read as somewhat dismissive, in large part because MacFarlane’s show is so derivative. The first reference to the program, however, criticizes it for its blue humor. In “Missionary Impossible” (20 February 2000), Betty White (voiced by herself) hosts a telethon to help save Fox and its shows, which includes various Fox characters, such as Hank Hill, Fox Mulder, and Bender, taking calls for pledges (a very intertextual scene indeed). As White pleads for pledges, she boasts that the audience’s pledges will “keep this crude, low-brow programming on the air.” As she says this line, a television monitor next to her displays the *Family Guy* logo, a not-so-subtle jab at the program. While the jab may be in good fun, it also clearly establishes *The Simpsons* as a more refined, intelligent show when compared to *Family Guy*, thus differentiating the shows with *The Simpsons*’ humor privileged.

Two episodes point to *Family Guy*’s perceived unoriginality, even further cementing *The Simpsons* superiority. In “Treehouse of Horror XIII” (3 November 2003), Homer creates clones of himself that are progressively dumber. In a wide shot showing multiple clones, Peter Griffin can be seen among them, which compounds previous criticisms of the show’s low-brow writing with the program being a less intelligent clone of *The Simpsons*. In “The Italian Bob” (11

December 2003) their criticisms are more direct. While thumbing through a book of known criminals, the Italian police find a page with a picture of Peter Griffin with a caption that reads “Plagiarismo,” then they turn to a picture of *American Dad’s* Stan Smith with a caption that reads “Plagiarismo de plagiarismo.” Such attacks reinforce Collins’s notion of texts competing with one another not only on market terms, but also artistic terms. Thus, in its intertextuality with other television programs, *The Simpsons* constitutes “a kind of action, an attempt to make an impact beyond the function of simple entertainment” (Alberti xix). By doing so, the writers of the program attempt to illustrate the cultural value of their humor because it fits into a traditional definition of satire, unlike *Family Guy*, which serves as “a negotiation of the satirical mode” (DeRochi 36).

One can see other animated programs attempt to underscore their significance through references to other television programs. *South Park* also seeks to establish its own place amongst animated programs while also privileging the mode of discourse over other animated programs. Parker and Stone find that they must differentiate their animated show from other animated genres, and they have largely succeeded in that goal. Johnson-Woods notes, “*South Park’s* distinctive style...created a space for a different kind of animation” (256). Parker and Stone often use parody and intertextuality to define their show against those in their genre, usually with the purpose of legitimizing *South Park* over its competitors in the adult animated market, particularly *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*.

In “*The Simpsons* Already Did It” (26 June 2006), Parker notes that they made this episode to express their frustration that the long-running sitcom has exhausted many ideas (“*The Simpsons* Already...” DVD Commentary). Their frustration is aimed less at *The Simpsons* and more at the people who automatically compare the two just because they are the same genre, a similar sentiment to *The Simpsons’* reference to *South Park* in “Bart of War.” Stone laments the instant comparisons, noting that “people lump *South Park* and *The Simpsons* and any animated program in together...People don’t compare us to *Sister, Sister* or *Small Wonder*” (“*The Simpsons*...” DVD Commentary). In the episode, Butters is representative of Parker and Stone’s point-of-view as his alter-ego, Professor Chaos, tries to think of ways to wreak havoc on *South Park*, only to realize all of his ideas have been done previously on *The Simpsons*. Eventually, Butters becomes so frustrated that he begins to see everyone drawn in the style of *The Simpsons*. After learning that every idea has been done before, Butters says, “So I shouldn’t care if I come up with an idea and *The Simpsons* already did it.... It doesn’t matter.” Parker and Stone show that even though they may have episodes similar to *The Simpsons*, their show is still distinct in its own right, thus legitimizing and separating their show from another popular animated sitcom while reinforcing the postmodern sentiment that every idea has already been done in some form anyway (Booker 241). The point that the episode makes



is that the creativity of any artistic endeavor should be determined by how well its authors synthesize ideas into something different, not necessarily brand new. *South Park*'s new use of old material shows how well Park and Stone can synthesize works of the past to make a commentary on something new.

Indeed, though *South Park* did reap benefits from the success of *The Simpsons*, Parker and Stone have carved their own niche and found ways to improve upon the satirical energies of Matt Groening's creation. Parker and Stone's show is aimed more at adults, while *The Simpsons* is more family friendly, though it still sometimes draws criticisms from parents. Because *South Park* is aimed specifically at adults, the show is willing to cross boundaries that *The Simpsons* simply cannot cross. Furthermore, while *The Simpsons* satirizes celebrity and culture, they do so from a more leftist position, and the satire of the show is ultimately more playful and less strident in its satire. Conversely, Parker and Stone have no identifiable political angle; their message is that all people in power are ignorant and they often display their message in the most offensive way possible. Even while separating themselves from *The Simpsons*, however, their intertextual references illustrate that Parker and Stone still respect the show for its longevity and wit.

Though Parker and Stone's parody of *The Simpsons* is without malice, their attack on *Family Guy* in "Cartoon Wars" (5 April 2006) is not. In this two-part episode, Cartman lambastes *Family Guy*'s lack of cohesive plot structure and its facile pastiche of pop culture references. His feelings, and Parker and Stone's as well, can be best encapsulated by his monologue to Kyle when Kyle learns of Cartman's plans to remove *Family Guy* from the air altogether:

I am nothing like *Family Guy*! When I make jokes, they are inherent to a story! Deep situational and emotional jokes based on what is relevant and has a point, not just one random interchangeable joke after another!

