

Whiteness, Man: Whiteness and *King of the Hill*

Introduction

“Are you sure that white people did all of that stuff? Because I come from white people, and this is the first I’m hearing of it.” This question, posed by thirteen-year-old Bobby Hill, encapsulates the critical depiction of whiteness in Fox’s *King of the Hill* (1997-2010). Over the course of its thirteen seasons, *King of the Hill* explored the changing social landscape of white American suburbia through the eyes of a proto-typical white nuclear family. Through the Hill family’s interactions with the world around them, viewers are able to glean insight into the more subliminal workings of whiteness. Because of the hegemonic nature of whiteness, white identity is seen as the invisible norm. Through the use of satire, *King of the Hill* presents whiteness as racial imagery while simultaneously providing critiques of white supremacy. While other satirical programs “critique” racism solely through the use of overtly-prejudiced characters, *King of the Hill* targets the way whiteness functions as a whole. The program exposes the seemingly innocuous manifestations of whiteness, such as white guilt, performative tolerance, and the idea that racism exists only as individual acts of prejudice. The Hill family, their peers, and white viewers are satirized for their ignorance without being “let off the hook” for their internalized racism. *King of the Hill* presents characters that are likeable despite their inherent racism, forcing viewers to align themselves with their actions and examine their own behaviors. This framing of characters is in opposition to other satirical programs, like *Family Guy*, which present us with distinguishably racist characters that viewers can comfortably distance themselves from. In this way, *King of the Hill* poses a depiction of whiteness and American populism that forces its white viewers to deconstruct their own whiteness. The satirical format of *King of the Hill* explores and subverts the ways that whiteness and American populism function in society.

King of the Hill takes place in the sprawling suburbia of Arlen, Texas. Inspired by Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), creator Mike Judge decided that "someone ought to do a movie about suburban white people" (Thompson 43). The show follows patriarch Hank Hill, a tightly-wound propane salesman, his wife Peggy, a spirited substitute Spanish teacher, and his son Bobby, an eccentric aspiring comedian. As the show's protagonist, Hank embodies working-class middle America: he is devoted to his lawn, his Ford pickup truck, and the Texas Longhorns. Though his political affiliation is never stated, Hank prioritizes the conservative values of hard work, fiscal responsibility, gender normativity, and sexual modesty. These values are often challenged by the world around him, for example through the non-traditional masculinity of his son or the cultural differences of his Laotian neighbors. Hank often expresses his discomfort over domestic beers with his other white friends: Dale, an anti-government exterminator, Bill, a depressed Army barber, and Boomhauer, a suave, incoherent ladies' man. It's through these conversations that Hank works through his racial anxieties and moral dilemmas. Clere writes, "Hank is traditional and fundamentally uneasy in the rapidly globalizing, neoliberal culture of the '90s and '00s, watching the world around him transform. But one of the show's great themes is Hank's own place in this changing world, and his engagement with it in spite of his own reluctance. He's stubborn with soft prejudices, but always drawn to do the right thing in the end."

By consistently placing Hank and the show's other white characters in situations they are uncomfortable in, they are forced to grow and acknowledge some of the more subconscious workings of their whiteness. Thompson writes, "When [Hank] encounters frustrations in the modern world, he does not respond with violent intolerance but attempts instead to adapt. Though he might wax nostalgic every now and then, he is focused on the future of his family and

the way things will be rather than excessive glorying in the way they were” (42). The way Hank experiences the world, though ultimately well-intentioned, is shaped by his own whiteness and masculinity. Understanding the role that this pervasive, seemingly innocuous whiteness plays requires reflection on the “invisible” nature of whiteness, as explored by critical race theorists Richard Dyer and Michael Brown.

Invisible Whiteness

The depiction of whiteness in *King of the Hill* is critical given the current disparities in racial imagery. Racial imagery shapes the world; it generates character assumptions and determines who has access to certain spaces. Dyer writes that this racial imagery is “never not a factor, never not at play” (9). However, this racialization is only applied to people of color. White people are never viewed through a racialized lens; their whiteness is “invisible.” White people are not racially seen or named (Dyer 10), and they are as unable (or unwilling) to recognize this whiteness as a fish in water (Brown).

