

Race, Whiteness, “Lightness,” and Relevance: African American and European American Interpretations of *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks*

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□—African American and European American participants were interviewed about two syndicated comic strips written by and featuring African Americans: *Jump Start*, a comic strip that portrays African Americans in a normative middle-class family narrative and focuses only occasionally on racial issues, and *The Boondocks*, a comic strip that focuses frequently on racial issues. The African American groups interpreted the comic strips through the terministic screen of race cognizance, through which racial politics and oppression were highly relevant. Almost all of the European American participants, however, interpreted the comic strips through the terministic screen of Whiteness, through which racial politics and oppression were not relevant.

U. S. media representations of African Americans in the television age, as various critics have argued, have been tailored to minimize the level of discomfort for European American audience members (see Gray, 1995; MacDonald, 1992; Riggs, 1991). As per the norms of the corporate media system, producers have feared that representations not tailored to the White gaze would draw poor ratings or lose sponsorship. At one time in history, fear of offending European Americans—especially Southerners—kept African

American programming to a minimum; for example, in 1957, the Nat King Cole Show was pulled off the air after just one year because it was unable to attract a consistent sponsor (see MacDonald, 1992, pp. 64–71).

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; as Gray argued, “representations of blackness operate squarely within the boundaries of middle-class patriarchal discourses about ‘whiteness’ as well as the historic racialization of the social order” (1995, p. 9). In other words, representations of African Americans in the U. S. me-

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dia have been tailored so that the representations seem more *relevant* to European American audience members.

Historically, the syndicated comic strip has served as a medium where African Americans met ridicule, and only recently have African Americans become authors of and protagonists in a handful of comic strips (see McLean, 1998). Robb Armstrong's *Jump Start*, which runs in over 250 newspapers, features Joe and Marcy Cobb, a police officer and nurse, and their young children, Sunny and JoJo. Armstrong downplays race, and the strip is marketed overtly to a broad audience. As the back cover of the *Jump Start* collection promises readers, "If you come from a strange and funny family (and who doesn't) you'll love the family in *Jump Start*. This collection chronicles lives that seem so familiar, you'll start checking your home for surveillance devices" (Armstrong, 1997).

In contrast, since its strikingly successful debut in over 160 papers in 1999, Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks* has provoked controversy in newspapers and on the Internet, especially on *www.boondocks.net*—as Cornwell & Orbe (2002) argued in their analysis of African American readers' comments on this website. *The Boondocks* features elementary student Huey Freeman, a precocious, politically conscious African American boy, who moves with his grandfather and younger brother Riley from Chicago to a lily-white suburb called Woodcrest. *The Boondocks* focuses primarily on racial issues, and the target audience of the strip is African American. As McGruder stated, "White folks can run along and catch up. If they get it, that's fine. The strip shows them how much they don't know about black

people, but it doesn't teach them about black people" (Simpkins, 2001, p. 42).

In this study, I conducted interviews with groups of European Americans and African Americans about *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks*. Most European American participants liked *Jump Start*, found it relevant, and applauded its lack of focus on race. Conversely, they strongly disliked *The Boondocks*. African American participants disagreed on whether each strip represented African Americans positively, but felt *The Boondocks* was more relevant to their experiences than *Jump Start*. In this study, I analyze how the participants interpreted the comic strips through what Burke (1966) defined as different "terministic screens." Participants' interpretations were shaped by the degree to which they found racial oppression relevant.

Relevancy and Terministic Screens

Relevancy research originated from Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding hypothesis (1973/1993), in which Hall posited that although audience members are most likely to interpret media texts in ways that reify dominant ideology, they also may interpret media texts through an oppositional ideological framework, or may negotiate readings that call into question some aspects of dominant ideology. While theorists such as Fiske have argued that the media serve as a "semiotic democracy" in which multiple interpretations are likely and frequent (1987, p. 324), other theorists (e. g. Condit, 1989; Harms and Dickens, 1996; Rivera-Perez, 1996) have problematized the likelihood and the frequency that audience members will interpret texts in ways that call into question dominant ideology.

As Morley (1992) argued, an underestimated factor in understanding audience members' willingness or ability to interpret texts oppositionally is the degree to which people from different social backgrounds find a text *relevant* (pp. 136–137). A growing body of research indicates that members of marginalized groups tend to see oppression as highly relevant when interpreting media texts, while members of non-marginalized groups do not find oppression relevant. In other words, people from different social backgrounds understand the way oppression relates to issues such as race, gender, and sexual orientation through what Kenneth Burke (1966) defined as "terministic screens."

Terministic screens are vocabularies that are particular to members of socioeconomic, cultural, professional, or other kinds of groups. Within these vocabularies, group members understand aspects of "reality" in different ways because each terministic vocabulary encourages members to "select" portions of "reality" while "deflecting" others (p. 45). Terministic screens are ideological in that the vocabularies of terministic screens can promote or challenge cultural norms or dominant power structures. For example, Schiappa (1989) argued that the Reagan administration fostered acceptance of nuclear power and weaponry by framing these issues within a terministic screen that deflected attention from the horrors of nuclear war (p. 258). Conflict may arise when groups who speak through competing terministic screens cannot understand each other's vocabulary; for example, Bello (1996) argued that the rhetoric of the "political correctness" debate has become polarized because members from each side understand the de-

bate through incompatible terministic screens.

As Burke argued, terministic screens are analogous to color filters that allow certain aspects of the photographic "reality" to shine, while obscuring other aspects of the reality:

When I speak of terministic screens, I have particularly in mind some photographs I once saw. They were *different* photographs of the *same* object, the difference being that they were made with different color filters. Here something so "factual" as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending on which color filter was used for the documentary description of the event being recorded. (1966, p. 45)

This analogy of a color filter lends itself appropriately to the discussion of race—and other identity issues as well. Some terministic screens serve as vocabularies that select or highlight racial politics and oppression, while others serve as vocabularies that deflect attention from racial issues. Although relevancy research has not drawn upon the concept of terministic screens, the findings of this research indicate that minority group members tend to filter identity issues through terministic screens within which oppression is relevant, while majority group members tend to filter identity issues through terministic screens within which oppression is not relevant.

