Beyond a Cutout World: 
Ethnic Humor and Discursive Integration in *South Park*

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A quick survey of recent popular American film and television comedy reveals a trend in the portrayal of racists, racism, and the sorts of stereotypes historically associated with conservative, Eurocentric worldviews. Comedians such as Sarah Silverman, films such as *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, and television shows such as FOX’s *Family Guy* all casually reproduce the external markings of racist beliefs in the service of comedy with what is presumably an ironic tone. As New York Times critic A. O. Scott notes in discussing the work of Silverman, such texts are often assumed not to be truly racist by virtue of the fact that they so effortlessly engage in the offensive. Ironic racism, in this view, takes advantage of the notion that in a culture so concerned with political correctness, only creators “secure (in their) lack of racism would dare to make, or to laugh at, a racist joke” (E13). Thus, to present racist characters in the current comedy environment may, paradoxically, testify to the creator’s ultimate lack of prejudice.

Although this understanding may suffice for the purposes of popular criticism, it neglects the question of how media texts are ultimately able to create messages that, while offensive on one level, can be deemed socially acceptable when considered in a larger context. It also fails to consider whether this trend makes a positive, progressive contribution to discussions of prejudice in America or works to annihilate the distinctions that make such debates possible. In this essay, we look to the show that perhaps best represents this phenomenon, Comedy Central’s *South Park*, in order to arrive at a better understanding of the ways in which the program’s overtly offensive ethnic humor operates within a broader discursive context. In doing so, we argue that the program’s integration of offensive humor into contemporaneous media discussions of ethnic prejudice works to show such prejudice as a systematic, social problem, not one that can be blamed on certain “bad” individuals.

Current scholarly accounts of the use of ethnic humor in adult-oriented cartoons in general, and *South Park* in particular, are insufficient because they often fail to account for the life that these programs have beyond their moment of broadcast. The offensive ethnic humor in *South Park* must be understood in a discursively integrated context, one that takes into account the material circumstances of the show’s production and its circulation within industrial and cultural discourses. By accounting for the way in which *South Park* has moved to a shorter production schedule that allows it to consistently engage with public discourses sur-
runding current events, we demonstrate that the program’s offensive ethnic humor needs to be set against a broad context that has been previously unexamined. We contend that *South Park* must be understood as what Geoffrey Baym calls “discursively integrated media” set at the intersection of “news, politics, entertainment and marketing” (262). We argue that *South Park* is not constructed in a manner conducive to the sort of deep textual analysis to which great works of literature are so often profitably subjected. Instead of great depth, the show achieves its complexity through a wide and far-reaching web of connections to other media texts and, crucially, the larger discourses with which these other texts are engaged. It is this latter attribute that separates “discursively integrated media” from the merely intertextual. *South Park* not only asks the viewer to make connections to other media, but it also asks its audience to critically engage with the modes of discussion in which these secondary texts are participating.

**Literary Models for Understanding Ethnic Humor in Prime-Time Animation**

Despite the considerable public controversy that *South Park*’s offensive ethnic humor generates, relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the specific ways in which the program’s ethnic comedy functions both textually and contextually. Recent work in Dalton and Linder’s *The Sitcom Reader*, though, provides a good starting point for grappling with the elements of *South Park*’s humor that transcend and transgress textual boundaries. Michael V. Tueth’s “Breaking and Entering: Transgressive Comedy on Television” (25–34), for example, argues that *South Park* represents a mainstreaming of transgressive humor that had previously been seen only in more marginal pop cultural settings, such as the 1983 Hustler magazine advertisement that lampooned the supposed vices of Reverend Jerry Falwell. Tueth questions whether *South Park* and its foul-mouthed ilk will eventually become television’s comedic norm but notes that cable outlets such as Comedy Central, at least for the time being, offer transgressive humorists a forum that both accommodates their style and ensures it an increasing viewership. Although not grappling specifically with *South Park*’s ethnic humor, Tueth nonetheless cites a critical industrial element—the program’s position on cable—that we expand on in examining *South Park*’s process of discursive integration. Although Tueth points to the broader discursive context in which prime-time animated sitcoms might be understood, work focusing specifically on offensive representations of ethnic minorities in such programs remains largely relegated to the textual level. In the following analysis we review scholarship that employs a literary-interpretative model in order to conceptualize offensive humor in prime-time animated sitcoms. We then address the shortcomings of such work and appeal to the broader contexts in which *South Park*’s ethnic jokes exist.

