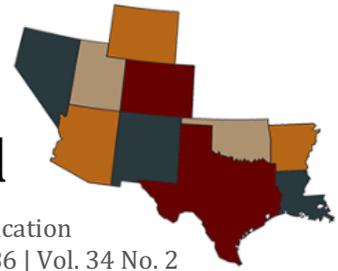


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‘Number One in the Hood, G:’ How Hip Hop Helped Adult Swim Get to the Top

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This paper examines the intersection of race, Hip-Hop Culture, and animation on Adult Swim and its programs while also comparing general trends in animated content surrounding the network’s debut and subsequent success. Animation has largely been produced by white creators featuring white characters aimed mainly at a white audience. Adult Swim has expanded animation beyond the white family sitcom so often seen in popular adult animated television programs to feature groups, styles, and ideas not often seen in television, either in animation or live-action programming. Hip Hop has been hugely influential on American culture, and by exploring its impact on race in animation and the success of the network among the highly valuable 18-49 demographic, the paper aims to contribute to research concerning racial and cultural representations in the United States.

Keywords: race, animation, television, Hip Hop, culture, African American culture, Ethnic Studies, Media Studies

Animation has a long, complicated history with race and non-white culture. In its over 100 years as an art form and an industry, animators have struggled to include culturally sensitive representations of people of color, particularly African Americans. One reason for this is that white males have dominated the production and distribution of animation since its beginnings in the early 20th century. Until recently, the insular nature of the industry has limited entry into the production side of animation, and the white male perspective has been the primary viewpoint presented in animation (Maltin, 1987) The barriers to entry into the animation industry has also helped maintain strong ties to the past. Although this has contributed to the industry maintaining a creative connection with the influential art produced earlier in the history of the art form, it has also made it difficult for animation to move away from various formulas and stereotypes that have contributed to the

lack of diverse representation and the slow introduction of new styles and forms of animation throughout its history (Rogin, 1996).

Even when people of color and women have been represented in animation, it is often by white males without knowledge and experience concerning the experience of marginalized groups, leading to insensitive or even ignorant representations of their culture and experience. This has led to animation being perceived as racist and sexist, but as an art form animation is not inherently discriminatory. Much of the whitewashing of animation can be connected to not only the race and gender of the producers, but the history and evolution of the industry, and by examining recent developments in the field of animation, it is clear that disruptions have emerged in the white cartoon world. As the media environment has expanded, particularly on television, it has provided more channels to allow producers and distributors to present styles and perspectives not seen in American animation in the past (Willetts, 2013).

Since its launch in 2001, Adult Swim has featured animated content that challenges previous conventions in animation, building a hip, subversive identity for the programming block that is recognizable in all its shows along with the interstitial material seen on the network and promotional materials in other locations (Mittell, 2010). This identity also carries over to how they approach race, since the network is the first in the animation industry to regularly feature representations of African-Americans produced by African-Americans. The network has also featured a variety of animation styles and techniques not widely utilized by other animation producers and distributors. As a result, the network has not only been able to increase their visibility against the more conventional television fare, but has also been able to challenge conventions that have limited animation for close to a century while courting an adult animation television audience established by shows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park* (Lee, 2013). One way Adult Swim has done this is by featuring Hip Hop music and culture on the network and its programs (Holmes, 2014). Embracing this musical and political movement deeply connected to African-American culture has allowed producers to approach non-white issues and experience with more awareness and sensitivity than ever before in the industry (C.M., 2013). This has clearly resonated with audiences considering Adult Swim is the top cable network among adults between the ages of 18-49. Analyzing the network's history and success through its bucking of previous conventions in animation can help illuminate the ways the creativity and flexibility in animation can be used in ways other than presenting white points of view and culture.

