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“For Us, By Us”: *The Boondocks*, Black Agency, and Black Spatial Reclamation in Comics

Luana Horry

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“FOR US, BY US:” *THE BOONDOCKS*, BLACK AGENCY, AND BLACK SPATIAL RECLAMATION IN COMICS

by

LUANA HORRY

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Luana Horry

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

“For Us, By Us:” The Boondocks, Black Agency, and Black Spatial Reclamation in Comics

by

Luana Horry

Advisor: Dr. Jonathan W. Gray

This paper will construct a literary analysis of The Boondocks comic collections—syndicated from 1999-2006—that will demonstrate Aaron McGruder’s use of the theoretical concept of Black agency, as it relates to literature, birthed from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and the contemporary #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement. Not existing in a vacuum, Aaron McGruder’s comic strip is an important result of and reaction to Black literary thought produced during the 1920s and 1960s movements. Furthermore, The Boondocks is a precursor to the publishing industry’s #WeNeedDiverseBooks countermovement. The connecting thread between each distinctive movement and McGruder’s work is the centralization of Black agency and Black authorship. The rallying cry for Black Americans to create, produce, and consume art and literature about themselves is one that can be heard throughout the eras. This paper will focus on The Boondocks as a work that answers that call, as literature written for and by Black America—a work of freedom, or as singer-songwriter Solange puts it, a work that is for us, by us (“F.U.B.U”)—and will argue that McGruder’s work is one that employs Black agency, as well as properly engages blackness.

To do so, this paper will first outline a brief history of innovative Black comics. Secondly, it will investigate the literariness of The Boondocks by contemplating its use of Black agency as it relates to the reclamation, domination, and decentralization of White space—
metaphorical and otherwise. Understanding the tradition of comic strips such as *Doonesbury*, this paper will also legitimize *The Boondocks* as culturally specific highbrow political literature and fundamental sociopolitical discourse for Black audiences. Lastly, examining literary theory produced by Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement figures, and the artistic/corporate initiatives of the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement, this paper will delineate areas of confluence by outlining the elements of McGruder’s work that fit into each tradition. The aim of the paper is to broaden the scope of Black literature by motioning for the inclusion of Aaron McGruder into larger body of African American literature examined in the academy and to interconnect literary movements that center blackness in an attempt to progressively change the narrative on and off the page of today’s mass publications.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am fluent in several languages: “Standard” American English, African American Vernacular English, New York slang, and musical lyrics. I listened to a great deal of music as I worked on this project, and I had the support of many individuals along the way, so what better way than to acknowledge those exceptional individuals than with a playlist?

1. “Sadie” by The Spinners (1976)
   My mother’s love has been instrumental to the completion of this project. Thank you for allowing me to read the funnies when you were done clipping coupons from *Newsday* on Sunday afternoons. My love for Huey, Riley, and Caesar run deep, just like my love for you. Further thanks for allowing me to use your WiFi.

2. “Soul Sister” by Cree Summer (1999)
   Thank you Lisa and Lynell for listening to me overanalyze our childhood pleasures. I hope I didn’t take the fun out of it. You both act as my springboard for intellectual philosophies. I thank you for letting me share them. You both are a girl’s best friend.

   Isabelle, Bria, and my Facebook community: your encouragement has propelled me forward during the sleepless nights leading up to the deadline. Thank you for your kind words!

4. “Flaws and All” by Beyoncé (2006)
   Ryan: you have willingly and selflessly held my hand through my entire graduate school journey. You are one of a kind—and it helps that you think I’m brilliant.

5. “‘Workin’ Day and Night” by Michael Jackson (1979)
M and J: You are the best supervisors any employee could ask for. When you saw that juggling work and school was just about to wear me thin, you both came in and saved the day (literally). Your support of my academic and publishing career are invaluable and I thank you both immensely.


I would like to extend a big thank you to my advisor who carefully guided me through several drafts of this project. Dr. Gray, thank you for taking me on as an advisee and providing helpful feedback. There aren’t many scholars in the academy that can match your expertise in Black comics.


This is for the tortured-soul and genius himself, Aaron McGruder. You’ve always reminded me of Lupe Fiasco, if Lupe could draw. Here’s to you, The Boondocks, and the countless Black Americans who agreed with Huey when he vehemently lamented the content presented to and about us on B.E.T at the turn of the century.
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“Is this successful because as it is, [it’s] all those things: funny, edgy, hip, and vulnerable, filled with attitude, slang, and irreverent, and uh, African-American? —Charlie Rose (1999)

“There is nothing in comics history to indicate that it’s at all benefit to be a cartoonist and to do a Black strip. [There] has been no hugely successful Black strip in the over 100-year history of the medium. So in that sense, the argument would be, ya know, probably no. It’s probably successful in spite of it being a Black strip.” —Aaron McGruder (1999)

Introduction

In 2016 the term “Black Girl Magic” flourished in mainstream music. From Beyoncé’s cinematic album *Lemonade*, to Rihanna’s fiery *ANTI*, and finally, Solange’s meditative and sultry *A Seat at the Table*, Black women successfully used music as a platform to bring awareness and attention to a female-specific Black narrative. Solange in particular used her album as a personal yet communal manifesto that proclaims her independence as a creative and free Black woman, situating herself in the tradition of other Black musicians who paved the way for her to exert that independence. This contribution positions Solange as both an important artist and a public intellectual whose song “F.U.B.U. (For Us, By Us)” will be utilized throughout this paper as both an organizational and culturally specific thread as it relates to *The Boondocks* by Aaron McGruder. “F.U.B.U.” is an ode to Black agency and testifies to those on the periphery of the Black community (White America) that Black art, Black thoughts, and Black bodies belong to Black people, and should not be infringed upon or interfered with.

With *A Seat at the Table* Solange articulates a theory of Black agency, which is evident in her description of “F.U.B.U.,” a song that portrays powerful Blackness as artistic production:
I named it “F.U.B.U.” because I wanted to empower, and I looked to people who have done that in their own ways. I thought of F.U.B.U. the [clothing] brand, meaning “For Us By Us”, and what kind of power it had and how normalized it became to wear that kind of symbolism every day. I remember reading stories on the product placement, and seeing LL Cool J wearing a F.U.B.U. hat in a national GAP advertisement. F.U.B.U. exhibited Blackness in any space, on a huge global level, and that is what I wanted to do with the song. (qtd. in Mayard)

Solange’s commitment to the empowerment of the Black voice and Black presence in her work, serves as the symbolic representation of countless Black women who have been silenced by mainstream White media and corporations.

Like Solange’s album, Aaron McGruder’s comic strip, The Boondocks, is a body of work created within the same “for us, by us” tradition. From the everyday White comic strip readers, to Black conservative figures such as Larry Elder, the comic strip has been referred to as fearless, irreverent, outright disrespectful, and the fan-favorite: controversial. However, these categorizations are articulations of insidious racially coded language used by mainstream or White opponents to Black radicalism and urban identity to describe what is essentially, a work of satirical art characterized by unapologetic Black agency. This thesis asserts that The Boondocks, as a collective of comic strips is a rich work of literature that employs Black agency as a literary device and stylistic tool, utilizes Blackness to “fill in” or to challenge metaphorical White spaces, and follows a rooted tradition of unapologetic Black literature. It is an academic investigation that traces how Aaron McGruder takes a seat at the cartoonists’ table.

This paper will first examine a small canon of Black comic strips—found in newspapers only—as a means to establish a history that precedes McGruder, following the example of Howard and Jackson’s Black Comics. Secondly, it will define Black agency as a radical and artistic commitment to Black concepts, audiences, and life, outline its indispensability to the
making of the comic strip, and deconstruct—what is traditionally understood as a sociological theory—into a three-part enlightening artistic process. This paper will then construct a literary analysis of *The Boondocks* using both a traditional literary and a comics lexicon, zeroing in on the concept of “space,” and will explicate how McGruder utilizes spatial reclamation as a revolutionary mode and device. This literary investigation will both legitimize and concretize Aaron McGruder’s place in ever-growing scholarship surrounding comics and graphic novels, as an artist capable of provoking intellectual, social, political, and cultural thought while making audiences laugh, and also as an artist who exhibits a high level of skill. Lastly, an important step in the legitimization and establishment of *The Boondocks* as an intellectual work of literature—a work that educators and universities have largely ignored when examining comics as an art form—is the act of placing Aaron McGruder within a literary tradition. Hence, this paper will also discuss selected basic arguments of the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement and the recent intra-publishing movement #WeNeedDiverseBooks and focus briefly on a few ways in which *The Boondocks* fits—or does not—into an already established Black literary tradition that sought empowerment.

Lastly, this paper will discuss the strip’s politics as they relate to the intended audiences of the strip, who McGruder considered “black readers generally and young people in general” (McGruder, *All the Rage* 160), and how that means in terms of creation and censorship for Black artists. Often, Black art intended for Black audiences is consumed by and packaged for younger White audiences. As a hip-hop comic strip, McGruder found it pertinent that not only were young Black voices heard and reflected, but that the vast majority of young Whites who read *The Boondocks* were exposed to the Black culture that is intricately attached to hip-hop music—including the negative and positive stigmas. Aaron McGruder faced ample amounts of scrutiny
and censorship as a result of the strip’s politics and it’s syndication within publications nationwide, in fear of its impact on White audiences. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the controversy surrounding *The Boondocks* and how it relates to artistic double standards and policing charged against the strip due to it’s racial content, as well as the controversy’s additional literary and artistic value to the work.

This paper ultimately aims to broaden the scope of Black literature by arguing for the literariness of Aaron McGruder’s work, in an attempt to validate his inclusion into the larger body of esteemed Black literature; and to connect his work to literary movements that center Blackness, in an attempt to progressively change the narrative on and off the page of today’s mass publications. Although McGruder has humbly asserted that he intended to make audiences laugh (Cornwell and Orbe 30), he also consciously made a commitment to tell unambiguous Black truths—geared towards young Black audiences—and to provoke ideological questioning through his adolescent Black characters (Cornwell and Orbe 30). In later interviews he states, “I have a responsibility to the black community, to represent us accurately, depicting us both in writing and art in such a way that black people will be proud to allow their children to read” (McGruder, *All the Rage* 160). Through his commitment to and taking responsibility for Black youth, *The Boondocks* introduced to the papers a fresh voice: a voice of Blackness, of resistance, and of a dissenting counter narrative. The Sunday funnies were no longer reserved for the elite voice, but would soon encounter one of the most dangerous marginalized voices to be heard in a long time.

**The Table: A definition of comics and the origin of American comics or the funnies**

The late nineteenth century marked the popularization of the genre of American comic strips. Comics are, “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to
convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud 9). Put simply, comics are *sequential art*, or the combination of word-plus-image (form) and message (content). One of the earliest successful full-color American comic strips was Richard Felton Outcault’s *Hogan’s Alley* featuring *Yellow Kid* initially published in *Truth* magazine (1894) and later in Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* in 1895. A year later the strip made its home in William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*. Outcault’s *Yellow Kid*, featuring a recurring character, speech bubbles and politicized humor, is often heralded as the originator of the American comic strip or “the funnies.” Every Sunday since, comics strips were published for entertainment sake and differed from the more serious political cartoons reserved for the editorial section.

Following the tradition of *Yellow Kid*, many beloved American characters graced the pages of the funnies section: *Little Orphan Annie* (1924), *Blondie* (1930), *Li’l Abner* (1934) *Barnaby* (1942), *Pogo* (1948), *The Peanuts* (1950), *Beetle Bailey* (1950), *Doonesbury* (1970), *Hägar the Horrible* (1973), and *Calvin and Hobbes* (1985) to name a few. Aside from the genius merger of story with visual image that is consistent in any comic strip, what these strips have in common is their predominant White authorship, lack of representation of Black characters, or the marginalization of Blackness through ridicule and negative imagery. During the twentieth century, Black readers of the funnies would have a difficult time finding a positive image or representation of their people, culture, lives, or history within the pages of a mainstream newspaper, if they were lucky enough to find any at all. Thus, Black comic artists writing and drawing for Black presses would take their seat at the table by invitation or by any means necessary.
“Now tell 'em why you mad son”: The lack of representation of blackness in comics

Statistical research reveals the truth about American comics: there existed a minimal representation of constructive Blackness within the average strip. Examining a total of 27,481 comic strip images published between 1915 and 1995, “26,945 were White, 207 were Black and 329 were other non-White races—mostly Asian and Latino” (White and Fuentez 78). By 1988, the presence of Blacks in American comic strips did not improve significantly, as stated by Howard and Jackson:

In 1988, the Detroit City Council Youth Advisory Commission urged Detroit newspaper editors to bring diversity to the funny pages. At this time, The Detroit Free Press counted the number of characters in its comic pages in a given month, and came up with 5,250 Whites and 31 Blacks (0.6 per cent). Detroit at the time was 63 percent Black (qtd. in Howard and Jackson 24).

Amongst the scant portion of images, Black characters were historically presented as background characters and were depicted as damaging racial caricatures. White and Fuentez found that, “In 1915 through 1935 over 90 percent of the Black images were portrayed in negative stereotypes. In 1945 through 1975 negative stereotypes were between ten and 40 percent” (79). The negative stereotypes consisted of but were not limited to the Uncle Tom, coon, mammy, tragic mulatto, and buck/brute archetypes that plagued the American psyche since the antebellum and Reconstruction eras but were normalized during the Jim Crow Era.

The history of the negative caricature of Blacks in twentieth century America, extensively recorded by scholars, is worth revisiting in order to grasp the challenge that Black comic artists and readers were facing in terms of reconstructing the Black image in comics during it’s genesis. In Bogle’s groundbreaking work focusing on major traditional Black caricatures created by Whites (and later performed by Blacks) in American film, he explores the characteristics of the Uncle Tom, coon, buck/brute, mammy, and tragic mulatto archetypes.
Although collectively these caricatures amount to the reduction of the Black experience into one of acquiescence and servitude to the White population, the variances between them are many and are outlined precisely. Within the nuances lie important constructions of Blackness that led to the meticulously specified oppression of Blacks as men, women, and children respectively, and that would later develop into the various contemporary formations of gender and class specific Black archetypes.

