

# Peace and Spirituality: The Boondocks and Navigating Media Perceptions Associated with Black Masculinity

by

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## Abstract

Positive Black male images are too few and far between and the images that are available are often not discussed in the proper context. Hence, this paper examines both curriculum theory and media literacy through a qualitative analysis that sought to answer the question of what is the curriculum of *The Boondocks*, a U.S. adult animated sitcom based on a comic strip of the same name by looking at the animated series through the lens of critical spirituality and Black masculinity to argue that the series can be understood and used as a curriculum text. The importance of this study is that it allows for a new way of exploring the media text and also a way to examine how critical media literacy and critical spirituality are visible in *The Boondocks* and subsequent curriculum.

Within academic research, specifically educational research, research published that constructs or examines maleness of masculinity has typically been monolithic. Within the *Boondocks* the author sought to challenge many of the traditional narrative surrounding both black maleness and the communities in which they operate. The narrative proposed in the text includes and extends past stereotypical issues that many African American males endure. One primary purpose of this article is to offer counter arguments to the negative conversations that surround the *Boondocks* comic and animated series. Considering most arguments about the text stem from the negative images and language critics find in the series. Furthermore, the conversations surrounding anything positive or hopeful, as it pertains to being a black male, are summarily omitted or restructured as a metanarrative by those who have power. This can be visibly recognized in the media when we look at movement like “Black Live Matter.” Moreover, there is an explicit need to examine critical texts and research that seek to use this media text like the *Boondocks* as an explicit form of curriculum or pedagogical tool. The need for culturally relevant knowledge, pedagogies, practices and text in schools is vitally important.

Although *The Boondocks* are typically understood and critiqued as a Black Nationalist text, the animated series was examined through the lens of critical spirituality and Black Masculinity. An argument has been made that the animated series can be understood and used as a curriculum text to further understand the discourse of maleness and masculinity. This curriculum text has the potential to be used in both traditional education settings and non-traditional atmospheres. The significance of conversations like this are far-reaching and allows for a more inclusive way of exploring the media text. It also provides room for one to examine how critical pedagogy and critical spirituality are visible in the *Boondocks* and when the animated series is viewed as a form of curriculum.

Within the analysis of the research, a discourse analysis offered the best method of analysis because it is openly recognized as a process that the studies language (Gee, 2010). More specifically, the explicit usage of critical discourse analysis (CDA) tenets made the understanding of both cultural and historical context more accessible. CDA “primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk, p. 352). Two specific guiding questions within this study were: how does the language of the *Boondocks* make African American male experiences with spirituality significant or not and in what ways, and second, what is the ideological effect of examining the *Boondocks* animated series through the lens of critical spirituality?

The analysis stemming from the CDA research offers a different outlook on both spirituality and black masculinity. The ultimate goal within this analysis structure was to seek out and give a counter narrative to the narrative surrounding African American media images.

### **Centering the Study: The *Boondocks* Animated Series**

Aaron McGruder created *the Boondocks* comic strip in 1999 and it eventually flourished into an animated series in 2005. The comic strip and animated series were designed and illustrated to mimic the manga/ anime style of comic book artistry. The style of choice may be ironic or purposeful, but it is very apropos because this satirical comic in no way resembles any traditional aspects found in American comic strips. This is supported by the fact that African American involvement in American popular culture has historically been stereotypical and overtly racist. Neither the comic strip nor the television show is in an “American” style.

The comic strip and animated series is composed of three main characters, Huey, Riley, and Granddad. Other characters have significant reoccurring roles in the show and each of them provides a specific context and examination of African American maleness. In addition, their roles help explain the evolution of the show and its characters. It must be noted that all of the primary characters in the animated series are African American males.