In the second part of the episode, the writers of *Family Guy* are revealed to be manatees using idea balls containing nouns, verbs, or pop culture references—a not so subtle jab at the creative synthesis of the show, which relies on non-sequitur vignettes that make popular culture references often completely unrelated to the plot of the episode. In the commentary for the episode, Parker admits that "we just don't respect [*Family Guy*] in terms of writing" ("Cartoon Wars: Part I" DVD Commentary).

The episode also includes references to *King of the Hill* and *The Simpsons*. Bart Simpson appears as a character, and he and Cartman compare which of the two is more wicked (of course, Cartman wins), while the writing staff for *King of the Hill* appear in the background as Kyle and Cartman are fighting. Parker and Stone note that they included references to both shows because their respective writing staffs thanked them for satirizing *Family Guy*, with Parker claiming that "there



was this very animation solidarity moment where everyone did come together over hatred of *Family Guy*” (“Cartoon Wars: Part II” DVD Commentary). Parker and Stone’s attack on *Family Guy* is particularly interesting because many pair the shows together. Because they both rely on low-brow humor, one could argue that *South Park* is more similar to *Family Guy* than it is to *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill*. That Parker and Stone seek to separate their show so distinctly, and so harshly, from *Family Guy* only reinforces the combative intertextuality of the postmodern era. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues that Parker and Stone self-consciously maintain an “explicit engagement with and critique of other animated programs and its corresponding statement of narrative philosophy” (93). Hence, *South Park* fits Collins’s description of postmodern intertextuality by creating fun dialogues with past animated programs or by distinguishing their show from their competitors while reinforcing the superiority of their own discourse.

The apparent commonality in *The Simpson’s* and *South Park’s* use of intertextuality is an obvious distaste for *Family Guy’s* mode of parody, burlesque, and satire. *The Simpsons* attacks *Family Guy* because of its crude humor and its unoriginality; *South Park* attacks MacFarlane’s program because of its failure to adhere to the conventions of narrative. So how does *Family Guy* respond to such criticisms of its humor, narrative structure, and originality? Or, more specifically, how does *Family Guy* establish an intertextual link with other contemporary animated programs that carves out a space for its own mode of rhetoric and narrative?

MacFarlane’s *Family Guy* never really responds to the criticisms made by Parker and Stone on *South Park*; however, the writers of *Family Guy* have responded to the critique made by *The Simpsons* and other critics who pan the series for its narrative style. The first example of *Family Guy*’s use of intertextuality to legitimate its own mode of storytelling occurs in “Mother Tucker” (17 September 2006). In large part, the episode is a subtle response to criticisms, both by other animated programs and television critics, of the show’s low brow humor and its status amongst other animated programs. The episode attempts to assert that it can rely on low brow, childish humor while engaging in serious, political topics.

After Brian is offered a job as a disc jockey at WQOG, the local radio station, he attempts to ground his program in intellectual discussion of contemporary political and cultural topics. His program is a stark contrast to star DJs Weenie and the Butt, who use childish pranks and inane station promos filled with lines from various iconic catch phrases from popular culture. Because of its poor ratings, Brian’s show is on the verge of cancellation until Stewie calls in to heckle Brian on the air. When the station manager hears Brian and Stewie’s banter (which is one of highlights of *Family Guy* in general), he forces Brian to hire Stewie or face cancellation. The show name changes from “The Lunch

Hour” to “Dingo and the Baby,” and Brian and Stewie’s show becomes virtually indistinguishable from “Weenie and the Butt,” just another crude radio program in which the DJs mock their listeners. Because of the instant fame Brian receives, he decides to fully embrace his newfound celebrity until Gore Vidal (voiced by Gore Vidal), a guest booked for the defunct “The Lunch Hour,” arrives for his interview while Brian and Stewie shoot hot dogs into a woman’s mouth so she can receive a free breast enhancement. Vidal’s appearance leads Brian to conclude that he has sold out his political principles for popularity and fame.

Though “Mother Tucker” does not particularly engage in any significant social, cultural, or political satire, it is nevertheless important because it engages in an analysis of its own rhetoric and how it is received through the use of parody. If we take Brian to be the show’s ethical filter and the primary voice of Seth MacFarlane’s political philosophy (which many have done), then his journey in the episode becomes vital to *Family Guy*’s legitimation of itself as not only a source of entertainment, but also a source of political analysis. To do this, the program first establishes an intertextual link with radio programs hosted by shock jocks. The episode levels the same criticisms at such radio programs that *Family Guy* faces from its critics, including *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. In particular, they are criticized for their pastiche of popular culture and their refusal to adhere to any identifiable politics other than the urges of the present moment. The criticism of radio shows parallels the perception of *Family Guy*’s humor to the point that it seems the writers included the parody as if to say, “THIS is what mindless, low brow humor looks like.” In “Mother Tucker,” *Family Guy* attempts to separate itself from such criticism by positioning itself as a show in which wacky hijinks and postmodern pastiche indeed occurs (the B-plot of the episode revolves around Peter’s mother dating local news anchor Tom Tucker that includes a parody of *Kramer vs. Kramer*), but it can also be a show that engages in a discussion of politics by its recognition of politically controversial figures such as Gore Vidal. Thus, *Family Guy* legitimates its own discursive skill set and establishes itself as a program in which pastiche, parody, and satire can coexist.