The Uncle Tom image, popularized by the 1903 film *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, depicted a “socially acceptable Good Negro” who is “chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted” (Bogle 5-6) but who “[keeps] the faith, n’er [turns] against their white massas, and [remains] hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind. [They] endear themselves to white audiences and emerge as heroes of sorts” (Bogle 5-6). The Uncle Tom image presented viewers with a singular narrative of the Black male whose purpose was to please and who had a high threshold for abuse; The Uncle Tom figure symbolically stood as the justification for ill-treatment of Black men and would communicate to Whites that a non-threatening Black man acted as an ally to a racist system.

Coons would soon become the most popular image of Blacks during the early 1900s. The pure coons depicted, “no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language” (Bogle 8). The pure coon symbolized, like the Tom, a complacent Black man but one who differed from Tom in that he did not act as an ally to Whites and was not happily subservient. Instead, a vexatious Black man, the pure coon was either too lazy or unmotivated to improve his life. He became a laughing stock. Although both were representations of Black male figures as an, “amusement object and black buffoon” (Bogle 7), there were two specific
variations of the coon image: the younger pickaninny and the older Uncle Remus. A pickaninny “was a harmless, little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting” (Bogle 7). Uncle Remus is “harmless and congenial…he distinguishes himself [from the tom] by his quaint, naïve, and comic philosophizing” (Bogle 8). Uncle Remus is a coon figure that, like the pure coon, dictated to White audiences that Black men were comfortable with their lowly position and the systematic degradation of the Black male body, and expressed this complacency through humor or lack of action.

The Black brute and buck, introduced in D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation (1915), were aggressor archetypes that symbolized violent and sexualized Black male identity. Black brutes embodied the epitome of reckless black rage: “the black brute was the barbaric black out to raise havoc” and appeared as, “subhuman and feral,” (Bogle 13) using violence as an outlet to express repressed sexual desire. If the brute repressed sexuality, the black buck did the complete opposite. Bogle explains the archetypal figure of the black buck as, “big, baadddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (14). Both the brute and buck signify the animalistic, dangerous, untamed strength of the Black male, which justified scornful White fear of Black men that led to their imprisonment, lynching, and “extermination” primarily in the South. These images of the Black male were routinely found in comic strips and other cartoon mediums that were created by Whites during this part of the century.

Black woman archetypes included the tragic mulatto and the mammy. The tragic mulatto, considerably light in skin tone, is usually of mixed race. About the mulatto Bogle writes, “usually the mulatto is made likeable—even sympathetic (because of her white blood, no doubt)—and the audience believes that the girl’s life could have been productive and happy had
she not been a “victim of divided racial inheritance”” (9). Mulattoes had the privilege of a mostly white appearance, but the burden of possessing a “drop” of Black blood. The mammy however, was visibly Black, oftentimes too Black, and was the female counterpart of the coon figure. Mammies are, “usually big, fat, and cantankerous” and are fiercely independent (Bogle 9). While she is a servant and ally to Whites, she also acts as an authoritative figure in the household; she governs the kitchen, raises the children, and maintains the normal domestic functioning of the White home. The milder tempered mammy figure known as the Aunt Jemima is “generally [sweet], jolly, and good-tempered—a bit more polite than mammy and never as headstrong” (Bogle 9). These female figures are found less in comic strips, because women were less prominent, but inform many of the counter-images that would emerge in comics drawn by Black female artists in the coming years.

In Phil Nel’s *Was The Cat in the Hat Black?* Nel discusses the presence of these racial caricatures, in both physical and social characterization, in children literature and cartoons, which in fact, extended to the funny pages. The damaging images of the happy-go-lucky Negro, the shuck-and-jive hilarious coon, or the ape-like buck associated with Black Americans were propagated by White comic artists who, “portrayed Blacks, Asians, and even Native Americans in roles akin to voluntary servitude” (Lenthall 45). The damaging images in question were reminiscent of aforementioned caricatures as explained by Bogle, which were still deemed acceptable during the twentieth century due to the imbedded racial beliefs held by White Americans throughout the nation. In the typical American comic strip, “most Blacks [did] not achieve even worldly success…Blacks—far more than Asians—existed in the White world as functional objects, not as people who belonged to the social structure. (Lenthall 46). Black Americans were viewed as subservient, flawed, and inherently inferior beings to White
Americans. In a discussion about American comic strips, Lenthall observes about Black characters:

Blacks…appeared as less than human. African-Americans looked more like animals than people, and both Blacks and Asians spoke in dialect that marked them as ignorant. It was not that Blacks and Asians were treated as enemies of Whites; in fact, Blacks and Asians were typically extremely faithful to, and respectful of, Whites. And it was not that Blacks and Asians lacked intelligence altogether, comic artists frequently portrayed members of both groups as street wise and worldly. But, in the comics, these groups lacked the finer sensibility of Whites. (Lenthall 43)

Akin to the African characters in the Belgian comic Adventures of Tintin and The Spirit’s sidekick Ebony White, Black characters were drawn with the same over exaggerated facial features as those present in minstrels. With huge, pink protruding lips, large noses, a sunken in face, and the occasional limp, “physically, the drawings of African-Americans made them look like apes” (Lenthall 44). An old trope that haunted Black Americans since slavery, these images in mainstream comics would continue well into 1940s.

Specifically, these negative images were found in some of White America’s most beloved comic strips. In Tim Jackson’s comprehensive work on Black pioneers of the comic book and comic strip world, he justifies the need for a separate genealogical record of Black cartoonists by examining some of the images found in American comics:

[Hogan's Alley or Yellow Kid] included a pair of grinning, darkly tinted creatures among the usual gang of children. Although all the children were street urchins, the dark creatures were never quite on equal terms with the others. Little Nemo of Little Nemo in Slumberland was often squired throughout his adventures in Slumberland by the fright-wig coiffed Impie, who dressed in a bizarre grass skirt. Barney Google had his faithful Black jockey, Sunshine, to selflessly worry over his well-being. In Joe and Asbestos, a
horse gambler, Jo Quince, had a servile Black companion, Asbestos, the wisecracking stable boy. Even Will Eisner, the much honored cartoonist and creator of the cult favorite, *The Spirit*, features in that cartoon the ungainly Ebony, the shoeshine boy and taxi driver. Then there are those assorted nameless domestics, who served little purpose other than as comical contrasts to the middle-class White main characters in America’s comic pages. (Jackson 5)

Tim Jackson also scrutinizes a 1970 *Dennis the Menace* strip featuring a Black pickaninny caricature named Jackson who was drawn with huge lips and colored in heavily. Dennis, feeling insecure, complains that Jackson will outrun him. Even at the end of the Civil Rights Movement, Hank Ketcham felt justified in illustrating the damaging stereotype of Black male’s hyper athleticism and its threat to Whiteness in this strip; this type of representation was commonly found on the funny pages. White comic strip artists and their publishers were complicit in the disfigurement of the Black image in cartoons, and would regenerate the minstrel culture established in television programming, literature, and other visual media.

Further conclusions about the population of Black characters in comics include the, “[lack of] any comics strips where non-stereotyped Black characters interact with one another or with non-Black characters about issues important to the Black community” (White and Fuentez 83) and the battle for the Black readers who may, “have to look harder to see themselves reflected on the comics page” (White and Fuentez 73). In metro areas where there were large populations of Black Americans, there was little to no representation of themselves in comic strips:

If the early 1920s with its wave of national syndication started the move toward taking Blacks, and indeed race in general, out of the comics, the early 1940s virtually finished it. African-Americans ceased to exist within the panels of mainstream comic strips. It was easy to read thousands of episodes of dozens of strips without seeing a Black character anywhere in the panels. (Lenthall 47)
It is important to note that this erasure of Blackness was normative for mainstream publications that skewed readership to White Americans. Black viewers and creators idly tolerated neither the misrepresentation nor the underrepresentation of Blackness. Similar to strides made in literature, visual arts, music, education, politics, and other areas of intellectual production, Black Americans created images of themselves instead of consuming comics written by Whites that utilized Black caricature or forgot Black Americans altogether.

**A Seat at the Table for Sunday Brunch: A brief history of Black comics**

To remedy the lack of representation of Blackness on the funny pages, Black writers and artists who emerged during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, created their own strips that featured Black characters in mostly Black publications. If comics is the marriage between word, image and message, then Black comics crucially differs in that they are characterized by a message that is, “by Blacks for Blacks” (Howard and Jackson 22). Black comics are defined as follows:

Black comic strips are open-ended dramatic narratives about a recurring set of core characters of African descent, told in a series of drawings, including dialogue in balloons and a narrative text, and published serially in newspapers…They are primarily authored by people of African descent but have also been authored by people of European descent. (qtd. in Howard and Jackson 91)

Published in Black owned papers and periodicals such as the *Amsterdam News*, the *Chicago Defender*, *Crisis Magazine* and soon thereafter, *All Negro Comics*, a few famous Black comic strips from the 1920s to the 1940s included: *Bungleton Green* (1920) created by Leslie Rogers, *Dark Laughter* (1935) by Oliver “Ollie” Wendell Harrington, and *Dixie to Harlem* (1937) by the first Black female cartoonist, Jackie Ormes. Black comic artists transformed the normative
narrative, inundated with Black stereotypes drawn by White cartoonists, by creating and therefore dictating their own image in the papers. These early comics deserve a considerable amount of academic scrutiny and recognition that has been scarce within conventional scholarship.

_Bungleton Green_ created by Leslie Rogers was birthed before World War II, which meant it appeared in The _Chicago Defender_ at a time when Black characters were either invisible or portrayed as “the other” in mainstream White publications. To counter those damaging “non-images” of Blacks, the main character Bungleton mirrored Billy DeBeck’s Barney Google who traverses the world with a sense of carefreeness and humor that was free from racial ramifications or codes. About Bungleton Green and other Black comics protagonists of this era Lenthall says, “Prior to the war, Black strips showed a diverse and independent Black culture, largely unconcerned with relations with Whites” (51). Lenthall continues, “The African-American society, as the strips envisioned it, was a world unto itself. Professionals and civil authorities were African-American. Blacks doctors were common, and Black policemen patrolled the panels. Whites and interracial affairs were largely irrelevant” (52). The absence of Whiteness, on the one hand, was powerful—in that Blacks could operate on their own terms and carry out normalized American lives. However, on the other hand, this represented a grave unreality and avoidance of dealing with racial issues that made Bungleton’s everyday antics feel dismissive of American racism. With Bungleton’s long nose, floppy shoes, and top hat, today, he resembles the coon, specifically that of Uncle Remus, the happy-go-lucky wandering character.

World War II fostered the reformation of American nationalist ideology and identity while promoting, “the American creed of equality and pluralist democracy [that] bloomed during the war, and that helped reshape much of White America's vision of race” (Lenthall 41).
American comics, as it often does, reflected the attitude of the public and accordingly called for fairer and equal treatment of all Americans; calling for a sense of unity that withstood racial boundaries on the home front. Black comic strips followed suit and Bungleton would soon become Bung: a Black protagonist who now lived amongst Whites but still did not encounter the hurdles of racial boundaries (Lenthall 53). Again, this was a fictionalized image of America, since racial inequality only worsened and was apparent as Black soldiers returned home only to find that they were still considered second-class citizens. Nevertheless, *Bungleton Green*/Bung would mark a very important stride in the world of Black comic strips due to its candidacy about the race of Bung as well as his freedom to live out a life of enjoyment and for its display of what is now considered “Black Boy Joy.”

*Dark Laughter* by Ollie Harrington was first published in the *Amsterdam News* on May 25, 1935. Featuring protagonists such as Bootise and Uncle Pee Wee, this comic strip series did not exist in a world secluded from Whites or the influence of Whites. Instead, Harrington would challenge racism during the approaching wartime delusion of unity and confront the hypocrisy of a nation that would travel abroad to fight Nazis but still prohibit Black Americans from eating at the same restaurant as Whites and their dogs. Bootise was usually expensively clad in a suit and the characters did not have the typical exaggerated features like that of *Bungleton*. There were also representations of White racists in the comics. For readers during this time, nearing the end of a period of Black artistic enlightenment and in the midst of the harsh economic realities that afflicted Black America due to the Great Depression, *Dark Laughter* became an outlet for the voicing of the sharply specific and contradictory Black perspective on what had been propagated as nationally-agreed upon issues. Harrington illustrated the effects of American disaster and triumph on Black America, packaged it with humor, African American Vernacular English
(AAVE), political satire, and black and white illustrations, and published it in one of the most radical newspaper publications of the era. In this way, *Dark Laughter* served as departure point from what had previously been out there in the world of comics about and by Black artists but unfortunately would go pretty much unnoticed in the comic strip canon due to the artist’s self-exile from a tumultuous America (“Oliver W. Harrington”).

