Taking
South Park
Seriously

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Taking *South Park* Seriously

When I first circulated a call for submissions for this collection, I was surprised to find that the solicitation was propagated online and provoked a certain amount of confused derision—not among academics, from whom one still might expect it, but among the general public. To both my amazement and amusement, while running an Internet search for articles on *South Park*, I discovered my brief call for essays included on a blog of sorts called "Spitting Image," along with the comment, "There's 'something appealing, something appalling' in this." This pronouncement was then followed by one of the strangest appraisals of contemporary academia that I have ever encountered: "this is how it is to be a university professor. you must be critical of any accepted narratives and generate a bigger better one all so that you can get more money, more students, more fame. its sort of boring." Not only is it unclear to me which "accepted narrative" the author presumed this collection would be critical of, but the author clearly has a distorted idea of professorial salaries, financial compensation for academic publishing, and class sizes at most universities! Then there was a posting of the call for papers on a site called "Digg.com," which prompted the response, "One more reason to laugh at professors of english." And the appearance of my call for papers on the *Free Republic* site prompted a long discussion thread that included memorable comments such as "This is what tax dollars SORRY ES I like South Park this is ridclous LOL!" "A class on South Park . . . My kids are majoring

in Engineering or they can forget about me paying for their college," and my absolute favorite, "Cartman would kick Professor Weinstock's butt."

Despite the intriguing imagining of academia offered on the "Spitting Image" site, derisive attitude toward "english" on digg.com, and the surreal image of a giant cartoon cutout kicking my butt, the most appealing and appalling discussion of my initial call for participation in the volume appeared, in all places, in a forum on the South Park Studies.com Web site. An initial posting noted my call for papers and a discussion thread ensued in which presumably *South Park* fans derided the idea of any serious consideration of the program. Although many participants in the conversation curiously mistook the initial posting to mean a class was being offered on the topic rather than a book being published (as did some participants on the *Free Republic* thread), the comments still have the same derisive resonance. One very bitter participant posted (in all caps), "REALLY PROVES WHAT A WASTE OF TIME AND MONEY COLLEGE IS. YOU LEARN VERY LITTLE OF VALUE AND ITS STILL NEXT TO IMPOSSIBLE TO GET A JOB WITH YOUR DEGREE. THIS JUST MAKES A MOCKERY OF OUR AMERICAN COLLEGE SYSTEM." Another less caustic posting echoed what appears to be a commonplace conceptualization of university salaries by noting, "Academics are quite happy to utilise any part of popular culture to draw attention and potential income," and pondered both who I thought the audience for this book would be (a fair question!) and whether permission had been obtained to quote or give examples from *South Park*.

What I find most fascinating about these dismissive comments in general and the ones on the South Park Studios.com site in particular is that the participants in the conversation in all likelihood are fans of the program or they would not be there in the first place—and many of them vigorously resist the idea that *South Park*, a program they enjoy, could have anything of interest to say about modern culture. Instead, all of the bemused or aghast comments noted previously that rebel at the idea of taking *South Park* seriously confirm that the perception of a deep divide between something called "high" or "elite" culture and something called "popular" or "mass" culture remains alive and well in American culture.

Senseless Vile Trash?

Part of what makes *South Park* so much fun to consider from an academic perspective is the fact that the program is hyperaware of itself as participating precisely in a debate about the value and influence of popular culture. Consider, for instance, the episode entitled "Death," aired during *South Park*'s very first season, in which South Park Elementary third grade teacher Mr. Garrison (who often incorporates references to television programs such as *The*

Love Boat and *Barnaby Jones* into his lessons), lectures his class on why they should not watch the animated program *Terrance and Phillip* (which, as all *South Park* aficionados know, is a program, much beloved by the children, that is built entirely around fart jokes): "Shows like *Terrance and Phillip*," explains Mr. Garrison, "are what we call 'toilet humor.' They don't expand your minds. These kinds of shows are senseless vile trash. You should be spending your time enlightening your mind with more intelligent entertainment." Mr. Garrison's comments come in the context of a parental movement, led by Kyle's mom, Sheila Broflovski, to get *Terrance and Phillip* pulled from the air because of her conviction that the minds of the town's children are being "tainted by the garbage on television that they see." Mrs. Broflovski here ironically ends up sounding quite a bit like the usual standard-bearers of high culture who are quick to defame pop culture for its lack of sophistication and presumed pernicious effects.

Clearly, this scenario in which concerned parents protest what they consider to be the degrading effects of a crass cartoon self-referentially foregrounds similar attacks on the program *South Park* itself, such as that by Action for Children's Television founder Peggy Charren, who rather inexplicably characterized the program in 1998 as "dangerous to democracy" (Marin 57), Focus on the Family's Bob Smithouser, who characterizes the program as "extremely mean-spirited" and "deplorable" (Fagin 38), petitions online to ban the program because of its presumed anti-Christian values (see "Ban *South Park*" and "Ban *South Park* it is anti-christ"), or various school districts that have at one time or another banned *South Park* clothing and paraphernalia.[1] Not surprisingly then, the episode paints the "concerned parents" as hysterical, hypocritical, and, most damning, insincere. Not only do the parents transform themselves into ridiculously ineffectual kamikazes who, to be "taken seriously" (and with rather eerie pre–9/11 resonances) use a giant slingshot to hurl themselves to their deaths against the Cartoon Central skyscraper, but also they themselves bandy about and enjoy the same kind of "toilet humor" that they find so disgraceful in *Terrance and Phillip*—part of the plot of the episode is that the adults have all contracted cases of "explosive diarrhea" that originated with Kenny, and they laugh at comments such as Mr. Garrison's colorful pronouncement, "I've got the green apple splatters."