The episode also contains a reference to *The Simpsons* that seeks to close the perceived distance between *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons*. Upon realizing that he has sold out his values for fame, Brian says to Stewie, “I’m a bigger sell-out than when you did those commercials for Butterfinger.” The scene then cuts to Stewie sitting on a park bench with a Butterfinger as he utters Bart Simpson’s line from Butterfinger commercials: “Nobody better lay a finger on my Butterfinger.” To punctuate the reference, Stewie follows the line with a sarcastic “D’oh!,” Homer Simpson’s ubiquitous catch phrase. The accusation of selling out to commercial interests is important for a couple of reasons. First, it undercuts *The Simpson*’s authority as a more artistic program by comparing it to the very radio programs the episode spent criticizing, emphasizing the commercial interests of both.

Second, it emphasizes that though *Family Guy* might be guilty of narrative and creative crimes, it is also a show that has not sold out its characters completely by having them endorse products on commercials, or at the very least asserts that *The Simpsons* is somewhat compromised in its artistic integrity.<sup>2</sup> The quick intertextual moment speaks volumes about *Family Guy*'s attempt to put itself on equal footing with more respected animated programs *The Simpsons* and *South Park* and proclaim itself as a program that can engage in political and cultural critique while it employs a nontraditional mode of parody.

Perhaps the clearest example of *Family Guy*'s defense of its own brand of humor in response to the *The Simpsons* is "The Simpsons Guy" (28 September 2014), in which the Griffins travel to Springfield and meet America's most cherished animated family. The episode marks the first crossover episode between the two programs, with the voice characters from the *The Simpsons* being written and directed by *Family Guy*'s staff.<sup>3</sup> Largely, it crystallizes the amount of respect that the writers of *Family Guy* have for *The Simpsons* while clearly distinguishing themselves. After Peter begins a comic strip called "For Pete's Sake," he finds himself in trouble after women find one of his comics offensive.<sup>4</sup> Already the episode attempts to explain and justify its brand of humor before the Simpsons even make an appearance. One can easily read "For Pete's Sake," a strip that pushes the envelope of good taste for the sake of humor, as a symbol for how *Family Guy* itself is perceived by the public, especially among female viewers who have found problems with the program's treatment of Meg Griffin. Peter appears on *The Flow*, a parody of women's program *The View*, to explain himself to an angry host who asks him, "You have no idea how offensive you are to women, do you?" Unrepentant, Peter claims that he loves women because he has categorical knowledge of all female pornographic starlets. A group of angry female protestors then surround the Griffins' home and threaten them with violence, which forces them to leave town. In this relatively brief opening that does not really tie into the plot, the writers of *Family Guy* defend their use of humor and display an awareness at how their crude, and often pointless, jokes frustrate some of their audience. That they use this to open a crossover episode with *The Simpsons* illustrates the differences between the programs.

The main plot of the episode, however, revolves around the Griffins' time with the Simpson family. After their car is stolen, the Griffins realize that they

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2 At the first airing of "Mother Tucker," *Family Guy* had no endorsements. Brian and Stewie have since become spokestoons for Wheat Thins.

3 Richard Appel, who spent four seasons as a producer/writer for *The Simpsons*, served as executive producer for the episode.

4 In the comic, a man is attempting to return a dishwasher that is broken. The trouble is that the dishwasher is his wife, who is deceased.

are in the town of Springfield. While trying to find food at the Springfield Kwik-E-Mart, the Griffins are saved by Homer, who buys them a dozen doughnuts, though he takes six for himself. From this point, the respective family members pair off with their counterparts: Marge and Lois are given little to do besides play their usual long-suffering housewife routine; Brian, along with Chris, is forced to bond with Simpsons pet Santa's Little Helper, Lisa helps Meg find her special talent, which turns out to be playing the saxophone.

By far, the most interesting pairings that illustrate the differences between the shows are Bart and Stewie and Homer and Peter. Stewie admires Bart instantly after realizing that Bart can cause mayhem with only a slingshot, while Stewie uses time machine and sophisticated weaponry. After seeing his weapons closet consisting of a mere slingshot, Stewie exclaims, "He's like something out of Mark Twain," which positions Stewie's antics as edgier while Bart's *modus operandi* is rendered somewhat quaint. The contrast becomes even more apparent when Bart conducts his customary prank call to Moe's Tavern. After Stewie observes Bart tricking Moe into asking his patrons if there is a Lee Key Bum in the tavern, Stewie is desperate to make a prank call of his own. On his own attempt, Stewie tells Moe, "Your sister is being raped," and hangs up the phone. Here again the contrast between the two shows is made apparent. While Bart's mischief is based on word play that requires at least a smidge of cleverness, Stewie's call relies on a hyperbolic, and somewhat twisted, threat—the joke relies on the shock factor more than ingenuity, which clearly illustrates that the two programs work on different levels. Nevertheless, Stewie's admiration of Bart is clear as they continue their antics; in fact, Stewie takes it upon himself to kidnap and torture all of Bart's biggest enemies, including Nelson, Principal Skinner, and Sideshow Bob. This act proves to be too much for Bart, and he distances himself from Stewie because Stewie's intensity is too malignant for Bart to condone. In this pairing, *Family Guy*, while perhaps not privileging its brand of humor over *The Simpsons* (after all, Stewie does admire Bart), does distinguish itself as a program that is more willing to push comedic boundaries—Stewie is able to make the jokes that Bart cannot.