The simultaneous denial of whiteness and reinforcement of nonwhite racial imagery maintains white privilege and supremacy. Dyer writes, “There is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity” (10). When white people do not acknowledge the ways in which their whiteness benefits them at the expense of people of color, they cannot recognize the more subtle workings of racism. Their experiences are coded as ‘neutral’ instead of as ‘white,’ allowing actions rooted in white supremacy to be deemed as harmless and commonplace. Brown writes, “[white people] can convince themselves that life as they experience it on their side of the color line is simply the objective truth about race. But while this allows them to take their privileged status for granted, it also distorts their understanding” (35). For instance, white people often refer to nonwhite

acquaintances racially, including the racial titles of “my black friend” or “my Asian co-worker.” However, these racial monikers will not be applied in reference to white acquaintances, who are simply referred to as “my friend” or “my doctor.” The invisible nature of whiteness perpetuates white hegemony by reinforcing the idea that white experiences, including their assumptions about people of color, are universal.

This invisible nature of whiteness operates in a number of ways. By erasing whiteness and imposing racial imagery onto people of color, white people are placed in control of defining racism. White conceptions of racism are often imagined as instances of individual prejudice, divorced from any structural or institutional underpinnings. Because whiteness is viewed as neutral, white interactions with people of color are also viewed as neutral, so long as there is no overt hatred behind the interaction. In this way, the more subtle workings of whiteness and racism go unnoticed by white perpetrators. Seemingly-innocuous racial ignorance, microaggressions, cultural appropriation, and white guilt degrade people of color and reinforce white supremacy, but these actions are neutral or invisible to white people. Regarding invisible whiteness, Brown writes, “Because it ignores culturally acceptable sophisticated forms of racism, the perspective is unable to detect the ‘nonracist’ ways that being white works to the advantage of European Americans” (55). All white people perpetuate these “culturally-acceptable” forms of racism to an extent, even if they perceive themselves as being non-racist. Dismantling these more subtle workings of racism must come about by naming and exposing whiteness. The ways that whiteness permeates institutions and dominates racial imagery production must be identified and subverted in the mainstream in order to shift dominant narratives about race. Satire, when handled intentionally, can be a vehicle for identifying this whiteness in mainstream media.

However, satire is equally capable of perpetuating invisible whiteness and white generalizations about racism.

Satire and Whiteness

“Most simply, to satirize is to scrutinize, which requires an object to study and, ultimately, to ridicule” (Thompson 40). The satirical format has been used (successfully and unsuccessfully) to critique groups in power for centuries. *King of the Hill* is a contemporary example of satire, where working-class white Americans are satirized for their outdated ignorance. Viewers are encouraged to laugh at Dale’s misinformed enthusiasm for guns or Hank’s tepid discomfort during a conversation with a tattooed feminist. Regarding Hank Hill, Thompson writes, “these figures are intolerant of other races, genders, religions, nationalities, beliefs, and so on, and they are, therefore, ripe for ridicule. Because these characters are so outrageous in terms of their intolerance, audiences can agree that they deserve to be ‘laughed at’” (41).

However, “laughing at” these subjects of critique does not directly translate into subversion of the subjects’ power. In his article “‘I Am Not Down with That’: King of the Hill and Sitcom Satire,” Thompson draws comparisons between Hank Hill and *All in the Family*’s Archie Bunker. Similar to Hank, Archie verbalizes “laughably” outdated beliefs about society. Because these beliefs are so outrageous, white viewers can comfortably distance themselves from Archie’s prejudices. By laughing at overt prejudice, white viewers reassure themselves that they do not maintain these same beliefs. Thompson writes, “it is worth considering, though, that although *All in the Family* ridiculed reactionary beliefs, it fell short of scrutinizing them because they were never rigorously considered” (41). This failure to “rigorously consider” the actions of an overtly-prejudiced character run rampant within the satire genre. For instance, the unabridged

racism and misogyny of *Family Guy*'s Peter Griffin or the anti-Semitism of *South Park*'s Eric Cartman are not situated within a greater context of hegemonic whiteness. Episodes such as *South Park*'s "The Passion of the Jew" (2004), in which Eric dresses as Hitler and marches through the streets yelling anti-Semitic slurs, perpetuate a view of racism rooted in individual discrimination. White viewers can comfortably distinguish themselves from the media's decidedly racist characters, drawing little attention to the more subliminal functions of racism inherent in whiteness.