Beyond this, however, the parents' self-righteous zeal is shown to have much more to do with self-aggrandizement than with sincere concern. As William J. Savage Jr. observes, the episode reveals the writers' awareness of "the unspoken subtexts in parental protests over television shows and the logic of censorship: this debate revolves around the power over who consumes what, who decides what sort of humor is acceptable for whom, and the desire for some parents to impose their own standards on everyone" (217). Ultimately, according to Savage, the episode presents the argument that "when parents put the onus for their children's behavior on the content of

television, it is a dodge, a way of evading responsibility for problems which might very well have roots elsewhere" (218). The episode ends moralistically with Stan and Kyle directly addressing the viewer:

> STAN: You know, I think that if parents would spend less time worrying about what their kids watch on TV and more time worrying about what's going on in their kids' lives, this world would be a much better place.

> KYLE: Yeah. I think that parents only get so offended by television because they rely on it as a babysitter and the sole educator of their kids.

As Savage points out, this conclusion is itself a kind of dodge because the content of television programs *is* something going on in children's lives, but the larger point is that the episode demonstrates a conscious awareness of the debates revolving around both *South Park*'s crude humor and the logic of media censorship more generally. According to the episode, the parents' sanctimonious indignation is in reality nothing but a power grab, a way to exert their wills over others. Although the episode never defends the content of *Terrance and Phillip*, and, by extension, does not defend its own scatological or provocative content, it attacks those who would impinge on the free expression and enjoyment of others.

This position is in keeping with the series' general political philosophy in which the unpardonable sin is the attempt to control someone else's speech.[2] However, the conclusion to "Death" is a dodge in more ways than one. Not only is television something going on in the lives of children, but the episode sidesteps entirely the thorny issue of whether television programs such as *South Park* actually do have the potential to influence children (or adults) negatively. Other episodes in fact clearly depict the children (most frequently Cartman) as easily manipulated by television and cinema. For example, in "Weight Gain 4000," Cartman mistakes fat for muscle and increases his already substantial girth after viewing a commercial for a product called "Weight Gain 4000"; in "Chinpokomon," all the children fall under the influence of, first, commercials for, and then messages encoded in, the Japanese game, "Chinpokomon"; and in "The Passion of the Jew," Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), leads Cartman to adopt a genocidal program against the Jews and Kyle to doubt his own faith.[3] In contrast to these episodes that unambiguously depict the influence of media messages on children, "Death" makes use of a sort of Freudian "kettle logic" by asserting simultaneously that watching television, if not harmless, is certainly better than other forms of mischief kids can get into (when *Terrance and Phillip* is taken off the air, the kids consider breathing gas fumes, smoking crack, and watching pornography); that limitations on free expression are more damaging than any ideas kids may get from watching television; and that television does not teach kids anything they do not already know or can-

not pick up from other sources.[4] *Terrance and Phillip* (and, by extension, *South Park* itself) may be "senseless vile trash," but, says "Death," its toilet humor is amusing and far less dangerous than the hypocrisy of those who conceal their intolerance and egoism behind a façade of compassionate concern.

Pop Cultural Capital

"Death" is a useful text to introduce this volume because it so clearly condenses numerous important issues concerning *South Park* the contributors will address. Among the questions the episode raises are the extent to which an animated program can engage in cogent social commentary and political critique (the episode also addresses euthanasia—Stan's grandfather, having celebrated his 102nd birthday, attempts to enlist Stan's aid in killing himself), the effects of television viewing on children, and the suspect motivations of those who seek to curtail or censor various forms of expression. More generally, the episode engages with cultural constructions of childhood and the appropriate roles for parents and educators in shaping child development. And, perhaps most notably, the episode self-reflexively interrogates its own status within American culture by raising (and ultimately not really answering) the question of whether it itself is "senseless vile trash"—and, if so, whether that is necessarily bad.

What consideration of "Death" and *South Park* more generally reveal is that the knee-jerk rejection of popular culture texts as lacking value and complexity is deeply problematic and tends to reveal more about prevailing ideologies and the critics' priorities than about the texts themselves. In particular, such dismissals arguably privilege certain class-inflected forms of knowledge and pleasure over others and manifest an almost willful refusal to look carefully at the content of popular culture texts. One learns how to watch *South Park* as surely as one learns how to take in Shakespeare (we learn for instance that Kyle is almost always right and Cartman is almost always wrong; that if Kenny dies, he most likely will be back again in the next episode; that Chef's advice invariably has more to do with libido than with the actual problem at hand, and so forth), and one is forced to dig as deeply into his or her database of pop culture references to make sense of the former as he or she is into Greek mythology for the latter. The big difference is not that texts by Shakespeare and James Joyce and T. S. Eliot and the other paragons of high culture require training to interpret and *South Park* does not, but rather that some types of knowledge are esteemed as more valuable within Western culture than others. Nowhere under the rubric of "culture" in the sense of "being cultured" is included conversance with what is generally referred to as pop culture—forms of entertainment open to the masses.