Torchy Brown, the protagonist of Jackie Ormes’s *Torchy Brown* in *Dixie to Harlem* was a Black Southern belle, described as, “a teenage country girl, starry-eyed and slightly wacky, abounding in pluck, optimism, and determination” (Goldstein). Torchy Brown, Patty-Jo, and other female characters in the series embarked on adventures that were both lighthearted—female characters were quite the fashionistas and led steamy love lives—but also touched on racial and political topics such as education, colorism, and the inherent feelings of displacement that came with the Great Migration. Although it only received a short 12-month run, *Dixie to Harlem* set a specific and vital tone for Black political commentary in comics:

Before the mid-1960s Jackie Ormes’s *Torchy Brown* challenged racial stereotypes and provided social commentary on a variety of issues. Torchy was an attractive, sexy, intelligent, and self-motivated young Black woman who, within the course of her romantic adventures (the binding theme of the strip), managed to fight racism, sexism, warmongering, and environmental pollution. (qtd. in Howard and Jackson 24)

Jackie Ormes, a monumental female figure during the height of Black comics, utilized her strips to represent a unique Black woman perspective that White or Black male comic artists either ignored or misconstrued in their work. Ormes presented readers with women who were independent, goal driven, beautiful, and proud to be black—the opposite of the prevalent media images of the woeful mulatto or the faithful, uneducated, servile mammy upheld by Whites.
Some Black comic strips created from the 1960s through the 1990s, featured in a wide range of publications from exclusively Black-owned, to major publications, included *Wee Pals* (1965) by Morrie Turner, *Curtis* (1988) by Ray Billingsley, *Jump Start* (1989) by Rob Armstrong, and *Herb and Jamaal* (1998) by Stephen Bentley. *Wee Pals* notably paved the way for future Black artists as the first nationally syndicated integrated comic strip in the United States. Starting out as a Black character only comic strip entitled *Dinky Fellas*, which received a slot in the *Chicago Defender*, newspapers initially picked up the strip at an underwhelming rate. Afterwards, Morrie Turner reworked his idea into what is now *Wee Pals*, by adding children of other races to the strip, earning him national syndication on February 15, 1965. Popularity moved at a slow crawl due to it’s “mixing” of ethnicities; White editors apprehensively supported the strip:

Mr. Turner’s comic strip *Wee Pals*, featuring childhood playmates who were White, Black, Asian, Hispanic and Jewish (joined in later years by a girl in a wheelchair and a deaf girl), was considered subversive in 1965, when a major syndicate first offered it to newspapers. Only two or three of the hundreds of newspapers in the syndicate picked it up. By early 1968, there were five. But of the many changes that occurred after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that April and the urban uprisings it started, some of the first appeared in the nation’s funny papers. (Vitello)

However, around 1968 the assassinations of major leaders from the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements propelled the concept of the Rainbow Power or Kid Power—an ideology created for Turner’s group of racially diverse child characters who coexist peacefully to fight for racial/social equality together—into the forefront of the American political and racial landscape (see fig. 1). Racial harmony and integrated social justice served as an optimal model for members of society who opposed violence, so much that both White and Black audiences widely
accepted the ideology. The assassination of Dr. King helped to expand the small syndication cycle significantly so that it appeared in almost sixty newspapers. Morrie Turner’s young characters did not speak AAVE, came from different areas of the country with ancestral roots from around the globe, and groomed themselves as humanitarians in the making. Morrie Turner’s kid protagonists proved that Black children, and all children, were conscious of the world around them and were the activists who would ultimately spearhead real change. The “Rainbow Gang” challenged White racism and Black separatism, and would show to Americans for the first time a mutual cooperation between Black and White characters on the funny pages. Turner was invested in improving race relations peacefully instead of perpetuating grotesque misrepresentations of Blackness or acting as a critic of White racism previously published in newspapers.


Fast forwarding to the 1980s, Ray Billingsley’s *Curtis*, introduced to papers in 1988, follows a young Black boy and his family who live in an urban city in an old brownstone. Curtis tackles the everyday obstacles that are going to school, having crushes on girls, and loving hip-
hop. His father, who is an old-school R&B fan himself, has a steady though loathsome job at the Department of Motor Vehicles and his mother is a supportive stay-at-home parent. Through the characters of *Curtis*, Ray Billingsley also notably explores the ideological differences between the older generation and hip-hop generations of the Black community. The characters participate in an intra-cultural discourse that, due to the erasure of the Black family, readers of the funny pages did not witness before *Curtis*; it was a rarity to see a functional fictionalized Black family in White newspapers. Ray Billingsley also deserves mention for his ability to juggle both the healthy image of the family and the realistic rifts between specific family members. *Curtis* presents readers with a complex view of the Black family, similar to sitcoms such as *The Cosby Show*, in which the family share heartfelt moments, engage in disagreement, and are portrayed as both serious and humorous. Furthermore, Billingsley’s comic strip, similar to *Dark Laughter* and *Wee Pals*, shares a Black perspective on the daily events happening in America. *Curtis* oftentimes spoke AAVE and would make political conclusions about the state of the Black community that younger generations could agree with or relate to, and made larger observations about American society. The strip covered everything from, “issues of race and health that have been personally meaningful to Billingsley, [Kwanzaa], Martin Luther King Day, Black History Month and Curtis’ efforts to get his dad to stop smoking” (Feller-Cohen). *Curtis* promotes multifaceted Black familial representation which early comic strips written by Whites ignored and disvalued.

Rob Armstrong’s *Jump Start* is an important comic strip that has received mixed reactions from Black and White audiences. While Whites enjoyed following the middle-class Cobb family and their ordinary yet humorous life, Black readers labeled the strip as conservative and one that was filtered for the White gaze, or White sensibility:
Jump Start operates within the terministic screen of Whiteness in that it deflects issues of White privilege and the ways that race might matter to the Cobb family. Depictions of racial issues in Jump Start occur only infrequently. When they do occur, they do not critique White privilege or Whiteness. (Rockler 403)

Armstrong argued that the strip reflected his real life; Jump Start followed a Philadelphian family composed of a police officer dad, a nurse mom, a mischievously innovative son, an intelligent daughter, and two adorable baby twins. The entire family speaks standard American English, the children go to school, and the parents hold full time jobs, but are relatively unaffected by everyday racism. The disengagement with racism, similar to Bungleton, is where much of the audience discrepancy lies. White audiences appreciated a comic strip that did not engage race, or did not impend on their comfortable privilege, by portraying a Black family that achieved the middle-class American dream. On the other hand, while Black readers agreed with the image of the well-off Black American family, Black readers did not sympathize with a family that lived a life devoid of racism or its effects. These readers struggled to believe in the strip. However, there are moments in the comic strip when Black and African historical figures are celebrated. Rob Armstrong has benefited tremendously from the nineteenth century Black Nationalist dream of upward mobility and created an image of a respectable, self-functioning, self-sustained Black family in comics—regardless of its accuracy.

Herb and Jamaal, created by Stephen Bentley, is set in an urban space and follows the adventures of a young Black boy, his family, and a family friend. Stephen Bentley claims that the strip is very much grounded in reality and the action, the characters, and the setting all stem from his real life:

Herb and Jamaal, was inspired by a high school reunion he attended, where he was reunited with an old friend. Herb and Jamaal depicts a long-lasting friendship
in which the main characters go through everything together; topics span from problems with their wives to household chores. (Howard and Jackson 26)

Herbert (Herb) and Jamaal are two Black, self-made, male entrepreneurs, both of whom quit their day jobs, and decide to open a diner together. Herb and Jamaal deal with women, family, and other banal life experiences together. This strip, unlike *Jump Start*, does deal directly with race and Black culture. One of the most unique story techniques used throughout the comic is the visual re-representation and animation of famous Black quotes. Spanning from Malcolm X to Langston Hughes, the characters in the story undergo funny situations using the words of important Black figures as a backdrop or as dialogue. For instance, in a March 21st, 2010 strip, an annoyed Ezekiel watches as a father-and-son pair stick their tongues out at him over three silent panels which ends with the last panel that reads, “When you know the origin, you’ll know the cause.—Malcolm X” (see fig. 2). In this way, Stephen Bentley uses the strip to not only illustrate the crucial image of Black entrepreneurs who make audiences laugh and carry out normal lives, but also uses the strip to make a much needed observation about race. In newspapers that once avoided racial discussion, or provided opinions from the White perspective, *Herb and Jamaal* made strides by genuinely using humor to highlight both everyday life of the Black family as well as highlight some important aspects of Black culture and history.
Fig. 2—Herb and Jamaal comic strip created by Stephen Bentley in 2010 from “Pool party!”, Joshreads.com, 22 Mar. 2010, joshreads.com/2010/03/pool-party.

Throughout the history of Black comics, artists have reshaped the image of Blacks on the funnies pages. From the correction of stereotypes, the engagement with the political concerns of the Black community, to the representation of the Black family, the comic strips radically transformed the mainstream portrayals of Black America. Within these strips, Black humor and Black agency were employed as the major literary devices that transformed the image of Black Americans in comics.

Keep it Out of the Funnies!: Humor and Political Satire in Black Comics

Since Yellow Kid, comic artists have produced work that American readers consume on a weekly basis but comics are still largely considered an exclusive space for jokes, jabs, and giggles. Recent scholarship (i.e. Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics; Aaron Meskin and Roy T. Cook’s The Art of Comics; The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature Edited by Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest; Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith’s The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture; and various academic journals and conferences dedicated to comics and graphic novels) has proved the contrary and argues that the daily consumption of comic strips does not operate only as a pastime, but as an ideological exercise; ample evidence proves that comics, like television, film, and music, as works of socio-political discourse, shape our national consciousness. Even then, Constance Bailey hints at the need for more academic attention to the influence comic artists have on shaping specific modes of consciousness by stating, “a study of their material is often thought to be unacceptable for study by folklorists” (Bailey 253). Comic strips deserve academic attention and intellectual investment because the simple recognition that they contain “important information” about our world does
not produce scholarship defining the various types of knowledge produced by specific strips. A serious engagement with form, style, genre, audience, functionality, periodization, and other aspects of literary work that are taken into account for traditional works will produce a more comprehensive and vigorous scholarship in the field of comics. Accomplished for some of the major cartoonists such as *Krazy Kat*’s George Herriman and *The Peanuts*’ Charles Schulz, and the worlds of Marvel, D.C., and to a lesser extent, the underground world of comix, this breadth of scholarship for many forgotten American comic artists who were featured on the funny pages remains minimal or nonexistent.

Every comic artist, whether the end goal is to teach or to entertain, communicates to its audiences a particular narrative or a political message. These narratives and messages pose great consequences to the process of knowledge formation because of the, “fact that presenting information visually and verbally [textually] can enhance cognitive processing of the information and may result in potential merger or interaction between the two channels to create meaning that go beyond information provided by each individual channel” (Abraham and Appiah 187). In other words, the visual representation of ideology as presented in comics plays an active role in forming perception. Reading, consuming, and interpreting comics every day, alongside news stories, helps the medium straddle within the realm of truthfulness. The juxtaposition of the “truth” from the news articles, with the politicized and humorous art from the funnies, primes us to align our ideals with comic strips; that juxtaposition is crucial to understanding the intensity of a comic strip’s potential impact. Therefore, these “pictures and images potentially merge and interact semantically to create new meanings larger than the sum of its individual parts (Abraham and Appiah 188). Black comic artists in particular have used imagery in comic strips—and humor—as a weapon of resistance against racism on and off the page. Using imagery and humor
allows Black comic artists to enter the national and global debates about race, power, and identity.

Most of the dissonance surrounding comics and its ability to construct impactful arguments, and to inform public opinion, rests in the cartoonist’s voicing of ideology or argument within humor. However, Black comic artists employ humor in strips through an approach that remains true to a Black tradition; one that follows the historical terrain of comedy in the Black community:

American slavery provides the backdrop of tragedy against which African Americans developed their distinct form of humor, in which the material of tragedy was converted into comedy...[The] use of humor provided a small, yet significant, form of relief from the brutality and hardships of slavery. Black slaves faced with the demand of White masters for rigid discipline, unconditional surrender, acceptance of Black inferiority, and White superiority, survived these emotionally crippling conditions through dignity, integrity and a rich sense of humor. (Gordon 256)

Black artists filter their frustrations connected to modern day systematic racism through humor. The earlier works of *Bungleton Green, Dark Laughter, and Dixie to Harlem* and the later works of *Wee Pals, Curtis, Jump Start, and Herb and Jamaal* managed to accomplish two feats simultaneously: make their audiences laugh and cogitate about their world. Black humor is a technique that grabs the attention and the hearts of their readers, but also speaks to larger issues facing the Black community. The ancestral Black rhetorical code of humor “functioned as a safety valve, as it facilitated a venting of anger and aggression while providing the community with a sense of solidarity” (Howard and Jackson 27). In an Afrocentric nationalist examination of *The Boondocks*, Tyree and Krishnasamy explain the cultural importance of humor to African Americans:
Humor is important to African Americans…[Laughter] allows African Americans to put their desires, situations, and ideals into perspective. Throughout history, humor exposed the absurd treatment of African Americans in America, highlighted the hypocrisies and pretensions of White Americans, and helped to reveal and mock the rationalization of the mistreatment of African Americans. (Tyree and Krishnasamy 42)

Through laughter, Black people not only express concern about their condition, but help to enlighten others about the state of the Black community without a blunt force. Humor takes a high level of skill to execute efficiently because humorists constantly embed heavy and burdensome history, culture, and criticism within “light hearted” jokes; they must meticulously curate satire so that it elicits uncomfortable truths; they help consumers cope with systemic racism and all of its implicit dangers. Black humor utilized in Black comics, such as Aaron McGruder’s The Boondocks, unpacks valuable intelligence that may otherwise get lost in an abyss of ignorant chuckles.

“Made this song to make it all y'all's turn / For us, this [is] for us”: A new, booming voice on the funny pages

In the opening of “F.U.B.U.”, Solange asserts that she wrote the song to make it “all y’all’s turn.” This verse expresses the cultural creed that states when Black people witness the progress made by others of their race despite oppressive systems of racism, it’s inspiring. Solange testifies about the progressive power of tradition, rootedness, and building on top of already existing foundations. Every Black comic artist following in the footsteps of pioneers such as Billingsley and Turner are taking “their turn” and producing more art that is “for us, by us.”
Following in the young tradition of Black comics and humorists, Aaron McGruder, the creator of *The Boondocks*, became an important yet humorous voice of resistance on the funny pages. Aaron McGruder, a young college student at the University of Maryland studying African American Studies began drawing *The Boondocks* as a small web comic that was eventually picked up by the school’s newspaper *The Diamondback* in 1997. A hip-hop influenced comic, *The Boondocks* soon landed a small run in one of the most popular hip-hop magazines, *The Source* in 1998. After an impromptu meeting with a woman on the editorial staff of Universal Press Syndicate who was interested in representing more characters of color in the newspapers, *The Boondocks* made its national debut on April 19, 1999 and ended syndication on March 26, 2006. A television series would air November 6, 2005 on *Cartoon Network*’s “adult swim” nighttime segment. Following in the footsteps of *Dark Laughter, Dixie to Harlem, Wee Pals, Curtis, Herb and Jamaal* and countless other unmentioned Black comic strips, *The Boondocks* became arguably the most successful and controversial Black comic strip of all time.