The researcher intentionally focuses on African American males and how this text provides the historical and current paradigms associated with the African American male images. The author, Aaron McGruder, has been questioned on his character and the lack of women in his programming, and his response has typically centered on not offering the proper context for the images and media message he would portray in political/ comedic satire. One of the purposes of this analysis is to subject this media text to further critical interrogation. In no way can one relegate the analysis of the Boondocks solely to the controversial and racialized language used. This is not only irresponsible but also diminishes the other isms brought to the discussion during any comic strip or episode. This is one presumable reason as to why the show is no longer in production. Due to Aaron McGruders liberal usage of the “n-word”; the scrutiny of his show and its content has been slanted in both the media and academic research. Although McGruder has reported in several interviews that the original intent for his show is laughter, this is rarely brought into the context of any discussion of race or politics. Interestingly enough, it can also be asserted that Aaron McGruder does not shy away from raising any social and political issues in the comic strip or the television program.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that guides this study is critical spirituality. The understanding of spirituality stems from many epistemological discourses. Multiple denotations of spirituality allow for an interrogation that extends past the traditional definitions. Though many consistently define spirituality within the context of organized religion and relegate the concept to something that is only irrational and indefinable. Although spirituality is a difficult construct to define, confining it to one meaning is dangerous. According to Michael Dantley (2010) “spirituality is the instrument in our lives through which we build connectivity and community with others” (p.214). Philip Wexler (2009) also suggests that the notion of spirituality often associated with one’s souls and is otherwise relegated to labels such as nonmaterial, nonsensual, and nonrational (p. 100). Philip Wexler also refers to spirituality as a “fashionable” term. While the term may be fashionable in one context, Dantley posits, “it is from one's spirituality that compassion, a sense of equity, understanding and passion toward others as well as the life's work to which one has been "called" emanate” (p.214). Clearly the understand and articulation of spirituality and its essential components are varying within the two scholars works. The definition that Michael Dantley offers suggests that spirituality is just as real and participatory as a living human being. Wexler’s assertion that spirituality is not a “fashionable” construct has some validity and causes one to ponder deeper on the denotation of spirituality. Within either conceptualization, spirituality has the potential serve as a foundational component that undergird one’s philosophical base. Furthermore, the latter assertion articulated by Philip Wexler’s spirituality definition indeed has some credence and merit, but there are some limitations to his denotation in that some researchers will assert that operating from strictly an empiricist paradigm is indeed the only way to define or analyze social constructs. For those who unashamedly champion empiricism, the understanding of spirituality will probably never be decided upon nor will the discourse be fully embraced.

Accept the idea that certain issues and discourses are not quantifiable or measurable goes against tenets and beliefs ascribed within empiricism. This explicitly means that one acknowledges that no singular answer, understanding or solution is always quantifiable or measurable.

When choosing to implement Critical Spirituality as a central theoretical framework, there has to be some recognition that there will be an amalgam of the tenets of African American spirituality and critical theory (Dantley, 2010, Stewart, 1997, 1999; West, 1982, 1993, 1999). Michael Dantley (2010) expounds further and clarifies that within a critical spiritual framework that the concept of “critical spirituality” is: “critical” and

... grounded in the notions of the asymmetrical relations of power as demonstrated in the contested terrains of race, class, gender, and other markers of identity. It is 'spiritual' ... active and personal search by educational leaders for meaning, connectedness, resistance, and ultimate transformation of schools and their social milieu that have historically touted a marginalizing and undemocratic hegemony (p.21)

Critical spirituality effectively changes the way the *Boondocks*, masculinity, and curriculum can be viewed and analyzed. From a critical spirituality context, the immediate expectation of growth could be assumed after one has consumed the text and provided with an alternative view of African American maleness. One focal point that was expected to be consistent throughout the analysis would be the theme of spiritual and psychological development. Typically in the *Boondocks* animated series, in the midst of chaos or conflict, each character undergoes, sometimes unexplainably, some fundamental shift that forces him to “critically reflect” on his current situation or life journey. These phenomena are evident in many episodes.

The reflective process used within the *Boondocks* text has the potential to shed light on how African American males potentially use the *Boondocks* as a form of curriculum. In the *Boondocks* text, this occurs with the main protagonist often and it is a hope examining text similar to the *Boondocks*, one can begin to use these discourse/textual analysis techniques in a practical way. Contrary to popular belief, spirituality is a part of student’s everyday experiences. For example, and this is purely hypothetical (because there is no research on the topic to date), if one expands the denotation of “dreams” into a faith based context, a student’s dream is nothing more than an extension of the student’s vision and faith. Both of which are unseen facets. This is one example that is exhibited in the *Boondocks* animated series. This could be an example of critical spiritual pedagogy.

