Cultural Diversity and the Musical Representation of California in Regional 1970s Television

Kendra Preston Leonard

[Slide: title] If you read the abstract for this paper very carefully or grew up with Saturday morning cartoons, you may have realized that co-author “Melinda K. Levy” [slide: gif] is an anagram of “Velma Dinkley,” and that this presentation is actually about [slide: intro clip] Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!

[Slide: SD background] However, nothing in the abstract is a lie. In this presentation, I’ll offer an analysis of Scooby-Doo, Where Are You! in which I argue that the show focused on and created an “ideal” white, affluent, youth demographic through the use of music and sound, and that although the show engaged with non-white characters, its music and optics ultimately perpetrated the white supremacy common to popular media in the late 1960s and 70s. Why does this matter? Fifty-one years after its debut, Scooby Doo remains a staple of popular culture, but it excludes heroes of color and reifies a harmful world in which only the rich white kids solve mysteries and fight crime.

Scooby-Doo, Where Are You! Was produced by animation studio Hanna-Barbera and ran for two seasons from 1969 to 1970. The title of the show was also used for a short-lived revival in 1978; here I focus on the first two seasons of the show. Scooby Doo was developed as a non-violent alternative to the superhero cartoons [slide: superhero cartoons] also popular at the time and was based on the characters in The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis, [slide: characters] a successful live-action teen sitcom.¹ The centerpiece of the 1969 and 70 Saturday morning cartoon slot on CBS, Scooby Doo

has had numerous spin-offs and has become a fixed point in popular culture. Writing in May 2020, Christopher Orr suggests that the show offered comfort to perceivers during “a period of acute generational conflict and anxiety,” citing the Vietnam War, Nixon, and “Never trust anyone over 30.” The show’s predictability was a panacea for more chaotic events in the world, and the very deliberately crafted evidence-based solutions to each supposedly paranormal mystery paralleled a parenting technique: “the surest way to comfort kids is to offer them an alternative explanation for the horrors that go bump in the night: It was the cat, or the wind.” (Ibid) Although later versions of the show did incorporate “real” monsters, it’s the original series that is referenced, particularly in the oft-(mis)quoted line from the very human villains, “And I would’ve gotten away with it if not for you meddlesome kids.” The show’s many formulaic elements also contributed to its function as “comforting”—and kept it in the range of the “comfortable,” at least for white perceivers. The racial homogeneity of the show, the implied heteronormativity of the characters, and the mainstream teen activities outside of sleuthing in which the characters participate are all hallmarks of cautious, conservative program development. The kids are also shown to be smarter than most of the adults, as various sheriffs and other law enforcement officials in the series testify.

For those of you not familiar with the show, it focuses on four white, apparently financially comfortable teenagers living in the California town of Coolsville—they have a van full of tech [slide: van tech] (at least in some episodes— see “Decoy for a Dognapper,” S1E5), access to boats, and travel internationally with the van. [slide: the gang] Velma Dinkley is the brains; Daphne Blake, the “danger-prone” beauty; Fred Jones, the male lead; Norville “Shaggy” Rogers, the cowardly slacker and comic relief; and the titular Scooby-Doo is an anthropomorphic talking Great

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Dane. Collectively, the gang—as they refer to themselves—solves mysteries that apparently involve the supernatural, uncovering crimes and debunking local legends and hauntings in the process. The show is highly formulaic, with creators Joe Ruby and Ken Spears relying on a 6-point framework for each 21-minute episode. Briefly:

1. **[SLIDE: Mystery Machine]** The gang is traveling or socializing when they get stuck in a remote or abandoned location.

2. **[SLIDE: Vasquez Castle]** This location involves a supposedly haunted place or item, or a monster.

3. After making an initial assessment of the situation, they split up to investigate further. Fred and Velma look for clues, while Shaggy and Scooby seek out food and goof around. Daphne finds danger, like a trap door, a secret room, or **[SLIDE: Daphne gets kidnapped]** gets kidnapped. There’s often a chase involving Scooby, Shaggy, and the ghost or monster.

4. **[SLIDE: trap]** Fred devises a Rube Goldberg-like trap to catch the villain, which usually goes badly.

5. **[SLIDE: Shaggy and zombie]** Shaggy and Scooby create chaos, leading to the villain being caught and unmasked. Velma leads in explaining what the villain was up to in full.

6. **[SLIDE: lawman]** The local sheriff or police take the villain away and the gang wraps things up.

