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13 December 2024

Homophobia, Hip Hop and Hard to Swallow Pills

In 2005, writer Aaron McGruder created *The Boondocks*, an animated show renowned for its witty social commentaries. However, one episode stands heads and shoulders above the rest. The episode, “The Story of Gangstacious Part 2”, satirizes homophobia in hip hop culture. Homophobia in hip hop culture has been a long standing issue for a while, and is often perpetuated by fans who often cannot come to terms with openly gay rappers. There are 3 central characters to this story, Riley, a rebellious 8 year old boy who has a very strong connection to hip hop culture, and is a large fan of the rapper gangstacious. The rapper Gangstacious himself, who in a previous episode hinted at his homosexuality. The final character is Heuy who is Riley’s twin brother who is much more calm than his brother. The episode in question is about Riley coming to terms with the sexuality of his favorite rapper. At the beginning of the episode Gangstacious sends Riley a bunch of new clothes, many of which are described as gay by the characters in the show. Riley continues to receive these shipments, along with some of his other friends. Riley, and eventually his friends wear this gear proud, despite others telling him he looks gay. However, later in the episode there is a big public revelation that Gangstacious is gay, which Riley eventually comes to terms with Gangstaciousness’s sexuality, however it leaves him feeling like he is gay. Throughout the episode the writers use many satirical techniques to

paint a caricature of hip hop culture through Riley, and how irrational, obsessive, and homophobic many hip hop fans, and the culture at large is.

Throughout the episode the writers make use of satirical strategies such as hyperbole and incongruity to highlight the ludicrousness of Riley's actions. In the beginning of the episode it has been established Riley on some level was aware gangstalcious was gay, admitting he saw gangstalcious kiss another man, but later retconning his statement by saying he dreamed it. However, as it is revealed later in the episode, Riley is of the belief that by admitting gangstalcious is gay, and being a fan of his music, it would make Riley gay by association. This leads into the main conflict of the episode of Riley, and to a larger extent many other hip hop fans, continually being in denial, even as the evidence piles up. This is represented by Riley's changes in wardrobe as he pushes himself into denial more and more, and to a lesser extent other hip hop fans. This is first seen when Riley first gets this new shipment of clothes from gangstalcious, which consist of a crop top, which Riley claims is a wife beater, and a handbag (6:45-7:00). While these do seem very feminine, they could reasonably be seen as not stereotypically feminine or homosexual. Men's bags have existed for a while, and so have short shirts, although not to the extent presented in the episode. This first step into hyperbole is further pushed by a conversation he has with three other fans of Gangstalcious, who are dressed in more stereotypical masculine clothing. These consist of white t-shirts, jeans, chains, and the physical builds of these men are all similar with them being rather tall and muscular. This is contrasted with Riley, being comparatively shorter, less muscular, and dressed much more feminine. This incongruity is further cemented as the three fans stand in similar traditionally masculine poses with their hands together and are standing in a row, while Riley stands opposite to them with his hand on his waist, again traditionally feminine or homosexual (7:10-7:50). This hyperbole is

pushed even further later in the episode when Riley begins to wear skirts, along with his crop top and handbag, and even later in the episode where he's shown painting his toenails. These are all representations of Riley going further and further to justify his belief in gangstalcious being straight. This belief is partly due to an internalized homophobia Riley has, which the authors also use to compound on the comedy present.

The authors use the satirical techniques of reversal and dramatic irony to further the comedy by building on the audience's knowledge of the characters. Given that this is the second season and 13th episode of *The Boondocks*, the characters up to this point have been well defined and characterized by the writers, and the audience is very familiar with these characterizations. Up to this point part of Riley's character has been his homophobia, and the authors use this to add to the humor of the episode, adding a layer of reversal to the main plot. This is even poked at by the writers, who in the beginning of the episode when Huey points out it's weird that Riley of all people doesn't think gangstalcious is gay, and then the show pauses and a brief montage of Riley calling things gay is played (4:04-4:20). Riley, who calls something or someone gay on a nearly episode by episode basis does not recognize gangstalcious, or the things he's doing as gay. He does not recognize wearing a crop top, nail polish, or a skirt as gay. He does not recognize using a handbag, or pearls, or standing with a hand on his hip as gay. This adds to the writer's use of reversal throughout this entire piece, and puts on display just how dedicated Riley is to denying Gangstalcious being anything but straight. The audience knows that normally Riley would be completely against this behaviour, but here he isn't acting rationally because he is desperate to prove gangstalcious isn't gay. This desperation is made humorous within itself by the writer's use of dramatic irony. Early in the episode it is heavily implied gangstalcious is gay, but later in the episode it is confirmed with him being in bed with

another man, both shirtless (9:19-9:34). This creates dramatic irony in the episode, armed with the knowledge of gangstacious's sexuality, it adds a layer of humor to Riley's actions. He is no longer a homophobic person believing he's acting straight, he is a homophobic person acting like a gay man, believing he is acting in a completely straight manor. This sticky sexuality situation solidifies a subtle satirical setting such that it can be taken advantage of by many of the future parts of the episode. This is mostly done through visual humor, as has been discussed previously, with many other moments of incongruity. However, this behaviour by Riley is not just used for comedic effect, but to scrutinize hip hop culture as a whole. Subsequently this sticky sexuality situation succeeds in symbolically shining a satirical spotlight showcasing scrutiny of non-straight sexualities in hip hop culture.

The story of Riley in this episode is modeled as a caricature of hip hop audiences, and the writers use this to satirize the homophobia present in hip hop culture. Throughout the show Riley is also shown to be very in tune with hip hop culture, even going so far to be a caricature of it oftentimes, this being one of them. Riley being in denial for the majority of this episode represents how slow hip hop culture is to acknowledging gay individuals. Many fans and executives alike will simply refuse to believe it, and make excuses for the artist or simply turn a blind eye. This in itself is brought up by the writers, who add 3 brief segments to the show of a parody for a documentary, by the name of "I love gay rappers". This show throughout its 3 minisegments, amounting to a tad over three minutes of run time, discusses two fictional rappers and it being made public of their homosexuality(3:17-3:32, 12:32-12:48, 20:07-20:08). In the interviews the artists are being interviewed and they say that in order for hip hop to be accepting of gay artists, someone needs to come out of the closet openly and have their fanbase stand behind them. However, this is rarely the case as many audiences, especially those ingrained in

hip hop culture are either in denial or distance themselves from the artist. This behaviour is the exact behavior shown by Riley over the course of the show, only to the extreme. Riley is acting like a clear caricature of the homophobia in hip hop culture and how dedicated audiences would react to changes in the status quo they personally aren't comfortable with due to their biases.

In conclusion, the writers of *The Boondocks* use many satirical techniques to effectively satirize homophobia in hip hop through using Riley as a caricature.

Works Cited:

"The Story of Gangstacious Part 2." The Boondocks, created by Aaron McGruder, season 2, episode 13, Sony Pictures Television, 2008.