These contrasts become even more apparent in the relationship between Peter and Homer. When they first meet, they become fast friends as they go in search of Peter's stolen car with a host of poorly planned ideas. One can certainly sense the privileging of *Family Guy*'s type of humor when Homer and Peter organize a free car wash for stolen cars, which features Homer and Peter assuming the role of attractive female car washers in a montage set to Def Leppard's "Pour Some Sugar on Me." While one would certainly expect for Peter to immerse himself in this activity, it is rather disconcerting to see Homer performing in this way. The use of this montage once again demonstrates the *Family Guy* writers' tendency to illustrate privilege of a shocking sight gag over a fully developed scene. Despite their hapless plans, the Griffin's car is eventually

found, and Peter and Homer celebrate at Moe's. Hoping to reward Homer for his efforts in finding their car, Peter offers Homer a Pawtucket Patriot Ale, the preferred alcoholic beverage in Quahog. Homer finds that the beer tastes like a poorer version of Duff Beer, the preferred brand in Springfield. Since Peter and Homer like beer so much, it seems their argument over their preferred brands serves as an apt metaphor to explore the differences between the two programs. Homer claims that Patriot Ale is "just a lousy ripoff" of Duff, and by this point, it is clear that the writers are no longer talking about preferred beer brands. Peter defends PPA by saying that it "may have been *inspired* by Duff, but I like to think it goes in a different direction." As the conflict escalates, Moe reveals that PPA is simply Duff with a new label placed over it, to which Homer responds, "You can't just slap a new label on something and call it your own." Asked to respond, Peter claims that Duff should be under scrutiny because it has not been relevant in thirteen years and notes that quite a few people prefer Pawtucket Ale, which illustrates the popular view that *The Simpsons* has peaked and is in decline while *Family Guy* remains more relevant with younger viewers. Nevertheless, PPA is put on trial for intellectual theft, and with none other than Fred Flintstone presiding as judge and noting that neither "beer" is wholly original, PPA is found guilty. As a result, the factory is forced to shut down, putting Peter out of a job. After the trial, Homer tries to apologize, but Peter refuses to accept; instead, he proclaims, "The Simpsons suck!" This proclamation spurs an eight minute fight animated in the same style as Peter's epic fights with a giant chicken in various *Family Guy* episodes. After they finish their quarrel, Peter finally acknowledges his respect for The Simpsons and Homer declares his respect for the Griffins, even if they didn't "work out as best pals." Homer finishes the conversation by saying, "Let's just agree to stay half an hour away from each other," which is a self-reflexive reference to the time slots the programs inhabit.

Throughout this episode, *Family Guy* attempts to strike a tone of respect for its predecessor by acknowledging the influence that *The Simpsons* has had on their program, yet the episode also makes a strong effort to differentiate and validate its style of humor as relevant and worthy of mantle of *The Simpsons*, even if the style is different. The largest flaw in this endeavor is that the episode is written by the *Family Guy* staff, so the validation from Homer to Peter, meant to reflect a validation of *Family Guy* by *The Simpsons*, rings somewhat hollow because the writers are making Homer say what they want them say. Homer's acceptance of Peter runs counter to the jabs that *The Simpsons* have taken at *Family Guy* over the years, as noted earlier. At the end of the episode, PPA does not shut down because, as Lois notes, "How are they going to enforce it? They're not coming here." This acknowledgement by Lois could very well be an acknowledgement by the writers that the staff at *The Simpsons* does not return that respect since it is unlikely that the Simpsons will visit Quahog in an episode.

The final scene of the episode leaves Stewie pining for his friendship with Bart, which seems more appropriate than Peter and Homer's mutual respect. The episode therefore ends at a false stasis.

In these three programs alone one can see that animated programs do indeed rely on parody and intertextuality with both texts in their own genre and those of others. Their use of parody emphasizes "the struggles of individual discourses to 'clear a space' within a field of competing discourses and fragmented audiences" (Collins 27). These struggles indicate that these programs use parody and intertextuality for a greater purpose than simply referring to programs that many of its audiences loved twenty years ago; they reference other texts to emphasize their own discourse, their own way of seeing the world. Collins argues that the absence of a grand narrative or cultural center that produces a single ideology for audiences does not signify that such projects have been replaced by sheer heterogeneity with no baseline (42). Instead, such narratives are replaced "by a multiplicity of structures all insisting on their ability to perform certain vital functions for the same social formations" (42). Animated television programs illustrate Collins's points perfectly with their own abilities to distinguish themselves from other animated programs and television programs, much like American writers and performers have had to distinguish themselves from one another in order to validate their humor.

Often, critics have the tendency to overstate the extent to which televisual texts are mediated by media interests, which often leads to a cynical reading of a television show's ability to critique religious, political, and economic systems. However, such a philosophy often ignores the methods that animated programs use to resist their commodification and to use unique methods and intertextuality to distinguish themselves. While animated programs are indeed cogs in a very lucrative television industry, they also critique the business of television and the marketing of culture from within. By privileging their own style of discourse over others through their use of intertextuality, animated programs illustrate an artistic pride in their own expressions and clear a space for their own particular satirical viewpoints. The use of laughter in these endeavors should not be underestimated because it provides the means for viewers to be exposed to politically, economically, and religiously subversive commentary they might not otherwise encounter. Such politically engaging laughter calls to mind Rushkoff's theory of the media virus that attacks the body politic as an agent of the system. Of commercial television, Rushkoff writes, "The more harmless or inane the forum, the more unsuspecting the audience" (7). As for animated programs, the audience might tune in for the fart jokes, curse words, and childish humor, but along the way they are also exposed to political, economic, and religious parody, critique, and satire of the incongruity of American culture.