From 24 Hour News to 24 Hours of Cartoons

On December 17, 1976, Ted Turner helped usher in the cable revolution by transmitting the signal of WTCG, the local network he owned in Atlanta, through satellite to several cable systems across the country. Although HBO launched a year before, WTCG, which would later become WTBS, was the first cable station not to require an additional fee to access, introducing the concept of basic cable. In 1980, Turner launched the first 24 hour news network, CNN, and in 1986 Turner Broadcasting Systems acquired Metro Goldwyn Mayer (MGM) and United Artists after a failed attempt to take over Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). Turner quickly realized it took on too much debt and sold back MGM and United Artist, but kept the rights to the studios' libraries before 1986. This included thousands of theatrical era MGM and pre-1948 Warner Bros. cartoons. Turner quickly put the new

acquisitions to use as a part of the programming for Turner Network Television (TNT), which launched in 1988. In 1991, Turner purchased Hanna-Barbera, which included not only the company's library, but also their still active animation studio. With a library of over 8,500 cartoons, and its own animation studio, Turner launched The Cartoon Network in 1992 (Turner Broadcasting). Even though other networks like Nickelodeon were using some animation to attract audiences, the success of CNN had convinced Turner that a 24 hour animation network could work in spite of skepticism. The network initially struggled to get picked up by cable systems, but the success of CNN, TBS, and TNT allowed Turner to package the new network with their more established properties forcing cable systems to carrying the animation network. Turner was also able to publicize The Cartoon Network by simulcasting its programming on their other networks (TNT/Cartoon Network, 1999).

The Cartoon Network relied on mainly reruns of old cartoons while still establishing itself on cable systems throughout the United States. In 1994, the network would debut its first original production, *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*. Cartoon Network had debuted a few shows in 1993, but they were still Hanna-Barbera productions that continued to exemplify that company's style, which dated back to the 1950s and 1960s with shows like *The Flintstones*, and continued to target a younger children's audience (Mittell, 2014). *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*, on the other hand, was aimed at an older teenage and adult audience that could not only appreciate satire and surrealism, but had seen it used successfully in a show that would become most popular and longest general audience animated show in television history, *The Simpsons* (Erickson, 1995). Cartoon Network had previously tried to court older audiences by featuring uncensored reruns from their library after 11:00 PM, after their primary youth audience had gone to bed, but the cartoons, many of which were black and white and close to 60 years old, did not attract consistent adult audiences. To keep down costs, the producers of *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* recycled animation cels from the Hanna-Barbera library, particularly the 1960s action-adventure cartoon *Space Ghost*, revoicing the characters and turning it into a parody of television late night talk shows. This use of deconstruction and subversion would become a hallmark of Cartoon Network's teenage and adult programming including shows also viewed by younger audiences like *Dexter's Laboratory*, *The Powerpuff Girls*, and *Cow and Chicken* (Mittell, 2014). Unlike many animation producers who used their animation knowledge and education to reinforce past conventions, the producers of *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* at Cartoon Network and Ghost Planet Industries used their knowledge to subvert previous convention and satirize not only animation, but popular culture as a whole. Ghost Planet Industries was established by Mike Lazzo who created the studio as a subsidiary of Hanna-Barbera, (C.M., 2013)

In 1996, Turner merged with Time Warner resulting in Hanna-Barbera becoming a subsidiary of Warner Bros. Animation. At the time, Time Warner was working to increase their holdings that could attract younger customers and they felt Turner offered this opportunity through its networks and programs, including Cartoon Network. Scott Sassa, former president of Turner Entertainment, promoted their many holdings across the many media holdings owned by Turner and Time Warner leading to increased visibility for brands like Cartoon Network (Curtin, 1996). This provided the network with more resources and financial flexibility, allowing Cartoon Network to explore other programming options and purchase more shows from other markets and production companies.

The next year, Cartoon Network introduced *Toonami*, a programming block created by Jason DeMarco and Sean Akins dedicated to anime and Japanese animation. In a television and animation

environment dominated by studios in the United States, the introduction of the different styles and perspectives from Japanese animators was an important step for a network trying to establish a reputation for broadcasting animation and other shows not seen elsewhere on television (“Cartoon Network Announces,” 2004). It also helped the network start to get out of the shadow of Hanna-Barbera and Warner Bros. as they began to feature animation that was not directly influenced by the style, content, and characters from the legendary animation studios and their libraries while also broadcasting animation previously only consumed by niche audiences. *Toonami* was also one of the first programs to utilize a dual screen experience by introducing “total immersion events” that gave viewers the opportunity to increase their engagement through online games and communication with other fans and producers during the programming block (“Total Immersion,” 2001). Although anime does feature some Caucasian characters, the majority of the characters in anime are people of color, particularly Asian. Before Cartoon Network and *Toonami* there were only a handful of animated shows and films produced by, and featuring, non-whites. The programming block helped to popularize anime further, which helped more of these representations to find their way in American media.

