

*When the Goode Family is not so Good: Racism Masked as White Liberalism*  
Midwest Pop Culture Association / American Culture Association  
2020 Annual Conference  
Melissa Kocelko  
Paper Presented

This presentation will provide an overview of the series *The Goode Family* and its use of white liberalism as a form of racism. First, we will look at how the 2008 presidential election impacted the reception of the 2009 show. Then, we will look at how *The Goode Family* is an example of a satirical animated sitcom and why it was ultimately “unsuccessful”. And finally, we will look at the episode “Helen’s Back” to exemplify how the series presents PC culture and identity politics as a form of racism.

While not the focus of this paper, I cannot begin a presentation on identity and racial politics without first acknowledging and addressing the present moment. I originally submitted the abstract for this research in August 2019 with the intention of exploring a cartoon and its use of hipster racism and colorblindness to poke fun at liberals. In the time since its submission, there has been a surge of attention to the Black Lives Matter movement sparked most recently with the murder of George Floyd. Beyond being horrific, tragic, and unjust, his death and the murders of other innocent Black lives highlight the impacts of race and racism on American society.

For the purposes of this paper, the Black Lives Matter movement is an important reminder that how groups are discussed and represented in pop culture, perpetuates harmful stereotypes that have real-world impacts. It also provides the social, political, and historical context for the 2009 creation of *The Goode Family*, and how to many, it was the time of “post-racial America” and as such, it was fine to make jokes about racism as race was no longer viewed as real and therefore did not have any real-world effects.

Before discussing the cartoon in-depth, it is important to briefly build onto this context and to dissect the 2008 presidential election, its impact, and societal reactions to it. In the months leading up to the election the media could hardly get through a discussion about Barack Obama

without commenting on his identity, more specifically his race. From inaccurate discussions of him being a Muslim to calling him African American rather than Black to the creation of birtherism, President Obama was “Othered”. Despite these efforts to discredit his nationality and character, his election was seen as David beating Goliath despite his credentials and qualifications.

His election to some meant that we as a country were able to look past race and entered a new era, a post-racial era. That “the traditional structure of race relations in the United States became less important” (Bailey 2009, 234) and even Henry Louis Gates Jr. noted that his election was “a magical transformation moment...the grand achievement of a great collective dream” (Gates 2009, 2, 3)” (Kam and Kinder 2012, 333). To others, the election of the first African American president meant that we—as a country—could not be racist, because how could we be racist if we elected a Black president? Looking back on this time with a 2020 perspective has shown us otherwise and what many already knew, that is racism is not over.

As this is not an exhaustive analysis of the election, I mention it only to understand the socio-political environment of what *The Goodes* are making fun of. A time when in mainstream media, race was touted as no longer being an issue, the show poked fun at politically correct or PC culture, overzealous environmentalists, and performative activism. What makes *The Goode Family* unique is its satirical bent of poking fun of liberals rather than conservatives.

Satirical animated sitcoms are not new, and in fact, are some of longest-lasting animated shows as can be seen with *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy*. These are shows that provide social commentary by pointing out the absurdity of society such as *South Park*’s take on PC culture or *Family Guy*’s jokes about colorism. The creator of *The Goode Family*, Mike Judge is not new to this genre as two of his well-known shows *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *King of the*

*Hill* both poke fun of society from two distinct perspective; that of anarchist, disillusioned teenage youth and the other from a conservative, middle-class perspective. What I believe separates *The Goode Family* from these shows is that the Goodes are neither humanistic enough to relate to like audiences did with Hank Hill or exaggerated enough to laugh at or with as we did with Beavis and Butt-Head. In addition, I argue that the topics the Goodes are poking fun at such as zero waste, cultural appropriation, and freegans were not yet well known enough for society at large to recognize, let alone laugh at. Similar to Judge's movies *Office Space* and *Idiocracy*, they were ahead of the social commentary and thus took time to for the critiques to land. So, who are the Goodes and does *The Goode Family*'s satire hold up in 2020?

Originally airing on ABC on May 27, 2009, *The Goode Family* follows the everyday lives of the Goodes. The heads of the family are the parents, Helen and Gerald Goode. Despite the family constantly complaining about a lack of finances, Helen chooses to be a stay-at-home mom who is too busy volunteering at pet adoptions to work. She, like the rest of her family, is a liberal, vegan, and environmental activist. But unlike her family, she is the most concerned with other's perception of her actions and makes family decisions to increase the social capital of the family, even at their own detriment. For example, she insists the family shops exclusively at One Earth, *The Goode Family* equivalent of Whole Foods, where she spends more than she can afford on groceries that are more expensive but the labels of organic foods are abundant.

Father Gerald works at Greenville Community College in an unspecified administrative role, but it does not matter what the job is because working in a college—even a local community college—holds prestige in the Goodes' eyes. Their daughter Bliss is a high school senior with a penchant for boys, rebelling against her parents, and getting out of Greenville no matter the cost. Their dog Che—as in Che Guevara, like the rest of the family, is a vegan.

Unbeknownst to the family is that Che—as can be seen in this picture—secretly eats and loves meat.

Last is Ubuntu, the youngest Goode who at birth was adopted from South Africa, a strategic move by the parents to show off their altruism. This clip discusses the adoption more in-depth and highlights the family's motives. Since his adoption, being born in South Africa has become his main identifying feature, something that can be seen in his name and character design. His name is Zulu for “humanity”, serving as a reminder that we are all one despite our differences. His blonde hair and lighter complexion from the other Goodes serve as reminders of his “Otherness” from the family. His clothes are signifiers of one of the most interesting characteristics about him, his ethnicity; something which can be seen here in this clip of Ubuntu getting his driver’s license.