In addition, almost every episode includes Velma losing her glasses, Scooby having an encounter with another animal, and a situation in which it is necessary to bribe Scooby or Shaggy with Scooby Snacks. Other aspects of the formula include the fact that no one’s clothes ever change and that objects—particularly food—can appear out of thin air.
The concept began with the idea that the gang would solve mysteries and be a band, with the dog character playing bongos. Although the band idea was dropped, music plays an important role in the show. The first season establishes a scoring practice of constant music and sound in a conventional manner—an underscore that can be pieced together from a selection of available clips. This underscore consists of an instrumental score that shifts fluidly from diegesis to acousmatic music, incorporating sound effects. There are occasional borrowings from Western art music canon—often that which is “exotic”—and well-known cinematic tropes. The formula for the episodes is paralleled in the score: the motifs and passages that make up the underscore are reused to create a sonic continuity that matches the visual predictability and standard plot framework for the show as a whole. The musical tropes for the show include the well-known theme song, composed by Dave Moot and Ben Raleigh; a second introductory theme by Ted Nichols that accompanies the episode title and a visual of the gang running across the screen; and numerous other commonly-used cues by Nichols. Much of the music is mimetic, particularly for Shaggy and Scooby Doo—for example, their frequent running in place is scored with drumming and staccato notes in the upper brass.

Music elsewhere creates norms for the protagonists’ age, activities, and behaviors. In “Decoy for a Dognapper,” (S1E5), the gang has a beach party and dances to instrumental pop reminiscent of the Beach Boys. Other instances of their listening and dancing tastes helps cement their cultural identities as mainstream and white. In the second season, chase scenes were accompanied by “bubblegum pop” songs composed by La La Productions (Danny Janssen and Austin Roberts) that emulate the white pop of the time period. These rarely have lyrics that related to the plot, but sometimes reference travel or movement that worked in the context of chases. Nonetheless, these songs helped in reifying the gang’s identity as a group of wholesome, fun-loving,
teenage do-gooders—ideal youth. There’s no funk, no drug references, and no political awareness in the scoring for *Scooby Doo*, although the bubblegum pop songs often suggest romance. [slide: blank]

The whiteness of the protagonists extends to the world in which they live, in which almost all of the adults and authority figures are white, and the institutions and entities they interact with are those of white privilege and colonialism, such as a museum, a mining town, and a ski resort, along with multiple mansions and European-style castles. In S1E16, “A Night of Fright is No Delight,” Scooby is named in the will of a Colonel Beauregard Sanders but must spend the night in Sanders’s haunted house to receive his claim. Sanders is a Civil War collector, focused on the Confederacy, and the episode shows Confederate materials and emblems everywhere in the house. In the end, Scooby inherits a million *Confederate* dollars, and everyone has a good laugh. No one mentions slavery or racism.

In episodes where the gang encounters people of different races, they are exoticized though their visual renditions, voices, and accompanying music. The majority of the characters of color are villains, and whites often take on the personas of BIPOC characters as their “frightening” disguises.

While in Season 1 the characters find themselves opposed by mostly older white male crooks, there are early indications about how the series will treat characters of color and their cultures in later episodes. S1E4, “Mine Your Own Business,” includes stereotypical “Indian” music when the kids encounter a storefront Indian, and in “Decoy for a Dognapper,” (S1E5), the kids are chased by the “Ghost of Geronimo” and must confront an “Indian Witch Doctor” created by the white villain. The music for both of these, as you might expect, includes drumming and “war whooping.” In S1E11, “A Gaggle of Galloping Ghosts,” a clearly Othered “Gypsy fortune teller” is accompanied
by Brahms’s Hungarian Dance No. 5. In S1E12, “Scooby-Doo and a Mummy, Too,” evil Dr. Najib, the first character of color to appear in the show, is positioned in direct contrast with the do-good Scooby gang and The Professor, the white man in charge of the titular mummy. Najib, who is depicted as dark-skinned, mustached, and wearing a fez, is voiced by a white actor, Vic Perrin, with an accent. In the final episode of the first season, “That’s Snow Ghost,” (S1E17), the gang meets a sinister figure modeled on Peter Lorre, Mr. Leech, who is Othered through his voice and behavior, and Fu Lan Chi, a Tibetan man who believes he has summoned the Snow Ghost by killing a Yeti in Tibet, both voiced by Perrin.