Centering two new Black residents of the fictionalized predominantly White suburb Woodcrest, Huey and Riley Freeman, *The Boondocks* is a racial political satire that takes place in real time, providing critical humor on topics relevant to the Black community. Huey and Riley Freeman, who are inner city Chicago natives, move in with their elderly Grandfather (referred to as Granddad) Robert Freeman, a retired veteran. Other supporting characters include: Thomas Dubois, Sarah Dubois, and Jazmine Dubois, a mixed family with a biracial daughter; Michael Caesar, another young Black Woodcrest migrant; Cindy McPhearson, a White Woodcrest resident; and later, Uncle Ruckus, a self-hating neighborhood nuisance. Not to be confused with the television show personalities, each character represents a facet of the Black mind and/or a figure within the Black community during the hip-hop era of the late 1990s and early 2000s.
Reacting to caricature archetypes as described by Bogle, as well as portraying contemporary Black archetypes and personalities, Aaron McGruder created an invigoratingly diverse Black world. The characters react not only to their fictional environment but also to the real social, political and cultural world of the audience, making it a source of meta-commentary similar to that of *Doonesbury* and other political comic strips.

Aaron McGruder’s *The Boondocks* fuses traditional comic strip devices together with culturally specific devices and literary techniques making it a rich work of Black literature worthy of further intellectual examination. Black agency was the literary/political tool used primarily by the comic artist. McGruder utilizes the same Black agency that was espoused during other Black literary eras such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement which makes *The Boondocks* an important work to consider when discussing the new #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement that is brewing today. Thus, it is imperative to understand Black agency not only as a theory but, also as a tool of empowerment and an enlightening process passed down from Black literary ancestors and elders who have cleared the path so that authentically Black voices and opinions would have a platform.

“All my […] let the whole world know/ Play this song and sing it on your terms”: Black agency as a reactive, deliberate, and transformative process

The early definition of agency, as stated in E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, denotes, “the degree to which they [worker] contributed, by conscious efforts, to the making of history” (qtd. in Cadigan 188). Thus, Black agency is a term used throughout various academic fields to denote the deliberate act of exerting power by Black thinkers and creators in order to produce definitions of identity, history, and culture for themselves. Using an interdisciplinary approach, Black agency will be defined here as a three-step process or mental
revolution that writers/artists undergo: (1) having an initial reaction to the White domination of media; (2) proclaiming a self-recognition and self-appointment of oneself as a spokesperson for the Black community; and (3) deliberately creating racially-specific, corrective, and transformative works of art. A further investigation into the definition will require a brief understanding of what Bailey and Rockler refer to as race fetishization and White terministic screens, as well as the concepts of the dialectical spokesperson, race cognizance, and the oppositional gaze. Together, these terms will contextualize a specific type of Black agency that, instead of conveying a single theory or concept, encompasses an entire process leading to enlightenment and active accountability for the Black community espoused by Black artists.

In Constance Bailey’s investigation of the “fetishistic consumption of Blackness” (253) in the media, the author states, “[the] appropriation of African American culture occurs as a result of the dominant culture’s fetishistic desire to consume Blackness and to regulate the Black body to that of spectacle that dates as far back as the 1800s but continues today in the way that Black performers are objectified” (254). Focusing on Black comedians, Bailey argues that White audiences recognize cultural difference, or a perceived lack thereof, and attempt to delineate pleasant parts of the opposing culture while demonizing other aspects that they do not comprehend (254-55). The race fetishization of Black culture in America is both a personal and shared socio-historical mode of analysis and consumption that filters Blackness through the White gaze. The White gaze, and White fragility—the inability for Whites to confront and cope with their own privilege—then leads to the objectification, appropriation, or reduction of Black artistic production and the Black body in the media (Bailey 258-9). Thus, images of Black people within mediums such as comics suffer from the filter of Whiteness; Blacks are constantly portrayed in a manner that is sensitive to White’s ability or non-ability to handle racial issues.
The fetish culture associated with Black bodies is responsible for the negative stereotypes or the non-threatening Black images created by Whites and perpetuated by all within comics.

Naomi Rockler’s interviews with Black comic strip readers illuminate the connection between the White gaze and the fragmented representation of Blackness in comic strips. Rockler argues that comics are Whitewashed, or filtered so that the content is digestible for the typical White viewer:

Today, representations of African Americans typically have downplayed or erased culturally specific aspects of African American culture, and instead often place African Americans in non-controversial, middle-class family narratives. Representations of African Americans that openly critique the systemic nature of racism in U.S. society are fairly unusual. (Rockler 398)

The filtered Whitewashing of content is directly connected to the concept of a group’s terministic screen. *Terministic screens* are ideological languages that dictate how groups understand oppression or how to select and deflect aspects of reality (Bailey 400). Therefore, Whitewashed comics strips are drawn, understood, and consumed through a White *terministic screen*. Racial issues are not considered real or relevant to the dominant White groups (Bailey 400). White dismissal of racial issues results in the lack of Black faces featured on the funny pages.

As Whiteness was reinforced under this mode of analysis, Black comic artists who created their own strips beginning in the 1920s reacted to the lack of Black representation and to characters and who did not reflect their reality. They operated according to a Black *terministic screen*—or through a concern with race—in reaction to the erasure. The first step or aspect of Black agency is the reactive impulse to need or want something contrary to the status quo. The reaction to the White-dominant space of comics garnered social awareness among the Black community of writers and artists. Therefore, Black agency is reactive.
After reacting to the non-Black images in comics, Black comic artists then assume a proactive position of “race-speaker” or accept a responsibility to accurately portray Blackness in their work. A burden such as this is also racially specific:

[Characterizations] of African Americans are never neutral. Instead, each image either “advances or retards the struggle” of representations (Therefore, African-American creators/ producers are faced with an additional responsibility that their majority counterparts do not. Specifically, they are confronted with two ideological questions: Do I create only favorable images of African American culture as a means to counter the abundance of negative portrayals? Or do I produce realistic images of African-American culture that include both positive and negative features? (Cornwell and Orbe 39)

This is not to argue that all Black artists and writers pledge allegiance to the Black community and its affairs. However, many artists such as McGruder consciously employ Black agency throughout their work and adapt the philosophy of race responsibility as explained above. McGruder said himself, “I don’t care nothing about tearing down stereotypes…I only want to represent the truth, inspire thought, and make people laugh…I feel it is my right and responsibility to be self-critical of the Black community” (qtd in. Cornwell and Orbe 30). As dialectical spokesperson, Black comic artists pledge allegiance to the Black community, using their platform to reinvent the image of the Black character and to lift it out of the shadows of White fragility. They do this by creating well-rounded Black characters, despite a desire to portray the Black body as negative or positive; they depict realistic or engaging characters and fully imagined Black worlds.

In order to create these characters, Black comic artists who employ Black agency view the world through a racially cognizant ideological frame and will utilize the oppositional gaze—two of the active and transformative components of Black agency. As quoted by Rockler and
defined by Frankenberg, *race cognizance* is the antithesis of Whiteness or color-evasive discourse. *Race cognizance* “asserts first, that race makes a difference in people’s lives, and second, that racism is a significant factor in shaping contemporary U.S. society (401). Being aware of structural de jure racism as well as the everyday de facto racism, and reinterpreting the experiences of Americans, but specifically those of Black Americans, is crucial to any work that claims to utilize Black agency. Another revolutionary tool related to cognizance is hooks’ concept of the *oppositional gaze*. Although hooks refers to the way Black women interpret Black film in a contradicting manner to the average White or male audience, the *oppositional gaze* also applies to the Black comic artist in relation to the predominantly White comic strip world. The *oppositional gaze* is directly connected to agency:

Spaces of agency exist for Black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The “gaze” has been and is a site of resistance for colonized Black people globally…In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating “awareness” politicizes “looking” relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist. (hooks 116)

hooks’s concept of the *oppositional gaze* fuels the fire for what she calls “staring” or “spectating” (hooks 117). Black comic artists have mastered the skill of examining an image, decoding it through a racially cognizant perspective, and reinventing or rewriting the image so that it is culturally relevant to themselves and the community they represent. This skill is at the heart of Black agency; *race cognizance* and the *oppositional gaze* together are direct results of the intellectual and cultural power to see (observation), to take responsibility (accountability), and to theorize/act (cognize) about the state of race within a certain artistic medium. These three
vital steps and/or components make for a truly unapologetically Black reading or creation of any work.

To the Boonies: A short introduction to The Boondocks collections

The Boondocks offers a wide-range of literary material that has not been investigated extensively in a comprehensive work. By utilizing stylistic and thematic elements, that are both traditional and assumedly universal, and then transforming these elements within the comic strip to be culturally specific, Aaron McGruder produced a work of high caliber but most importantly, a work that is marked by Black agency from every angle. Certainly not a holistic literary analysis, this paper will touch on one major literary/artistic device used in a resistant manner: space. From metaphorical space, to white space between panels, to the physical space between characters within panels, Aaron McGruder meticulously “fills” space with Blackness: Black characters, Black culture, and Black thought. Within the investigation of how McGruder uses space, this paper will touch lightly on aesthetics, humanities and the digital age, representation of the other, characterization and stereotypes, youth, and language. The first three Boondocks collections, Because I Know You Don’t Read the Newspaper (2000); Fresh for ‘01… You Suckas (2001); and Public Enemy #2 (2005) are the primary works used in this study since together they show the progression and growth of the characters, the world, and mark the beginning of a strong shift in Aaron McGruder’s intellectual and artistic interests starting somewhere in 2004—with the second-term election of President George W. Bush.

Because I Know You Don’t Read the Newspaper (2000) is a collection of comic strips originally syndicated from 1999-2000. In these early strips, McGruder introduces 8 to 9 year old Riley and 9 to 10 year old Huey who arrive in Woodcrest after leaving Chicago. In this collection the two boys interact with their new guardian and oblivious grandfather, Robert
Freeman; their biracial neighbor, Jazmine, and her parents, Tom and Sarah; and enter their new predominantly White school, with classmates such as Cindy. Significant episodes from this collection include the interrogation of Jazmine’s racial identity performed by Huey, meeting Cindy, following the travails of Star Wars super fans, Granddad asking Huey and Riley to cut the grass, and Christmas time in Woodcrest.

This collection features the main cast on the front cover with Huey fully depicted in the forefront and Jazmine’s prominence following close in second. Granddad, Huey and Riley have their signature scowls imprinted on their faces. Their expressions are juxtaposed with Jazmine’s slight smirk, Cindy’s blissful smile, and Thomas Dubois’ large grin. The cover introduces readers to the very important characters of the collection and also broadcasts diversity of persona within the cast. Because Huey and Riley’s unsmiling visage contrasts so starkly with their carefree neighbors, the cover foreshadows the Chicagoans outcast position amongst the other residents of Woodcrest. In the background, there is a large tree. The tree becomes an important symbol that acts doubly throughout the entire series: it is a space that initially signified suburbia, and would later become a space where Black thought prevails freely. This early collection features a celebratory analytical foreword written by hip-hop activist, Harry Allen.

Fresh for ‘01...You Suckas! (2001), featuring comic strips written between 2000 and 2001, introduces new characters to the cast, and was designed to appeal to a hip-hop sensibility. The cover for this collection features the three boys, Caesar, Huey, and Riley, each of whom depict a different profile of Black masculinities found within hip-hop. Caesar, the purist, who wears a happier expression is off to the far left, Huey, the conscious rapper, resides in the middle with his traditional scowl and large hair, and Riley, the gangsta rapper, sports an army bandana, presumably connecting him the prevalent youth hip-hop image. Riley’s emotionless, glare
closely resembles Nas’s *Illmatic* (1994) album cover which serves as the inspiration for Riley’s character profile. Nas is revered as the streetwise, racially conscious, and Black male representation of “hood life” in the hip-hop community, and McGruder’s depiction of Riley was inspired by the gangster persona, yet youthfulness of Nas. The title type treatment is displayed in two different styles of graffiti—another aspect of the hip-hop generation—one that clearly looks like a tag, probably drawn by Riley, and the other that looks like it belongs on a picket sign, belonging to either Caesar or Huey. This cover is a clear departure from the first in that Aaron McGruder intended to gear the strip towards the exploding hip-hop generation by removing the older and White characters. Those personas would not translate to the young generation who McGruder claimed was his target audience.

On the back cover, a portrait of Caesar wearing an EMCEE shirt is positioned adjacent from a list of negative feedback from an enraged reader. The pulled quotes are indicative of a common reaction to hip-hop consumers such as Caesar himself and to the strip as a whole; the hip-hop generation is usually misunderstood, seen as violent, nonsensical and “rebellious and hateful” (qtd. in McGruder, *Fresh for ’01*). Notable episodes within the collection feature Black History Month, Bush running for president, freeing Puff Daddy, a Santa Claus conspiracy report by Huey, the first scene with Caesar, Riley wanting to join the NRA, the census, and Huey starting his online publication, *The Free Huey World Report*. In this collection, Aaron McGruder focuses heavily on popular culture (movies, music, and television) as well as politics. However, these collected strips build on the family and friendship dynamics between the characters as well.

Skipping the year 2002 and covering March 2003 through November 2004, with cameos from earlier years, *Public Enemy #2* (2005) presents a clear growth in Aaron McGruder’s political consciousness. Where the previous anthologies were able to focus on both
characterization building, the strips collected in this volume build upon the characters’ political ideologies and sociopolitical configurations. In the strips, McGruder focuses heavily on the thoughts and opinions of Huey Freeman in regards to the presidential and governmental affairs and hot news stories. The Black characters interact mostly with one another, with fewer appearances from Whites. Topics covered in this volume include: the presidential race of 2003, Al Sharpton and democratic platform, the War in Iraq, the SARS outbreak, Riley shoveling the snow, Black English month, the Kobe Bryant sexual assault scandal, and Condoleezza Rice.