One could say a great deal on this topic of high culture versus pop culture—one could demonstrate, for instance, that elite culture touchstones such as Shakespeare and Chaucer have moments every bit as bawdy as anything in *South Park* (see Melissa Hart's "'South Park,' in the Tradition of Chaucer and Shakespeare")—and much work has been done to demonstrate the ways in which canonical authors' works are not at all "universal" or "timeless," but are instead very much products of their times that do not invariably or unproblematically cross great cultural divides. However, my point here is not to dismantle the high culture/pop culture divide entirely, but rather to question it at the onset in light of dismissive attitudes toward programs such as *South Park*—and similar volumes that take pop culture phenomena as their focus—on the part of both academics and the general public. Suffice to say that I and the contributors to this volume take *South Park* seriously—that is, we presume that it is meaning-bearing, complex, socially significant, and worthy of analysis.

South Park's Histories

All texts are invariably and inevitably products of their historical moments and *South Park* is no different: It has a history, it is a product of historical forces, and it quite consciously incorporates and contends with a variety of specific histories. The remainder of this introduction, prior to turning to the chapters themselves, provides background about the series and the social forces governing its emergence. Rather than being in any way complete or exhaustive, this background highlights the complexity of cultural analysis. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz has famously discussed in relation to something as simple as deciding between a wink and a blink, interpreting the cultural significance of an action or text requires a sort of "thick description" that attends to the place of a signifier within the broader field of signification.

In terms of the specific history of the program, that the "discovery" of the show seems to be a parody of the cherished American dream of accidental stardom is entirely fitting. As frequently recounted in the popular media, *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone, both Colorado natives, met at the University of Colorado at Boulder where Stone majored in math and Parker, who never graduated, studied music theory and produced the film *Cannibal! The Musical* (1996). According to Parker, the two bonded in a film class because they "were the only ones who didn't want to make black-and-white films about lesbians" (Marin 59). (Parker's film, *Giant Beaver of Southern Sri Lanka* [1989], featured a little girl dressed as a beaver ravaging a town.) Stone's recollections are more surreal as, in an interview with *Rolling Stone*'s David Wild, he remembers being impressed with the fact that while other college students subsisted on noodles or beans and rice, Parker had a big roast

on his counter ("Evil Geniuses" 34). (Alas, none of the *South Park* commentators draw a connection between *Cannibal! The Musical* and the roast.)

Although the specific details at this point vary slightly depending on the source, the story of *South Park*'s origins seems to follow these lines: Parker and Stone relocated to Los Angeles where their *Cannibal! The Musical* impressed FOX executive Brian Graden enough to work with the network to try to develop a pilot. However, Graden could not interest anyone in *Cannibal*—or in other ideas he tried to develop with Parker and Stone, including a television series about "two apes who hang upside down and sing" (Collins 76)—so, to help them pay the rent and buy food (according to Stone, the two were down to one meal a day [Wild, "Evil Geniuses" 34]), he paid them $1,200 in 1995 to produce a holiday video for his industry contacts based on an animated short the boys had produced at the University of Colorado about four little boys, aided by a dashboard-size Jesus, who stop a killing spree by Frosty the Snowman. The result was the now legendary "The Spirit of Christmas," a five-minute refined version of the Frosty story in which Jesus and Santa Claus duke it out over who has the bigger claim on the holiday while the kids cheer them on.

Collins quotes Graden as saying that he had intended to send it to the "500 people on [his] executive kiss-a__ list," but, despite it being "the funniest thing [he'd] ever seen," he decided he could not send it to the studio heads, so it was instead distributed to forty of his friends, most of whom, according to Graden, were not even part of the entertainment industry (76). Nonetheless, the video became an "underground bootleg obsession" (Marin 59) that won them many high-profile fans (according to a 1997 *People Weekly* article, actor George Clooney dubbed 100 copies of the video for friends [Tomashoff 17]) and catapulted Parker and Stone to stardom. Marin notes that the boys received numerous offers, including one to direct *Barney's Great Adventure* (1998), but went with Comedy Central because when Parker asked, "How do you feel about talking poo?" they responded, "Love it!" (59). McDonald adds that the original idea for the program was to call it *The Mr. Hankey Show* and have it star what undeniably is television's most loveable piece of talking poo, but that Graden persuaded Parker and Stone to focus more on the four boys and their town (24). The pilot episode involved more than 5,000 actual construction-paper cutouts and each action was filmed individually (24).

South Park premiered in August 1997 and was touted as the first made-for-television cartoon to warrant a TV-MA rating that designated it for mature audiences only. Indeed, part of Comedy Central's marketing strategy has been to emphasize *South Park*'s potentially offensive humor with advertising taglines such as "Alien abductions, anal probes, & flaming farts: Why they invented the V–chip." The Christmas episode that ran on December 17, 1997, drew a 51% share among men age 18–24 in the 47 million homes

receiving Comedy Central and a 5.4 rating—the biggest rating in Comedy Central's history at that point and the second highest rating on cable for that week (Ross). By early 1998, advertising rates during *South Park* were selling for more than ten times the network's standard prime time rate; the program's list of advertisers included AOL, Calvin Klein, CBS, The Gap, RadioShack, Snapple, Sony, and Volkswagen; and sales of *South Park* merchandise had already topped $30 million (Ross).