For the most part, the music that surrounds the white protagonists and the crooks in the first season is generic instrumental scoring to match the scene. In “Spooky Space Kook” (S1E14), in which the gang investigates a ghost UFO and its alien pilot, the score includes motifs common to UFO movies and shows: synthesizers and sounds moving up and down in pitch with the motions of the UFO; in S1E8, “Foul Play in Funland,” the scoring provides a sonic backdrop that references the calliope and fair-ground sound. In Season 2, there are numerous episodes that music to signify BIPOC characters in stereotypical ways, emphasizing the normate status of a white group of friends solving mysteries. Here are two worth studying in more depth.

**Case Study 1: “A Tiki Scare is No Fair,” (S2E6)**

In “A Tiki Scare is No Fair,” (S2E6), the gang is in Hawai’i, where the normal underscore is at first replaced by “Aloha O’e” as the shot pans across Hawaiians to get to Shaggy and Scooby [slide: group]; native Hawaiians, all in traditional garb, are next shown identifying “ghost drums,” and only one has any lines. The ghost drums are played in the same manner as the drums used for American Indians earlier in the series and herald the appearance of a “witch doctor.” [slide: witch doctor]
The witch doctor is scored with the ghost drums and maracas, and the drumming continues as the native Hawaiians flee, leaving the whites alone.

At the same time, over at the “Pineapple Parlor,” [slide: Pineapple Parlor] Fred and Daphne, tired of luaus, dance to the “beach party” music. As the gang begins to investigate, the Hawaiian music is abandoned in favor of the normate soundscape associated with the gang, and the kids focus on finding their host, Mr. Simms, completely ignoring the disappearance of all of the Hawaiians who vanished at the same time. In replacing the sounds of Hawaii with the show’s established underscore and cues, the location is co-opted from its origins and reassigned to one in which the white rich kids are the most powerful force. The standard underscore tracks here maintain the consistency of previous episodes, but with the setting obviously shifted away from the gang’s usual haunts, the inclusion of Hawaiian elements becomes appropriative window dressing that is added on to, rather than used in dialogue with, the show’s premise. When the witch doctor reappears in two scenes to chase the kids, the “Indian” drumming returns, signifying the villain’s temporary position of power; when they escape him, their own accompaniment returns. [slide: Scooby hula] Hawaiian music is used is when Scooby dons a hula outfit in order to fool the witch doctor and is accompanied by hula music; and when Shaggy and Scooby play ghost drums to lure the witch doctor into their trap. It is the white (or, in Scooby’s case, white-adjacent) characters who are given control of the music, essentially Westernizing it for their own purposes. Even when Lt. Tomoro, [slide: party panorama] a Hawaiian undercover policeman, throws a party for the gang and serenades them on the ukulele, Fred and Daphne play records and do their usual beach dance, although Velma, in traditional costume, does dance the hula.
In this case, the villain is a white man appropriating local traditions and beliefs for his own gain, and we can easily hear how the standard underscoring for Scooby Doo suppresses what is native to Hawai’i and its people. Native music becomes entertainment only, especially once the villain is caught. In the second case I’ll present, it is the character of color himself who is the villain; once again, the normate sound of the kids overcomes that of the villain.

**Case Study 2: “Mystery Mask Mix-Up,” (S2E2)**

“Mystery Mask Mix-Up,” (S2E2) begins with a zoom shot on a pagoda-style building. Inside, the ghost of Zen Tuo, a masked man in “Chinese” garb, speaks with a heavy accent to two others clothed the same way. Meanwhile, the Scooby gang takes in San Francisco’s Chinese New Year parade ([slide: fireworks and dragon]), the only whites ([slide: crowd 1]) and the only figures not in some kind of “Chinese” dress. ([slide: crowd 2]) The features and positions of the Chinese crowd doesn’t change, even as Scooby and Shaggy teeter precariously among them—they’re stage decorations, not actual people. ([slide: teetering]) The music that accompanies this scene is that of drums, coming from the parade, but as soon as Scooby and Shaggy begin to fall, it shifts to the underscore, indicating that the gang’s music—acousmatic as it may be—trumps any diegetic music that doesn’t relate directly to them. When Daphne buys a gold mask from a Chinese shopkeeper—who, like the earlier Chinese figures, speaks with a heavy accent—the scene is underscored with a cue that indicates danger, and it continues as the gang runs into the villain’s two henchmen, also in racialized clothing. Scooby runs into a Chinese Laundry, where the voices of those inside are gibberish meant to sound Asian—even Scooby’s voice takes on a fake-Chinese cast. The art dealer to whom the kids take the mask also has a heavy accent, and the scene uses underscore with woodblocks added on top to create an “Asian” timbre. As the dealer tells the kids they’re in danger,
the music combines the standard underscoring with a variation on the “Oriental riff.” [slide: Asian riff]