The Goode parents have taught Ubuntu to identify as African American, he does not identify as Black. Similar to President Obama, Ubuntu’s ethnicity is “Othered” but unlike Obama, this was chosen by the Goodes and is a reminder to others of what they consider to be their “good actions”. Ubuntu is able to choose this ethnicity because he is white, an “unmarked category [that] is fluid” and if he so chooses, he can add other identities on top of it; identities like African American (Brodkin 1998; Gordon 2008; Sterling 2015 from *The Archaeology of Gender*). The irony of choosing to be identified as African American is that Ubuntu is the embodiment of settler rule in South Africa. But based on the Goode’s logic, instead, Ubuntu is a reminder to others that they as a family cannot be racist because they have an African American son.

However, the Goodes, primarily the adults, are wildly uncomfortable about discussing identity, race, and ethnicity with anyone who is not white as can be seen in this clip with their

neighbor Ray. A combination of their colorblindness mixed with a “post-racial” America has caused them to “Other” Ray, a person who should be familiar to them as their neighbor is made unfamiliar based on his skin color. Rather than talking to Ray and listening to his thoughts, the family ultimately chooses to walk away and avoid situations where they can potentially be called out for not using the politically correct term of the moment. Ubuntu, the last Goode standing, chooses to offer his suggestion on how Ray should identify stating “I like Black.” A statement that is given no further explanation and continues the idea that it is for the Goodes to decide who is African American and Black.

With the background of the Goodes in place, let’s dissect an episode that builds on these ideas of racial identities. Episode four, “Helen’s Back” revolves around 3 different yet intersecting sets of relationships and the power dynamics that exist within them. First, there is the relationship between Helen, and her childhood pen-pal, Myanmar refugee Mahkinkin. The second is that of Gerald and his relationship with 3 gardeners he hires to help with the family’s organic garden. The third follows Bliss and Ubuntu’s journey to “trade up” a dented water bottle for a box of flaxseed waffle mix. The episode as a whole is about how “days before the Organic Gardening Club is to review the Goodes garden, Helen hurts her back” ([IMDB](#)). In order to ensure their garden meets the standards of others, they agree to hire a group of gardeners to help them while Mahkinkin unexpectedly arrives for a visit.

When we first meet Mahkinkin, it is through Helen’s flashbacks of her childhood writing to her, but we are soon faced with an adult Mahkinkin on their doorsteps. No explanation is given about how she made it there or how she is feeling, instead, Mahkinkin sees an injured Helen—who has hurt her back—and tends to her. Within minutes of her aide, Helen is up and walking and Gerald gives her a tour of the family’s home, taunting her with all the luxuries they

own but choose not to use in protest of capitalism. While the Goodes do not see their waste, the viewers are left to wonder who, if anyone, can enjoy the luxury of running water in the Goode's worldview?

The story then turns to Gerald who, at his wife's behest, hires a group of gardeners he cannot afford to make sure the family garden is up to the Organic Gardening Club's standards. When he spots a group of what he codes as Latino gardeners, he reluctantly begins walking to them to hire them but instead spots a gardening truck which is driven by a white man Andrew and hires him. In the Goode's logic, by purposefully not hiring Latino gardeners, Gerald is not feeding into harmful stereotypes rather than what he is actually doing, which is using racist hiring practices. Gerald ultimately tells the workers to not work for Andrew who is exploiting them and instead becomes their boss.

While all of this is going on, Bliss and Ubuntu were tasked to buy groceries for the family since Gerald and Helen are too busy with their chosen roles of looking after and over Mahkinkin and the gardeners. While at the store, Ubuntu accidentally breaks and must pay for a water bottle, and since it is One Earth, is \$20, the same amount as the flaxseed waffle mix they were tasked to buy. They then set out on a mission to "trade up" the broken water bottle at a swap meet for the waffle mix. When Ubuntu does just that, Bliss' greed takes over and she continues to trade until she has a pink moped.

The stories all converge when they meet at the Goode house where the gardeners are working, Mahkinkin is serving Helen and Gerald, and the kids show up at the house with only the moped (the once important waffle mix is never mentioned again). It is during this time "the moment of realization" occurs. Gerald realizes that he is the conquistador he warned the gardeners about, Helen realizes she has been taking advantage of Mahkinkin, and the kids...well

they learn nothing. The family quickly scrambles to hide their actions to the Gardening Club with Mahkinin's work being presented to the group as a form of "trading up"(which it is not) for the moped rather than what it is which is as indentured servitude. When accused of using Latino gardeners for his work by the Club, the gardeners finally speak for themselves and say they are Afghani, a move that embarrasses the Club for coding the Brown men as Latino but never results in an apology or compensation from anyone, especially Gerald who also coded them as Latino. The episode finally ends with Mahkinkin riding away on the moped.

What makes this show and episode what I am calling "unsuccessful" is that its satire with no bite. It is a sitcom without lessons learned or resolution, something that is in fundamental opposition to the sitcom format. The series does however serve as a time capsule of capturing identity politics of 2008-2009 America, and in the future, I hope that the period and this show receive more critical attention and analysis. Thank you.