The cover, the first published by a major publishing house (Three Rivers Press, an imprint of Penguin/Random House) depicts two mug shots of Huey Freeman, further politicizing the later strips. He is described as, “Angry Kid with Afro” and “(Un) American,” (McGruder, Public Enemy #2). Referencing Huey’s unfavorable opinions that result in a public smear campaign that labels him a threat to the White people of Woodcrest, this cover also alludes to both the dissenting hip-hop group Public Enemy, and the countless Black orators and public figures who are targeted and placed on scaffold by the media as internal terrorists for their contrary (or Black) opinions. This cover speaks to the overtly political content within the book and the clear evolution of the strip in the later years of 2003-2004. The publication of this collection also marks the beginning of the “adult swim” television series of the strip, which follows disparate storylines and character profiles from the comic. Aaron McGruder openly admitted that creating the show and drawing strips simultaneously became an unbearable workload. In these later strips, Aaron McGruder did less to hone in on its characters, but more so reflected the political thoughts and feelings of Black America in response to everyday news stories.
“Don't feel bad if you can't sing along”: Reclamation and “darkening” of White space

Across the five years of collected comics strips examined, one of the major techniques used by Aaron McGruder is spacing or spatial reclamation. In various instances, McGruder manipulates space, and co-opts “White space,” to make loud proclamations about Blackness. He achieves this reclamation of space by (1) featuring one of the few Black comics in newspapers, (2) placing his characters in White dominated spaces and allowing them to narrate the stories and to exert their Black identities, (3) isolating Blackness in the midst of Whiteness as means to project Blackness, (4) structuring space while forming panels in order to sway the action of the strip in favor of its Black characters, (5) using large amounts of space between Black and White characters to illustrate physical/cultural distance, and by (6) using space as a mechanism to form or break bonds between characters of different races.

The first space that is manipulated to magnify and to exert Blackness is within the layout of the newspaper itself. In 1999 when the strip was first nationally syndicated, it stood out due to its Black characters drawn in manga style. The manga style for one positioned Black faces in otherwise non-traditional mediums, but it also allowed for McGruder to exert his first act of Black agency. Instead of mirroring the styles of most American, bubbly, cartoony characters (i.e. Wee Pals and Curtis), McGruder used the predominantly White space of the funny pages to draw unapologetically distinct and Black characters. His characters were nothing less than striking. Aesthetically, Huey, Riley, and Caesar were not just Black, but had big hair, sagging pants, and prominent frowns in almost every panel. They demanded the attention of readers.

The second instance in which Aaron McGruder’s characters dominate White space is within the neighborhood of Woodcrest. When asked why the boys move to an integrated neighborhood McGruder responds:
White people are the backdrops in most Black American’s lives. It’s basically just that simple. While most of our friends, our families, our ups, our downs all come from other Black people, there’s always that backdrop of White America—who we work for, who we pass on the way to the store and who we sit in classes with but don’t really hang out with after class. That’s our lives. (qtd. in McGruder, All the Rage 171)

Understood to reside in an all-White neighborhood aside from the presence of the Dubois family, Huey, Riley, and the urban Black characters narrate the comic, and therefore, act as the mouthpiece of the community. White people are no longer telling the story, but now represent background characters; McGruder transparently inverts the common thread of the background Black characters from earlier mainstream comic strips. While McGruder cannot escape the reality that Whiteness drives some of the action in the story as it does in society, the majority of the story is told by and belongs to Huey and Riley. The power of voice allows Woodcrest to be reinvented through the eyes of the boys. Counter-intuitively, Huey views Woodcrest as antagonistic, from the old ladies who ask him to carry groceries, to the Edgar Hoover name plastered on his elementary school, and Riley views the neighborhood as “too soft”—both articulating that their new environment is too White. Their views of the neighborhood are then projected onto the reader; the neighborhood is filtered through their unfavorable opinions of the space. In a complete departure from the early Black comics that almost never depicted a White neighborhood, much less had unfavorable opinions about thus neighborhoods, The Boondocks offers readers an alternative interpretation of a “safe” quiet and peaceful Woodcrest. Instead, Woodcrest is anxiety inducing.

Aaron McGruder also metaphorically shapes empty (white space) into meaningful or Black space. In comics, “when the content of a silent panel offers no clues as to its duration, it
can also produce a sense of timelessness. Because of its unresolved nature, such a panel may linger in the reader’s mind, and its presence may be felt in the panels which follow it” (McCloud 100). In various examples, it is evident that McGruder used the long periods of silence (or large gaps of space) in order to leave a situation unresolved or a comment unsaid. The unresolved nature of the spacious strip declares to readers the inherent difference between the White and Black residents of Woodcrest and leaves Huey and Riley with the task of coping with their new environment, or creating new meaningful Black space.

One of the first examples of difference appears on the first page of Because I Know You Don’t Read the Newspaper. In the scene, Huey and Riley arrive to Woodcrest but are surrounded by White space in the first panel. We see two young Black boys looking down and eldest saying, “Riley, we’re not in Chicago anymore…” (see fig. 3). In what feels like the immediate moment after a dreamlike sequence, and Aaron McGruder making a comical nod to The Wizard of Oz when Dorothy realizes she’s not in Kansas anymore, this moment of alienation and displacement becomes the introductory theme of the strip. The boys do not feel like they are home, and readers see them as outsiders standing alone in the middle of an empty sidewalk. In the next panel, Huey verbalizes his own observations about the qualities of the new neighborhood and we are given another perspective of the space. The boys are surrounded by a large home with a huge tree as audiences are looking down on their heads. This panoptic view again invites the reader to interpret the space as lonely and unwelcoming to the boys.
In the following strip, again readers are given a view of the boys from above but this time they are lost in an array of trees and leaves. Aaron McGruder uses trees and neatly mowed lawns as a motif of middle class suburban neighborhood aesthetics. To add to their feelings of displacement Riley complains that the air stinks to which Huey replies, “Clean air. My guess is we’ll get used to it eventually” (McGruder, Because I Know 7). The new Black residents will have to adapt to their new space and Aaron McGruder suggests that the boys will eventually define themselves while living in their new neighborhood. McGruder utilizes an interruptive voice—squared off text in it’s own frame—to announce Huey and Riley’s attempt to adjust. The voice sidebar adds to the “outsider-looking-in” motif that marks their arrival. These two scenes illustrate the general feeling associated with migration from inner city Black neighborhoods into the boondocks, or suburban White neighborhoods that ostracizes new residents. Woodcrest represents the table, and Riley and Huey have to figure out a way to take a seat comfortably.

What follows the opening scenes is an execution of Black agency on the part of Huey and Riley, as they aim to convert White space into a meaningful Black space, or to define themselves within their new neighborhood. In keeping with the recognition component of Black agency, the boys realize that they are underrepresented and are less than welcome guests. They see
instantaneously that Woodcrest is White and has always been mostly White. As for accountability, both Huey and Riley make note that they will exist within Woodcrest while asserting their Black identity. Huey declares, “Oppressors, run and hide! Fear the arrival of the righteous! I Huey Freeman, represent your darkest fear (McGurder, Because I Know 8) and Riley protests, “I’m the hardest, baddest thing for miles, and I can run amok here without fear” (McGruder, Because I Know 7). Additionally, Riley stars in a sequence where he renames the street signs around Woodcrest with the names of rappers, as a form of resistance and vandalism, or to “Blacken” and toughen up his space. Both of the boys are concerned with fear—either instilling fear or possessing a void of fear as a means of surviving in Woodcrest. McGruder uses the characters to show that they are stepping up to the task of being the Blackest neighbors anyone in Woodcrest had the displeasure of having. Situating (being careful not to integrate) themselves into a new space is a form of action (the final component of Black agency) that allows them to survive and be Black amongst Whiteness.

Huey and Riley, in distinct ways, take a seat at the table, or situate themselves into the new space, by engaging in cool pose behaviors. Cool pose is a coping mechanism used by Black males who live under a system of White supremacy that renders them powerless:

Black males have learned to use posing and posturing to communicate power, toughness, detachment, and style—self…As with most coping strategies, cool pose helps individuals adapt to environmental conditions and neutralize stress. Humans, like other animals, struggle for existence within the context of their social and physical environment…being cool helps maintain a balance between the Black male’s inner life and his social environment. (Majors and Billson 8-9)

Stemming from slavery, cool pose is the contemporary rendition of “the mask”—or the need to fill different roles or to take on different personalities in order to survive in a space that is hostile
towards one’s mind, body, culture, or any other humanistic asset. Huey uses Afrocentric, pro-
Black intellectualism as a protective and resistant mechanism and Riley uses the gangsta or thug
persona in Woodcrest in order to assert his Black identity. For Huey and Riley, *cool pose* is an
effective tool, albeit destructive, of asserting Blackness in Woodcrest as well as an underlying
mode that is central to Aaron McGruder’s controversial nature. Using *cool pose*, Huey and Riley
claim a stake in Woodcrest and disrupt the apparent peace of the neighborhood; they and Aaron
McGruder quite literally Blacken up the White space.

Aaron McGruder also co-opts space to alienate Black characters as means to project
Blackness. The alienation of Blackness is depicted in the opening scene when Riley comments
on the lack of familiar establishments from Chicago to which Huey replies, “Riley, we are
pilgrims in an unholy land” (see fig. 4).

![The Boondocks comic strip created by Aaron McGruder 1999 from Aaron McGruder; Because I Know You Don't Read the Newspaper. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel, 2000. p. 9.](image)

McGruder reclaims this space by appropriating what is a White historical group, the pilgrims,
and applies their plight to the two Black boys from a contemporary Chicago. Huey and Riley are
walking on the sidewalk off the page (or towards the bottom of the panel), looking back only at a
large tree which for McGruder represents suburbia. In this scene, the artist states to readers that Black people too feel like outsiders and that if the revered pilgrims are refugees, or journeyers, so are Black families who move into previously all White spaces. The image says: victimhood does not belong solely to Whites. McGruder inverts a White historical moment to mean something to Black characters—or levels the playing field.

Spacing also isolates the Black characters due to their radical ideological perspectives. Ironically, isolation and ridicule amplifies the character’s ideological message. Scott McCloud’s theory of *amplification through simplification*—the ability to convey large ideas in a restricted amount of space by reducing the concept down to it’s bare necessities and allowing the reader determine the meaning of the image-word combination (30)—is applicable in this case. Huey presents readers with uncomfortable or unpopular opinions: he believes that America orchestrates conspiracy against its citizens, cops are dangerous, White teachers mis-educate Black students, the N.R.A. are as violent as gun-toting rappers, and that the news is fictitious. Aaron McGruder will have Huey express his views, but his opinions are often met with ridicule from his younger brother Riley, dismissal from his grandfather Robert Freeman, frustration from colorblind individuals such as Thomas or his schoolteacher, and complete disappointment from naïve Jazmine. Even though Huey feels ignored, McGruder strategically places Huey in a spacious panel to voice his opinions. Granddad gets a new job as a census enumerator, and Huey feels that job is, “seemingly harmless but nevertheless inappropriate for the grandfather of a revolutionary” (McGruder, *Fresh for ’01 68*). A census taker essentially engages in the rounding up of private information, distributes it to the government, who then uses it to exploit the masses—according to Huey. In a very poignant scene Huey sits on his bed and loathes the current state of his family:
Granddad’s going to be a census taker, Riley’s joining the NRA…I just can’t believe it./
I’m ashamed of all this counter-revolutionary pro-establishment behavior I’m seeing in this household!! Shame on y’all…/
Acting like Americans…(McGruder, *Fresh for ‘01 68*)

Huey is drawn in solitude in all three panels for this strip: he is surrounded by nothing but a White background. Huey’s shame is something he wishes to communicate to others but unfortunately the message does not get across the panels. What seems like “free speech” is freely stated but is actually confined inside the panel with borders. His thoughts do not leave his room. It instead crowds his personal space. Huey is bombarded by his own words. The bombardment expresses to readers that Huey’s opinions are unpopular even amongst the Black people in his house, which it does primarily. However, this empty lonely space (visual simplification) also allows Huey to express himself wildly and vividly (ideological amplification). It signals to the reader: this is an important opinion. The lonely space gives Huey a mouthpiece. Evoking sympathy for the ignored and unheard character, readers can laugh at his absurdity or they can reflect on Huey’s words—and only his words—without distraction. The abundant amount of space given to Huey is meant to be liberating.

In another case in which Aaron McGruder reclaims isolation as a means to provide a platform for the characters to speak unapologetically, he speaks directly to his Black audience and evokes a call of communal self-reflection. In a scene following the failure of Huey’s conspiracy theory report about Santa Claus, he’s found alone on the step lamenting the amount of time spent on the paper. He thinks aloud: “(Sigh)...Three months...15 pages...What a waste” as he holds his paper and wonders why no one cares. Huey then says “I want my people to be free! I will enlighten the masses!! My voice will ring out across the globe and make difference!”
and immediately following thinks to himself, “Yeah, right…” (McGruder, *Fresh for ’01* 33). Aaron McGruder himself towards the end of his comic strip career commented that comics were not a lively enough medium to communicate truths with younger audiences (McGruder, *All the Rage* 171), which suggests that this commentary was a type of self-criticism. Contrarily to McGruder’s lament about accessibility, Huey’s muffled voice is heard—loud and clear—in this strip. Again, him sitting alone without any other visual distractions for the reader draws readers into this dialogue. However, this isolation dictates another important point: Huey is living betwixt a new era of digital versus print information circulation. Isolation in this scene acts as both a new space for Huey to be heard, but also, for Black intellectuals to see their own fears—fearful of the landscape of knowledge production and dissemination—projected by Huey. Isolation serves as a self-critical reflective space for Black intellectuals who understand Huey’s message, but they too have difficulty reaching a younger audience with written material. Space acts as a mirror.