The program also predictably roused the ire of individuals and organizations concerned about its crude humor and irreverence toward all forms of authority. As noted, religious organizations assailed the program, concerned about its crude humor and language, and *South Park* merchandise was banned from a handful of elementary school grounds. Despite these attacks, *South Park*—in sharp contrast to another "edgy" program called *Nothing Sacred* about a Catholic priest that appeared on ABC in 1997 and was quickly cancelled after offended Christian viewers protested—has had no trouble retaining advertisers.

The success of *South Park* freed Parker and Stone to develop other projects. In 1997 they released *Orgazmo*, a feature film written, directed, and starred in by Parker and produced and acted in by Stone; 1998 saw the release of the critically disparaged *BASEketball*, a David Zucker sports parody starring Parker and Stone. In 1999 the duo brought *South Park—Bigger Longer & Uncut* to the big screen, where it was nominated for an Academy Award for best original song ("Blame Canada"), which Richard Corliss lauded in *Time* as "ruthlessly funny," but which was reviled by many defenders of "traditional morals," such as the Christian ChildCare Action Project Ministry, describing the film as an "extraordinarily vulgar, vile, and repugnant movie" and as "INCREDIBLY dangerous" (qtd. in Gardiner 51). In 2004 the pair released *Team America: World Police*, a feature film that uses marionettes to satirize the American War on Terror and celebrities turned activists, and included a scene of puppet sex so racy that it had to be edited for the film to receive an R rating. As of this writing, the program has now surpassed 100 episodes and is in its eleventh season.

South Park is of course most immediately the product of its creators' experience, talents, and imagination—all combined with an element of chance. In various interviews, Parker (who is the voice of Stan, Cartman, Mr. Garrison, Officer Barbrady, Mr. Mackey, Phillip, and Mr. Hankey) and Stone (who is the voice of Kyle, Kenny, Jesus, Jimbo, Terrance, Pip, and Big Gay Al) suggest historical origins for various characters and plot conventions. Parker generally identifies with Stan, and Stone generally identifies with Kyle (McDonald 23). More specifically, Mr. Garrison allegedly is based on Parker's British literature professor and Parker has an older sister, Shelly, who wore orthodontics headgear and bullied him. Stan's love interest, Wendy Testaburger, purportedly is based on Parker's former fiancé who walked out on

him (McDonald 23–24). Parker's father is a geologist, as is Stan Marsh's father on the program. Bizarrely—and perhaps apocryphally—Parker revealed at the U.S. Comedy Arts Festival in Aspen, Colorado in 1998 that Mr. Hankey was a product of his own childhood trauma. According to Parker, as a young child of three or four, he had difficulty remembering to flush the toilet and his father, in an effort to provide the necessary motivation for his recalcitrant child, informed him that failure to flush causes Mr. Hankey to emerge, sing a little song, and then *kill you* (Collins 75). (This comment leads Collins to conclude that *South Park* "explore[s] the surreal terrors of childhood" [75]. In the program, Mr. Hankey is a kindly figure who brings toys on Christmas to all the good boys and girls with enough fiber in their diets.) Not quite as absurd, but still rather odd, in an interview with *Newsweek*, Isaac Hayes (who voiced Chef) mentions that as a child, he had a friend in Memphis who owned a gay dog. While Hayes does not identify this as the origin for the gay dog Sparky (George Clooney is the "voice") in the episode "Big Gay Al's Big Gay Boat Ride," this would be a surprising coincidence if it were not (Marin 60–61).

In contrast to these autobiographical incorporations, what many have noted as the program's most notable repetition compulsion—the recurring death and resurrection of Kenny—seems to have originated mainly as a result of historical contingency combined with Parker and Stone's willful antiauthoritarianism. As Parker and Stone tell it, Kenny died in their original five-minute short, "Frosty vs. Jesus." However, when Graden commissioned them in 1995 to produce his Christmas video, *The Spirit of Christmas*, the two brought Kenny back because few people had seen the original short. Then, when they signed on with Comedy Central to develop the series, they felt they should start with the four boys again—and that's when they realized "how much we liked the fact that Kenny dies, so we kept killing him" (Parker qtd. in Wallace 15). Stone then adds that Comedy Central network executives opposed the recurrent death and resurrection of Kenny because it "destroyed the logic of the show." With characteristic maturity, this only fueled their desire to incorporate this aspect—which they did until they felt it was expected of them: "So as soon as we set the role [*sic*] that Kenny must die in every episode, we immediately broke it. In one episode, Kenny didn't die, and everyone got very upset with us because we f***ed with their rules. As soon as there's one there, that's when we break it" (Stone qtd. in Wallace 15).

In these respects, *South Park*—as is the case with any cultural text in any medium—clearly is the product of the experiences, desires, and vision of its creators, combined with an element of chance. However, in a more global sense, the program is what one might refer to as "congealed history"—the materialization of converging lines of historical forces that shaped the possibility of the program, structure its form, and explain its spectacular success.