Melissa Hart’s article “*South Park*, In the Tradition of Chaucer and Shakespeare” is pedagogical in origin and thus emerges from a consideration of a very specific sort of audience (B5). The question for Hart is how it is possible for a group of professors and students, individuals who take “political correctness to a level mimicking Orwell’s thought police,” to find themselves laughing at *South Park*’s anti-Semitic stereotypes and other offensive humor. Hart suggests that other viewers, particularly those of an older generation, tend to be unable to move beyond the show’s crudeness, dismissing *South Park* as “coarse and ugly.” For Hart, these difficulties can be resolved simply by re-dividing potential *South Park* viewers into two groups: those who miss the point and those who get it. Comparing the show’s characters to obscene and offensive characters created by Chaucer and Shakespeare, Hart suggests that *South Park* represents the latest way in which “intellectuals have stepped down from the upper classes to revel in lowbrow humor” (B5). The educated among the rabble are thus able to better discern the meaning of the humor, enjoying it on a deeper level that is more in line with the creators’ presumed inten-
It is obvious that, for example, *South Park* character Eric Cartman’s campaign against the “the filth of the common Jew” is funny because anti-Semitism is ridiculous, not because Jews really are worthy of disdain and degradation. In this approach, the enlightened viewer identifies prejudice as a problem of the individual to be cured by educating that individual. It fails to account for the broader, systematic, and cultural elements that might be implicated—one might infer from Hart that if we all “got” *South Park*, we would cease to be racist like Eric Cartman.

Similarly, the respective approaches of Hugo Dobson and William Savage Jr. to *South Park*’s offensive ethnic humor are based in a literary-interpretive model. In many ways these theories employ Hart’s intuition as a foundation on which to build more nuanced visions of the manner through which offensive humor can be redeemed. These two approaches both presume a deeper textual level within the texts of *South Park* that may justify our acceptance of its apparently inappropriate humor. The key, they argue, is locating the proper critical lens through which to see that depth. It should be noted that Dobson and Savage engage with both *The Simpsons* and *South Park* in their respective analyses, often using one show to illustrate a point that applies to both. Although there is no doubt good reason to compare these shows to one another, Dobson and Savage overstate their similarities while excluding some relevant connections to other programs and mediated discourses.

In an article titled “Mister Sparkle Meets the Yakuza: Depictions of Japan in *The Simpsons*,” Dobson refutes accusations that *The Simpsons* portrayals of Japan and Japanese people ought to be viewed as racist (44–69). Cataloging complaints levied against the show, Dobson outlines a list of offenses ranging from Krusty the Clown’s reprisal of an archaic, buck-toothed Japanese stereotype to the show’s portrayal of modern-day Japan as a land full of emotionless people. Dobson acknowledges that such depictions may be seen as offensive, inflaming latent anti-Japanese sentiment in America and across the world. He is quick to counteract this perspective, however, claiming that any such fears represent “overreactions and that a closer reading of the scripts and images fails to reveal any bigotry” (56). It is a deeper look into the text, he argues, that ultimately redeems the apparently offensive content of the show. Although Dobson specifically discusses *The Simpsons*, he also makes reference to Hart’s work on *South Park*. In order to offset the accusations of racism leveled against *The Simpsons*, Dobson sets up a two-step system of literary analysis—the first step removes the danger from the humor in question, and the second attributes a positive value to it.

Dobson utilizes Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque in order to defuse *The Simpsons*’ potential to offend. Quoting from Bakhtin, he notes that the carnivalesque “celebrates the body which eats, digests, copulates, and defecates” (57). A text that employs such cues can more easily establish itself as engaging in the carnivalesque and thus creates a situation where “everyone and everything is a target” (58). Key to Dobson’s argument is the medium of animation. *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, by virtue of being animated, can and do quite freely engage in the sort of body-oriented humor that serves as a marker of the carnivalesque. By recognizing this level of meaning, the viewer can then see that these shows are providing “an opportunity to ridicule and let off steam against the piety of current political correctness” (58) as opposed to engaging in anything truly offensive.