From a curricular standpoint, this discourse analysis is situated and fits well within critical media literacy discourses. This concept theoretically and literally requires one to be culturally aware and responsive. Moreover, it suggests that an educator use culturally relevant pedagogies. Realistically, educational practitioners that minimize curricula possibilities also limit pedagogical possibilities and overall contravene the educational process for all parties involved. It is with this idea that teachers or educators of any kind must comprehend various dimensions of schooling. In other words, the educational practices that are politically motivated and executed must be understood (Kincheloe, 2004, p.2). For this reason, the *Boondocks* animated series serves as a useful media text for students use and deconstructed with culturally competent teacher facilitating the conversation. The usage and understanding of the *Boondocks* within an explicit or implicit curriculum may be an initial challenge due to the mature content but the animated series offers a rich and relative context that reflects the daily experiences of African American males.

## **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Conducting research using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) implies that one can “describe, interpret and explain the relationships within language and important social political and educational issues (Rogers, 2005,p. 1).” Critical discourse analysis contains various methods and approaches that address the educational and social issues that exist within several discourses. Depending on the context, discourse can differ in theory, methodology, and the type of research issues (Fairclough, 2012). The term discourse within the CDA framework focuses on linguistics and the way language functions depending on the context. In this framework, discourse, both reflect and construct the sociopolitical world and are construed through several mediums. In this analysis, the text is the Animated series the *Boondocks*. “Discourses are not just a product, but a set of consumptive, productive, distributive and reproductive processes that are in relation to the social world” (Rogers, 2004, p. 5). This statement affirms that even in this study, contexts, meaning, and discourses are bound to change and adapt. Depending on what type of discourse analysis one ascribes to, the methods and approaches change. “Critical discourse analysts treat language differently than linguists, sociolinguists, or conversation analyst. Discourse within a CDA framework is not a reflection of social contexts but constructs and is constructed by contexts” (Rogers 2004, p. 6). Within this analysis, the ideas set forth by John P. Gee is were conjoined to assist in guiding the analysis.

The examination of the *Boondocks* animated series as a curriculum text and the inquiry into maleness and spirituality are centralized themes. According to Rebecca Rogers (2004), CDA can be seen as both theory and method. However, within this framework, CDA is different from other methods of discourse analysis because “it includes not only a description and interpretation of discourse in context, but also offers an explanation of why and how discourses work” (p. 2).

“Methodologically, the CDA approach entails working in a transdisciplinary “way through dialogue with other disciplines and theories which are addressing contemporary processes of social change” (Fairclough, 2012, p.452). This particular media text addresses an array of social constructs and marginalizing issues. CDA takes into account how language and contexts overlap depending on the situation those involved. Rebecca Rogers (2005) via the research and reference of Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, agreeably promoted eight foundational principles within CDA. Those principles are:

1. Addressing Social Problems
2. Power relations are discursive
3. Discourse constitutes society and culture
4. Discourse is ideological work
5. Discourse is historical
6. Sociocognitive approach is essential to understanding the relationship between texts and society
7. It is a socially committed scientific paradigm (Rebecca Rogers, 2005, p. 2)

Within the Boondocks texts, there are many opportunities to address socially and politically marginalizing issues. According to John P. Gee, he suggests that some approaches to conducting a discourse analysis are often debatable. “Method” according to Gee is not a “set of step-by-step rules,” “it is a set of thinking devices that can be used to investigate certain types of questions, with due regard for how others have investigated such questions, but with adaptations, innovation and creativity as well” (Gee, 1999, p. 9). This article serves as a starting point within the discourse of the Boondocks, maleness and curriculum. The article seeks to show that the “Discourse” surrounding spirituality, maleness and curriculum are currently limited to certain constructs within academic research. What this study sought to accomplish and understand is how society continues to build and reconstruct the world and meaning through language and action. The recognition that discourses are also conveyed through media, nonverbal cues, values and beliefs, is partially the rationale for choosing this methodology (Gee, 1999). This is specifically within the context of curriculum, maleness, and spirituality. Gee continues to assert, “whenever we speak or write,” meaning is constantly being constructed. He puts forth are six constructed area /thing of “reality”. Those six ideas are: “The meaning and value aspect of the material world; activities; identities and relationships; politics (the distribution of social goods); connections; and semiotics” (Gee, 1999, p.12). All six ideas help to place “discourses” into a specific context. There is a resonating fact throughout the rest of Gee’s work that within a discourse analysis “people” inevitably and inherently possess different positionalities due to their experiences and privilege. These experiential or sociopolitical privileges help one to create distinctively different ways of knowing and being, which ultimately dictates the status and positions of power within society.