While *King of the Hill* also contains characters with outrageous, outdated ideals (albeit to a lesser extent than the aforementioned media), these characters are intentionally located within the context of seemingly well-intentioned whiteness. The characters that we are encouraged to "laugh at" are also performing some of the more subconscious operations of whiteness. In her analysis of Asian-American representation in *King of the Hill*, Loader writes, in its depiction of race and class, *King of the Hill* both deconstructs and perpetuates stereotypes. Comedy and satire play a complex role in racialized representation. *King of the Hill* demonstrates that animation can offer a unique strategy for addressing the politics of difference head on" (Loader). Unlike other satirical programs that position an overtly-discriminatory character in stark opposition to their seemingly morally-just peers (and viewers), *King of the Hill* presents a community of whiteness where everyone, even those that are well-intentioned, are complicit in their whiteness.

To reiterate the difference between *King of the Hill* and its satirical counterparts, Thompson cites a focus group comprised of the program's viewers. He writes, "when asked to compare the show to other animated sitcoms they liked, in particular *Family Guy*, they said that this was a different kind of comedy that required paying more attention and perhaps having more life experience to appreciate. These references to a "different kind of humor" reiterate the notion

that *King of the Hill* works not only as a sitcom but also as a satire on domestic and cultural mores that requires more attention for appreciation than the rapid-fire cultural pastiche/ comic onslaught of *Family Guy*” (47). The specific ways in which *King of the Hill* names whiteness will be elaborated upon in the following section, but it’s important to distinguish how the program fundamentally differs from similar work in the satire genre.

Nuances to Whiteness

While the characters of *King of the Hill* expose whiteness, it’s important to note the nuances in this portrayal based on economic class standing. The Hill family and their peers serve as representations of working-class, middle Americans (Bai): these are characters who work blue-collar jobs and are generally not college-educated. While there are general trends in the way whiteness functions across class groups, it’s important to name how it operates differently based on economic status. The whiteness of liberal elites may be more easily hidden than the populist whiteness portrayed in *King of the Hill*, but that doesn’t make it less white. Brown writes, “when tolerance means verbalizing principles acquired through exposure to liberal middle-class institutions, lower and working-class whites will appear to be more racist than middle class whites” (41). Similar to how white viewers are comfortable distancing themselves from outwardly-racist characters, liberal, intellectual white viewers may feel comfortable distancing themselves from the “white trash” whiteness portrayed in *King of the Hill*. This reading of the show further cements the “invisibility” of whiteness, but it instead deems “liberal whiteness” as the neutral, universal identity. White viewers should read the show as a critique of *all* whiteness instead of reading it as a critique of “that other kind of whiteness.” Clere writes, “viewers on the left could enjoy laughing at ‘hicks’ who felt increasingly out of touch in the modern world, while those on the right could both appreciate and identify with the “redneck” stereotypes they were

proud to embrace...*King of the Hill* drew viewers in with these caricatures, then used them to subvert expectations.” The critiques presented in *King of the Hill* should not make any white viewers feel as if they have been “let off the hook,” even if they are from a different sect of whiteness.

That being said, the show primarily depicts the operation of whiteness in the following ways: white performative guilt/sympathy, white belief in racism as individual prejudice, and white dependence on people of color for validation. The following sections will explore how each of these manifestations of whiteness function in the episodes “Westie Side Story,” “Traffic Jam,” and “Racist Dawg.”

Case Study “Westie Side Story”

“Westie Side Story” (1997), the seventh episode in *King of the Hill*’s first season, focuses on the Hill family as they first encounter their new Laotian neighbors. Upon viewing their Asian-American neighbors unloading their minivan, the Hills become both uncomfortable and intrigued. Hank nervously comments, “a neighbor’s a neighbor,” while Peggy excitedly declares, “it’s like we get to travel to the Orient without having to worry about getting diarrhea or being jailed for our pro-democracy beliefs.” The Hills invite the Souphanousinphone family, comprised of Kahn, his wife Minh, and their daughter Connie, over for dinner. The following day, Kahn and Hank get into a dispute when they catch their dogs breeding. Hank tells Kahn that his dog should “breed with its own kind,” to which Kahn calls Hank a redneck. Tensions ultimately cool between the two men, and the Souphanousinphones become staple characters on the show.