_The Boondocks_ also disrupts White space between the physical panels, known in comics as the gutter. As argued by Scott McCloud, the gutter or spacing within panels translates into passing time, which adds a cinematic effect to comics. Through those cinematic effects, Huey positions himself as a young Black man with significant opinions to voice. On page 117 of *I Know You Don’t Read the Newspaper*, Huey is given a documentary-like platform that is structured by combining snapshots, interruptive type, and large white space between panels. In the first panel, only a quarter of Huey’s hair is shown. Similar to a close up in film, this snapshot is used as the precursor to a larger reveal, which in the second panel, pictures Huey sitting under a tree and clear sky scowling. Huey is referred to as the pinnacle of the “radical school of the new millennium,” (McGruder, *Fresh for ’01* 117) and audiences are encouraged to read him
seriously. The white space between panels allows readers to pause and to see each panel as a different scene. The spaces act as movie transitions. In this small documentary-like strip, McGruder claims a highbrow space, one of documentary intellectualism, which is not oftentimes reserved for radicalized Black characters. Huey’s voice is amplified here through a simple execution of giving him a different “space” or platform to share his radical, even if lackluster, opinions.

One of the most impactful uses and manipulations of space occurs within the panels: Aaron McGruder uses physical space to denote cultural difference between his White and Black characters. In Fresh for ‘01…You Suckas, the collection opens with a scene featuring a bundled up Huey and Riley and a scantily clad young White boy. It is five degrees, and feels like negative eleven due to wind chill. The White character asks a singular question: “You guys COLD?!” (McGruder, Fresh for ‘01 7). Riley and Huey scornfully glare at the seemingly carefree White boy wearing shorts and a t-shirt. This moment primes readers for another major theme of Aaron McGruder’s comic strip: there are clear cultural and socioeconomic differences between White suburbia and Black urban life. Those differences debunk the colorblind and harmonistic nationalism that is projected upon integrated spaces. In the large space between the boys, readers are forced to divide the singular panel into two: Black people who are resistant to cold and White people who are not. For added effect, there are bare trees situated behind Huey and Riley, and lush green trees behind the White peer. The trees serve as a visual confirmation; natural elements respond to the disconnect between the characters separated by space, or by cultural difference. The reaction to temperature is just one way that Aaron marks this cultural difference using a spacious panel.
McGruder also alludes to this difference in culture, social class, as well as race ideology, through a frequent character, Cindy McPhearson. Cindy is an oblivious White girl who subscribes to a colorblind ideology, loves hip-hop, and worships rappers. Unaware of racist institutions such as slavery, Cindy embodies the archetype of a White person who is racially tone deaf, but consumes Black popular culture. She naturally upsets Huey regularly. Cindy sits directly behind Huey in class in a similar set up to the characters in Charles Schultz’s *Peanuts* comic. However, Huey’s position in the classroom allows him to distance himself from Cindy—or to literally make space between Cindy and himself. Unlike the characters from *The Peanuts*, he never turns around or directly addresses his classmate. Huey’s back is always turned to her. In one scene, Cindy yells to Huey “WAAASSZZUUUUP!!” after seeing “that beer commercial with the Black guys on the phone and they’re all yelling” (McGruder, *Fresh for ’01* 29). The words that Cindy yells occupy majority of the background space in the scene. White microaggressions (such as assuming that Black people can only connect to others through
popular culture references) are understood here as overwhelming burdens and are visualized as invasive macroaggressions. Even so, Huey demarcates a large amount of distance between Cindy and himself. Fed up, he articulates aloud that he wants to move his seat (McGruder, *Fresh for ‘01* 125) as he pinches his eyes close and puts his hands over his ears—referring to her ridicule as painful (McGruder, *Fresh for ‘01* 30). Aaron McGruder utilizes the spacing between Huey and Cindy as a means to illustrate cultural difference and a level of misunderstanding between Black and White youths, which are apparent to the former group and not the latter. Cindy, like Woodcrest, poses a threat to and is hostile towards Huey’s form of Blackness. Aaron McGruder however does not portray Huey as defenseless against this invasion of space, but instead, uses Huey to communicate with a Black audience a familiar frustration with cultural appropriation, and to White audiences that this type of communication is unwanted.

In contrast to his annoyance with and refusal to address Cindy, Huey embraces other pupils such as Caesar. Between the two young boys, *The Boondocks* portrays an intentional display of Black camaraderie by using space. Caesar is around the same age as Huey and identifies as a Jamaican Brooklynite who (genuinely) loves hip-hop, movies, and has an intelligent understanding of the Black urban landscape. Not as rigid as Huey in his critique of American racism, Caesar offers a sense of camaraderie due to his ability to articulate his opinions on racism but to also engage in hip hop culture—to act as a counterpart to Huey and a median personality between Huey and Riley. As Huey’s right-hand man, Caesar acts as a balancer to Huey radical Pro-Black ideas. When Huey first meets Caesar, he instantly looks him in the eye and addresses him; Huey closes a metaphorical or cultural space. Caesar screams at Huey, somewhat in the same fashion as Cindy, “Hey, you with the ‘fro!” but instead of a large block of text occupying Huey’s personal space, Aaron McGruder places the exclamatory
sentence in a speech bubble—indicating that there is dialogue, and the yell is part of a participatory conversation.

The word “fro,” a familiar and politicized Black hairstyle, grabs Huey’s attention and causes him to turn three quarters of the way back instead of his usual half turn when dealing with White characters like Cindy. Huey and Caesar proceed to discuss the lack of Black people in Woodcrest. They find common ground in their displacement, so much that the next panel begins with a close-knit handshake. Despite their difference in temperament and appearance—Huey sports his usual scowl and Caesar a happier expression—the two Black boys connect with one another, and look each other directly in the eye. Aaron McGruder uses this moment to decrease the amount of space between these two residents of Woodcrest to display brotherhood. It’s a powerful assertion of not only rejection of hostile Whiteness, but also, an embrace of finding comfort in likeness. Caesar is not Huey’s clone and has his own ideological perspectives (such as his unwavering support of rappers) that are contrary to Huey’s, but his unapologetic Blackness is one that Huey can identify with. Thus, Caesar and Huey are seen in close proximity with one another, facing one another, or listening intently to the other as brothers.

If space between White characters is marked by scorn for Huey, the space between White characters and Riley is characterized by fear or hostility. White residents racially profile Riley continuously although he’s an adorable child who has never committed any real acts of dangerous violence. Sometimes achieved and other times not, Riley has made it a mission to act tough, scaring or “thuggin’” his way through Woodcrest in order to assert his form of Blackness. Riley, and to a certain extent, Huey are always found sporting an “ice grill,” or an unsmiling expression used during the hip-hop era to denote toughness and emotionlessness as a means of protection. Riley sports this look purposefully and his character is utilized to explore the
phenomenon of racial profiling that is unwarranted and biased towards Black youth immersed in hip-hop culture. Aaron McGruder uses space to portray this phenomenon by displaying the impact of Riley’s form of Blackness in the face of nervous Whiteness. In a classroom scene Riley is drawn with his head on the desk, suffering from boredom, and a White peer stares at him nervously out of the corner of his eye—sweat drips included. Riley asks him, “Is there a problem?” and to that the boy nervously utters an inaudible nonsensical response. The teacher asks what Riley did to Phil, and Phil asks to go to the bathroom. All the while, Riley’s head is on the desk still and he lets out a singular, “Sigh” (McGruder, *Fresh for ’01 52*). Ironically, this is a rare moment when Riley nonthreateningly exists in a White space, yet the White student still fears Riley’s Blackness. Instead of defensively or verbally reacting to the racial profiling he encounters in his learning space, Riley nonverbally expresses his discontent so that he doesn’t validate the White fear. Riley reacts by exhibiting another form of *cool pose*, a survival technique in which Black boys employ disinterest or a disassociation from emotional response. The space between the two students is plenty, which presents doubt that Riley had any intention of bothering his peer. Riley’s coolness, or nonchalance, juxtaposed with the frantic fear of the White student and the distance between the two exemplifies White fear of the Black body that is exerted on Black boys in American society.

In another scene, Riley is also subject to racial profiling, but by an adult. A White man who is driving a very nice car pulls up to his Woodcrest home and is approached by Riley—dressed in a White tank and wearing sunglasses. The man is startled when Riley looks up to him and says, “Nice car” (McGruder, *Because I Know* 21). In this scene, the lack of space between Riley and the White man’s possession is enough reason for him to be nervous. Due to its proximity with the White body, the Black body is interpreted as threatening. Aaron McGruder
visually reveals an awkward truth: White people fear the Black body and find it inherently
dangerous. McGruder further portrays this fear in both scenes stylistically. The scene is drawn in
various sized panels that are arranged in a chaotic fashion. It enhances the anxiety of the scene
and justifies the White man’s fear of Riley.

The manner in which Aaron McGruder manipulates space and utilizes Black agency is an
example of radical Black spatial reclamation and immense literary and artistic skill. *The
Boondocks* reinterprets historically White spaces, such as the funnies page, metaphorically white
spaces such as the gutter, and the literal physical space between White and Black characters, to
reform Black images and representation in comics. No longer background characters or silenced
figures, Huey, Riley, and Caesar take full command of their space and, in the tradition of Black
agency as an enlightening process, redefine their surroundings, assert themselves, and speak
directly to Black affairs.

*“And you pulling up to your crib/ And they ask you where you live again/ But you running
out of damns to give”: Frequent areas in The Boondocks community and the expression of
Black agency*

Aaron McGruder uses the convention of drawn space to reveal large questions and truths
about Blackness, but also uses areas, or domestic places, within the fictional neighborhood of
Woodcrest to exhibit a similar expression of Black agency. Frequented physical spaces in this
comic include: the television area in the Freeman’s home, a brick wall, the space under a large
tree, the Freeman’s backyard, and the Internet. Aaron McGruder created a recurring motif
associated with each space, revealing themes about the Black characters and their world, all of
which are illustrated by a voice of Black agency. Furthermore, these spaces were previously used
in comics created by White cartoonists for their White characters, and appropriated by Aaron
McGruder in *The Boondocks*, transforming traditionally White spaces for Blackness. The third collection *Public Enemy #2*, best demonstrates these motifs associated with particular spaces because by 2003, *The Boondocks* themes, characters, and conventions were well established—at this point, motifs are clearly identified as well as supported by the scenes in this collection.

The Freeman family and friends watch a considerable amount of television, spending majority of the later strips sitting on the couch, a beanie bag, or the floor watching everything from news channels to *Black Entertainment Television*. Similar to characters from Trudeau’s *Doonesbury*, the television is a technological springboard for the character’s sociopolitical commentary. Aaron McGruder’s use of the television becomes an important space where Huey, Riley, and Granddad are able to engage with the White-prioritizing news stories as well as address it’s Black readers directly. In some instances, Huey is watching television with his usual scowl and will hear a popular, yet satirized, public opinion such as:

> The Pentagon announced today that while it had not found any “traditional” chemical or biological weapons in Iraq, it did discover a large stockpile of cigarettes, indicating Sadam Hussein may have been planning to attach neighboring countries with massive amounts of secondhand smoke. (McGruder, *Public Enemy #2* 30)

Huey’s silence and facial expression portray apparent discontent. His silent rejection of news reports surrounding the lack of weaponry found in Iraq allows for a young Black character to openly oppose a government whom he does not trust. Furthermore, Huey will outright walk away from the television in silence (McGruder, *Public Enemy #2* 17)—in these scenes he not only expresses rejection, but disappointment in what he’s hearing on the news. In other scenes, Huey will respond to the television, but respond directly to the reader by making “eye” contact.

When discussing the cause of heart disease, the reporter claims that, “the nation’s top doctors
and nutritionists announce today that they don’t have the slightest $#&%@* clue” to which Huey responds, “It’s about time they frigging admit it…” (McGruder, *Public Enemy #2* 41). Other reactions include listening and in the last panel, staring at the reader in silence (McGruder, *Public Enemy #2* 65), as well as becoming a silhouetted figure when something is said that he disagrees with (McGruder, *Public Enemy #2* 55). The television for Huey is a pacifying device that spreads falsified misinformation, which he never readily accepts. When Huey sits in front of the television, he uses the space to engage the oppositional gaze and to reinterpret reports that are an insult to his Black radical intelligence. Huey reclaims that otherwise pacified space in the way he resistively watches and refuses to absorb information presented on television.

Huey and Caesar occupy a large ground of outside space; specifically, they can be found leaning on a brick wall and lounging under a tree, making what on the surface read like adolescent conclusions about large political or popular culture inquiries. However, Huey and Caesar provide a body of socio-political discourse and commentary while leaning on brick walls in Woodcrest, a clear nod to the contemplative space used in *The Peanuts* by beloved characters Charlie Brown and Linus. Huey, the revolutionary Black version of skeptic Charlie Brown, says to Caesar, a hip-hop version of the enlightened but lighthearted Linus, “American democracy is a thing of past. The media conspire with this administration to misinform a public that is either too scared or too stupid to reclaim their government” (McGruder, *Public Enemy #2* 39). Caesar in his mild temperament responds, “Someone once said “The cynic knows the price of everything and the value of nothing”” (McGruder, *Public Enemy #2* 39). The two young friends share philosophical and political opinions with one another in a space once reserved for White American comic strip characters. Instead of discussing whether or not the world is a good place, they pose heavier questions about media brainwashing and the state of a stubborn oppressed
mind. For Black boys, cross dialogue about the balance between “wokeness” and happiness, is a very common within pro-Black circles.

Huey and Caesar also use the wall to riff on popular culture within the Black community through humorous argumentation. Huey complains about the state of politics during the race for governor of California between Arnold Schwarzenegger and Gary Coleman and Caesar is found with a picket sign that reads: “Vote Gary Coleman for Governor” (McGruder, Public Enemy #2 53-4) smiling and staring at a less than enthused Huey. Another instance on the wall includes making in fun Condoleezza Rice and her dating life. Making a conclusion about the lack of qualified candidates running for or in office, McGruder uses the wall to also make double-meaning jokes about Blacks on television and their influence on political affairs.