Gee would assert that the differing levels of social status are the “root source of inequality in society and intervening in such matters can be a contribution to social justice” (Gee, 1999, p.13). Debated in the sense some believe that one should “avoid combining of a model of grammatical and textual analysis (of whatever sort) with sociopolitical and critical theories of society. Others analysts using CDA believe that within the context of education, “combining aspects of sociopolitical and critical theory with rather general (usually thematic) analyses of language not rooted in any particular linguistic background or theory such work is a form of critical discourse analysis” (Rogers, 2005, p.20). The second assertion method is often not believed to be an actual discourse analysis.

Although there is no formal suggested “formula” for conducting CDA, researchers who use CDA are concerned with critical theory within a sociopolitical theoretical framework and epistemology, the understanding and subsequent correlation between language and discourse. Within the construction and representation of the social world, this methodological approach allows one to actively read, describe, interpret and explain the relationship that exists between each construct (Rogers, 2005). The term “critical” in CDA is similar to the way “critical” discourse often examines power relations. In a CDA framework, critical analysts intentionally uncover power relations and expose inequalities embedded in society. It also believes that by doing so, “it ultimately leads to the disruption of systemic and marginalizing power relations within different social contexts” (Rogers, 2005, p. 3). Examining CDA from an educational perspective, scholars have defined the process of education as something that happens formally and informally. They suggest that the learning opportunities experienced in schools can also occur in the community in which they reside. Recognizing that these occur because of their immediate environments as well as the local and national political policies, ultimately shape the way curriculum, schooling, and learning are understood (Rogers, 2005).

There is one specific approach within this analysis and CDA framework that will be used throughout the duration of this analysis and that approach was set forth by John P. Gee. He specifically looks at four analytic tools: social languages, situated meanings, cultural models and discourses. The first tool, Social languages, as explained by Gee is a “way of using language so as to enact a particularly socially situated identity (Gee, 1999; Rogers, 2005). He posits that “enacting and recognizing kinds of people is all about negotiating, guessing and revising guesses about kinds of people; it is all about contesting and resisting being positioned as a certain kind of person” (Rogers, 2005, p. 42). This is an active idea within the *Boondocks* animated series. It is explicitly visible in the way the main protagonist constructs his own identity. It can be understated that social languages and big “D” discourses are different terms and ideas. Social language can be interpreted as the things we learned from explicit or implicit curriculum and the things we say. Discourse, on the other hand, is something typically thought of as a language, but it does constitute so much more. Discourses are usually operated within or are used in tandem with language.

That means discourse are reliant upon and impact the way people of act, interact, value, believe, feel, and with the physical body dictates how one dresses, give off non-verbal cues etc. (Gee, 1999). The second tool, “situated meanings, ” recognizes that within social languages, there are very specific instances where context is imperative. It recognizes that “words” have meanings that are specific and located in the contexts of their usage. An example of this could be the usage of the word “Nigga.” Its usage is explicitly in this context instead of N-word because the two have very different meaning depending on the context and who is using it. This is always highly debated and contextual. This won’t be addressed in this article. It is also used as an example because it is heavily used in the show and shying away from it does a disservice to the creator and the show. Words, phrases, and utterances in use act as clues or cues that guide active construction of meaning (Rogers, 2005). For this particular example and discourse, meaning is constantly being made and reshaped.

The next tools of inquiry used in Gee’s work are cultural models. Cultural models are the usage of situated meanings within a specific social language. According to John Gee (1999; 2005),

Cultural models are not static and are considered fluid or changings...(they change and are adapted to different contexts; Gee 1992) and they are not purely mental (but distributed across and embedded in a socio culturally defined groups of people and their texts and practices.) Cultural models help people determine, often unconsciously, what counts as relevant and irrelevant in given situations. (p. 45)

Cultural models within the context of the Boondocks have and can be viewed in multiple ways. For example, one cultural model that is prevalent in the Boondocks is “Americanness.” The creator and author have always critiqued this cultural model and the critiques sociopolitical implications are often received negatively from those within the dominant group.