Having established that a close look at *The Simpsons* will identify its ostensibly offensive humor as acceptable, Dobson then employs a second mode of literary interpretation in order to illuminate a positive aspect of ethnically insensitive comedy. Appealing to philosopher Carl Matheson’s notion of hyper-irony, Dobson
demonstrates that shows such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park* actually work to undercut the sort of ignorance and prejudice of which they are often accused. According to Matheson, hyper-irony occurs when a comedic text consistently advances “positions only in order to undercut them” (118). Much of Dobson’s argument depends on the idea that the creators of these shows “are highly educated and are familiar with the object of derision,” thus echoing Hart’s notion of intellectuals descending to the masses to enjoy layers of meaning embedded in “lowbrow” forms (60). Here, Dobson points to a specific moment in *The Simpsons* episode “Thirty Minutes Over Tokyo” in which Homer makes the “statement that if he wanted to see a Japanese person he would have gone to the zoo” (60). As Dobson notes, however, it is quickly revealed that Homer is merely referring to a Japanese friend of his who works at the local zoo, removing the apparently racist element of the humor by drawing attention to the common assumptions viewers are likely to hold. This type of joke, according to Dobson, is common to both *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. Both shows employ this sort of irony in order to turn their ostensibly racist jokes back on the viewer. By momentarily seeing the program as racist, the viewer is forced to confront his or her own assumptions and latent prejudices. Through the lens of hyper-irony, offensive humor is mitigated by its turn into a progressive statement. Although Dobson’s mode of critique is compelling in many ways, it focuses, like Hart’s, primarily on a single text, failing to account for additional discursive elements. As such, when a particular text includes a narrative or joke that does not seem to overtly undercut its offensive elements, it becomes difficult to read the text as positive or progressive absent the larger context.

In his article “‘So Television’s Responsible!: Oppositionality and the Interpretive Logic of Satire and Censorship in *The Simpsons* and *South Park*,” Savage, like Dobson, suggests that complaints about the offensive content of prime-time animated sitcoms such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park* emerge from readings of these texts that fail to engage in deep, thoughtful analysis (197–224). Savage refers to the “false dichotomies” that are constructed in the world of literary analysis in order to separate the serious from the popular (202). Having been lumped into this second category, a show such as *South Park*, he argues, tends to be taken at face value, whereas a more respected text would be probed for subtle or symbolic meaning. Speaking pedagogically, Savage emphasizes the importance of teaching students and scholars “to see the levels of satire which exist in the most otherwise beneath-consideration text” (221). He contends that such an approach has the ability to redeem offensive ethnic humor and even expose oppositional, progressive elements embedded within it.

Although Savage is explicit in his belief that training in “the interpretive logic of satire” (222) can redeem “Jew jokes or goofy Chinese accents” (220), offensive ethnic humor is a subspecies of the more general sort of text he wishes to redeem in the essay. Savage’s goal is to show that *South Park*, considered closely, often intends meanings in direct opposition to what it overtly states, and it consistently advances nuanced positions in ways that surface readings of the show miss. To illustrate this point, Savage considers the episode “Death” and its engagement with the taboo subject of euthanasia. In the course of an outrageously crude argument over whether or not the *South Park* character Stan should aid in his grandfather’s suicide plans, the episode introduces a subtle, important point, Savage argues. By momentarily contemplating the lingering effects such an action would have on Stan’s later life “in the midst of all the fart jokes and sight gags” (219), *South Park* subtly adds to the public debate on this very serious, controversial issue. Although such a moment is likely to be missed by the casual viewer, Savage says, one who applies reading strategies usually reserved for more respected texts will find the show to be full of rich, often oppositional meanings.

The use of such “dual-level methods inherent in the interpretive logic of satire” (222), Savage ultimately contends, can potentially
allow a viewer to get past the apparently offensive elements of *South Park*, including its penchant for jokes that attack marginalized ethnic groups. This approach, much like Dobson’s, is one that instructs the viewer to look closely at a given episode, ferreting out its deeper meanings and using them to counterbalance the simpler, cruder ones that superficial readings of the same text provide. Although this reading strategy can be useful in some analyses of *South Park*, it can be problematically limiting in certain instances because of its inability to account for discursive elements that reside outside of a given text. Before moving on to illustrate this point by appealing to recent depictions of Muslims and anti-Semitism in *South Park*, it is instructive to briefly consider Savage’s approach in the context of a more recent episode of show.

The episode that Savage considers focuses on the question of euthanasia in general terms without any obvious real-life analogue. As such, in order to perform the sort of in-depth reading that Savage recommends, one can rely mostly on a general cultural knowledge that includes a basic understanding of major ethical concerns, including assisted suicide. What if he had used “Best Friends Forever,” however, an episode that heavily parallels the persistent vegetative state controversy of Teri Schiavo? In order to develop a full understanding of this episode, a viewer needs to do more than apply general knowledge through close textual analysis. In addition to making reference to contemporaneous events, “Best Friends Forever” also engages with the innumerable media commentaries that were produced on the subject during the weeks surrounding Schiavo’s death in 2005. In such an instance, although a close look at the show’s text is certainly important, one might also consider what is available to the viewer who looks outside of the episode itself in order to find meanings that transcend its surface level crudeness. Seen in this broader discursive context, the offensive elements of the show may take on different meanings by interacting with and commenting on other media texts. This discursively integrated approach to understanding a media text requires an understanding of the uniqueness of production and exhibition of *South Park*, one that facilitates its interaction with contemporaneous media coverage of any given subject matter. Accordingly, the ethnically insensitive humor of the show ought to be interrogated not only via close literary analysis but also via its industrial context and the ways in which it both subtly and overtly interacts with mediated elements of public discourse. Just as Savage draws parallels between “Death” and early *South Park* episodes that feature “Jew jokes or goofy Chinese accents,” the discursively integrated Schiavo episode serves as a useful example when considering later episodes such as “Passion of the Jew,” “The Snuke,” and the “Imaginationland” series.