## Conclusion

# Irony and Nihilism: Postmodern, or American?

I would like to conclude this study discussing perhaps the most important postmodern feature of animated programs, irony. In particular, to what extent is the irony in animated television programs postmodern, and to what extent is the irony comparable to the irony used by American humorists and satirists of previous eras? Furthermore, to what extent might animated television programs be *more* hopeful? In this book, I have been arguing that animated programs follow in the tradition of “the Great American Joke,” which acknowledges the incongruity between the real and ideal. Essentially, “the Great American Joke” is itself built on irony. American humorists who emphasize this incongruity often embrace the ironic and employ it to the extent that it becomes nihilistic. Therefore, when we critique animated programs and their use of noncommittal, nihilistic irony, do we take into account that much of American humor also possesses this same irony? Furthermore, do we look for ways in which animated programs embed utopian dimensions in their supposed nihilistic satire? These are important questions to consider further in determining how animated programs follow in the footsteps in American humorists.

Perhaps the most debated characteristic of postmodernism is the use of irony in postmodern texts. In particular, it is argued that an overreliance on irony in the postmodern era has resulted in a rejection of any possible solution or real political action for the challenges we face in the post-industrial age. While postmodern satire and parody may indeed challenge the principles, assumptions, and practices of dominant religious, economic, political, and cultural ideologies, the caustic, if not nihilistic, rejection of all political discourse fails to pick up the pieces and recreate the possibilities of what practical action can be taken to solve very serious problems. According to D.J. Dooley, the satire of the late twentieth century is “a defensive humor of shock, a humor of lost norms, or disorientation, or lost confidence,” which mirrors the increasing relativism often associated with late capitalism (7). The loss of these norms results in postmodern satire, which Dooley suggests is different from that of previous eras because “it [is] possible to say what it [is] against, but not what it [is] for” (14). Viveca Greene asserts that such ambivalence results in what Kierkegaard calls “infinite negativity,” which simply maintains the status quo rather than



engaging in any significant ideological debate (16); in fact, many might consider these programs post-ideological. On the subject on how irony informs postmodern satire, Matt Russell concludes, "Today, satire functions as a kind of 'therapeutic irony': it flatters us as above the schlock, provides catharsis for our anxiety or anger, all the while making us comfortable in our alienation."

Such charges have been made against animated television programs in particular. In his analysis of "The Cartridge Family," an episode that satirizes the issue of gun control, Kevin J.H. Dettmar acknowledges that *The Simpsons* can sometimes be "profoundly disturbing for anyone who wants to believe in the political efficacy of postmodern irony" because the show can sometimes undercut any semblance of authority and often chases one more ironic joke instead of staking out an identifiable political position and defending it (104). Of *Daria*, Kathy M. Newman writes that the ironic outlook of the show's protagonist "den[ies] the value of the very world she [is] trying to transform" (202). Jack DeRochi acknowledges that *Family Guy*'s use of irony and satire "portrays a resistance to its stated unitary function" (38). Even *King of the Hill*, a show in which irony is a bit more subdued than other animated programs, gives in to the impulse of cynicism, as evidenced by Hank's admiration of various institutional icons, such as his father, his boss, a town councilman, and even President George W. Bush. Each of these figures, for various reasons, shatters Hank's idealistic perceptions and leaves him disillusioned.

Because of its controversial content and ambiguous attacks on religion, politics, and capitalism, *South Park* faces the most criticism for its supposed post-ideological satire. While largely celebrating the show's satire, Matt Becker also suggests that the program serves as the on-screen manifestation of the political ideals (or lack thereof) of so-called Generation X (147-148). Greene and Stephen Groening are more critical of the shortcomings of *South Park*'s satire. Greene states that "far from liberating, such performances [of unstable irony] tend to degenerate into self-referential, self-legitimizing gestures that reflect and foster what Peter Sloterdijk calls a state of 'enlightened false consciousness'" (16). Groening blasts the program for its "espousal of an emergent cynicism that discourages its viewers from asserting political agency" (125).

In essence, *South Park* is ironically hindered, and helped, by its own ironized positioning and its willingness to visit cultural issues individually because it leads to a distortion of its message. The show certainly attempts to curtail its own influence with its ironic disclaimer that appears before each episode, which states that "due to its content [*South Park*] should not be viewed by anyone." Such a statement, while clearly a satire on parent groups who demand disclaimers for inappropriate contents, can also be interpreted as a disavowal of any satirical commentary that follows. Furthermore, while embracing and criticizing tenets of capitalism and religion shows that Parker and Stone have an open mind and a willingness to point out flaws in society, it can also distort

the subversive message of the show because there is no single goal in mind, no particular agenda, echoing Dooley's sentiment that postmodern satire knows what it is against, not what it is for.