For example, in an audience-analysis of a gay-themed teleplay, Cohen (1991) found that gay viewers selected issues relating to gay oppression, such as a character's homophobia. Heterosexual viewers deflected these issues in their interpretation, and instead selected issues they found relevant, such as how AIDS affects heterosexuals. In an audience-analysis of Spike Lee's film *Do The Right Thing*, Cooper (1998) ar-

gued that African American viewers selected several scenes they felt were relevant examples of racial oppression, but because many European American and Hispanic viewers did not identify with these scenes or select them as examples of oppression, they evaluated the film as racist and violent. In an audience-analysis of the film *Thelma and Louise*, Cooper (1999) found that women selected scenes they felt were relevant examples of sexism, sexual violence, and female friendship, but because male viewers did not select these scenes or find them relevant, many interpreted the film as an irrational exercise in man-bashing. In comparing African American and European American reactions to a news feature about realty discrimination, Lind (1996) found that within their differing terministic screens, African Americans found the feature relevant because it related to broad discrimination issues, while many European Americans found the feature irrelevant because it took place in another city and because they were not purchasing homes.

In this study, I found that African American participants interpreted *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks* within the terministic screen of what Frankenberg (1993) has called "race cognizance." Most European American participants, however, tended to interpret these comic strips through a terministic screen that various theorists (e. g. Frankenberg, 1993; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Jackson, 1999; Warren, 2001) have called "Whiteness."

Race Cognizance Versus Whiteness

In a series of interviews about race with European American women, Frankenberg (1993) identified three discourses about race that reflect racial

discourse throughout U. S. culture. Each discourse may be understood as a terministic screen that filters how different Americans make sense of racial issues. One 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" (p. 157). This discourse, argued Frankenberg, is not common among European Americans. A second discourse, "essentialist racism," focuses on perceived biological inequalities, and is regarded as unacceptable by most Americans. Most common among European Americans, argued Frankenberg, is the discourse of "color-evasiveness," marked by phrases such as "I'm color-blind," "I don't see color," and "We're all the same."

This discourse of color-evasiveness is a primary component of what theorists call the rhetoric of "Whiteness." Shome (1993) defined Whiteness as "the everyday, invisible, subtle, cultural, and social practices, ideas, and codes that discursively secure the power and privilege of European Americans, but that strategically remain unmarked, unnamed, and unmapped in contemporary society" (p. 503). On one level, Whiteness functions as a normative category that "Others" are measured against. Many European Americans see race as something people of color have, but that they themselves do not. The standards of European American culture, which many European Americans perceive as race-neutral and "normal," are perceived as general societal norms, while the standards of minorities are seen as culturally specific and exclusionary. For example, through the terministic screen of Whiteness, common African American women's names such as Yolanda

or Keisha may be perceived as "Black" names, while common European American names such as Jennifer or Amy may be perceived as racially-neutral names that are "for everybody."

Although color-evasive discourse can be well-meaning, argued Frankenberg, this discourse functions hegemonically to promote racial hierarchy. By asserting that "we're all equal," European Americans fail to problematize the racial inequalities and "White privilege" from which they benefit. This White privilege manifests itself in the economic "possessive investment in Whiteness," which Lipsitz (1998) argued results in "cash value" for European Americans through everything from discriminatory housing markets, to inequitable education, to insider business networks, to intergenerational wealth (p. vii). According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2001), while the average 1999 European American family income was \$40,816, the average African American income was \$27,910. White privilege also manifests itself in everyday matters of dignity, which, as McIntosh (1998, pp. 79–81) argued, include freedom from harassment from traffic cops and security guards, the ability to find "flesh" colored bandages, and the freedom to not be judged on the basis of race. Furthermore, the discourse of Whiteness also functions to blame minorities for their lack of success in a society where "we're all the same"; as Rodriguez argued, "We are told that all people are the same under the skin and that we all have the same equal chances of making it. Therefore, the 'logic' continues, if a minority person fails to achieve, then the blame lies *solely* with the individual" Rodriguez (2000, p. 9). This is similar to Jhally and Lewis's (1992)

argument that the successful African American family on *The Cosby Show* serves as evidence to many European Americans that "The American Dream" is achievable by all.

Another characteristic of the discourse of Whiteness is that it reduces the systemic phenomenon of racism to the behavioral problems of individuals who participate in the discourse of essentialist racism. By simplifying racism as behavior, one avoids critiquing the power structure of White privilege; as Warren (2001) argued, "If one reduces racism to intent. . . whites hold no responsibility for the perpetuation of racism and therefore they are free to keep inequities in place through their own inaction" (p. 103). Similarly, Madison (1999) argued that mainstream films with "anti-racist-White-heroes" fail to critique systemic White privilege, and instead present a conflict in which an extremely racist individual is defeated by a European American hero.

Gray (1995) identified three ways that African Americans typically have been portrayed in the media—the first two reflecting the "we're all the same" terministic filter of Whiteness. One discourse, "assimilation and the discourse of invisibility," features African American characters who are removed from African American culture, community, and politics (p. 85). In the "pluralist or separate-but-equal discourse" African American characters live together in "domestically-centered black worlds and circumstances that essentially parallel those of whites," while rarely focusing on issues specific to African American culture, especially racism (p. 87). A less common third discourse, which reflects the terministic screen of race cognizance, is the discourse of "multiculturalism/diversity" in which African American characters are "the au-

thors of and participants in their own notions of America and what it means to be an American" (p. 89). Shying away from the normative middle-class ideal, these representations feature many aspects of African American culture and politics and portray "complex, even contradictory, perspectives and representations of black life in America" (p. 90).