When characters are found under the tree, the dialogue between characters addresses Black issues ranging from population increases to Black celebrity scandal; the areas beneath the tree provide contemplative space for the characters to produce further intellectualisms. Similar to the wall, Huey and Caesar (and earlier, Jazmine) dwell under the tree when discussing Black celebrities. Sometimes silhouetted, the characters speak very little and are surrounded by the night sky. Silhouettes remove explicit meaning from iconography, and allow for readers to focus their attention on content (in this case, dialogue) rather than identity politics, as well as associate the body with universality (McCloud 30-1). The wide-open scenery and the universality of the silhouetted body enables Huey and Caesar take shape as deep intellectual thinkers, even when the content isn’t necessarily complex or possesses a serious tone. In fact, Aaron McGruder uses their humor to make large revelations. The use of comicalness in a contemplative space elevates the use of Black humor as a source intellectual discourse. The engagement with celebrity gossip and popular culture make the content more relatable to younger readers, and adds believability to
the young but wise personas of Huey and Caesar. For Huey and Caesar, pointing out the fetishization of celebrities such as Kobe Bryant is a productive mental exercise.

Another area frequented by the Freemans is their backyard, a space in which Aaron McGruder presents Black readers with “inside jokes” that are crafted for a Black audience. In earlier strips, Granddad is frustrated with a sweaty Huey who refuses to do yard work because it’s physical labor that resembles slavery and is a forced refinery of the natural landscape. In *Public Enemy #2*, a flashback of the joke features Riley and Granddad, as the latter laments:

I just don’t know about these kids nowadays. No respect…no discipline…no work ethic…it must be that rap music ‘cause I sure wasn’t like this when I was young…[But] that shiftless grandson of mine couldn’t do that one simple task…and why? “Cause he lazy.” (33)

Granddad doesn’t see Riley, who is up to his chest in snow, bewildered, and unable to move with the shovel in hand. The generational disconnect between Black elders and young Black children is a topic not often displayed in comics strips (aside from *Curtis* and *Jump Start*), and certainly not in the highly satirical manner that Aaron McGruder presents the phenomenon. Granddad has a very false sense of intensive labor and the boys have a magnified sense of self that translates into stubbornness and disobedience, a dissonance held between the intergenerational Black family. Hence, both generations clash. The references to “slavery” and “lazy” are cultural and historical references to tropes that were once racial trigger words used against Black people. For this reason, many readers found Aaron McGruder’s critique of the Black community to be destructive, but this type of space allows for Black readers to reflect on their cultural values, practices, and communal ideologies. The backyard space allows for Black readers to laugh at themselves and to see their experiences—exclusive experiences—on the pages of a newspaper. Another instance in which McGruder uses exclusive Black generational humor is in a 2004 strip
when Huey stands in opposition to his Granddad, next to a fully clad snowman, and Robert responds, “Y’all can build all the snowmen you want in here. I ain’t turnin’ on the heat!” (McGruder, *Public Enemy #2* 94). The habit of the house owner refusing to turn on the heat in fear of increasing the heat bill is normal (or at least familiar) in most Black households. It is in these spaces that Aaron McGruder develops the familial bond between the Freemans that is refreshing in the midst of its usual political tone.

Cyberspace, or the Internet, is another of Huey’s frequented spaces for political discourse. Huey Freeman, the author of *The Free Huey World Report*, uses technology at the height of the explosion of the Internet to spread knowledge and to share think pieces with the Black masses. As early as 2000, Huey created his online and print publication which is loosely based on the 1933 *U.S. & World Report* that shares news, opinion, and other types of analysis from America’s business class. Designed to be a Black consciousness raising publication, Huey writes his conspiracy theories and opinions of dissent on his website, where he also receives the bulk of his hate mail. Although it doesn’t gain the traction he expects, McGruder prematurely tuned into what is now commonplace: the power of the Internet and its sharing capabilities. In a fiery letter to President Bush, Huey types: “PLEASE DON’T BOMB ME!!” (McGruder, *Public Enemy #2* 19). Furthermore, in a movie review on *Matrix* Huey types: “With so many Black people in the movie, it was impossible to predict who would die first” (McGruder, *Public Enemy #2* 28). In both editorials, Huey projects a radical voice, barley able to reach the keyboard, through the unfiltered and unmediated power of technology.

In the aforementioned spaces, rooms with television, the brick wall, outdoors under the tree, the backyard, and on the Internet, Huey and the other characters act as what Mark Anthony Neal coins, *post soul* ideologists who engage in a “folk identity” discourse that is both valid and
critical intellectual production for the Black community. In Neal’s *Soul Babies*, he defines a contemporary formation of Blackness called *post soul*. The *post soul aesthetic* is the reimagining of previous generations of Black popular culture and thought and “describes the political, social, and cultural experiences of the African-American community since the end of the civil rights and Black Power movements” (Neal 3). His concept of *post soul* is predicated upon his endorsement of folk identity. While it’s debatable whether or not soul babies are actually creating new ideological frameworks—be it cultural, social, or political—or if they are engaging in a long view practice of building onto an already established culture, the centralization of folk identity is key for thinkers like Huey, Caesar, and especially Riley. About the folk identity populace Neal says:

> These folks who some Blacks posit as on the margins of acceptable of even relevant Black life—the niggas, the bitches, the queers, the baby-mama, to name a few—are as integral to that experience as those who try to keep them at arm’s distance, rhetorically, spatially, or otherwise. (Neal 10)

The three focal characters, Huey the revolutionary, Caesar the pop-culture junkie, and Riley the “wanna-be” thug are manifestations of marginalized identities. All possessing unpopular or vulgar personalities and sharing their view of the world on their own terms, Aaron McGruder gives precedence to these archetypes and in that sense adds a level of profundity, wisdom, and credibility to their character.

The three young characters are producing, regardless how unpopular, a certain body of knowledge that speaks to the experiences and realities of many Black boys in America. Huey is capable of writing an editorial letter that actively critiques the world surrounding him; Riley can adequately find the contradictions in the NRA’s support of guns and disapproval of gangsta rap and start a local counter movement; Caesar acutely relates pop culture to the current political
world and intellectually challenges White teachers. It’s within their archetypes that they break stereotypes about the marginalized, silenced, undesirable, and downtrodden masses.

The characters produce intellectualisms while speaking AAVE—the language of the folk identifiers—and that’s wassup. Language is fundamental to folk identity in Black comics and separates the White appealing strips from the Black. In Elaine Richardson’s examination of African American literacies, she states about Black verbal and nonverbal language:

African American discourse and rhetorical practices emanates from Black American people’s social, economic, cultural, political, educational, and historical experiences…The Vernacular represents the historical and current survival strategies including counterlinguistic practices and vernacular acts, African American-centered through, literature, music, art, and religion that African Americans have used and continue to use to achieve their goals and to make life better. (32-33)

Articulation through AAVE is directly associated with the use of Black agency because using AAVE in comics that produce intellectual and political discourse, associates prestige with a marginalized and stigmatized language regularly used by Black Americans from all walks of life. Neal says about Huey, “he’s specifically utilized to challenge the limits of romantic political ideologies and affirm the possibility of seeing this generation of Black youth, even as they thoroughly embrace mass culture, as potential social critics and intellectuals” (171). These young thinkers create ideas and worldviews for future generations to stand on.

Directly related to their roles as the post soul intelligentsia is their young age; Huey, Caesar, and Riley are younger than ten years of age. Aaron McGruder states that he used children to depict controversial issues and opinions to soften the blow: “McGruder explained that having adults [voice his opinions] would be too scary…[His] plan was to get a provocative point of view into newspapers by wrapping it in a cute package” (qtd. in McGruder, All the Rage 160).
However, the strip still angered many readers, regardless of how cute and adorable McGruder thought he drew his characters. That is because, as young Black critics and intellectuals, these three are victims of Western conceptualizations of innocence and childhood. “Children’s literature frequently depicts children as acting independently of adults and performing roles more commonly attributed to adults, such as caring for other children or undertaking journeys. The depictions suggest that children embody miniature adults” (Hintz 28). For young Black boys, this model of childhood is especially applicable, as they are faced with hard questions about their position in a racially stratified country. Instead of being read as a naïve child, Huey is read as a radical voice of validity or one of offense—both of which are adult voices. Aaron McGruder exploits the child identity and, in a negative reversal of the intent *Wee Pals, The Boondocks* places the burdens of American society onto the shoulders of its most vulnerable. In a convoluted manner, Aaron McGruder exposes readers to the type of culture that is passed down to Black boys and children in America when the nation elects racist presidents, teaches young biracial girls to hate their hair, or moves them into a White space that is hostile to their identity. Huey, Caesar, and Riley suffer from a culture that forces Black and Brown children to grow up prematurely, and to practice coolness in reaction to their racially violent world.

*The Boondocks* has been discussed as a parody on Black archetypes, as an Afrocentric work, and even as a misogynistic and patriarchal comic strip, but there has yet to be a serious discussion about how Aaron McGruder used the comic strip to dominate, reclaim, and reserve spaces for Black voices. Whether Black characters are gracing the pages of a major publication on a daily basis, or occupying fictional worlds of Whiteness, or appropriating traditional spaces reserved for White characters, *The Boondocks* is a proper execution of Black agency as it relates to the construction of metaphorical and literal space. Black comic artists like Aaron McGruder,
when they create unapologetic and unfiltered Black voices, are taking that unreserved seat at the table, or as Solange puts it, “When you know you gotta pay the cost/ Play the game just to play the boss” (Knowles). Using White space to make profound worlds of Blackness is an example of how Black agency takes the old and creates the novel.

**Laying the Foundations: Black literary and publishing movements and *The Boondocks***

Equally as important as carving out space in White dominated worlds, is establishing one’s voice within a Black tradition. Aaron McGruder’s *The Boondocks* was inspired by the literary eras of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, and sheds light on the current emerging movement within the publishing world, #WeNeedDiverseBooks. Similar to the genealogy of Black comics, a look at Black literary traditions as they relate to or inform Aaron McGruder’s strip will locate the work and thus provide added value to the comic strip as a literary body of work.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s was a revolution characterized by the artistic, intellectual, and cultural proliferation of the Black community, heavily centered in Harlem, New York, but budding across the country and the globe. During what is known as the “roaring twenties” of White America, Black families were moving from the South to the more opportunistic North—participating in what we call today, the Great Migration. During this move, they also managed to shift the culture; Black intellectuals used literature, music, academia, visual arts, dance, as well as critical thought, to reaffirm their humanity previously robbed from them in the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras in the South.

The general mood of the movement was one of pride in and the elevation of the “new negro” image, coined by philosopher and acclaimed thinker Alain Locke, which represented, “demands for new social order, demands that Black fight back against terror and violence,
demands that Blacks reconsider their notions of beauty, demands that African be freed from the bonds of imperialism” (Huggins 15). Black people sought to redefine themselves as a group who were not docile and uneducated servants, but a group who contributed to the larger society with talents, wits, skills, and intelligence. Being careful not to generalize and attempt to encapsulate a movement into a moment, it must be noted that the Harlem Renaissance extended beyond the borders of New York and definitely extended far beyond 1918 and 1939. However, for literary periodization purposes, the Harlem Renaissance literary thought that will be examined briefly will fit into the aforementioned time and geographical parameters. Investigating essays from two literary giants of the Harlem Renaissance who exhibited Black agency, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, it’s clear how this movement influenced Aaron McGruder over fifty years later. Langston Hughes’s famed essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” and Hurston’s “Characteristics of Negro Expression” are instrumental in understanding Aaron McGruder’s *The Boondocks* and it’s audacious Black voice and intentional identity formation of its characters.

In 1926, Langston Hughes discusses the racial nature of Negro art. Hughes argues that the most authentic and true Negro art is art that is racial in content, and assigns the Black artist the task of overcoming the racial mountain that is “the urge within the race toward Whiteness, the desire to pour individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro as possible” (qtd. in Napier 27). Hughes’s literature expressed self-love and pride that is inherently about race. He then continues to distinguish between the middle class Negro who engages with, “Nordic manners, Nordic faces, Nordic hair, Nordic art, and an Episcopal heaven” (qtd. in Napier 28) versus the “low-down folks, the so called common element and they are the majority” (28). Out of the two groups, he rests more confidence in the commoners to embrace
their racial pride through their artwork, or to assume the role of true Negro artist. Because of their experiences in the real social, political, and economic world as a Black person in America, these folks have more of a perceptive scope through which to view the world and thus to produce honest art. “Racial Mountain,” even at a time when elevating the race was the motto of the day, chose to look at the average Black person and see beauty and potential for them to be the creators and innovators of tomorrow. Hughes also states:

So I am ashamed for the Black poet who says, “I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,” as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world...[An] artist must be free to chose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose. (qtd. in Napier 30)

Hughes celebrates the jazz, the rhythm, the style of Black life and Black art, and questions any writer or artist that would want to eradicate those elements from their work. Essentially, he articulates a need for unapologetic Blackness as a literary (or and artistic) element needing to be present in any work by Black writers. This includes being transparent about race, racial issues, cultural practice, and community.

The principles of Black art according to Langston Hughes are present in Aaron McGruder’s The Boondocks. As explained earlier, he was unapologetically Black and would employ Black agency throughout the creation of his strip by focusing on the “low-down folks” of the Black community. Aaron McGruder expressed regularly his identity as a Black satirist and creator of a racially motivated strip. In an interview he says, “the strip has always been about the Black perspective of the world, and that’s what it is” (qtd. in McGruder, All the Rage 171). Receiving backlash from White and Black audiences daily, having his strip pulled from various publications, and being labeled a belligerent artist, Aaron McGruder has faced his fair share of
controversy because his strip is racialized and communicates directly with Black people. Amidst the backlash, *The Boondocks* as a body of work has always maintained its Blackness, in content, style, language, and structure; the comic strip, has crossed the racial mountain of trying to appeal to White audiences. Though the strip revealed truths that would benefit White audiences, McGruder did not filter his work for their gaze, as demonstrated by the treatment of White characters like Cindy in the strip. Drawing Huey as a rebellious character took courage and firmness in his identity, and it can be argued that Aaron McGruder followed in the footsteps of Black artists as defined by Langston Hughes.