The final tool of inquiry used is an explicit discussion and understanding of the term “Discourses.” John P. Gee within his research breaks discourses into two separate terms. He labels them “Big” D” discourses and “Small d” discourses. For this study, there is an emphasis on “Big D” discourses. “Big "D" discourses are always language plus other stuff (Gee, 1999). An example within this study could be Black masculinity or Black male identity construction. If one examines:

language, action, interaction, value, me, symbols, objects, two, and places together such a way that others recognize at title identity engaged to get a type what activity here and now you have pulled off and thereby continued history and if only for a while. (Gee, 1999, p.18)

Regardless, within this discourse of maleness and schooling the images and language that has been used, seen, read, understood, etc., everything must still be similar to the original or similar to other performances representing the “Discourse” and continue to be recognizable by those who inside and outside the discourse. This becomes applicable to curriculum and schooling because discourses are often immersed and visible within social institutions. John P. Gee asserts discourses existed long before the discussion of discourse analysis was apart of academic jargon and will consistently adapt and change. “Discourses, through our words and deeds, carry on conversations with each other through history, and in doing so, form human history (Gee, 1999, p. 18)”. Again, neither this analysis nor the “Discourse” surrounding African American males and curriculum is examined within a historical context. It must be placed in a much larger context and the Boondocks is an excellent reference for doing so. Finally, it must be remembered within this discipline “Discourses are always socially, politically, racially and economically loaded” (Rogers, 2005, p. 7). Such discourses also allow for a rich analysis and can promote or begin a dialogue that is rooted on changing the status quo. CDA very purposeful in the sense that, within the analysis, the analysis does not just focus on what is seen, said, read, or interpreted but also the things that are intentionally and unintentionally left out of the conversation or text.

## **Methodology**

There are many questions provided within a CDA framework that have been considered and omitted from this analysis. What must also be acknowledged within the methodology is that the creator/author ascribes to an African centered/black nationalist model. Both Black Nationalist and African centered ways of thinking allows reading and the context of this textual analysis stems from a theoretical disposition that explicitly interrogates African American maleness and Afrocentric ways of thinking. This paradigm immediately shapes the discussion and places this study within very specific situated meanings, social languages, cultural models, and discourses. One of those discourses that are visible and prominent in this study is Christian theology. Although an understanding of theology is not explained in depth, the context for much of the study stems from the idea of spirituality rooted in Christianity. This understanding of Christianity and spirituality is not rooted in the institution or the church. Because this study also comes from and African American context, spirituality is also examined and influenced by the experiences of African American who endured chattel slavery, the Civil War and any other events in this country’s history.

As a researcher, recognizing that some may interpret this viewpoint as purely religious and in some ideologies, exclusionary. Recognizing that religious institutions and the practices associated with religion, it is vital to understand the practices have and do affect the context in which the Boondocks animated series have been presented and read. Although the experiences of the black church will be discussed further in the study, it will not go any further than that.

The simultaneous usage of biblical scripture and academic theory is done so because most academic literature is considered despiritualized and the goal is to infuse some essence of spirituality within the context and logic tends to attempt to grapple with concepts that need multiple perspectives. Connecting Christian theology and an ethic of social justice to this project helps to connect and guide not only the axiological view but the entire research project. Beginning with the axiological positionality should help begin to illuminate why this study even should exist.

## **Thematic Organization for Analysis**

During the process of conducting the study, several themes arose. Critical Spirituality in the context of curriculum resembled Carlyle Stewart's concept Street Corner Theology. It became noticeable that theology, curriculum, and maleness became self-identifiable terms. Spirituality was noticeable in different visual and auditory cues. These cues occurred in all three seasons analyzed. The spiritually based themes are Critical Reflection (Individual and situational), Prophetic moments, Ethereal Moments, Visions/Dreams, and freeing epiphanies. Each of these themes within the research not only shed light on how the text itself can be a reflective curriculum tool but also an alternative curriculum tool, which addresses several cognitive and social issues unaddressed by traditional curriculum. Through the Boondocks, the linguistic patterns, curriculum, and social implications of the study allowed for an alternative way to conceptually understanding maleness and potentially educating students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. In addition, it gives another tangible and reflective resource that African American males can relate.