Those who critique the program often focus on two particular episodes: "I'm A Little Bit Country" and "Douche and Turd." "Country" aired shortly after the 2003 United States invasion of Iraq and burlesques the debate between those who supported the invasion and those who opposed. To glean insight into what the Founding Fathers would want, Cartman travels back in time (via dropping a TiVo filled with History Channel programs on his head) and learns that the Founders intended for the nation's foundation to be "saying one thing [anti-war] while doing another [going to war]." When the town hears Cartman's answer, they decide to come together in acceptance as they sing a parody of Donnie and Marie Osmond's "I'm A Little Bit Country." That both sides are equally skewered in the episode leaves the viewer confused as to what Parker and Stone propose as an alternative. While the episode approaches a subversive commentary, it ultimately reinforces the cynical notion that the debate leading up to the war is "business as usual"—the Founding Fathers did it in 1776, we are doing it now, and it will be done again at a later time. Airing shortly before the 2004 election, "Douche and Turd" finds Stan ostracized for his refusal to vote for a replacement after the school mascot is discontinued. Because of a prank, the finalists in the vote for a replacement are a giant douche and a turd sandwich. Uninspired by both, Stan is kicked out of South Park; however, when he learns that all elections are between a giant douche and a turd sandwich, Stan sees the error of his ways and votes in the election, only to find his vote was wasted after his candidate is defeated soundly. Thus, the perceived nihilistic stance of the show somewhat undermines its revolutionary significance. While it may be true that our elections are usually a choice between a giant douche and a turd sandwich, the constant adherence to that attitude can only lead to an apathy that will blind us from someone who can facilitate change. Because the show rails against people both for the establishment and against the establishment, one can easily argue that their message is one of hopelessness, a critique that extends to other animated programs.

The critiques of irony in animated television programs raise some very important questions. Does this mean that animated programs do not, in fact, follow in traditions of American humor because of their over-reliance on unstable irony? Can any redeeming qualities be found in the satire of animated programs if they reject the possibility of genuine social change through their use of irony? Finally, in what ways does this use of irony redefine satire and expose the limits of satirical structures?

Though animated programs veer toward 'infinite negativity,' we have to be careful not to limit this phenomenon to postmodern irony alone. Certainly, irony has become more pervasive in the postmodern period, which results in

texts becoming less grounded in a particular ideology. However, the charges of their nihilism being more extreme are rather unfair. Because satire is often reliant on irony, even the greatest satires, American and foreign, appear to reject the world they are trying to save. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* leaves the protagonist in a horse's stable after rejecting humanity after they become indistinguishable from Yahoos. In American literature, perhaps our most treasured humorist, Mark Twain, gives in to the nihilistic impulse in both *Huckleberry Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. *Huckleberry Finn* ends with the protagonist once again washing his hands of society altogether and lighting out for new territory, an act that is magnified by Twain distancing himself from the satirical targets of slavery and oppression in favor of the hijinks of Tom Sawyer in the problematic ending of the novel. Such a distancing suggests a detachment from hope of a better future. Where Huck simply repudiates society, protagonist Hank Morgan completely obliterates it in *A Connecticut Yankee*. Morgan enters Camelot believing that expertise in advanced technology and political enlightenment will cure all ills. That Morgan fails is not only an indictment of Camelot, but an indictment of American industry and its promises to bring moral and cultural advancement to the United States. Morgan is meant to bring enlightenment to Camelot, but he and his technology ultimately bring its destruction, which displays a nihilistic reading of both the medieval past and Twain's present. One can also see this impulse in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, in which liberalistic protagonist Carol Kenicott makes little difference in a small, conservative town that refuses social progress. In *A Cool Million*, a novel that blasts the American Horatio Alger myth by suggesting that instead of America functioning as a land of opportunity, it is a land of opportunism in which hypocritical authority figures use the language of patriotism and duty to exploit citizens. In West's novel, protagonist Lemuel Pitkin is unable to overcome this system; in fact, he is killed by it, and his funeral is a celebration of the very ideals that led to his death. Thus, while postmodern texts and animated programs might rely on irony to a greater degree than did satirical works of the past, the despairing tone of the satire is nothing new.

Critics of the irony present in animated programs must also be careful not to overstate the stable ironies and earnest satirical strategies of American authors of the past. In particular, American humor and satire frequently finds itself reveling in ambivalence, and perhaps even nihilism when faced with the incongruity between America's ideals and America's reality. Indeed, Richard Hauck was among the first to postulate a theory of the cheerfulness of American writers when faced with the absurd. Using writers such as Twain, Franklin, Melville, and Barth as examples, he writes that "humor in American absurd fiction is healthy, and it is sick. It may originate in corrective satire and then proclaim that there are no solutions to any problem at all. It relieves frustrations and frustrates...the ability to see all sides to every question may eliminate all motives for action..." (Hauck 13). Furthermore, Hauck notes that ambivalence and

irony serve as the foundation for America's most important humorists. Hauck's assessment of American humorous fiction mirrors many of the same concerns voiced by critics of animated programs. Perhaps, then, the irony and humor at work in animated programs is not so different from those humorists who faced the void and dared to laugh in its face. Ultimately, it might not solve the problems we face, but it might be more desirable than falling into despair. Indeed, William Keough writes that "...perhaps we must simply accept the fractured response our humorists offer rather than expect any real vision of wholeness" (291).