Thus, "Whiteness" serves as a terministic screen through which many European Americans understand racial issues. This terministic screen serves as a color filter that deflects attention from racial oppression in a manner that promotes White privilege. Conversely, the terministic screen of race cognizance serves as a color filter that highlights or selects the ways that race makes a difference in people's lives and challenges White privilege. Through the filter of the terministic screen of Whiteness, racial oppression and White privilege are not relevant, because "we're all the same." Through the filter of the terministic screen of race cognizance, racial oppression and White privilege are quite relevant.

Jump Start vs. The Boondocks

Jump Start falls into Gray's "pluralist-or-separate-but-equal" category. Similar to the ubiquitous European American family strips that dominate the funnies page, *Jump Start* focuses on a family entrenched in a middle-class lifestyle. As portrayed in the sample of strips in the *Jump Start* anthology (Armstrong, 1997), the strip's humor revolves around familiar middle-class situations; the birth and early days of Marcy and Joe Cobb's daughter Sunny (pp. 5–9), going to church (p. 26), buying a house (pp. 85–93) and an SUV (pp. 93–97).

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. Notably, one of the few racial issues discussed in the strip is interracial marriage, a topic inclusive of European Americans. When Marcy and Joe befriend their interracial neighbors, Clarence and Charlene, Clarence tells them that "some people act real stupid around us." Marcy responds, "When they act stupid, it's not an act" (p. 85). As Frankenberg argued, the discourse of "color-evasiveness" often is promoted by those who discursively separate themselves from "essentialist racists." Here, Marcy and Joe separate themselves discursively from "stupid" individuals; at the end of the strip, the two couples are pictured close together, smiling, with Clarence's arm around his European American wife and his new African American friends. Racism here is a behavioral issue that will be resolved when more "color-blind" people like Marcy and Joe befriend their interracial neighbors.

Although they live in what appears to be a middle-class, integrated neighborhood in a large metro area, Marcy and Joe never encounter the indignities of White privilege. Joe is never pulled over unfairly by the police in his expensive new SUV. In fact, in *Jump Start*, Joe is the police. In one strip, as Joe handcuffs an African American suspect, the man accuses Joe's European American partner of being racist. Joe, laughing and smiling, responds, "Crunchy isn't the least bit prejudiced. He's equally offensive to all of our suspects!" (p. 117). The punchline fo-

cuses on Crunchy's characteristic grumpiness, as opposed to the politics of race in the eyes of an African American police officer.

In contrast, *The Boondocks* reflects Gray's "multiculturalism/diversity" category and the terministic screen of race cognizance. *The Boondocks* critiques the suburban ideal and the myth that African Americans can fit in seamlessly. The Freemans lack the White privilege of quiet acceptance. Some of the boys' new classmates and teachers at J. Edgar Hoover Elementary School fear them, and the principal rents *Menace II Society* and *Booty Call* for Huey's apprehensive teacher so he can learn about African American culture (McGruder, 2000, p. 59). Huey is exoticized by Cindy, a European American girl who tries to touch his hair (2000, p. 73) and calls him on the phone to yell, "Waaass-zzuuupp!" (2001, p. 30).

The Boondocks critiques the normativity of Whiteness, calling attention to standards that sometimes appear to European Americans as race-neutral. When Huey is depressed because "my people's been persecuted" (McGruder, 2001, p. 36), his biracial friend Jazmine buys him a "friendship card"—which, to Huey's dismay, contains pictures of two "angelic white kids" (p. 38). Riley spray paints his development's street signs, changing names like "Timid Deer Lane" to "Notorious B.I.G. Avenue" (2000, pp. 82–86). According to *The Boondocks*, the old "White" street names are just as racial as the new "Black" ones.

Furthermore, as Gray argues is characteristic of the discourse of multiculturalism/diversity, *The Boondocks* explores aspects of African American culture in conflict with each other, as opposed to a monolithic representation. As Harry

Allen wrote in the preface to the first *Boondocks* collection:

Huey Freeman is a pint-sized, foot-high-Afro-wearing, razor-tongued Black revolutionary, and Riley is a half-pint-sized, platinum-coveting, foul-mouthed roughneck. Like Cain and Abel, they signify two long-standing, mutually opposed, vigorous traditions in the so-called Black community, clasped in uneasy, brotherly embrace. (2000, p. 6)

Within this complex perspective, McGruder neither romanticizes nor condemns his main characters, and all of them at times are the subject of satire—even Afrocentric, socialist Huey, who often seems to speak as McGruder's voice. For example, on a stifling summer day, Huey refuses his grandfather's request that he come inside because, "We have forgotten that as Africans we are a people of the heat. We are sun-drinkers." After sweltering outside, Huey asks his grandfather if "a proud African can get some Kool-Aid or something?" His grandfather responds, "In the fridge, Shaka Zulu" (2000, p. 57). McGruder also critiques not just Whiteness, but Black popular culture as well; *The Boondocks* is full of jabs at rap artists, UPN, and especially Black Entertainment Television, which Huey calls, "Black Exploitation Television" and "Butts Every Time" (2001, p. 29).

The Boondocks is an unusual portrayal of African Americans that bridges the "we're all the same" discourse of Whiteness, calls into question White privilege, and operates within the terministic screen of race cognizance. In contrast, *Jump Start* operates within the terministic screen of Whiteness, downplaying racial difference. While *The Boondocks* selects racial issues, *Jump Start* deflects them.

The Audience Study

In this study, I constructed small group interviews, which Lewis (1991, pp. 89–90) defined as groups of about 3–5 friends or family members; the small group size and familiarity promotes in-depth, open discussion in a manner less time-consuming than one-on-one interviews. Interviews with small, homogeneous groups of audience members have become an increasingly common way to compare how members of different demographic groups interpret media texts (e. g. Morley, 1980, 1992; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Browne & Schulze, 1990; Cohen, 1991; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Lind, 1996). Homogeneity is used to encourage open communication and to allow for points of comparison. The homogeneity of the African American groups was decreased by my subject position as a European American woman; interestingly, however, the African American participants seemed more comfortable talking to me about race than the European American participants.