This episode speaks to the invisible nature of whiteness in that the “neutral” white Hill family is uncomfortable when confronted with the Souphanousinphone family, the nonwhite “others.” This discomfort is immediately apparent from the first time the Souphanousinphone minivan pulls into the neighborhood. The episode also depicts the need for white people to ascribe racial imagery to nonwhite others: shortly after their first meeting, Hank asks Kahn “so are you Chinese or Japanese?” Kahn subsequently explains that he is from Laos, to which Hank repeats “so are you Chinese or Japanese?” This exchange relates to Dyer’s arguments about whiteness. He writes, “(whites) will, say, speak of the blackness or Chineseness of friends, neighbors, colleagues, customers or clients, and it might be in the most genuinely friendly and accepting manner, but we don’t mention the whiteness of the white people we know” (Dyer 10). Had the Hills’ new neighbors been white, would they have named them as such?

The Hill family does not respond to the Souphanousinphones with outright discrimination, but their discomfort, ignorance, and exotification of the family is in opposition to how they interact with their white neighbors. The Hill family and their white peers have the privilege of being neutral, of being just “neighbors” instead of the “Asian neighbors.” Loader reflects on this episode, claiming that it is “locating racial prejudice in readily resolved individual misunderstandings rather than systemic racism and unequal power relations; and placing the privileged subject position as that of the white middle class, in this case Hank Hill.” While viewers know they are supposed to laugh at the blatant ignorance of the Hills, they are also challenged to see themselves as complicit in their own whiteness. The satire genre exaggerates the very real, diffuse nature of white anxiety by presenting us with characters that verbalize anxieties whites would rather keep hidden.

Case Study: “Traffic Jam”

“Traffic Jam” (1998), *King of the Hill*’s sixteenth episode in its second season explores how humor is used by people of color to challenge white hegemony. The episode follows Hank as he attends traffic school classes led by Booda Sac, a black stand-up comedian (voiced by Chris Rock). Hank takes offense to Booda Sac’s humor, much of which pokes fun at white people, despite the fact that his son, Bobby, finds Booda to be hilarious. Bobby experiments with joking about black experiences as Booda does, to which Booda suggests he get in touch with “his own race.” Ultimately, Hank complains to the traffic school supervisor, and Booda is fired. After his termination, Bobby tries some of his new “white humor” out at one of Booda’s open mic night events. However, when researching “white humor,” Bobby unknowingly stumbles upon a white supremacist joke site. He performs these jokes at open mic night, and Booda deflects the audience’s anger at Bobby’s routine. Seeing this, Hank apologizes to Booda and hires him at his own place of work, Strictland Propane.

This episode exemplifies the white misconception that racism exists solely within interpersonal interactions. Hank perceives Booda’s humor, which speaks to black experiences and explicitly challenges whiteness, as prejudiced towards him. This reading of Booda’s routine is entirely divorced from the way power and privilege operate: while Hank may feel discriminated against in the moment, he is still the one who holds the power and privilege. “In a state still confronting a long legacy of racism, humor offers Booda a weapon that upends the historical power dynamic between white and black males” (Clere). After perceiving this individual discrimination, Hank exercises his institutional privilege to get Booda terminated from his job. This speaks to the way whiteness functions under structural racism, since Hank was able to invoke his whiteness and utilize it as soon as he perceived his power to be threatened. Brown writes, “narrowing the concept to purposeful individual bigotry is highly advantageous for

whites. It locates racism in America's past. It labels black anger and white guilt as equally inappropriate. It renders most whites innocent" (64). Booda's routine forces Hank to experience white guilt, and he responds by trying to diminish the validity of Booda's experiences.