## **Explaining “Social Languages” and “Situated Meanings” within The “Boondocks”**

In many mainstream American media, African Americans have historically been marginalized and devalued. Since the interrogation of cultural identity and the intersectionality of media images are at the center of the subject, the analysis of the disproportionate amount of publishing of African American centered comic strips and animated series becomes very important step in understanding the historical context of this animated series. It is paramount to begin with its creator and initial medium. Moreover, because there has always been a multitude of comics and television shows that depict the everyday occurrences of whites and this has not been the case for African Americans.

Within the confines of the definition of “social languages,” those who have historically been able to control the production of media images, also control the narrative associated with the images. The powers to create, disseminate, and ultimately control narrative and images have been essential to the maintenance of power.

It is often reiterated by Douglass Kellner (1995) that, “Media images help shape our view our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil” (p.7). Starting with this rationale, one can suggest that critical media pedagogy and the subsequent praxis within any curriculum or academic environment be helpful. This pedagogical tool has the potential change detrimental psychological and intergenerational practices that have historically hindered and marginalized people relegated to the “subordinate” group. Apprehending and possessing knowledge that change paradigms as well as attaining the ability discern social norms is vital to producing systemic and epistemic adjustments within a hegemonic culture predicated on hedonistic consumerism and whiteness. “Consequently, the gaining of critical media literacy is an important resource for individuals and citizens learning how to cope with a seductive cultural environment” (Kellner, 1995, p.2). The social languages noticeable are exhibited immediately and invariably interwoven in the Boondocks animated series’ language.

The familiarity of this sitcom has propelled people to critically examine “blackness” and “black male identity.” The instant critique of the show is most often reduced to the usage of the word “nigga” Within the context of this show and the Black community the word has taken on its own life. The life and effect of the word have and is continually being shaped because “ownership” of the word is constantly under scrutiny. Within the context of the show and the black community, there are variations on the “derogatory” word. The inflection of one’s voice, the spelling of the word, the user’s position of power or lack thereof all contributes to understanding the context. This discussion becomes even more difficult when introducing the issues of race, class, or sexual orientation. When examining this from the context of maleness, this may become more difficult only because of the historical context associated with the word and the abuse associated with being called a “nigger” in this country. Considering there is a debate among African Americans taking ownership of a derogatory term and repurposing it to be and represent a sense of endearment, it inherently causes a struggle over identity. For some black males, this is quickly attached to their identity. Being the biggest blackest buck and resistant to white supremacy was an identity to be proud. I offer the idea that some African American prefers the image of “Django” to Eugene Allen (The Butler). “For the Black man in this country, it is not so much matter of acquiring manhood as it is a struggle to feel it his own” (Grier & Cobbs, 1969, p.49). This critical media analysis delves into understanding how Aaron McGruder (Creator) constructs, deconstructs, and potentially perpetuates negative and positive assumptions of what the black male identity encompasses. Acquiring literacy in the culture of power requires not only mastering the discourse of whiteness, but learning and performing the habitus of the dominant white culture (Bourdieu, 1977; Delpit, 1988). One media source that openly challenges this notion of whiteness is the sitcom the “Boondocks.”

The popularity of this show has propelled people to critically analyze “blackness,” “whiteness,” “black male identity,” and a multitude of other social constructs. This interrogation process should not just apply to this television show but also other mediums like CNN, textbooks, and other teaching tools. Lisa Delpit (1988) posits the “rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.” The idea of power has resided with people who are recognized as possessing white privilege.

When examining the situated meaning embedded in black masculinity, the term is often associated with hypersexuality, aggressiveness, and violence. Patricia Hill Collins says, “physical dominance aggressiveness and the use of violence to maintain power constitute a central feature in definitions of hegemonic white masculinity that AAM must confront. (2006, p. 86)” For African American males, there are conflicts between whiteness and their own identity. According to bell hooks this is present due to white supremacy and in her text *We Real Cool*, begins her chapter on education and schooling by stating that “more than any other group of men in our society, black males are perceived as lacking in intellectual skills” (hooks, 2004, p.33). When being compared to their white counterparts, black males understanding maleness is immediately compared to a construct that has historically kept away from them. This negative perception associated with education is something that critical spirituality begins to interrogate. The immediate recognition and challenging of asymmetrical power relations within the educational setting is an important component within this analysis. The perception that African American males are incapable of achieving in school (based on a Eurocentric conceptualization of success) is predicated on “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture” (hooks, 2004, p. 34). Even though the dominance bell hooks speaks of is directly related to ones’ sense of identity in society, it is evident that the dominance has transferred into the classroom.