I interviewed 5 groups of European Americans and 4 groups of African Americans, with a total of 34 participants. Groups contained between 3 and 5 participants. One of the African American groups included the European American girlfriend of an African American participant. Ages ranged from 18–54, and slightly over half of the participants were students at colleges and universities throughout the area. For each group, I recruited one participant and asked him or her to construct a group of friends or family members of the same race for the interview. I recruited participants by placing advertisements on the bulletin boards of a suburban apartment complex (resulting in 4 groups), by placing an advertisement on a listserve for mi-

nority students at a local university (resulting in 2 groups), and by asking acquaintances if they would like to participate (resulting in 3 groups). Over half of the participants lived in an upper middle-class, primarily European American suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota—similar to *The Boondocks's* Woodcrest. The remainder of the participants lived or attended school in other Twin Cities metropolitan area locations. Participants were interviewed in an apartment complex common room, in coffee shops, and in a dormitory cafeteria.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to read a sample of strips taken from the *Jump Start* (1997) and *Boondocks* (2000, 2001) anthologies. Because time constraints prevented them from reading entire anthologies, I selected 25 from each of the strips that portrayed both racial and non-racial issues; because *Boondocks* portrays racial issues far more frequently, the *Boondocks* sample contained 15 strips that focused explicitly on race, while the *Jump Start* sample contained only 6, although other strips from the sample alluded less directly to African American culture and political issues, such as several *Jump Start* strips that feature Sunny resisting her parents' efforts to manage her hair. After reading the strips, participants were asked to give their general impressions of each strip, to discuss aspects of the strips they did or did not like, and to discuss in what ways they found the strips relevant to their own experiences. All but five of the participants were at least somewhat familiar with the two comic strips, which appear adjacent to one another on the funnies page of the local paper (unlike some newspapers, which generically classify

The Boondocks as an editorial cartoon by placing it on the editorial page).

Interviews were taped and transcribed, and all participants' names have been changed. The transcriptions were analyzed using the methodological framework discussed by Lewis (1991), who argued that qualitative audience-analysis researchers ought to focus upon how media texts "and the viewer's ideological repertoire combine to make meaning" (p. 119). Lewis urges researchers to divide the participants' discursive responses about the media text into categories, and then try to relate these categories to broader ideological discourses. He emphasizes that it is important to use these categories as guidelines and not to essentialize the analysis (pp. 119–120). This is especially important because, as Cornwell & Orbe (2002) argued, the diversity of responses within the African American community to media texts frequently are rendered monolithic (p. 28). As a qualitative research method, the goal of interview research is not to generate generalizable, statistical evidence about the attitudes of a demographic group, but rather to create a discursive text of audience members speaking about a media text, and analyze that text rhetorically and/or ideologically. The objective of my interviews was to create a body of discourse of European Americans and African Americans speaking about race and representation in relation to *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks*, and to analyze how this discourse was informed by the terministic screens of Whiteness and race cognizance.

Results

Similar to the African American respondents in Cornwell & Orbe's (2002)

study, the African American participants in this study were concerned with the impact of the representation of African Americans in *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks*, and they had mixed reactions as to whether the strips were positive representations. Many felt *Jump Start* was a more positive representation than *Boondocks*. However, all of them felt that *Boondocks* was funnier—and all but one of them found *The Boondocks* more relevant. Although the African American participants responded to the strips differently, all interpreted the strips through the terministic screen of race cognizance. Through this terministic filter, their discourse emphasized the *significance* of racial representation, as well as the importance of race, racial oppression, and White privilege in the politics of everyday life.

With the exception of one group, the European American participants strongly preferred *Jump Start* over *The Boondocks*. They said little about whether the strips portrayed African Americans positively—even when I asked them this directly. Through the filter of the terministic screen of Whiteness, *Jump Start* was commendable because racial issues were deflected, as opposed to *Boondocks*, which selected these uncomfortable issues. In the remainder of this essay, I analyze and compare reactions to *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks*, and also examine instances where some participants negotiated interpretations of the strip through combinations and adaptations of terministic screens.

Jump Start

Most African American participants felt *Jump Start* was a positive representation that transcended stereotypes by

portraying the Cobbs as middle-class and successful. These comments reflect race-cognizant concern with the impact of media representations of African Americans:

Rochelle: It shows a side to Black people that people don't know about if they don't know the Black community, because the 'hood is all that's shown. That's just a stereotype.

Briana: I liked the fact that it showed a couple, and not a single parent family. A lot of people think of African American families as just having a single parent. (AAGroup3)

Although most African Americans felt *Jump Start* portrayed African Americans positively, a few were more critical. One woman criticized a strip she felt made fun of a woman with dreadlocks, and also the choice of the name Sunny:

Sandra: A lot of times when we were growing up, it was a big joke about African American hair. White girls would laugh at our hair. These pictures with the messy hair and the dreadlocks, to me, well, that's not the way we walk around. And the name Sunny? I remember once I was called "Sunshine." That's a stereotype they would call Blacks years ago. It's like an Uncle Tom name. Growing up, people would say, here comes Sunshine, here comes Aunt Jemima. (AAGroup1)

African American participants expressed ambivalence when asked if the strip reflected their own experiences even though most of these African American participants felt *Jump Start* was positive. A *Jump Start* theme participants did find relevant was Marcy and Joe's attempts to style their unwilling daughter's hair—a theme that was selected as a typical African American experience. In each group, participants laughed and told stories of their mothers trying to style their hair. How-

ever, a few participants—like Sandra—expressed concern that European Americans would see the strips as an opportunity to make fun of their hair.