So should we completely deny the value of animated television programs because of their reliance on irony? Though critics of animated humor make very valid points concerning the dangers of unstable irony and their effect on television audiences, one can also argue such irony provides a valuable service in helping its audiences unfold the complexities of a given topic. Perhaps the focal point of the satire is not proposing solutions that will cure all the ills of society, but revealing the complexity of our problems while exposing the often reductive rhetoric in public discourse that itself refuses to reach tenable solutions. Maybe the satire provided by these programs is a satire on the absurdity of postmodern rhetoric rather than moral corrective, and ironic detachment is the most useful tool in exposing such rhetoric. DeRochi acknowledges that animation often deemphasizes the external focus of satire, but in so doing, it also "provocatively encourages us to reconsider our preconceptions of art in general and of satire specifically" (46). Dettmar concludes in his analysis of irony in *The Simpsons* that "*The Simpsons* will not presume to teach us, in twenty-three minutes, how we should feel about private gun ownership; it can, however, begin to suggest just how complex an issue gun control really is" (105). Such a feat should not be simply dismissed because the overall stance is left open-ended. To recommend a pat solution would simply reduce animated programs to the programs and rhetoric that they so effectively parody. One could therefore argue that the political ambivalence of animated programs should not be seen as the end of the dialogue on a given topic, but the beginning of discourse after rendering the polarizing, dogmatic stances taken in public media ridiculous. Indeed, as Newman concludes about *Daria*, "Irony does not equal revolution, but it might represent the first step towards mounting a critique of the system" (200).

Critics of postmodern irony also must not ignore the utopian dimensions that animated programs have to offer. Jameson notes that in post-modern texts, even those that are commodified and highly suspect, one should search for a utopian longing of what exactly is worth saving. Moreover, Matt Russell posits that "despite its inherent negativity, irony always comes with a certain utopian dimension, since it relies on the difference between the way things are and the way we feel things should be." Such utopian dimensions are abundant both in

animated programs and in the communities of fans that follow them so admiringly. Indeed, one could argue that a major difference between past American humorists and animated programs is that animated programs often offer a utopian dimension. Though these programs remain ambivalent about how to solve the problems they critique and exude a certain cynicism regarding institutions such as government and religion, they also imply that such problems can be solved by maintaining strong interpersonal relationships that emphasize the importance of individuals.

In *South Park*, no matter how much Parker and Stone skewer religion, government, and economics, their main protagonists and ethical filters, Stan and Kyle, model behavior that emphasizes inclusion and tolerance. Though they are sometimes prone to be typical fourth graders who enjoy hurling insults at one another, they also include mentally and physically challenged Timmy and Jimmy into their group of friends. They defend Big Gay Al when he is unjustly fired as their Boy Scout leader when Al is groundlessly accused of being a child molester ("Cripple Fight" 27 June 2001). One can point to countless other instances where the boys emphasize compassion and understanding when conflicts become too divisive. Instead of focusing on Cartman's frequent ethnic slurs toward Kyle, one might be better served by focusing on the friendship between Stan and Kyle, or Stan and Token, or even the boys' friendship with the impoverished Kenny or Starvin' Marvin. The friendships in *South Park* cross racial, sexual, economic, national, and religious fault lines, and though these discursive ideologies certainly come into conflict, those friendships are also readjusted based on one understanding the other's perspective. While the hot political topics are indeed ironized, the relationships between the characters possess a utopian element. Lindsay Coleman writes, "Through their characterizations and narratives, [Parker and Stone] illustrate the potential for positive outcomes to emerge from racial and ethnic tension" (141). Certainly, their decidedly non-ironic inclusion of characters like Timmy and Jimmy connote an acceptance of all people on an individual level. Therefore, one could argue that the solutions to the problems that plague us lay not by mandating laws relying on traditional hierarchical structures, but by maintaining personal relationships with one another based on respect, acceptance, and a desire to truly understand one another, a utopian gesture if there ever was one.

*King of the Hill*, another program that revels in irony, also possesses a utopian dimension because of protagonist Hank Hill's ability to adapt to the cultural changes around him. Booker notes the underlying cynicism in *King of the Hill* through its "tendency...to depict almost all authority figures in a negative light" (74). Nevertheless, rather than letting the failure of authority figures such as his father, his boss, and George W. Bush negatively affect his earnest belief in social institutions, he attempts to adapt to such disappointments while modeling respectable behavior for his son Bobby. Furthermore, the increasingly

complicated modern world often perplexes Hank, who attempts to maintain a simplistic, perhaps even naïve, world-view. Hank's struggles often manifest in his complicated relationship with Bobby, who desires to be a prop comic and generally embraces newer trends that often conflict with Hank's more traditional world-view. However, the utopian dimension of Hank is that he attempts to negotiate to changes around him rather than maintaining a rigid, dogmatic adherence to past values. Indeed, as Ethan Thompson writes, "When [Hank] encounters frustrations in the modern world, he does not respond with violent intolerance but attempts instead to adapt. Though he might wax nostalgic every now and then, he is focused on the future of his family and the way things will be rather than excessive glorying in the way they were" (42). Thus, the hope offered by *King of the Hill* for its viewers is that one can adjust and maintain a belief in positive abstract values even in the face of hypocrisy and change.