When adapting the aforementioned idea about identity to the idea of spirituality, it is easy to see the images of spirituality present throughout the animated series. From the moment the some episodes start, there was a spiritual sense of reflection. Episode like, *Stinkmeaner Strikes Back*, *Passion of the Ruckus* and *Return of the King*, most of the characters in these episodes either started or traversed through some reflective experience. Both situated meaning and social languages are used. Looking at one particular episode, *Passion of the Ruckus* (using Uncle Ruckus as a primary example), I find that his ethereal experiences occur at the beginning and the end of the episode. Other characters like Riley Freeman (brother of Huey Freeman) feels this throughout the animated series and it directly deals with maleness and sexuality within the African American experience. These experiences are in direct conflict to traditional Hip-Hop conceptualization of maleness and masculinity. Needless to say, Riley Freeman is an example when examining the social construction of maleness. Returning to the reference, Uncle Ruckus, he also is a walking contradiction because he openly acknowledges his positionality within the African diaspora and the white supremacist power structure. The social language he possesses is reflective of the racist ideologies he ascribes.

The situating meaning when examining the totality of Uncle Ruckus's character suggests that his identity and language are very complicated. His positionality and conceptualization of maleness and spirituality are complex. His ideologies are engrained and aligned with white supremacist thoughts. The difference between Uncle Ruckus and any other character is that he openly denies every aspect of his Africanness. Therefore, his identity is established not by who he is but by what he was taught to believe. He openly accepts that he must "embrace" hating the marginalized aspects of his past and current paradigms associated with people of the same descent. Throughout the episode, the character's positionalities have been a part of the various ontological perspectives about African American males. This being the case, some psychological and spiritual interventions/shifting. Specifically for Uncle Ruckus, this occurred in the way of being struck by lightning. The narration before he gets struck by lightning goes:

**Uncle Ruckus:** Now let us pray. Lord, I have spent my whole life hating you for making me black. And now I see I must hate myself and all those like me, and cause them misery just like your savior Ronald Reagan did. And if any of my words don't come directly from the almighty God himself, then may I be struck by lightning right this very instant! Halle.... Aahhhhhhm<sup>1</sup> (Boondocks, Oct. 19, 2007)

In this scene, it becomes obvious the curriculum that he had been taught. Even though Uncle Ruckus is clearly an African American male, he still never concedes to he was indeed black. His desire to receive no help from a person of color (his best friend Robert Freeman, a black man). The reaction Uncle Ruckus gave off after being struck by lightning (apparently by white Jesus) it served as affirmation that he was contradicting himself the entire time by denying his blackness.

When examining the psychological matters interwoven into this episode, one must understand how the impact of media affects minorities. Spirituality or spiritual intervention impacts the individual. For example, the way the character Uncle Ruckus reacted would never be the same as Huey, Riley or Tom throughout the episode. From a spirituality context, spiritual "enlightenment" has to be a personal goal and desire to achieve. The fact that there has been a constant attack on African American males within the media and educational realm, a constant critique of power structures is necessary to garner change. Aaron McGruder purposely made this an integral cog within his agenda and the inception of the comic strip/ animated series. "The critique of hegemonic relationships relies on the acceptance of an ethic of social justice. Incorporating the "notions of social justice, explicitly troubles the field of education through the acrid interrogation of the issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and other signifiers of identity" (Dantley, 2007, p.159). What is accomplished with the contradictory nature of Uncle Ruckus and the other characters is that each provides an image that forces one to critically question personal motives.

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Researcher conducted episode transcription but other online references provide different transcriptions that offer additional commentary and interpretations. Those references are noted in the works cited. They were not used because the researcher felt some commentary used, offered an alternative interpretation to the text.