[slide: blank] There’s a bubblegum pop chase scene—for the only car chase in the series—through Chinatown and to Fisherman’s Wharf with the song “I Can Make You Happy.” While the first lines of the lyrics—“I know a place where I am going/And the place where I am going/Just around the bend”—go with the scene, the rest of the song does not: “‘Happy’ is the secret word/And if you're happy it will get you through/And I love you, you know it's true/And I can make you happy if you love me too.”

When the gang goes to the Temple in the Hills—the pagoda-roofed building from the opening scene—to rescue kidnapped Daphne, their music travels with them, asserting the supremacy of the kids and Scooby Doo as they search out the space, which is coded as foreign and Asian with a large Buddha statue, Chinese dragons, a statue of a multi-armed god, a gong, and red and gold décor. Even as Shaggy and Scooby run from Zen Tuo, the music—the established chase theme [slide: chase theme] suggests that the cowardly duo remains in control of the situation, and in a sense that’s true: the villain needs to keep the two quiet about what they’ve seen. This continued underscore also provides comforting familiarity in a spot where viewers would be concerned about Shaggy and Scooby’s fate. Scooby and Shaggy then take up Chinese drag to confound their enemies: Shaggy is given the facial features of the Chinese people shown earlier as well as protruding front teeth, and they speak with heavy fake-Chinese accents.

[slide: reveal] The reveal shows that Zen Tuo is actually A. Fong, the art dealer from earlier in the episode. In a rare appearance of a person of color on the right side of the law, the arresting
detective, who admits that the kids did what he couldn’t in getting evidence against Fong, is also Asian, but he too is voiced with same accent used for the other Asian characters. Finally, after Shaggy and Scooby jump for a Scooby snack and miss, a mouse, drawn with the same stereotypical Asian features of the human Asian characters, comes out of the temple walls, squeaking in gibberish with the same inflections used for “Chinese” in the Chinese laundry. Scooby and Shaggy laugh, their music, now without added woodblock or “Oriental riff,” is continuous, and the supremacy of the white, wealthy Scooby gang as detectives is confirmed.

Conclusions

[slide: gang] Throughout the *Scooby Doo, Where Are You?* series, race, economic status, and age are on display, and the message the show sends is one that emphasizes the value of white, well-to-do youth in their community. While some people may say, “it’s just a cartoon” or “it’s just a kids’ show,” we know that the origins of racism and other kinds of bias and bigotry can be found in very early childhood. Through its soundscapes, *Scooby Doo* teaches perceivers that the characters of color are obviously villains; that it’s okay and funny to mock other cultures; and that being a contributing member of society requires a vehicle and lots of expensive gear. It reifies mainstream, white, wealthy teen culture as normate and aspirational without acknowledging the legitimacy and value of a myriad of other cultures—musical or otherwise—that exist within the show’s fictional world. Chinatown is played as an exotic location and as a ghetto that the kids deign to visit for its brief attractions, and Hawai’i is sonically turned into a colony of the gang’s home territory. Further research into *Scooby Doo* and its spin-offs will undoubtedly yield more material about the show’s white characters and their sonic culture as one steeped in white supremacy and both institutional and casual racism. I recommend spending an afternoon on the sofa with some Scooby snacks, listening anew to this old standby. [slide: contact info]
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Kendra Preston Leonard and Melinda K. Levy
Melinda
K. Levy
The Mystery Machine
Vasquez Castle
Daphne gets kidnapped
A mousetrap, a gong, roman candles, a train set; what could go wrong?
Chaos
The lawman
“A Tiki Scare is No Fair” (S2E6)
“A Tiki Scare is No Fair” (S2E6)
“A Tiki Scare is No Fair” (S2E6)
“A Tiki Scare is No Fair” (S2E6)
“A Tiki Scare is No Fair” (S2E6)
“Mystery Mask Mix-Up” (S2E12)
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“Mystery Mask Mix-Up” (S2E12)

“Common version of the “Oriental riff” (Wikipedia)

Scooby Doo version of the “Oriental riff”
“Mystery Mask Mix-Up” (S2E12)
“Mystery Mask Mix-Up” (S2E12)