**South Park Production Practices and New Possibilities for Discursive Integration**

So far, we have argued that existing models of reading ethnic offensive humor in prime-time animated sitcoms rely on literary modes of interpretation and require the viewer to have only a cursory understanding of the show’s discursive context. The following sections characterize recent seasons of *South Park* as an exception to these models, one whose construction of ethnic stereotypes is more integrated into the political and cultural discourses surrounding the show and whose humor arises not only from a coherent reading of the text, but also from what Lynn Spigel has called “semiotic breakdowns” (258). In discussing *South Park*’s place in the post-9/11 media landscape, Spigel focuses on the exaggerated, nearly incoherent nature of the show’s storytelling when dealing with controversial subjects. She suggests that the lack of obvious internal meaning in episodes such as “Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants” encourages the viewer to read the program not as a direct comment on post-9/11 culture but instead as a meta-comment on the media itself, emphasizing the cacophony of political opinions being broadcast and the lack of substance behind them. We seek to expand
Spigel’s observation, demonstrating how similar meta-commentary is triggered by the show’s ethnic humor. In the following case studies, we argue that exaggerated portrayals of Jews and Muslims are intended to motivate critical consideration of the ways in which the media present topics such as anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and ethnic sensitivity. Whereas The Simpsons, for example, makes politically progressive commentary on ethnic stereotyping accessible through literary notions of parody and satire, South Park obfuscates such readings by utilizing stereotypes that can be read simultaneously as regressive within the confines of the text and as progressive in its implications beyond the text. But if both shows arise from the same sociohistorical context, how does South Park dialogue with the network of discourses around it in a different manner than that of its prime-time animated brethren?

The best way to approach South Park’s circulation within cultural discourse is to first address that of prime-time animation. Jason Mittell has argued for a definition of television genres (such as cartoons or situation comedies) that transcends the text, identifying, among others, program scheduling and channel identity as two industrial discourses key to understanding television genres (56–93). This framework proves instructive in the case of The Simpsons, a program used by Fox initially to woo viewers away from the Big Three and later to build audiences for animated sitcoms such as Futurama and Family Guy. As prime-time animation has found increasingly comfortable niches beyond broadcast networks on cable, industrial discourses have become especially important in describing prime-time animation’s circulation as a television genre. South Park, for instance, has helped define the explicit genre expectations established by Comedy Central and has fostered the growth of like-minded satirical cartoons such as Drawn Together and Lil’ Bush. As prime-time animation has found increasingly comfortable niches beyond broadcast networks on cable, industrial discourses have become especially important in describing prime-time animation’s circulation as a television genre. South Park, for instance, has helped define the explicit genre expectations established by Comedy Central and has fostered the growth of like-minded satirical cartoons such as Drawn Together and Lil’ Bush. Although this approach capably addresses the discourses through which television genres are constructed, circulated, and understood, we also wish to emphasize the material conditions that create the potential for differences among programs of a particular genre. South Park might be culturally constructed like any other prime-time animated program, but its harried, weekly production process grants it access to issues largely unavailable to its generic brethren.

South Park co-creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone initially collaborated as students at the University of Colorado on the animated short Jesus vs. Frosty, creating it entirely out of construction paper and shooting it on 8 mm film using stop-motion animation techniques. After the short circulated among a handful of television executives, the duo landed a deal with Comedy Central, and South Park premiered on 13 August 1997. The series instantaneously became a hit despite, or perhaps because of, widespread derision in the popular press. The program was a huge boon to Comedy Central in advertising revenue, in merchandising, and in ratings support for programs such as The Daily Show. Moreover, in its first season, South Park cost merely $250,000 per episode to produce, compared to the $600,000 average cost per episode to produce a live-action situation comedy at that time (Carter D11). This low cost sprang from various factors. Parker, with nominal support from a writing staff, wrote every script, and he and Stone voiced nearly every character in the South Park universe. This process remains more or less intact today. Additionally, South Park kept all of its animation in house in their California studios, minimizing outsourcing costs common to other prime-time animated sitcoms. This is as much a result of Parker and Stone’s control over the show as it is the natural evolution of its cutout animation techniques. Although the Jesus vs. Frosty short and the pilot episode (“Cartman Gets an Anal Probe”) were created with the same construction paper and stop-motion animation techniques, Parker and Stone found the manual workload unsustainable over the course of an entire season and quickly moved to computer animation programs that simulated the show’s rudimentary, original aesthetic (Tanner).