Two groups felt strongly that *Jump Start* was not relevant to their experiences. They criticized the speech, mannerisms, and behavior of the characters, which participants felt were not realistic; one said, "I didn't think their mannerisms were what I'm used to in Black families. In my family, there's a lot more drama. It's a lot different in the dialogue" (AAGroup2). Most of the criticism, however, was that *Jump Start* portrayed racial issues superficially. They felt this was problematic in part because it was unrealistic; as one participant argued, "I thought it dealt with race issues in a funny way. It slow-footed around it. We normally deal with issues more directly than they do" (AAGroup2). More importantly, they felt *Jump Start* did not do justice to racial issues they found relevant. One participant argued, "It's like watching the Bill Cosby show. Nothing ever goes wrong. They've got a few things about the interracial thing, but nothing really concrete. They don't dig deep" (AAGroup1). Several participants felt patronized by *Jump Start* because they felt it simplified racial issues to "educate" non-Blacks:

Vicki: I think the things they dealt with were simple and not important at all. . . . These are things I know already, you know what I'm saying? These would be comics that people who weren't Black would read. It's almost to learn more about Black people. We know this stuff.

Yvonne: Black education in the newspaper. (AAGroup2)

Notably, one of the groups that criticized *Jump Start*'s lack of realism had quite a bit in common with the strip on the surface level. One of the partici-

pants brought his toddler daughter to the interview, but surprisingly, no one compared this child to *Jump Start's* Sunny, even when I prompted them to do so. The toddler's grandmother was also in the interview, and she did not compare herself to the *Jump Start* grandmother. The toddler's uncle, also a participant, was training to become a police officer, but when asked if he identified with fellow officer Joe, he criticized *Jump Start's* portrayal of an African American police officer.

While the African American groups criticized *Jump Start* because they felt it deflected racial issues that were relevant to them, most of the European Americans liked *Jump Start* because "it's just like us." Participants favored strips that represented "universal" situations, such as Sunny's new "big girl" bed (p. 24), Joe and Clarence's boredom on their wives' shopping trip (p. 98), and Marcy and Joe's efforts to keep Sunny quiet in church (p. 26). Unlike the African American groups, they applauded *Jump Start* for not focusing on racial issues:

Maggie: I just thought it seemed like a normal family. Normal issues that everybody goes through.

Kevin: Yeah, family, children, that kind of stuff. Not so much the race issues.

Carl: They could be any race. (EAGroup4)

Gene: There are African Americans in this strip, but they are cross-cultural in terms of what they are dealing with. Everybody buys a house. Taking their kids to church—everybody does that. This isn't just things specific to African American culture. (EA-Group2)

Many European American participants also found Sunny's unmanageable hair funny and relevant. However, while the African Americans selected this as an African American experience, the European Americans

selected this as a universal experience. Only one group—which included a former hairdresser from South Carolina—identified this as an African American experience. In reference to a strip where Marcy chases Sunny with a comb, one participant said it reminded her of her brother, who fought their mother when she tried to put him in pajamas.

Unlike African American participants who felt *Jump Start* dealt with racial issues too superficially, most European American participants considered it an asset that *Jump Start* dealt with racial issues in a "light" manner—a word used by a striking number of participants:

Josh: The topics about race, like the interracial relationship, were a lot lighter than in *The Boondocks*. (EAGroup2)

Terri: (discussing the interracial couple) They can address an issue and still be amusing. I think that's a good portrayal. It's fairly amusing, light. (EAGroup5)

Beth: I liked *Jump Start*. Fun and light humor that doesn't make you think. (EA-Group1)

As per the terministic screen of Whiteness, participants explicitly stated they liked *Jump Start* because they themselves were "color-blind," and therefore they appreciated such a color-blind strip:

Ray: From where I grew up and the upbringing I had, race was not an issue. It's how people act. It's what a specific person does that determines whether I feel they could be good or bad people. What I got out of this . . . It's not an us-or-them comic. And that's what I really found refreshing about this. It dealt with the whole race issue by almost turning it into a non-issue. We have people, they have skin. It's not the central focus of their lives. One color isn't better than another, one color isn't oppressing another, it's just a big we. (EA-Group5)

The European American participants' discussion of *Jump Start* included what Frankenberg described as "black, green, yellow, or pink" statements. For example, one participant argued, "You have an interracial couple. And then you have the other couple with dark skin. But they could be white skinned. They could be middle skinned. They could be purple skinned. It doesn't matter, because they're not oriented around race" (EAGroup5). As Frankenberg argued, this kind of color-evasive statement is "a euphemism for avoiding race; it shifts attention away from color differences that make a political difference by embedding meaningful distinctions among non-meaningful ones" (1993, p. 38). Another participant stated, "They could be Japanese people with no legs, and it's all the same," to which his wife replied cheerfully, "Just harder to get around" (EAGroup3). One participant joked about the dark-chocolate and white-chocolate cookies he had baked for the group—a "race issue" he found as irrelevant as the race issues in the comic strips (EAGroup1).

Although most European American participants felt comfortable with *Jump Start's* "light" treatment of racial issues, a few participants argued that *Jump Start* dealt too much with race. In relation to the interracial couple, several participants accused *Jump Start* of "trying to teach a lesson." One participant argued that the strip could have made its point about interracial couples just by putting them in the strip; "pointing out the interracial couple," she argued, was too much (EAGroup1). One group criticized *Jump Start* for introducing a nursing assistant who asks Marcy not to call her Native American, but rather Miwok Indian. The group accused the character of "building racial barriers"

by calling attention to her race; one participant said, "I'm 100% Czechoslovakian. Woo. Anybody care?" (EAGroup5). Within the terministic screen of Whiteness, even *Jump Start's* "light" references to race were not "color-blind" enough for these participants; the strip failed to deflect racial issues often enough.

Thus, through the terministic screen of race cognizance, most African Americans found *Jump Start* to be fairly positive, but felt the strip deflected racial issues that were important to them. Through the terministic screen of Whiteness, however, most of the European American participants applauded *Jump Start's* "light" color filter that selected sameness and deflected racial issues.