In Zora Neal Hurston’s acclaimed blueprint for Black arts, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” there are twelve important features present in any one piece of Black art: drama, will to adorn, angularity, asymmetry, dancing, negro folklore, culture heroes, originality, imitation, absence of concept and privacy, the jook, and dialect. All of these elements are found in *The Boondocks*, which help to classify the strip as a piece of work that follows the traditions of the Harlem Renaissance. However, two of the most frequently engaged elements found in the strip are that of asymmetry and dialect. Huey and Riley seem like complete antagonists. Riley is engrossed in a fictitious thug lifestyle while Huey is training to be the next Black Panther Party leader of the New World formation. Hurston describes asymmetry as, “the abrupt and unexpected changes. The frequent change of key and time…” (35). The two brothers are unexpectedly similar to one another and their personalities shift throughout the strip; Huey and Riley in all their difference are actually counterparts to one another. There are times when Huey sits and watches movies that he considers to be racist (*Star Wars*), and there are times when Riley makes observations about social and political life. Neither of them are complete singular archetypes. They are both multifaceted Black boys who have the ability to maneuver in and out
of their personalities, jumping into one another’s. Furthermore, the various archetypes used throughout the strip help to represent the many facets, or asymmetries, of Black life that McGruder felt needed attention. Granddad is the older generation disciplinarian; Thomas DuBois the contemporary Uncle Tom or the middle-class colorblind liberal; Michael Caesar the cool, calm and collective hip-hop intellectual; and much later in the strip, Uncle Ruckus a pugnacious self-hating Black man who is figuratively and literally blind. These different male personalities are not individualized, and together comprise an entire Black world. Their differences represent diverse Blackness rather than a single archetype—for they all break character and interconnect with one another. Aaron McGruder’s seemingly singular flat character development is really a method of complicating the narrow stereotype of an “angry” Black man. Instead, he shows a complex array of Black masculinity through these asymmetrical characters.

Secondly, Aaron McGruder, like Black comic artists before him, utilizes dialect and Black language throughout. In Hurston’s brief piece, she begins the section on dialect by listing out a few particularities of Black speech—essentially attempting to lay down legitimate rules for AAVE which has been achieved by Rickford and Rickford decades later in their work *Spoken Soul*. Rickford and Rickford say about Black talk, or an African linguistic continuum:

> [I]t marks Black identity; it is the symbol of a culture and a life-style that have had and continue to have a profound impact on American popular life; it retains the associations of warmth and closeness for the many lacks who first learn it from their mothers and fathers and other family members; it expresses camaraderie and solidarity among friends; it establishes rapport among Black; and serves as a creative and expressive instrument in the present and as a vibrant link to the nation’s past. (10)

Aaron McGruder follows the traditions of Zora Neal Hurston, a master of dialect, and other writers of the era by writing in a multitude of Black urban dialects of the twenty-first century.
While Huey’s language falls into the category of sermon-like resistance speech, another distinctive Black form of rhetoric used during protest and other Black public spaces, he also say’s “Yo,” and drops the occasional “gonna” in his dialogue. Most of the language is relatable to young Black kids growing up in the early 2000s, but definitely reflects the shift in Black language so that it doesn’t feel dated or obsolete. For instance, the characters don’t use the invariant “be” (ie. “I be”) and depending on the setting, they don’t always drop the “g” from words ending in “–ing.” McGruder methodically crafted language that resonated with targeted audiences. There is a balance between traditional AAVE and contemporary Black speech as it suavely adapted to new surroundings, such as being in an integrated neighborhood around speakers who retain the “g” at the end of words. McGruder utilizes the language of Black Americans within his work and this choice also follows another literary style of the Harlem Renaissance.

A powerful literary movement that coincided with the Black Power Movement and the establishment of Black Studies as an academic discipline in major universities is the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Usually heralded as the founder of the movement, LeRoi Amiri Baraka Jones, and Black women such as Sonia Sanchez (who taught the first Black Studies course and the first Black women in literature course in 1966) constructed a literary ideology that embodies Black agency. The Black aesthetic was the terminology artistic activists used to define a separate literary lexicon and style that spoke directly to and for the Black community and that would establish their art as inherently in line with the political interests of the Black masses. Larry Neal’s essay is revered as the most popular exploration of the concept:

This movement is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a
radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American’s desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics. (29)

The Black Arts Movement, the artistic wing of the Black Power Movement, was a testament to separate Black aesthetics and institutions. Neal continues the piece concisely stating, “the Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one. That the contradiction between ethics and aesthetics in western society is symptomatic of a dying culture” (Neal 31). It was a call for literary symbolism that propelled the Black masses forward economically, spiritually, but most importantly, politically.

Aaron McGruder’s work fits into this ideological tradition that equates ethics with art; The Boondocks acts as protest to the mainstream news and knowledge shared about Black communities, politics, and life. His strip not only reclams White space, but it also demonstrates family dynamics between Black people in a manner that is always culturally specific and a direct a reflection of his ethics, which are “pro-Black” but specifically are critical of racism, corrupt politics, violent hip-hop culture, and the mis-education of the masses. When asked about whether or not he hesitated to report on 911, McGruder responded, “No, the only question was how soon? And that was the big decision to be made. My deadlines at the time were falling on Tuesdays. [I] was going to talk about it the following week. And I did” (qtd. in McGruder All the Rage 146).

McGruder explicitly and transparently intended for The Boondocks to be a politically charged strip. During 911, he was concerned with Black people rallying their allegiance behind the flag and simultaneously being executed (prison, police shootings, or otherwise) by the same officials
who work for that very flag—he used the strip and his voice to highlight and critique that hypocrisy. Most of his “Flagee and Ribbon” strips were pulled from the New York papers due to it’s poking fun at the commercialization of nationalism that blossomed after the Twin Towers collapsed.

In a candid and early interview in which Aaron McGruder took calls from fans he said, “My personal…I do try to take a sorta straightforward and upfront stance on the racial dynamic, be it inter-racial or intra-racial” (“Aaron McGruder on The Boondocks”). He continues, “Its audience is Black people. It was written for them” (“Aaron McGruder on The Boondocks”). The strip has never shied away from the hard hitting questions about the intersection of race, policy, and politics, and lived up to the Black aesthetic called for by Neal, Baraka, and Sanchez.

However, it must be noted that Baraka and the likes would have supported his strip in The Source magazine, but not in mainstream newspapers. The movement also put a large focus on publishing their work in their Black-owned publications. In that sense, Aaron McGruder would’ve fallen out of favor with that movement, like many writers at that time.

Publishing houses are currently undergoing and intra-revolution: writers, editors, agents, marketers, publicists, and other’s involved with the publishing process are calling for Own Voices books—or books that are written by, handled by, and geared towards marginalized populations. This movement spearheaded by author-activist and current president Ellen Oh resided primarily online with the hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks. In 2014, the viral hashtag was registered as an official nonprofit organization in the state of Pennsylvania with high-profile board members including, but not limited to, “familiar YA and children's authors Grace Lin, Jacqueline Woodson, Matt de la Pena, Cynthia Leitich Smith, and Cindy Pon” (Sun 20). Still, with a huge following and a board full of talent and caliber, there are many in the publishing
industry who are confused about #WeNeedDiverseBooks, and it is often met with a combination of White (or privileged) fragility as well as animosity. #WeNeedDiverseBooks is an internal movement to hire writers of color, disabled writers, queer writers, and writers from other marginalized demographics to write books featuring characters of those same multiplex identities. It is a move to, within publishing, hire diverse editors, marketers, and publicists who can bring their life experiences and identity politics to books and get the books into the right hands with specialty that would otherwise be missing in the hands of someone who does not possess common ground with marginalized groups. It’s an overall message to publishers: everyone deserves to see themselves reflected in literature. Board member de la Pena explains that a call for diverse books is a call for, “Books featuring diverse characters, written by diverse authors, [that] are worthy, too, and it's time we had a seat at the table” (qtd. in Sun 20). Aaron McGruder benefitted from having likeminded individuals who supported his Black-centered vision while writing and drawing *The Boondocks* strip.

The discovery of Aaron McGruder’s comic strip falls in line with the of the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement’s networking initiatives. The strip was “discovered” by a woman named Harriet Choice during an impromptu meeting at the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) convention one evening in Chicago (“Aaron McGruder (The Boondocks)”). Since 1975, The NABJ has connected and mobilized Black journalists within the industry, and Aaron McGruder’s career was advanced in this space. Similar to the NABJ, #WeNeedDiverseBooks hopes to have networking meetings to assist emerging Black writers finding their way to becoming published authors. These organizations are beneficial to marginalized professionals because it allows them access to the resources of the privileged class. Aaron McGruder also had a Black editor for his last three compilations of strips: Chris Jackson.
A well renowned editor of huge titles such as Ta Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*; Jay-Z’s *Decoded*; and an anthology titled *Step Into a World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature*, and the founder of the multicultural imprint One World, Chris Jackson has paved the way for many young Black professionals in the publishing business. Meeting Harriet Choice and landing Chris Jackson as an editor are a few of the ways in which Aaron McGruder has benefited from initiatives that are closely in line with that of #WeNeedDiverseBooks. Choice and Jackson are individuals who heard a marginalized voice and knew that it was one that needed to be introduced to the masses—thus *The Boondocks* was put into print and served as the much needed Black radical voice on the funny pages.

Aaron McGruder’s fearless identity politics and execution of Black agency were what activists today mean by “Own Voices.” Looking at his strip—the good, the banned, and the controversial—and the ways in which he dominated a mostly white space, writers and publishers alike have a model of what this genre truly entails. Own Voices essentially means agency—marginalized people strive to write their stories independently and boldly. Recently, books such as *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward are receiving widespread celebration, but there is still work to do in the industry in terms of eradicating the White gaze as it relates to creative and publishing decisions. McGruder has set a prime example of what agency, or Own Voices, looks like in print.

**Conclusion**

*The Boondocks* is a comic strip that follows and challenges already established Black literary traditions, and asserts Blackness amongst the landscape of White mainstream comics. This paper has first, scrutinized the history of the black image in mainstream comics, examined the rich tradition of Black comics as a genre, as well as defined Black agency as it relates to
literature. Secondly, it explored McGruder’s technique of spatial reclamation and how spaces were used to reaffirm a Black identity that was not represented in nationally syndicated newspaper comics. Thirdly, this paper sought to situate The Boondocks in racially concerned literary eras. Together, these observations show how Aaron McGruder, as a Black artist, illustrated Black agency and took a seat at the table; it shows how The Boondocks, a socio-political work of literature, challenged Whiteness on the funny pages.

The album A Seat at the Table was inspired by an incident that stunned Solange who at the time was well known as the younger sibling of superstar, Beyoncé Knowles and daughter of famed music producer, Matthew Knowles. Solange was essentially raised in a space of privilege that fosters a sense of invulnerability. That was until White podcast host Jon Caramanica said about her in regard to speaking out against racism “I went to Solange’s concert and I noted who her audience was, and if I were her, I’d be careful of making these statements because I’d be careful not to bite the hand that feeds me.” (qtd. in Taryn) Solange immediately tuned into what the racially coded speech-policing really signified and would later comment:

And it haunted my mother to hear someone telling her daughter ‘don’t bite the hand that feeds you.’ And also the racial subtleties—[that] are not so subtle—of what that encompasses when you say that to a Black woman. Then you connect it by saying ‘Do you know who’s buying your records?’ So I was essentially being told to shut up” (qtd. in Taryn).

The realization that Black voices are not valued and are silenced within public discursive spaces by Whites, especially in predominantly White spaces, is one that Black Americans have been hyper aware of, have endured, and have fought against. Solange’s Grammy-nominated album challenged this form of silencing and erasure within music.
Like Solange’s album, *The Boondocks* challenged Whiteness as it relates to comics. Although he was writing primarily for Black audiences, McGruder’s readership was mixed, and in addition to comments from Blacks who felt he exposed negative aspects of the Black community, there were various White readers who complained, boycotted, and urged newspapers to pull the comic strip. The controversy that ensued because of Aaron McGruder’s Black opinions comes from the same ideological mindset of White Americans who, as consumers of Black art, felt that Solange should silence herself concerning race in order to maintain that audience. Black musicians and Black comic artists, who speak unapologetically about race, accomplish the same feat. They create an intellectual or political dialogue with White consumers stating that White audiences cannot dictate or filter the artists’ Black identity.

McGruder was aware of the censorship he’d face but would still have the syndicate send the strips out to editors (subtly revised) as means of asserting his Black agency. In his collection of banned strips, he expresses his disappointment at racist double standards held for Black art by White or mainstream editors:

> Violence has always been a part of comics because violence has always been a part of childhood. *Peanuts, Calvin & Hobbes,* and other classic comics have always shown kids knocking the shit out of one another. Even still, I gave in to the syndicate’s requests to keep violence off-panel. Still didn’t help.

> I was a bit upset by the fallout of these [May 31st, 1999] strips, which was so ridiculously overblown. Some said it was the Columbine effect . . . I still believe it was racial double-standard . . . Racial, man . . . racial . . . (McGruder, *All the Rage* 211)

Because young and White audiences would also read the strip, McGruder’s strip was pulled from newspaper when editor’s felt the message was too violent, too unpatriotic, or too “angry” and “Black”. Despite newspaper editors’ attempts to censor his strips, Aaron McGruder created well-
rounded Black worlds consisting of familial bonds, friendships, various settings, culturally specific rhetoric, and humor, countering the American ideal of the background or negatively portrayed Black character. McGruder dominated traditionally White spaces and established a powerful, unforgettable black voice. *The Boondocks* was a comic strip made “for us, by us” and is a distinguished work of political and artistic importance.
Works Cited


“Aaron McGruder on The Boondocks: Cast, Characters, Cartoon, Quotes, Comic Strip (1999).” *YouTube*, uploaded by Way Back, 10 March 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRq1aOB7rLU.