Hip Hop Helps Cartoon Network Mature

Toonami also featured a soundtrack that heavily featured Hip Hop music heard during interstitial material. DeMarco and Lazzo, whose Ghost Planet Industries helped produce *Toonami*, are big Hip Hop fans who saw the music and culture as another way to separate the network from other fare aimed at teenagers and adults, since underground or emerging Hip Hop music and culture was rarely seen or heard on much of television and resonated strongly with the younger audience in this vital demographic. The recognition, appreciation, and utilization of Hip Hop culture would become a staple of Cartoon Network’s late night programming moving forward (C.M., 2013).

Until 2000, *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* remained the lone American adult animated program produced exclusively for the network. Two years earlier, Ghost Planet Industries changed its name to Williams Street Productions as they worked to produce more late night programming aimed at adults to replace the outdated cartoons that filled the schedule after *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* ended. Cartoon Network premiered four new productions by Williams Street on December 30, 2000, two of the shows, *The Brak Show*, a spinoff of *Space Ghost*, and *Sealab 2021* were produced in the same style as *Space Ghost* recycling and revoicing earlier animation. A third show, *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law*, would also utilize the Hanna-Barbera library by featuring characters that originally appeared in their 1960s and 1970s cartoons, including the previously forgotten *Birdman* who was reinvented as a lawyer who defended cartoon characters in various satirical legal situations. *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law* originally debuted on The WB but was moved to Cartoon Network the next year, further establishing the network as a repository for animation that other networks may ignore or reject (Lee, 2013).

The fourth show, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, was Williams Street’s first show that completely broke away from the direct influence of Hanna-Barbera, although the characters were first seen in *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*. It featured three anthropomorphic food products, a milkshake (Master Shake), a box of fries (Frylock), and a meatball (Meatwad) and their human neighbor, Carl. The original premise had the pathological liar Master Shake, the dimwitted Meatwad, and the rational Frylock solving mysteries, but they quickly moved away from that format. The producers were not closely tied to the premise since they used to get the show approved after producers had a hard time pitching a show about

“three food products doing random things.” The program fully embraced its surreal and subversive elements as the series moved forward and utilized animation to present situations and gags that were not only impossible in live action content, but not seen before in animation (Doyle, 2008).

From the first episode, the unorthodox animation and content of *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* was introduced by a Hip Hop theme song, which was very uncommon at the time, aside from some clumsy attempts to feature unoriginal rap songs in children’s animation to make it seem cool or edgy. *Aqua Teen* instead commissioned Schoolly D, a Philadelphia rapper that many consider one of the originators of gangsta rap, to write and produce the show’s theme song, along with providing narration and commentary during the episodes (Ryan, 2006). *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* was also one of the only adult animated shows at the time to prominently feature black voice talent, with Carey Means providing the voice of Frylock on the program. *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, along with *Harvey Birdman*, *Sealab 2021*, *The Brak Show*, and *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* provided the network with a stable of shows as they looked to further establish themselves among an older animation audience.

All four of the network’s new adult shows premiered unannounced on December 30, 2000 as a preview to a new programming block aimed at adults that Cartoon Network planned to launch the next fall. Lazzo, who has been connected to Turner animation since the 1980s, was named programmer for the block.