The Boondocks

Similar to the African Americans in Cornwell & Orbe's (2002) study, the African Americans in this study disagreed over whether *The Boondocks* represented African Americans positively. Several participants criticized the strip for the portrayal of biracial Jazmine, whom they felt was belittled. Others criticized some of the characters' speech, which they felt was stereotypical. Some feared *The Boondocks* might foster stereotypes; one participant said, "Someone could look at this and think that Black people are negative and have a bad attitude" (AAGroup4). Other participants found the representation more positive. One group applauded the portrayal of Huey and Riley as strong, intelligent, and proud:

Mary: They portray the kids really well. They stand up for what they believe in. They don't try to please everybody.

Sandra: I knew young men like this who were very intelligent. . . Huey, he reminds

me of my cousin and my sons. My son, he was really strong growing up, dealing with racial issues. (AAGroup1)

Although participants disagreed on whether *The Boondocks* was positive, all but one participant (a woman raised by European American parents) identified with *The Boondocks*, which they felt selected aspects of their experiences that were important to them. Most of the European American participants, however, expressed strong antipathy toward *The Boondocks*. Participants stated explicitly that *The Boondocks* was not relevant to their own experiences:

Katie: We're never going to face these issues that these kids have.

Andrea: This is my life: I'm middle-class, I'm educated. I have no way to relate to this. I grew up in a small town with a thousand people. There weren't any Blacks, not only in the town, but in the whole county. So I don't relate. (EAGroup1)

One point of divergence between the African American and European American groups was Huey's anger. Although some African Americans felt this anger was a negative representation, many identified with it—and found Huey's bursts of anger humorous. Within the terministic screen of race cognizance, these participants did not question *why* Huey was angry. Upon discussing *The Boondocks*, one group of students erupted into a cathartic, candid chronicle of their demoralizing experiences at their university:

Keisha: Guys will hold the door open for a White girl and as soon as you walk by, they let go of the door. It's like, I'm a woman too, okay?

Yvonne: I've had my hands full and people will just walk by and they won't hold the door for me. Or they'll quickly push the elevator buttons when you're trying to get into the elevator.

Tanya: In high school, we all had White friends, we hung out with White people. But here, it's different. Everyone stays with their own.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Keisha: 'Cause it's the real world. In the real world, the only place Whites and Blacks interact is in the workplace. Besides that, Black people go home to their Black families and Black neighborhood and Black churches, and White people go home to the same thing. (AAGroup2)

Strikingly different than the terministic screen of Whiteness, these students did not claim that "we're all the same"; rather, their discourse reflected the perception that race relations are both discriminatory and segregated. These students directly related their frustration to Huey's anger; one student said, "Before I came here, I was not very militant. But now that I live with White people constantly, I'm more militant, more aware. So I guess I'm like Huey." Another student speculated that European Americans would not like *Boondocks* because they would not find Huey's anger relevant; she argued, "They might be thinking, what's he getting his underwear in a bunch for? They couldn't understand where his anger was from."

Indeed, as this student predicted, what European American participants liked least about *The Boondocks* was Huey's anger, which made little sense within the "we're all the same" terministic screen of Whiteness. As one participant said, "It just seems like five pages of them talking about how they're oppressed. It gets old" (EAGroup2). One group tried to make sense of Huey's anger as an abandonment issue.

Gene: Where are the parents? You don't know. You know, give me a reason why this kid is as angry as he is.

Carrie: Well, you just answered your own question. Where are his parents? If you didn't have parents, you might feel this way too.

Gene: But give me a reason. Why are they not here? Make it tangible to the story.

Carrie: That's kind of what I was hoping, that there would be some context for their anger. How old is he, 10? How angry could you be, other than the abandonment issues you might feel? (EAGroup3)

To Gene and Carrie, a "context" is needed to explain Huey's anger, which, within the terministic screen of Whiteness, is not rational—quite unlike the responses of the African American groups, who needed no explanation for the anger and found it relevant.

One instance of Huey's anger that elicited divergent reactions was the series of strips where Jazmine tries to cheer up revolutionary Huey with a "white" greeting card (2001, pp. 38–39). Many African American participants considered this story line to be one of the funniest, and discussed similar experiences with normative European American cultural expectations:

Will: I was involved in a wedding, and I was the only African American in the groom's party. And on the cake there were these little figurines, and there was this one little African American figurine. The groom said it took him forever to find a Black cake figurine. He thought about just taking a White one and painting it black. But he shouldn't have had to look so hard to find one. And not just African Americans. You shouldn't have to look hard to find a Hmong card if you're Hmong, or a Somali card, or a Japanese card, but it's very hard to find these. You're looking for something with European Americans, and they're everywhere.

Sandra: Or those pictures of babies, like the ones you see in the little cabbages? They're always White. (AAGroup1)

In contrast, the European American groups cited these strips as another example of Huey's irrational anger. Within the terministic screen of Whiteness, this card is not racial, and therefore Huey is just being mean:

Holly: There's this one part with Jazmine, when she's trying to do something nice, and she gives Huey a card to make him feel better, and it's got White people on it, so he goes completely nuts on her. (EA-Group5)

Carrie: I remember when I was a little girl, if I were going to do something nice for a boy, it was a big deal. But it's not about the boy-girl thing here. Very first off, it was the color of the kids of the card. (EAGroup3)

African American participants found some of the representations of European American people in *The Boondocks* humorous and relevant. Many discussed a strip where the school principal brags to Huey that he is eating a peanut butter sandwich, which makes him think of George Washington Carver and "a contribution by your race to world cuisine" (2001, p. 46). Several participants discussed similar European American teachers who "tried to be down and cool," and one mentioned a principal at her suburban high school who treated minority students unfairly, but claimed to be their friend (AAGroup3). Participants also found relevant strips about Cindy, the European American girl who exoticizes Huey and is fascinated by African American culture, and mentioned times they had felt exoticized; a college freshman discussed how women in her dorm wanted to touch her braids (AA-Group2); a large man discussed being pointed and stared at in lily-white Green Bay, Wisconsin as the locals tried to figure out which Packer he was (AAGroup1). Participants also discussed a European American boy who

is terrified when Riley sits next to him in class. In each group, participants told stories of European American people being afraid of them:

Alice: This happens a lot more than people know. Sitting next to a White person, they get kind of nervous. You know, they try to keep their distance, or if they have something in their hand, they try to hide it from you. Or you try to say something to them, and they stutter. (AAGroup4)

In contrast, some of the European American participants identified with European American characters. Several complained that the principal, one of the only European American characters, was portrayed as an idiot. Others found Cindy likeable and genuine. In reaction to a strip where Cindy earns Huey's wrath by asking him, "Why do black people say 'muva and fava' instead of 'mother and father'?" (2001, p. 35), one participant said, "I took her as someone who was really interested. I didn't think she was being negative and derogatory at all" (EAGroup1).