## “Cultural Models and Understanding “Discourses” Within The Text

Reflecting on the character Uncle Ruckus once again, it is through his active denial and open confession of white supremacist ideologies, that makes him an easy to reference as a cultural model. Moreover, he can be used to understand the discourse of racism easily. It is his intense level of complexity that spirituality can be used. Immediately, it can be reasserted, that throughout many of the episodes, there is universal discussion and connection to participating in a self-reflective process. Interestingly enough, Uncle Ruckus somehow possesses a belief that if “minorities” were able to examine themselves, they would eventually gain the skills to address their own problems. In Uncle Ruckus’s mind, this form of critical self-reflection delves into the realm of common sense and spirituality. I am not in complete disagreement with Uncle Ruckus’s positionality but my analysis of the satirical content and the overall epistemological/ ontological underpinnings of the satirical show says that it will take an afro centered approach instead of an ideology rooted in white supremacy. Those changes within the African American community are indeed vital, but it must be rooted in finding one own identity. Some race based theories uses a self-reflective process, as well. Specifically, critical race scholars inspect “the interplay of power and authority within minority communities and movements” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 51). Automatically, the analogy of “crabs in a bucket” can be made when thinking of how African American see other being successful. According to Uncle Ruckus, this can be avoided if the Black community consciously chooses disregard himself in the “white man’s world. ” Every time Uncle Ruckus opens his mouth, he preaches publicly or visits a talk show to express his views on Blonde haired, blue-eyed Jesus, he reaffirms the power associated with hegemony. In the animated series, multiple episodes discuss this same sentiment. Uncle Ruckus as a character explicitly fundamentally embodies contradictions and complexity. This is only one prominent image has been visible and part of the discourse in the Boondocks. Characters like Huey Freeman use open methods of reflection. He on several occasions engages in spiritual events that other characters do not experience. In the aforementioned episode, Tom Dubois is the other individual who is directly impacted by a spiritual encounter. It is through this experience that the characters all experience various conceptualizations of maleness and spirituality. It is through these individuals that an understanding of a healthy form of spirituality and maleness can be deduced. It must be recognized that these experiences are rarely easy or occur quickly. In the forthcoming dialogue, the discussion of a spiritual encounter is understood and culminated by the recognition of a peaceful spirit. Although spiritual “peace” is brought about in a convoluted capacity, it is yet established between two of the most conflicted characters.

**Ghostface Killah:** I can’t believe you haven’t figured this shit out yet. Peace.

**Possessed Tom Dubois:** (not visible) You got an imaginary friend?

**Huey Freeman:** Peace. Peace. Stinkmenaer, you hate black people, don't you?

**Possessed Tom Dubois:** I sure do! I mean, I hate everyone in general, but black people especially.

**Huey Freeman:** And Ruckus, you hate black too?

**Uncle Ruckus:** I wouldn't exactly call them people, but yeah. Yes, I have a deep distaste for Negros.

**Huey Freeman:** Right and Stinkmeaner, you hate rap music?

**Possessed Tom Dubois:** If you can call that stinky booty gorilla noise music.

**Uncle Ruckus:** (laughs at possessed Tom's comment) Stinky booty. I must say that's a brilliant observation, Meaner.

**Huey Freeman:** (narrating) I have forgotten that a nigga moment cannot be resolved through violence, but where there is harmony and peace.

In the discussion of both cultural models and discourses, the cultural models most recognizable are associated with maintaining whiteness. It could also be asserted that blackness can be equated to subjugation. The sociopolitical implication for such ideologies allows for an open interrogation of both race and racism. What Huey recognized after much critical examination is that Uncle Ruckus and Colonel Stinkmeaner's commonality are rooted in spiritual peace. The implications for a spiritual approach reaffirm that it is through spiritual practices that African American have historically found solutions to their problems.

## **Significance and Future Implication For Analysis**

The readings of the Boondocks text, the idea that growth is ever present and occurs often. These shifts often come unbeknownst to the characters in the show. I believe this analysis has the potential to develop the curriculum discourse. There is an abundance of educational research that discusses culturally relevant pedagogy, but there isn't much research that discusses the different mediums like the Boondocks that students find representative of their everyday experience. In closing, spirituality and the Boondocks are not two concepts most would immediately put together. By doing so, you thoroughly expand how spirituality, maleness and curriculum may be viewed.

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