Among these historical forces are the new political economy of cable television, the history of prime time animation and evolving animation technologies, and the broad and contentious spectrum of American ideology, including, importantly, attitudes toward racial difference and "political correctness." Although I cannot do justice to the complexity of these three topics within the restricted space of this introduction, I would be remiss not to at least gesture toward the importance they have had on the emergence of *South Park* as a contemporary cultural phenomenon.

Niche TV

To begin, *South Park* clearly owes the fact of its existence—at least in its current form—to the existence of Comedy Central and, more generally, to what Paul Wells has referred to as the development of "niche channels" and "dedicated broadcaster outlets" including the Cartoon Network, the SciFi Channel, ESPN, the Food Network, and others (4). Although little so far has been written about it, the development of cable and satellite television has had a profound impact on the lives of millions of people in the United States and around the world and has fundamentally altered program development and, arguably, viewership practices. Many television viewers today take for granted the fact that one can turn on the television and select from literally hundreds of programs. However, those old enough to remember "antiques" such as manual typewriters and Betamax video recorders can also remember a time when television viewer choices in the United States were restricted to a handful of stations—typically, the trio of ABC, NBC, and CBS, along with Public Broadcasting. The development of first cable television and then satellite television greatly expanded viewer choice and, concomitantly, competition for the major networks. The networks have responded to the diversification of the television marketplace by developing their own cable offerings (NBC, for example, is connected to the SciFi Channel, the USA Network, and Bravo; CBS is related to Showtime; ABC is connected to the Disney Channel and ESPN), and through an increased homogenization of network television whereby each major network offers variations on the same popular themes and formats (if one network launches a medical drama or dance contest, the others counter with something similar) and reserves more experimental or adventurous programming for cable—keeping open the possibility that if a program does especially well on cable, it can be transferred to network television in syndication (which has happened with *South Park*).

Cable television thus provides a fertile breeding ground for unorthodox programming and the risks that cable programs can take are heightened by the fact that censorship standards are far more lax on cable. The Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) regulatory domain with respect to indecency

remains restricted to the public airwaves, notably VHF and UHF television and AM/FM radio. Cable and satellite television, in contrast, is largely free of regulatory oversight and instead is governed by internally developed network regulations, ever mindful of the need to attract and retain advertisers.

South Park clearly takes full advantage of the opportunity that cable programming affords for off-color (to put it mildly) humor and representations— Parker notes in an interview with Jeff Otto that Comedy Central gives them the freedom to do "any topic [they] want," including topics that network television would not touch. While a list of "daring" representations would be extensive, a few of the more outrageous ones would have to include Martha Stewart inserting a whole Thanksgiving turkey into her ass, Mr. Slave inserting Paris Hilton into his, Christopher Reeve sucking on fetuses as a way to rehabilitate himself, and the animation of Oprah Winfrey's vagina and anus. Also notable is an entire episode, "It Hits the Fan," built around "curse words" in which the word "shit" is repeated uncensored 162 times. (This episode includes Mr. Garrison's unforgettable rendition of "Hey, there, shitty shitty fag fag, shitty shitty fag fag, how do you do?" sung to the tune of the title song from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* [1968].)

South Park is occasionally censored—a scene in which Shelly throws lit matches at Stan, for example, was cut at the request of Comedy Central out of fear that children might imitate the act (McDonald 24) and, notably, an image of the prophet Mohammed was censored without Parker and Stone's approval during part two of the episode, "Cartoon Wars." (Mohammed had previously been shown without network concern in the pre–9/11 episode, "The Super Best Friends.") Nonetheless, *South Park* is clearly a phenomenon related to the rise of cable television with its more lenient censorship standards and immense range of programming. Its outrageousness is one important means through which it distinguishes itself within this broad field.

Animation History

Although *South Park*'s indebtedness to the specific history of television animation is the topic of chapter 4 (see Weinstock's "*Simpsons* Did It"), it is worth mentioning briefly here because discussing *South Park*'s emergence as a cultural phenomenon without having the history of television animation and *South Park*'s differential relationship to contemporary animated programs as points of reference is impossible. In various interviews, Parker and Stone acknowledge that they are fans of the 1980s Saturday morning cartoon *Space Ghost* (both Parker and Stone note that they love *Space Ghost* because "it's barely animated" [Wallace 14]), that they are "huge fans of *Beavis and Butt-head*, and huge fans of Mike Judge [the creator of both *Beavis and Butt-head* and *King of the Hill*]" (Wild, "Under Attack" 86), and that they found much

to enjoy in *Ren & Stimpy* (Wild, "Evil Geniuses" 36). *South Park* explicitly references *The Simpsons* on at least two occasions ("*Simpsons* Already Did It," in which Butters, as his evil alter ego Professor Chaos, attempts to come up with an original plan to cause mischief, but finds that all his ideas have been used on *The Simpsons*, and "Cartoon Wars," in which Bart Simpson himself makes a cameo appearance in part 2) and *South Park* launches an assault on the FOX program *Family Guy* in "Cartoon Wars" for its frequent reliance upon non sequiturs. In various other episodes, *South Park* implicitly references other animated programs by adopting particular animation styles for part or all of an episode. For example, "Korn's Groovy Pirate Ghost Mystery" is both plotted and animated like *Scooby-Doo*; "Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants," in which Cartman antagonizes Osama Bin Laden is clearly styled after an episode of *Loony Toons*, with Cartman playing the role of Bugs Bunny; and "Good Times with Weapons" switches back and forth between *South Park*'s trademark low-tech style and the general stylistic features of "Japanimation." In all these instances, *South Park* reveals the extent to which it is a part of a specific history of television animation as it both pays homage to and attempts to distinguish itself from particular programs.