Adult Swim debuted on September 2, 2001 with *Home Movies*, a show cancelled by UPN two years.. The executives at Williams Street, who are responsible for the programming on Adult Swim along with much of its original programming, wanted a programming block to formally separate themselves from the more child-oriented Cartoon Network to let teenagers and adults know that the programming would be directed to them. It also helped keep young viewers as they got older and aged out of the younger programming on Cartoon Network, a strategy utilized by Nickelodeon by establishing a younger Nick Jr. audience that could grow up through Nickelodeon and Nick at Nite (“Adult Swim/CN, 2005). Although there are legitimate criticisms concerning the saturation of media into children’s lives, and conditioning children to be consumers of certain content, it has been a marketing and content strategy that has been extremely beneficial for both networks also leading older viewers to watch some of the Cartoon Network programs (Gitlin, 2001). The establishment of a block explicitly aimed at adults not only pushed the network to produce more mature animated content, but also allowed them to present material and perspectives that satirized the formulas and stereotypes that have been seen in animation throughout the history of the industry. This includes the broad, white middle class male inspired content that dominated television and film animation in previous decades. Even their interstitial material was different than other networks, and the bumpers they used to separate their shows and advertisements often broke the fourth wall addressing the audience through simple white text on a black background (Matheson, 2013).

Adult Swim was not devoid of this content, however and while preparing to expand to five nights a week in January 2003 they started buying more syndicated content from other networks to fill the schedule. They bought the syndication rights to *Futurama* and *Family Guy* in 2002, which helped bring the two shows’ loyal fan bases from Fox to Adult Swim. The latter quickly became the highest rated show on the network and Adult Swim went from serving a niche ground of viewers to attracting large audiences on weekday nights among the 18-34 demographic.

Family Guy immediately produced controversy when it premiered on Fox after the Super Bowl in 1999, but never found a regular time slot on the broadcast network as Fox struggled to schedule it among the network's other programs as the animation, mature content, and low profile of Seth MacFarlane at the time made it hard to market the series (Ellis, 2000). Adult Swim, on the other hand, played episodes several nights a week, and along with DVD sales, helped build a regular audience for the show, leading to its renewal by Fox after a two-year hiatus. *Futurama* was also cancelled by Fox in 2003 and was renewed after solid ratings on Adult Swim, leading to four more seasons on Comedy Central starting in 2007 (Gorman, 2010).

Adult Swim has clearly benefited from syndicating shows like *Family Guy*, as it has expanded its audience substantially, bringing each show's fan base to Cartoon Network. *Family Guy* and *Futurama* were both receiving about five million viewers per episode before being cancelled, which is mediocre for network television but very successful for late night cable shows. This helped Adult Swim expand further, leading Nielsen to consider Adult Swim its own network as a daypart to Cartoon Network, similar to how Nick at Nite splits time with its daypart Nickelodeon, since both late night networks have very different audiences than their daytime counterparts. These shows, particularly *Family Guy* and the other Seth MacFarlane vehicles that eventually appeared on the network like *American Dad* and *The Cleveland Show*, clearly follow the more traditional television and animation tropes and representations even as they satirized these same forms, but they also brought more attention to some of the network's more unique productions (Thielman, 2015).

Diversity and Growth on Adult Swim

Offsetting the presence of more traditional syndicated fare like *Family Guy* on Adult Swim's schedule were shows like *Minoriteam* and *The Boondocks* that featured non-white creators and characters. *Minoriteam* tried to satirize racial stereotypes, but the content was seen as reinforcing many of the stereotypes they aimed to address, and the show was cancelled after one season (Croop, n.d.). *The Boondocks*, on the other hand, was based Aaron McGruder's popular, but controversial, syndicated comic strip featuring social commentary on contemporary African American experiences. McGruder was also responsible for the animated adaptation, bringing the characters from the comic strip to the television screen. The pilot was originally developed for Fox, but McGruder found it too difficult to adapt the show to network standards. Adult Swim's Lazzo came across the pilot and decided to pick it up as long as McGruder produced episodes that were more mature and had less of the feel of a broadcast network series. Like the comic, the show follows Robert Freeman as he moves his grandsons, Huey and Riley, to a suburban neighborhood to help them stay out of trouble. As a result, they are constantly faced with race and class issues, which are often addressed through satire with the most attention paid to issues that affect African Americans (Galbraith, 2019). Unlike most shows featuring African Americans that either celebrate middle class individualism or deplore urban poverty, the show addresses the social and structural issues applied to each of these assumptions or stereotypes (Gray, 1989). Much like the comic strip the show was both critically acclaimed and criticized due to its portrayal of several Black figures and institutions including Martin Luther King Jr., the NAACP, and BET. In one episode in the third season, they satirized Tyler Perry, who has a close relationship with Turner since they broadcast several of his shows, which brought complaints from Perry and threats of increased oversight from executives leading to McGruder's departure after that season (Flint, 2010).