Perhaps the greatest unintended irony of animated television shows is that their loyal following often seek to form discursive communities online, in which various members engage in discussions of episodes, politics, and popular cultural references. These communities can often contradict the assertion that the use of irony in animated programs breeds cynicism. In her study of the interaction between fans of MTV's *Daria*, Newman draws a rather unexpected conclusion:

Whatever *Daria*'s personal philosophy, and enduring negativity, she has produced a surprisingly optimistic fan culture: TV viewers who believe in the value of artistic production and the possibility of change. For them, *Daria* does not propagate nihilism; rather, the show has become a way of dealing with nihilism itself. (202)

Certainly, this statement does not apply to all of *Daria*'s viewers or all viewers of animated television. However, Newman's study also suggests that animated programs and online communities provide a shared outlook in which users use the shows as a starting point to discuss important cultural and political topics that are common to them. In his analysis of online communities discussing *The Boondocks*, Avi Santo writes the show often "serves important cultural and political roles in providing outlets for social criticism and community engagement" (252). These communities may not reach consensus and the opinions expressed might not represent an oppositional impulse. Nevertheless, both studies reflect a somewhat utopian impulse to work through issues of alienation (for *Daria* fans) or racial politics (for *Boondocks* fans).

Such instances of audience engagement and discussion in communities temper the criticisms of those who accuse animated programs of encouraging political aloofness. In his critique of how *South Park* caters to the philosophical leanings of its audience, Groening boldly assumes that "for *South Park* and



its viewers, cynicism, manifesting as irony and ironic detachment, justifies withdrawal from political action” (114). To support his assertion, Groening notes a study conducted on Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* that gauged how the satirical (and very ironic) show influenced its audience’s political engagement.<sup>1</sup> There are a few problems with Groening’s point: 1) *The Daily Show* is not *South Park*. Though they rely on the same kind of irony, one cannot make assumptions about an entire fan demographic based on a study of another show. 2) The study in question can be contradicted by a similar study in which it was found that voters (participating in the election) who watched *The Daily Show* possessed a more nuanced understanding of politics than those who received their news from “legitimate” outlets (Russell).<sup>2</sup> Regardless of which study holds the most truth, Russell’s assessment of the cause of political disengagement might be the most accurate: “there’s one thing that turns people off modern politics, and that’s modern politics.” Here we come to the eternal question: does the irony in these shows *cause* the lack of political engagement, or do they *reflect* a growing sense of mistrust of once venerable institutions? I will abstain from answering that question and instead simply grant that the proclivities of audience members vary. Instead of leaping from the assumption that all audiences of animated programs lack political motivation and embody cynicism, one might also point to instances of fan communities online that foster a sense of community longing that belies a disengagement from personal relationships and political discourse.

Ultimately, we might bestow too much responsibility upon those who use humor to critique the shortcomings in society, and thus we unfairly criticize them when they do not come to our own conclusions or they abstain from recommending the social action that we believe is necessary. Though the use of unstable irony might weaken the social satire posited in animated programs, such use does not lessen the impact of their willingness to at least address controversial topics in an environment where the intrusion of political commentary in entertainment can be unwelcome.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, we might even applaud them for even knowing what political issues are at stake. In Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the

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1 The study in question was conducted by Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris. They concluded that viewers who watched *The Daily Show* were less likely to participate in political endeavors because of their exposure to the show.

2 The second study was conducted by the National Annenberg Election Survey at the University of Pennsylvania.

3 In their more self-referential moments, animated programs often respond to criticisms by their fans that they are becoming “too preachy” with political messages. For example, in *South Park*’s “Cartoon Wars,” a *Family Guy* fan defends the show by stating that “at least it doesn’t get up its own ass with messages,” a criticism voiced by many fans of *South Park*’s later seasons.



Fool often uses ironic humor to expose the folly of Lear. Ultimately, however, it is the responsibility of Lear to heed the ironic warnings of his Fool. Similarly, animated programs' role of critiquing the divisive discourse amongst political leaders is a noble one, and much of their audience shares those feelings of displeasure. Like Lear's England, the role of enacting true social change lies with American leadership, especially when the displeasure of the public has been made known. Thus, while the irony of these programs indeed forestall clear solutions, they allow for subversive readings that also help set parameters that can lead to serious debate and possibly even social change.

"The Great American Joke," ever reliant on irony, continues to be passed down through generations of American humorists. The Southwest humorists used it to expose the shams of market culture and religion on the economic frontier. Mark Twain used it to expose hypocrisy in American religion and politics, while displaying deep skepticism in America's faith that technology would cure social ills. George Schuyler used it to expose the sinister motivations of both white supremacists and hypocritical African-American political establishments. Kurt Vonnegut used it to repudiate all glorification of war in United States culture. Where hypocrisy and incongruity have triumphed in America (which happens quite often), its best humorists have been there to capture it with laughter. The laughter can be joyous or it can be grim, but it is laughter nonetheless and each version has its own role of relieving tension and providing comfort to those who recognize it.

Therefore, adult animated television in its current incarnation has now been in existence for 27 years, which is more than enough time to develop a distinct approach to humor and satire. However, humor is often a learned behavior, particularly the artistic expression of humor. Animated television programs have indeed inherited many of the most evident traditions in a distinctly American humor, but they have also transformed and combined them into a distinct style. Just as living organisms are unique amalgams of their progenitors, so too is animated television the unique child that has inherited the DNA of its parent, but because of political environment, the child has learned to use its skills differently. Thus, animation is something new, something old, and something different all at the same time. "The Great American Joke" may now look different, but it is the same joke nevertheless.

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