All or Nothing

Finally, *South Park*'s success cannot be considered without situating the program against the broad backdrop of American ideologies and identity politics. Here we need to acknowledge that the program's political orientation has in fact been the subject of much discussion and debate. Brian C. Anderson's

FIGURE 1
South Park in manga vision.

book, *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt against the Liberal Media Bias*, paints the program broadly as an antiliberal satire and Parker and Stone themselves are fond of foregrounding the apparent irony that they provoke the most controversy by advancing conservative viewpoints. However, as inclusions in this volume by Becker and Fallows (chapters 8 and 9, respectively) observe and as Parker and Stone themselves are aware, demarcating the program as ideologically conservative does not tell the whole story. Stone notes in an interview with *Time* magazine's James Poniewozik, "you could also easily write a book called *South Park Liberals*, because we've attacked a lot of funny stuff that conservative people and institutions do in America. But we're the only show that rips on Rob Reiner and antismoking laws and hippies, so we get that label [conservative]." And, indeed, various episodes of the program adopted socially progressive positions vis-à-vis such issues as homosexuality, euthanasia, and religious zealotism in general.

Although "libertarian" is the political rubric that seems best to fit the show, Judith Kegan Gardiner offers a fuller description of the program's politics in her analysis of the *South Park* movie. She writes that the film's "ethics" are "unempathically tolerant, polymorphously perverse, ambiguously gay affirmative, and disruptive of heteronormativity but also misogynistic, classist, and ethnocentric" (51). What Gardiner is getting at here is the film's—and the series'—overarching ethic of what may be referred to as inclusivity via mockery—an ethic articulated clearly in the "Cartoon Wars" episodes as either everything is available for mockery or nothing is. This "all or nothing" approach to satirizing identity politics is the cagey stratagem that the program deploys to defuse criticism of its potentially offensive representations of historically disenfranchised populations, and it provides the necessary alibi for socially sensitive viewers to laugh at "politically incorrect" humor—the idea being that if everyone is offended equally, no one is singled out, and therefore anyone who takes offense is being overly sensitive and "can't take a joke." *South Park* thus gives the viewer license to trespass on taboo ground and laugh at its parodies of ethnic and social minorities—and this arguably constitutes a great deal of its appeal at the start of the twenty-first century.[5] But this fact raises a series of important questions—ones Samuels and Groening (chapters 5 and 6, respectively) pursue—including why does this sort of humor appeal to viewers and is it really the case that to offend everyone is to offend no one? Do self-aware viewers tune in simply to see what outrageous thing *South Park* will show today and laugh good-naturedly as we recognize "that *South Park* is really making fun of us—both the people who recognize the ignorance-based stereotypes that humanity has cultivated, and the people who buy into those stereotypes" (Hart)? Or does *South Park*'s democratic approach to offensiveness obscure real histories of inequity and provocatively liberate a fundamental but generally repressed aggressiveness on the part of the viewer toward exoticized others? Succinctly stated: Is poking fun at a middle-class white man

really the same thing as poking fun at an African American (or a Native American or an Asian American or a Hispanic American or the physically challenged, and so on), and does a member of a social or ethnic minority have any "right" to be indignant at the redeployment of derogatory stereotypes?

South Park's "anti–PC" ethic is not the only provocative component of the program of course, nor is it the only—or even the most obvious—means through which the program participates in the contemporary U.S. political arena. The program's accelerated production schedule, that is, episodes can be put together in a week's time, allows it to achieve a level of currency generally only reserved for news programs. For example, the program aired an episode built around the right to die ("Best Friends Forever") the same week that Terri Schiavo died after having had her feeding tube removed. In this episode, Kenny is killed because Heaven needs him to assist in an apocalyptic battle against Satan. However, the future looks dark when Kenny is revived and kept alive artificially. Heaven emerges victorious only when Kenny is allowed to die. Similarly, the two "Cartoon Wars" episodes that aired in April 2006 engaged with censorship of the image of the Muslim prophet Mohammed after riots in Denmark and elsewhere following the publication of political cartoons that many Muslims found offensive. Comedy Central actually censored this episode, and blacked out the image of Mohammed.

Again and again, *South Park* intrepidly wades into the American ideological fray and no American sacred cow is spared its satiric attack. Among the topics the program addressed at one time or another are environmental issues such as global warming, hybrid cars, and the depletion of the rain forest; religious issues surrounding Mormonism, Scientology, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; and social issues such as gay marriage, stem cell research, animal rights, celebrity worship, and the sexualization of children. Again and again, *South Park* demonstrates the extent to which it is invested in its particular historical moment and analysis of the program must therefore bear this in mind.