In both the African American and European American groups, some participants expressed concern that the comic strip was not an appropriate genre to discuss race. Within the terministic screen of race cognizance, some African Americans felt racial issues were too important to be discussed in a genre associated with humor and lacking in dialogue; one participant said, "You need a different forum where people talk, where there's dialogue back and forth. In a comic strip, it's not like there's feedback" (AAGroup2). In contrast, European American participants' generic concerns reflected a desire that that comic strips be escapist and deflect attention from uncomfortable topics such as racism:

Jack: I don't want to read that in the Sunday paper. I'd rather have more of a relaxed atmosphere.

Andrea: Yeah, when I'm reading the paper, this is about relaxation. I don't know if this is the appropriate place to address these issues.

Beth: Comics are supposed to be fun. (EAGroup1)

As is also characteristic of the discourse of Whiteness, European American participants defined racism implicitly as the behavior of prejudiced individuals, as opposed to a systemic power structure from which European Americans personally benefited. Although the European American groups rejected *The Boondocks's* critique of systemic racism, in every group European Americans told stories about "essentialist racists," and condemned the behavior of these individuals. For example, participants condemned a security guard who asked the store clerks to monitor minority shoppers (EAGroup5), a student who wrote "KKK" on an African American student's dorm room door (EAGroup4), and an out-of-state guest who said he liked Minnesota because "I can count the number of Black people on one hand" (EAGroup2). By comparing themselves against these outwardly prejudiced individuals, these participants defined themselves as antiracist in a manner that failed to critique the power system.

Thus, through the terministic screen of race cognizance, African Americans expressed mixed feelings about *The Boondocks* as a representation, but found the strip to be relevant and funny because it selected familiar parts of their reality. Most European American groups, however, did not find these selected portions of reality relevant, and instead found *The Boondocks* angry and irrelevant.

Responses from Other Terministic Filters

Most participants interpreted *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks* through the terministic screens of either race cognizance or Whiteness in ways that were strikingly polarized. A few participants, however, responded to the comic strips from other subject positions and interpreted the comic strips in less dichotomized ways. These respondents selected particular aspects of the comic strips that reflected their particular experiences with race and racial issues. Their interpretations suggest that terministic screens of racial discourse function not necessarily as polarized “Black/White” dichotomies, but rather as fluid categories that can be combined, negotiated, or seen as continua.

One such respondent was the European American woman who participated in an African American group with her boyfriend and his family. This woman worked at an inner city program with minority children. Unlike most of the European American participants, racial oppression and White privilege were relevant to her. However, her particular terministic screen of race cognizance was adapted in a way that selected experiences that reflected her particular subject position. For example, although she agreed with her boyfriend that the interracial couple in *Jump Start* was portrayed superficially, she also identified with the interracial couple, who had experienced negative reactions from both African Americans and European Americans, and talked about her similar experiences. As minority children also were relevant within her terministic screen, she spoke highly of the representation of African American children in *Boondocks*, stating, “I really like Huey because he is a very educated guy. And that he’s not afraid to speak his mind.

And I like to see that in any child. He by no means feels the pressure to keep his wisdom to himself” (AAGroup1).

Another participant from a negotiated subject position was a European American college student whose mother was dating an African American man. At times, she seemed to speak through the terministic screen of Whiteness; for example, she argued that she liked *Jump Start* more than *Boondocks* because it downplayed race. At other times, however, she seemed conflicted between competing terministic screens, and seemed especially conflicted on whether she felt racial oppression was relevant. On the one hand, she described her mother’s new race-cognizance as “paranoid.” In contrast, she discussed with frustration an experience when she and her mother’s boyfriend were turned away from a business by a prejudiced proprietor. Although she claimed that she could not relate to the experiences of African American children living in the suburbs, later in the interview she discussed an experience where she had been in the minority. More self-consciously than most of the European American participants, she speculated that her opinions about the strips were influenced by the fact that until recently, race had not been relevant to her:

Tammie: My soccer team went to nationals at Georgia Southern University. We walked into their athletic center, and everyone was African American. I was the minority for the first time in my life. And everyone *looked*. If I had grown up in something like that, I probably would like *The Boondocks* better than *Jump Start*. (EA-Group2)

One African American group included a college student who had been raised by European American parents

in an affluent European American urban neighborhood, but had attended a majority African American high school. This participant's terministic screen was complicated by her experiences of relevancy. From the beginning, she stated she could not identify with either comic strip well because she had European American parents. However, as the interview progressed, she selected points to discuss that were relevant through her terministic screen; for example, she identified with the *Boondocks* strip about the fearful European American boy because she had experienced being feared, and also identified with popular culture references such as a *Boondocks* character's "Mos Def" T-shirt—her favorite rap artist.

One group of European American students differed from the other European American groups because they felt *The Boondocks* was funnier and more relevant to them than *Jump Start*. They argued that they were not old enough to identify with the family issues in *Jump Start* such as having a child and buying a house. Instead, they identified with the "younger, edgier humor" of *Boondocks*, which, as several participants mentioned, they had seen on cable TV. To this group, youth defined their terministic screen more than race, even though group members stated they had little experience with African Americans. This group's discourse shifted at times from Whiteness to race cognizance. Group members argued that they liked the family in *Jump Start* because "they seemed like a normal family . . . just like us." At the same time, this was the only European American group to discuss seriously whether *Boondocks* was a positive representation of African Americans; they argued that Huey was portrayed positively as strong and intelligent, but that

Jazmine should have been portrayed stronger, and should have stood up for herself.