McGruder's appreciation for anime and manga, was evident in the animation, inspired by several of the shows featured on *Toonami* at the time. Similar to the other programs on the network, Adult Swim offered assistance in compiling the soundtrack, but gave creators control over what songs and artists are used in the show. Like much of the promotional materials on the network, *The Boondocks* featured a Hip Hop inspired soundtrack, and welcomed several Hip Hop artists to make cameo appearances and lend their voices to characters on the show (C.M., 2013). Even with its controversy, *The Boondocks* is one of the few animated shows in the history of television with a black creator that directly addressed issues that affect African Americans. The critical success of the show would further establish Adult Swim as a platform for animation that other networks refused to air because of their antiquated ideas about the topics and representations that should be featured in animated content (Braxton, 2008).

Growing up and Getting Bigger

In 2006, Adult Swim expanded their online presence by launching Adult Swim Video, later renamed adultswimtv.com. The site was one of the first to offer full episodes of the programs that appeared on the network, along with original pilots, webseries, and video games. Adult Swim has even let fans vote on a set on pilots to choose which one gets picked up for production. The network was one of the first to embrace internet video, and they continue to use their online presence to engage with fans and offer content beyond what they play during their regular broadcast hours (Zimmerman, 2010). Also, as the pilot polls exemplify, the video portion of the Adult Swim has become a platform to broadcast shows either not appropriate or not ready for air, providing another channel for animators, which can be difficult with the limited avenues for exposure provided by the insular animation environment.

On January 31, 2007, Adult Swim got national attention when a guerilla advertising campaign for *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* featuring the show's characters, the Mooninites, created a bomb scare in Boston. Turner was forced to apologize, but after the initial anger, the publicity ended being positive for Adult Swim as it made even more people aware of the network and its unconventional shows. Later that year, Adult Swim expanded to seven nights a week, taking over Friday and Saturday nights from Cartoon Network. Adult Swim and Williams Street continued to produce new shows, even venturing into live action programming and other media businesses connected to the network (Harrell, 2007).

One of these businesses was Williams Street Records, a music label started by DeMarco as a subsidiary of Warner Music Group. DeMarco had brought a lot of attention to independent Hip Hop artists by featuring their music in interstitial "bumps" between shows on *Toonami* and Adult Swim. In 2006, he began co-producing albums with several independent labels around Atlanta, where Turner and Adult Swim are headquartered. The next year, DeMarco started producing albums for Adult Swim and Williams Street, with many of the albums inspired by the shows on the network. The label produced music in a variety of genres and styles from rock to african folk music, even recording music through the fictional band Dethklok from the heavy metal parody, *Metacocalypse*. One of the label's biggest impact was clearly within the Hip Hop genre as Williams Street provided a platform for many unknown Hip Hop artists. Artists also received exposure through the network as Adult Swim played much of this music during bumps. Adult Swim began featuring the music of Flying Lotus in 2007 when they received several of his songs after asking for submissions from artists to play between shows. Flying Lotus has admitted that Cartoon Network was one of the strongest influences in his life and music increasing his popularity as a critically acclaimed musician in the underground Hip Hop scene. DeMarco also

introduced El-P, who was also producing music for the network at the time, and Killer Mike. The two artists went on to form the critically acclaimed Hip Hop duo, Run the Jewels, in 2011, producing two successful albums through their collaboration (Holmes, 2014).

The Adult Swim Singles program, started in 2010, helps to promote the music of emerging independent artists, exchanging exposure through the network and its website for the ability to distribute singles for free to interested listeners/viewers. The exposure through Adult Swim and its outlets creates opportunities to reach audiences residing in the target demographics through streaming at a time when major labels and radio are providing fewer opportunities to new artists. Mike Will Made-It, Vince Staples, and Earl Sweatshirt have all contributed to the program, which helped them expand their audience and increase their popularity outside the independent scene (Lyle, 2017). The success of the program, and some of the difficulties and costs related to album production, marketing, a distribution has led Williams Street Records to stop producing albums and focus on artist promotion allowing the label to maintain considerable influence in the independent Hip Hop scene through promotion and artist collaboration (Darville, 2018).