The Book

Turning now to the chapters in this volume, they have been grouped into four parts, each of which is focused on a particular feature or aspect of *South Park*. Part 1, Pleasures of *South Park*, deals with a topic all too often omitted from academic textual analyses: pleasure. The chapters in Part 1 attend to the ways in which the program seduces the viewer and provides for a pleasurable viewing experience. Chapter 1, "'Bigger, Longer, & Uncut': *South Park* and the Carnivalesque," by Alison Halsall, examines the program in light of Russian literary critic M. M. Bakhtin's writings on Rabelaisian carnival. Halsall explores the ways in which *South Park* interweaves levels of parody and satire to ridicule many of the figures and symbols that are iconic of American cul-

ture and asserts that *South Park*'s carnival humor, the pride that creators Parker and Stone take in rejecting official dogma and in mocking "high" cultural references, makes it so deliciously addictive.

Halsall's chapter serves as an appropriate lead-in to Brian L. Ott's chapter, "The Pleasures of *South Park* (An Experiment in Media Erotics)," in which Ott explores the ways in which the program "speaks directly to the body." The central question organizing this contribution is not *what* does *South Park* say to viewers, but *how* does it arouse viewers? To answer this question, Ott probes six scenes from the show, each of which illustrates a specific type of transgressive pleasure: the abject, the carnivalesque, the intertextual, the ironic, the liminal, and the depthless. Ultimately, according to Ott, thinking carefully about the ways in which *South Park* produces pleasure helps to explain why people are drawn to particular programs.

Part of the pleasure of watching *South Park*, according to Jason Boyd and Marc R. Plamondon, is precisely the enjoyment viewers derive from the occasional musical numbers. In their "Orphic Persuasions and Siren Seductions: Vocal Music in *South Park*," the authors analyze the role of two types of song in both the *South Park* movie and the series—what the authors refer to as Orphic songs and Siren songs. Boyd and Plamondon argue that these songs function as powerful satiric tools that "normalize" outrageous plot conventions and seduce viewers into morally ambiguous positions that "complicate the complacency many viewers have about the certainty of their convictions and about where their sympathies lie."

Rounding out Part 1 is my own contribution, "'*Simpsons* Did It!' *South Park* as Differential Signifier," which explores *South Park*'s persistent intertextuality. This chapter asserts (as I've done throughout this introduction) that the cultural significance of *South Park* cannot be assessed properly without taking into consideration the ways in which the program appropriates from and militates against the history of television cartoons and the ways in which it attempts to distinguish itself from other competing shows including *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*. Part of the fun of *South Park* is precisely the way in which it self-referentially foregrounds its own status as animated program within the broader context of cartoon history.

The chapters in Part 2, Identity Politics, examine the program's representations of and general attitude toward ethnic and social minorities. The section begins with Robert Samuels's psychoanalytic approach to the *South Park* movie, "Freud Goes to South Park: Teaching against Postmodern Prejudices and Equal Opportunity Hatred." *South Park*, according to Samuels, enacts what he refers to as a "rhetorical reversal" whereby one is taught to be intolerant of tolerance and tolerant of intolerance. Samuels views this reversal as part of a larger social effort to challenge and reverse progressive efforts to fight stereotypes and prejudices in American culture and emphasizes the ways in which pop culture representations have the power to provide the

rhetorical foundation for a political reversal of victims and victimizers. Implicit in his chapter is a powerful justification for incorporating pop culture texts into the classroom and his chapter concludes by calling on responsible pedagogues to teach against "equal opportunity hatred."

Stephen Groening's contribution, "Cynicism and Other Postideological Half Measures in *South Park*," shares Samuels's cynical approach to *South Park*. According to Groening, *South Park* appeals to an audience consisting of media-savvy individuals who acknowledge the distortions and misrepresentations inherent in television and other forms of mass culture and yet act as if these representations have no consequences. Focusing as does Samuels on the program's egalitarian offensiveness that obscures real historical inequities, Groening asserts that *South Park* fosters a form of "postideological" cynicism that runs wholly counter to the commitment necessary for political engagement.

The last chapter in Part 2, Lindsay Coleman's "Shopping at J-Mart with the Williams: Race, Ethnicity, and Belonging in *South Park*," is more sanguine about *South Park*'s representations of racial stereotypes than Samuels and Groening. Coleman begins by noting that ethnic and personal slurs are the stuff of even the most mundane conversations in the program and through such intemperate rhetoric *South Park* joins a long tradition of decidedly impolite, racially charged comedy. However, Coleman contends that in creating an atmosphere of pervasive social derision, Parker and Stone accomplish a dual objective: They first illustrate the deeply ingrained prejudice underlying all aspects of American social life and then, having done this, they ironically establish a "counterhegemony" that privileges racial minorities. Thus, Coleman also views the program as enacting a rhetorical reversal, but one that ultimately undermines rather than reinforces bigoted thinking.

Part 3, South Park Conservatives?, consists of analyses of *South Park*'s "worldview." Each of the three chapters included in this cluster attempts to weigh into the debate over how to characterize the program's political stripes. With interesting connections to Groening's chapter, Matt Becker in his chapter, "'I Hate Hippies': *South Park* and the Politics of Generation X," contends that the political sensibilities of both *South Park* and its creators align most clearly with a Generation X world view—one characterized by political cynicism, apathy, and disengagement. Becker's chapter asserts that *South Park* is politically inconsistent and includes simultaneously radical, reactionary, and non- or apolitical leanings that relate intimately to the political worldview of Generation X.