Conclusions

This study supports Morley's (1992) argument that relevancy influences the degree to which audience members interpret texts oppositionally. Whether or not participants' interpretations of *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks* reflected dominant ideology was influenced by how relevant they found racial politics, White privilege, and racial oppression. Using Hall's (1973/1993) terminology, the terministic screen of Whiteness represents the dominant reading of *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks* because this reading deflects issues that challenge dominant ideology about race. The terministic screen of race cognizance represents an oppositional reading, in that it provides an alternative framework for interpreting the comic strips that challenges dominant ideology. The participants who read the strips within multiple or adapted terministic screens were negotiated readers who drew upon multiple frameworks.

As Schiappa (1989) argued in his analysis of the Reagan administration's terministic framing of nuclear issues, terministic screens are ideological. Within the vocabularies of terministic screens, portions of "reality" may be selected or deflected in ways that privilege dominant power structures. This study demonstrates how the terministic screen of Whiteness strategically deflects attention from White privilege and systemic racism. The vocabulary of the terministic screen of Whiteness promotes the myth that "we're all the same," and does not provide a terminological framework for understanding

inequality, oppression, and the normativity of European American cultural standards. The deflection and subsequent transparency of these issues hegemonically promotes dominant racial power structures because these issues go largely unquestioned. As one African American participant argued, the terministic screen of Whiteness allows European Americans the comfortable illusion that racism no longer exists, and “blinds” them from examining contemporary racism:

Will: There’s a group of people who I call the blind people. They’re just blind to what’s really going on in the world. They don’t want to see, because they don’t want anyone to open their eyes to what’s really going on. Just because people aren’t being lynched on trees, people aren’t being tarred and feathered, certain things are still going on that are just as bad. Maybe in some ways it’s even worse. (AAGroup1)

In this study, many European American participants used the terministic screen of Whiteness strategically to deflect racial issues in a number of ways. Participants evoked the color-evasive standard that it is inappropriate and rude to call attention to racial issues—a standard that stifles discourse that might call into question White privilege and racial oppression. This manifested itself through the curious use of the terms “light” and “lightness” to refer to *Jump Start’s* superficial treatment of race. Within the terministic screen of Whiteness, they argued, it is only appropriate to select race when using a “light” color filter that deflects attention from “dark” politicized racial issues. Another manifestation of color-evasiveness was the European American participants’ generic concern that comic strips are supposed to be funny and “light,” as op-

posed to racially-explicit. This was quite different than the African Americans’ generic concern that a humor-based genre might not do justice to racial issues because the topic was too serious. Although it is impossible to say how the European American respondents would have reacted to racially-explicit samples of a more “serious” genre, the absence of European American concern with the *impact* of racial representation within the comic strip genre is telling. It indicates that perhaps generic violations were not the main concern of the European American participants, but rather the fact that *Boondocks* (and, at times, *Jump Start*) violated the color-evasive standard of deflecting attention from race. Other strategies used by European Americans to deflect racial issues included comparing themselves to essentialist racists—a strategy that deflects attention from the more subtle workings of systemic racism—and the use of what Frankenberg called “black, green, yellow, or pink” statements that deflect attention from meaningful racial distinctions by comparing them to meaningless ones.

This study illustrates how the concepts of relevancy and terministic screens can inform each other and illuminate the ideological nature of each concept. Relevancy is the ideological shadow upon the color filters of terministic screens. It is what differentiates ideologically the terministic screen of race cognizance from the terministic screen of Whiteness. Because racial oppression is highly relevant within the terministic screen of race cognizance, this terministic screen resists the dominant ideology of Whiteness by allowing those who speak within this termi-

nistic screen to select ways that systemic racism and White privilege affect individuals and society. Conversely, because racial oppression is not relevant within the terministic screen of Whiteness, this terministic screen deflects attention from racial power structures that privilege European Americans. Further research might examine how other terministic screens select certain concepts as relevant and deflect others as irrelevant, and what impact this has on promoting or challenging dominant ideology.

This study also illustrates that when looking at how relevancy and terministic screens inform each other, theorists must be careful not to polarize discourse exclusively into competing terministic screens. Terministic screens shape how people select and deflect a sense of what is relevant—but, at the same time, personal experiences may encourage individuals to adapt their terministic filter to select reality in a way that is relevant to them. Certainly, as Bello (1996) found in his study of the polarized discourse of the political correctness debate, the majority of the participants in this study interpreted *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks* through competing terministic screens in dichotomous, polarized ways based on their race. However, a few participants from negotiated subject positions adapted elements from either or both of the dominant two terministic screens in ways that reflected what they personally found relevant. For example, the European American woman in this study who dated an African American man and worked with minority children spoke within the terministic screen of race cognizance because she found racial oppression and White privilege relevant—in ways that

most European American participants did not. However, in her particular adaptation of this terministic screen that reflected her own experiences, she identified with the prejudice experienced by the interracial couple in *Jump Start*, and praised *Boondocks* for its portrayal of strong minority children. A few of the European American participants—the woman whose mother dated an African American man, and the students who preferred *The Boondocks*—moved between terministic screens and seemed conflicted by them, suggesting that at times, terministic screens may be understood as continua as opposed to dichotomous poles.

Although it is important not to essentialize responses of the respondents in this study, it is noteworthy that so many of the interpretations of the respondents were polarized by race. This study serves as further evidence that many African Americans and European Americans speak through competing terministic screens that render communication difficult—especially regarding issues of racial oppression. Further research is needed, not only to analyze further the terministic screen of Whiteness and how it informs media interpretations and promotes racial inequality, but also to help communication educators devise strategies that encourage students and other citizens to examine dominant racial discourses and to consider alternative racial discourses. Researchers might also consider undertaking similar multi-racial audience analyses of discourse related to media texts about European Americans, which some European American audience members might normatively interpret as race-neutral.

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