Business and Identity Collide

During this time, Adult Swim also expanded internationally, often in tandem with its daypart partner, Cartoon Network. In some countries, like Australia and India, the block appears in its entirety late night on local cable networks. In other countries, like Russia, several of the shows appear in similar adult animation blocks on cable networks not explicitly connected to Adult Swim. Animation is much more adaptable to international markets than live action content because it is easier to edit and dub smoothly for local audiences. As a result foreign audiences have become vital for the success of animation throughout the history of the industry. Adult Swim, Turner, and Time Warner have recognized this and they continue to work to utilize the adaptability of animation to expand the reach of Adult Swim. The block and its programs are available over the air in over a dozen countries and online in many other locations, sometimes illegally through virtual private networks with its shows dubbed into several languages (Hardy, 2015). The fact that they have experience importing dubbed and adapted Japanese animation helps increase awareness about how to adapt Adult Swim programs for international markets. With its focus on animation, and its corporate connections through Turner and Warner Media/At&T, Adult Swim is well positioned to increase its influence around the world (Turner Broadcasting, 2014).

Due to its success among the 18-49 demographic, Adult Swim continued to expand taking another hour from Cartoon Network in 2010, which expanded the broadcast time of the block to nine hours a day from 9:00 PM to 6:00 AM, an hour deeper into primetime (Crupi, 2010). As a result of this expansion, Williams Street began production on a collection of new programs and Adult Swim commissioned several new shows to be produced for the network. The majority of the new shows produced after 2010, either by Williams Street or by other production companies exclusively for the network, were live action shows. This was partly due to the lower production costs and quicker production schedule compared to many of the animated shows. Although Adult Swim moved away from the production of animation during this period, the shows still contained the subversive and unconventional content that has been a staple of the network for over a decade. This included several parody shows that satirized either scripted shows or news programs appearing on broadcast networks.

Adult Swim continued to feature shows created and produced by African-Americans even as they produced more live action programs. In 2012, the network debuted three shows created by black producers and featuring black stars. In 2012, *The Eric Andre Show* debuted featuring the eponymous comedian and fellow comedian Hannibal Burress in a spoof of late night public access talk shows. Andre admitted that the show was inspired by the Cartoon Network and Adult Swim series *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* with its irreverent often subversive humor, deconstructing the talk show format in similar ways. When the show premiered, Andre was a regular cast member on the ABC show *Don't Trust the B--- in Apt. 23* and was asked by ABC to not mention the sitcom on his show due to the mature content and the fact that the shows are owned and produced by different companies (Luippold, 2012).

Loiter Squad premiered the same year, originally pitched as a combination of *Chappelle's Show* and *Jackass*. It is produced by Dickhouse Productions, which produced *Jackass* and the film adaptations of the show for MTV. Producers pushed to have the show called *Blackass*, promoting it as the African American *Jackass*, but the producers refused. *Loiter Squad* stars the members of Odd Future, a Hip Hop collective from Southern California and frequently features music from Odd Future along with collaborations with popular Hip Hop artists like Lil' Wayne and Juicy J. The Hip Hop inspired focus of the show clearly fit with the style and identity of the rest of the network, with the stunts and sketches attracting the same male teenage audience as the show that inspired it. However, considering the title implies the stars were loiterers and the large white male audience for both stunt shows and Hip Hop, some felt the representations of African Americans in the show were less than positive. In spite of these criticisms, the success of the show led Adult Swim to renew it for second and third seasons (Veronin, 2012).

By 2012, Adult Swim was premiering new animated shows along with its new stable of live action shows. Like *The Eric Andre Show* and *Loiter Squad*, *Black Dynamite* was a program featuring black producers, actors, and characters. The animated series was adapted from the 2009 live action film of the same name. Like the film, the television series was a parody and tribute to the blaxploitation films of the 1970s, using the time period to comment on present day race relations and politics. The show satirized stars of the time, like O.J. Simpsons and a young Michael Jackson, while portraying Richard Nixon as the ultimate villain in both the series and the film. The show also uses real life cultural events, like the premiere of the mini-series *Roots* and the meeting between Elvis Presley and President Nixon concerning the War on Drugs, as fodder for the show's larger social commentary (Andreeva, 2012).