Additionally, the episode challenges the "invisible" nature of whiteness by specifically naming it via Bobby's comedy routine. When prompted to get in touch with his own race, Bobby discovers a hub for white supremacy. Although he doesn't understand the implication of these jokes, the open mic audience (Hank included) are still horrified at what he says. When whiteness is named, it is more transparently open for critique. Even Hank, who embodies the more subliminal forms of whiteness, is appalled by his son's white supremacist words.

Case Study: "Racist Dawg"

Similar to "Traffic Jam," "Racist Dawg" (2003) confronts white guilt and names whiteness. In this episode, the Hills' dog, Ladybird, is called a racist for barking at a black repair man (voiced by Bernie Mac). Hank is horrified that his dog would be deemed as such, and he tries various preposterous methods to "train her out of racism." At obedience school, a trainer informs Hank that dogs pick up on their owners' feelings, so Hank is actually the racist. Hank emphatically denies this, and he reaches out to his black co-worker as well as an online racism test to affirm his non-racism.

This episode speaks to the invisible nature of whiteness and the discomfort and guilt that arise when it is named. Whites become enraged/uncomfortable when their whiteness (and their racism) are acknowledged (Dyer 10-11). For Hank, this discomfort manifests as insecurity and a desire to be validated. Brown writes, "because white privilege is invisible, it is common to describe 'racists' and 'nonracists' as very different kinds of people." White misconceptions of

racism depict it as something that is moralized and intentional. Hank views himself as a moral person with no racist intentions, so he is anxious to rid himself of such a moniker. This illustrates the way in which white people reduce structural racism and white privilege to conscious prejudice. In doing so, they remove themselves from their complicity in structural racism.

This episode also illustrates white performative non-racism and the expectation of validation from people of color. The satire format presents these ideas about whiteness in a preposterous format (for instance, there is a scene where Hank holds his dog's eyes open and makes her watch rap videos to train her out of her racism) as a way of critiquing white perceptions of racism. Hank is so desperate to rebrand himself as a non-racist that he sucks up to his black friends and takes an online racism quiz in front of his co-workers. Peggy also takes the quiz, hanging her results on the wall when the quiz deems her to "strongly prefer the company of black people." In this way, the episode explicitly names the performative and often self-congratulatory nature of whiteness when whites are convincing others (and themselves) that they are non-racist.

Multiple Types of Work: Characters of Color

While the show presents a successful satire of whiteness, its depiction of people of color is debatable. On the one hand, the show presents several fully-realized characters of color voiced by people of color. These characters are not entirely bound by stereotypes, and they are given interesting plots independent of white characters. For instance, John Redcorn, an American Indian character voiced by an American Indian voice actor, possesses an arc about trying to reclaim his ancestors' land from the Texas government. Additionally, Loader suggests that several episodes foreground the challenges that the Souphanousinphones face as Asian Americans – issues of cultural isolation, racial prejudice, identity formation and assimilation”

(Loader). Loader also argues that Kahn's brash demeanor intervenes in the myth that Asians are shy and politically reserved. She writes, "expressions such as these, of Asian American grief in mainstream popular culture, are almost non-existent. Yet anger is a powerful political force and racial grief and grievance has performed a vital role in implementing change."

However, it could be argued that these depictions do very little to advance media representations of people of color. For instance, the show has been criticized for its use of "yellow voice," which Loader describes as "an accent not specific to any linguistic origin but one that fulfils audience expectations of what Asians sound like, thus racializing them as foreign and all the same." Kahn's character is voiced by Toby Huss, a white voice actor performing a vague, stereotypical "Asian" accent. This racialized characterization is similar to that of Apu from *The Simpsons*, a South Asian character voiced by the white actor Hank Azaria. The use of "yellow voice" and "brown voice" are problematic aspects of the satire genre that fail to advance the position of people of color. In their quest to satirize and subvert the ignorance of whiteness, these characterizations are actually perpetuating white production of racial imagery. Even though these outrageously stereotypic depictions are supposed to serve as critiques as whiteness, they ultimately do more harm than good for people of color.

In conclusion, while the critical subversion of whiteness in *King of the Hill* exposes the more subliminal functions of racism, the program is not without its own racial shortcomings. The show performs multiple types of work, and as with all depictions of race in media, *King of the Hill* warrants critical discussion.

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