For Randall Fallows, *South Park*'s reluctance to embrace any political viewpoint fully is part of its general critique of rigid dichotomized thinking. Fallows maintains in chapter 9, "*South Park* Heretics: Confronting Political Orthodoxies through Theater of the Absurd," that one thing that nearly all the episodes have in common is the notion that the United States has become a country

that goes to absurd extremes. Although according to Fallows the show rarely offers realistic solutions to contemporary problems, it frequently reveals the ridiculous quality of all-or-nothing thinking that has become increasingly common in American culture and politics. By parodying the extreme views to which both liberals and conservatives often adhere, *South Park* encourages the viewer to think beyond a mere repetition of ideological clichés and explore more creative ways of dealing with old problems. Fallows links the program's satiric approach to political orthodoxy to the tradition of Theater of the Absurd, which reached its apex during the early part of the Cold War and which dramatized and ridiculed similarly extremist thinking.

Adopting a very original approach to *South Park* and its politics, Michael W. DeLashmutt and Brannon Hancock link the program not with the Theater of the Absurd but with biblical prophecy. In "Prophetic Profanity: *South Park* on Religion or Thinking Theologically with Eric Cartman," the authors argue that its satirical nature places *South Park* in a long line of subversive and corrective pronouncements central to the prophetic within the Christian tradition and conclude that in keeping with the prophetic tradition, the program "spew[s] its centrist truth at a complacent American populace." The authors see *South Park* as performing an important social function with biblical precedent.

Part 4, Specific Critiques, moves the reader from general characterizations of the program's politics to focused readings of the program's treatments of particular topics and each of the two chapters included in this section demonstrates the ways in which *South Park* targets particular aspects of modern life for satiric critique. In "'You Know, I Learned Something Today . . .': Cultural Pedagogy and the Limits of Formal Education in *South Park*," James Rennie makes the case that with its narrative reliance on the schoolhouse, *South Park* routinely undermines the pedagogical influence and function of formal education and shows that the most important lessons come from the least likely of sources. Consequently, Rennie sees *South Park* as mounting an important critique of contemporary public education and its role in youth culture and development.

Damion Sturm's contribution focuses in on another central target of *South Park*'s irreverence: contemporary celebrities. In "'Omigod, It's Russell Crowe!': *South Park*'s Assault on Celebrity," Sturm maintains that *South Park* offers a challenge to the cult of celebrity in the United States—and Western culture more generally—by repeatedly undermining the value of contemporary celebrity. Sturm shows, through parody, how *South Park* provides both a comical and insightful critique of celebrity, exposing and mocking the processes of "celebrification" and questioning the authenticity, value, and place of celebrities in American culture.

All the chapters herein take *South Park* seriously and assume that any program attracting millions of viewers week after week constitutes a cultural phenomenon worth scrutinizing carefully. Together, these chapters cover a lot of ground. Not surprisingly, however, given the increasing attention to *South Park* as presenting cogent political satire, the volume as a whole emphasizes the program's politics and their implications for understanding American culture.[6] Clearly, only so many approaches can be incorporated into a single volume. Therefore, rather than being definitive, I hope that this volume instead will serve as a fruitful starting point for future considerations of the importance of *South Park* and other popular culture phenomena that follow in its wake.

Notes

1. Although many accept as common knowledge online that many schools have enacted bans, I have only been able to find specific references to two cases: Thomas Elementary School in Plano, Texas (Scoville), and Hickory Flat Elementary School in Canton, Georgia (Marin 60).

2. Consider for instance the satiric approach to "political correctness"—perceived by the series' creators to be a form of censorship—as depicted in the "The Death Camp of Tolerance" during season six. In this episode, Cartman, Kyle, Stan, and Kenny, after protesting Mr. Garrison's outrageous gay-themed antics (which include inserting a gerbil into the rectum of his new, bondage-clad teaching assistant, Mr. Slave, so that he can get fired and sue the school system for discrimination against homosexuals), are sent to a gulag-style "tolerance" camp at which, under the supervision of German-accented monitors, they are forced to color pictures including persons of varying races for hours on end.

3. Beyond these episodes, television and other forms of popular media play an enormous role in the series in general.

4. Freud develops the idea of "kettle logic" in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in relation to the contradictory logic of dreams. He illustrates the notion through a funny anecdote: "[A man was] charged by one of his neighbours with having given him back a borrowed kettle in a damaged condition. The defendant asserted, first, that he had given it back undamaged; secondly, that the kettle had a hole in it when he borrowed it; and thirdly, that he had never borrowed the kettle from his neighbor at all" (153).

5. Notably, *South Park*'s approach to identity politics has been appropriated by Comedy Central's satiric *Mind of Mencia* and short-lived *Chappelle's Show*, both of which present themselves as "equal-opportunity offenders" and further defuse potential criticism of potentially offensive stereotyped representations by having the representations originate with members of ethnic minority groups themselves.

6. Poniewozik observes in his 2006 interview with Parker and Stone that "[. . .] in '97 all people talked about was the vulgarity. Now all they talk about is the social commentary."

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