Adult Swim has continued to expand their content offerings as they have altered their public identity as just a animation network. They increased the content available online exponentially, debuting over two dozen webisodes and web series in 2013, however all but two were live action shows, with some based on series on the cable network. Adult Swim also launched a live streaming network through the Watch Adult Swim mobile application. The next year, Adult Swim premiered a collection of new shows, and although the network continues to establish their live action fare they also maintained their reputation for featuring irreverent content on the network. Three of the shows they premiered, *Rick and Morty*, *Mike Tyson Mysteries*, and *Black Jesus*, feature non-white leading characters. *Rick and Morty*, created by Dan Harmon, who previous created *Community*, and voice actor Justin Roiland, follows Rick, an alcoholic scientist who often pushes his grandson Morty to help with his adventures. Rick's race does not come into conversation much during the series, but the fact his last name is Sanchez does make it one of the first animated shows with a Latino lead character (Cohen, 2014).

Mike Tyson Mysteries, which premiered in the fall of 2014, is produced by Warner Bros. Animation with an animation style and story structure style similar to *Scooby Doo, Where Are You?* spoofing mystery cartoons from the 1970s. Tyson voices his cartoon alter ego, who is a bumbling leader of a group of private detectives, including his fictional adopted 18-year old Korean daughter. Tyson is a controversial figure after his boxing career and his arrest and imprisonment for rape, but partially due to his cameo in the hit movie the *Hangover*, his reputation has softened enough over the last 25 years to convince Warner Bros. to green light an animated spoof with him as the star. The program relies on absurdist humor rather than providing any type social commentary or addressing issues of race. Like *Rick and Morty*, the show was received well by audiences and renewed for a second season (“Mike Tyson Mysteries, 2014).

Unlike *Rick and Morty* or *Mike Tyson Mysteries*, a third show that premiered in 2014, *Black Jesus*, explicitly addresses issues surrounding race and the experience of African-Americans in the inner city. Unlike most other shows on television dealing with inner-city poverty, *Black Jesus* does not treat it as a personal failure and instead examines the conditions that force people into the situation in satirical and humorous ways (Gray, 1989). The show is created by Aaron McGruder, who moved on from his animated adaptation of *The Boondocks* after the third season, and Matt Clattenburg, creator of the *Trailer Park Boys*, a dark comedic mockumentary that follows that lives of three trailer park residents who commit petty crimes as their source of income. Much like McGruder’s *The Boondocks* was a commentary on African American life in America, Clattenburg’s *Trailer Park Boys* was a satirization of working class life in Canada. Along with providing his viewpoint, Clattenburg also has experience producing live action series in the mockumentary format (Thurm, 2014).

As the title suggests, *Black Jesus* features an African American Jesus Christ living in the Compton neighborhood of Los Angeles as he tries to spread his message through a small group of followers. The show actually avoids overt religious commentary or satire, rather it is a show that humanizes the inner-city experience by presenting residents’ daily lives in their neighborhood, much like the *Friday* series of movies. It also presents Jesus as someone struggling to survive while maintaining his morals and conscience, actually making the inspiration for the largest religions followed in the world a more relatable figure (Kameir, 2014). The show was renewed for a third season, but that was delayed, and reruns were blocked from airing after another writer, Saint Solomon, sued claiming he created the character. In late 2017, the lawsuit was thrown out and it was confirmed production would proceed in the future (Chill, 2017).

In 2017, Tyler, the Creator (Tyler Okonma) made headlines while speaking at San Diego Comic Con when he pointed out that historically there has been a severe lack of Black representation in animation. At the time, he was promoting his new show, *The Jellies*, that featured an African-American character who is adopted by a family of jellyfish. The show features primarily Black voice actors, writers, and producers. The show premiered in October, 2017 and was renewed for a second season a year later not only adding much needed non-white representation but further cementing Adult Swim’s connection with Hip Hop by developing a show created by a popular rapper (Yesha, 2017)

