

Where has all the great black satire gone?

by *Mychal Denzel Smith*



***The Boondocks** was an American adult animated sitcom on the Cartoon Network. It was created by Aaron McGruder, based upon his comic strip of the same name. The show involves a black family, the Freemans, settling into the fictional, peaceful, and mostly white suburb of Woodcrest. The perspective offered by this mixture of cultures, lifestyles, social classes, stereotypes, viewpoints and racial identities provides for much of the series' satire, comedy, and conflict.*

Last night saw the airing of the 62nd annual prime time Emmy awards. The critically-acclaimed comedy 30 Rock was nominated for “Best Comedy Series” for the fourth time in as many years (it was unseated from its throne by the new series Modern Family). The increasingly popular show features the talents of Emmy winners Tina Fey, Alec Baldwin, and nominee Tracy Morgan, who portrays a character known as Tracy Jordan, a rich black comedian known as much for his childish antics as his broad comedic abilities.

In this setting, Jordan is used as a satirical look at black actors/comedians and their behavior in the white-dominated entertainment industry. He often complains of racism, indulges in debauchorous behavior with strippers, and is accused of fathering children out of wedlock, among other things. The character has been simultaneously criticized and praised—at times being written off as another stereotypical representation of black men and a brilliant use of satire to observe and send up the way Hollywood views and treats black celebrities.

With 30 Rock entering its fifth season, I think about the Tracy Jordan character and its longevity in comparison to other popular satirical representations of black life, namely Chappelle’s Show, which went off the air after two seasons, and the recently wrapped animated series The Boondocks, which managed to last three. I have to wonder if the Jordan character can maintain its freshness, humor, and bite or will it meet an early demise like that of its satirical brethren. And that leads me to the larger question: is black satire built to last?

Consider Chappelle’s Show. After two hugely successful seasons which propelled Dave Chappelle to “funniest man in America” status and set records with the DVD sales. But with a new \$50 million contract in hand for the production of a third season, Chappelle bolted without warning, taking a highly publicized and rumor laden trip to South Africa. In his first interview after returning stateside, Chappelle spoke to Oprah about his decision to quit the show. Part of his reasoning was that during the filming of a sketch in which faeries encouraged various peo-

ple of different ethnic groups to participate in stereotypical behavior, Chappelle noticed a white crew member laughing in a way that made the comedian uncomfortable. He said it was at that moment he felt he was doing something “socially irresponsible” with his art.

But Chappelle wasn't doing anything different than what his prior work would suggest. The difference, as William Jelani Cobb, a professor of history at Spelman College and author of the recent book *The Substance of Hope: Barack Obama and the Paradox of Progress*, noted in his 2006 essay “The Devil and Dave Chappelle” was the audience. Where the first two seasons spoke to an audience that was “in on the joke”, the audience that tuned in after the infamous Rick James parody was a bit less savvy and aware of Chappelle's intent in using satire. Were the original audience could appreciate the nuance and sociopolitical underpinnings of the “Black Bush” sketch in which Chappelle imagines the backlash that would be received had former President George W. Bush been black, the new audience seemed to only respond to his less intellectual work. And rather than play into that and become the very thing that he was attempting to skewer, Chappelle left.

In contrast, *The Boondocks*, seemed to overstay its welcome in fall into the exact trap that Chappelle consciously avoided. Noted scholar R. L'Heureux Lewis, a professor of sociology and black studies at the City College of New York, says “Black satire is one of the most complex forms of social commentary and the first two seasons of *The Boondocks* added to a long legacy of black satire,” but adds that the third season “sacrificed the multi-layered appeal of satire for fast laughs.”

For me, *The Boondocks* started losing its appeal during the second season, when I could notice a shift in focus from the stories centered around the Huey character, pre-teen revolutionary in the making who often served as the show's moral center, to the periphery characters such as the self-hating Uncle Ruckus who often



Dave Chappelle

voiced harsh critiques of the black community in ways that would make Bill Cosby blush. The show was losing its satirical edge, in my eyes, in favor of cheap laughs that, as Lewis says, “leave the masses laughing but seldom questioning.” Many fans felt dismayed with the way in which the third and final

season played out. Writer

Roland Laird seemed to disagree with this sentiment, however, writing for *Popmatters.com*: “This ability to sharply comment on race and society while at the same time poking fun at black and white people is part and parcel of the subversive comic tradition.” Laird is entitled to his opinion, of course, but I think something huge was missing from that season. “Satire has a purpose. It's not only to bring light to the absurd, it's also to turn it on its ear in order to show the correct order,” says writer and pop-culture critic Bassegy Ikpi, “What McGruder did this season was highlight the absurd and then become part of it.”

McGruder seemed to have left the realm of satire in favor of ridicule, denigration, and contempt for the consumers of his show. “I think satire is often what people do to folk with more power or status than them,” Cobb says, and McGruder stopped tuning the great deal his attention to those in power and projected it on those he essentially saw as less sophisticated than himself. The result appealed to certain

people looking for a laugh at any expense, but for viewers like myself who appreciated the cartoon for its ability to provide keen insight into the sticky fields of race, culture, and politics, it no longer suited our sensibilities.

The shared thread between Chappelle and McGruder is that, essentially, the satire became too much. Whether the fault of the audience or the ability of the artists, their shows burned brightly for a brief period and bowed out, possibly before they had a chance to fulfill their potential. With only two or three seasons to their credit, respectively, their short-lived statuses make me wonder how Tracy Jordan has managed to escape that fate and remain interesting and entertaining for at least four years.

“Tracy Morgan does a brilliant job as this composite of black comedians,” Ikpi says, “so much so that you are often surprised and pleased when you spot it.” The key has been building a character that is as complex as the black community itself. Jordan plays on stereotypes, de-

fies them, creates new ones, dismantles that identity, and starts all over. Where he was once played a millionaire playboy, he’s now a devoted family man who wishes to win an Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony (referred to as the “EGOT”). He becomes equally as known for his raunchy comedic offerings as his role as a father. The writers have avoided playing him as one-note, and so far it has worked.

Black satire will likely always be an arduous undertaking and require a certain sensitivity and deft craftsmanship. “Satire works in part by taking a real trait and exaggerating it,” Cobb says, “But what do you do with black folk whose culture and ways have already been elasticized and exaggerated before you even start with the joke?”

My guess is, we’ll just have to play it by ear and enjoy a few laughs along the way.