Adult Swim Continues to Find Success

By maintaining their identity as a destination for smart, subversive content, Adult Swim has been able to capture and maintain some of the most desirable demographics on television while also

continuing to expand their media presence and content offerings. On March 30, 2014, Adult Swim took over another hour from Cartoon Network, expanding their broadcast time to 10 hours a day, matching the 8:00 PM to 6:00 AM schedule for fellow daypart Nick at Nite. They also changed the aesthetics on the network replacing some of their simple black and white style with landscape backgrounds for their interstitial material (“Cartoon Network’s,” 2014). In late 2018, with its growing popularity among older audiences, Cartoon Network reclaimed the 8:00 pm hour, although this may change again in the future as Turner reacts to consumption trends and its audience’s preferences (“On-Air Schedule”).

All of these changes are coming on the heels of the network’s most successful years. Since 2013, the network has earned the highest total day ratings for the 18-49 and 18-34 demographics among all cable networks. They also draw some of the largest and most consistent numbers in late night television, often beating programs in the same time slots like *The Tonight Show* and *The Daily Show*. Advertisers have clearly noticed the networks consistently high numbers and ability to capture vital audiences. Even though Adult Swim and Turner does not release advertising numbers, Turner Broadcasting’s head of Animation, Young Adults, and Kids Media, Stuart Snyder, has admitted that the expansion of Adult Swim has come on the heels of increased demand from advertisers to market their products to the network’s audience. In a time slot that has consistently been written off by various cable networks, Adult Swim, with its median audience age of 23, has found a way to not only make the difficult time slot profitable, but also maintain a market for live television viewing by featuring, and rerunning, short episodic programs that can be seen in very few other places on television (Carter, 2014).

Even in an environment that is more racially inclusive than the rest of the animation industry, Adult Swim continues to follow some of the conventions that have plagued animation, particularly the maintenance of animation as a space for men (Perras, 2008). In many ways, Adult Swim has avoided patronizing its audience by merely offering superficial displays of feminism through their male produced series, instead promoting the viewpoint of the mostly male creators and producers (Banet-Weiser, 2004). Women have largely been ignored or invisible on the network, mostly appearing as secondary characters or as the significant others of the main characters on animated programs like *Family Guy* and *American Dad*. Although they are parodies of the family sitcoms of the past, they still feature stay-at-home mothers in the leading female roles. In other shows, like *The Cleveland Show* and *King of the Hill*, the lead female characters do work, but are often still portrayed as stereotypical housewives whose careers merely supplement to their family life (Brockway, 1989).

Portrayals of homosexuals and other sexual identities have also been limited on the network as heterosexuality continues to be the sexual identity of most characters on Adult Swim (Gray and Lotz, 2012). It can be argued that certain shows, like the several productions of Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim, present queer ideas about gender and sexuality, but there are still very few shows on the network that address constructions of sexuality in society. Unsurprisingly, this presentation of the heterosexual male perspective has resulted in an audience that is almost 2:1 male to female. The network has very little motivation to change since this audience is seen as one of the hardest to draw in television, especially through scripted, non-sports programming. Even though it would be beneficial for a network with this type of reach to address all oppressed or overlooked groups in society, they unfortunately have very little financial motivation to do so (Carter, 2014).

Adult Swim’s connection with Hip Hop has clearly contributed to its success as a network, particularly among younger male audiences, however their approach to racial representations on the

network has been far from perfect throughout its run. The majority of consumers for Hip Hop are white, and as a result, Hip Hop sometimes supports white ideas about black authenticity as they try to market the content to white youths (Rabaka, 2013). The syndicated *The Cleveland Show* is often criticized as modern blackface since white writers, producers, and voice actors are responsible for most of the shows content, presenting a white perspective on the black experience. *Loiter Squad* is also seen by some as modern minstrelsy since the black performers on the show often purport themselves as deviant buffoons on the show (Itzkoff, 2009). They continue to face significant lack of female representation on both sides of the pen, and have even been accused of supporting content containing views supporting white supremacy (Wright, 2016)

Keeping this in mind, the presence of at least some consciousness about race and the influence Hip Hop on the network has contributed to the industry progressing forward slightly in terms of featuring non-white representations and perspectives in an industry that has almost exclusively presented the white male perspective over the last 100 years.

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