In latching onto new digital animation techniques while holding to their impulse to attack
anything and everything, Stone and Parker were in position to comment on contemporaneous issues. Stone joked, “We can ‘cast’ whomever we want, or fly to Mars or have four airplanes flying overhead at one time. We just need to cut up a few more pieces of construction paper” (qtd. in Meisler 3). Crude content mirrored its rough form in the early going, as topics ranged from anal-probing aliens to chicken-“loving” weirdoes. Though South Park utilized some inflammatory representations of marginalized groups in its first several seasons, it did so in a manner largely circumscribed by the conventions of parody and satire. “Big Gay Al’s Big Gay Boat Ride,” for example, introduces a parodically exaggerated gay character (Big Gay Al, donning an ascot and lisping platitudes like “Fabulous!”) into South Park in order to teach the children “it’s O.K. to be gay.”2 “Jewbilee” satirizes misconceptions and commonly held tropes of Judaism without explicit reference to contemporaneous events or discourses. These episodes function not as part of a larger discursive web, but as media texts encoded in a manner similar to that of The Simpsons. But as South Park headed into its middle seasons at the beginning of 2000, the confluence of world affairs, media industry transmogrification, and the show’s own production process would yield something more significant.

As animation director Eric Stough notes, “The computer allows us to be so efficient that we can crank out 6–8 shows in that many weeks . . . We owe our entire ways of scheduling to the fact that we are computer based” (“Interview” 26). Although not every episode subsequent to “Chef Goes Nanners” necessarily addressed some event contemporaneous to its production, it is important to note that the potential existed for this to happen, a potential facilitated by the program’s weekly production process.

The show’s ability to stay topical, facilitated by its weekly production schedule, was placed into sharp relief after 9/11. Fewer than two months after the attacks, “Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants” aired, an episode in which the children visit their Afghan counterparts and hunt down bin Laden. The episode’s bizarre climax, a Looney Tunes homage featuring Cartman in the Bugs Bunny role and bin Laden (whose evil nature is at one point attributed to small genitalia) as the hapless Elmer Fudd, refuses any compartmentalization into the dichotomous “with us or against us” rhetoric of the period. As Spigel notes, “the program establishes such a high degree of pastiche, blank irony, and recombinant imagery that it would be difficult to say that it encourages any particular ‘dominant’ reading of the war” (258). Indeed, Parker and Stone seemed disinterested in using the show as a sort of moral compass, resisting any obvious or symbolic reading of bin Laden’s inflammatory representation. Instead, as we argue in this article, episodes such as “Farty Pants” can be seen as part of a broader web of discourses, one spreading across media texts, networks, and genre.

As South Park (and the rest of the country) tried to move on after 9/11, Parker and Stone became acutely aware of the show’s association with current events. Stone complained before the start of a new season in September of 2005, “‘Now it’s like, ‘What’s South Park going to do this week about Hurricane Katrina?’ I don’t know what we’re going to do. We should do an episode about how the town can’t wait to see this show and what they’re going to do
about Hurricane Katrina” (qtd. in Aurthur E1). Stone’s comments point to a larger conception of the program held by Americans and how the public looks to South Park for relevant social commentary, not just satire-derived laughs. Again, South Park’s weekly production schedule, though not necessarily a mandate for topical humor each week, enables the show to circulate among contemporaneous political and cultural discourses in a manner unavailable to other prime-time animated sitcoms. Furthermore, the production schedule, in conjunction with adjacent program scheduling and Comedy Central’s channel identity, propels South Park beyond the realm of literary interpretation and into a framework of commingling discourses. South Park’s placement before the “fake news” hour of The Daily Show and The Colbert Report reinforces its status as a text in dialogue with the same political and cultural issues addressed by the latter two shows; accordingly, all three programs have helped forge Comedy Central’s reputation as a network that markets a unique blend of information and entertainment.

South Park and Comedy Central’s brand of cultural production need not be characterized by the bedraggled label of “infotainment,” as Geoffrey Baym has argued (262). Instead, the program can be better understood as an example of what he calls “discursive integration, a way of speaking about, understanding, and acting within the world defined by the permeability of form and the fluidity of content” (262). It is precisely through this framework of integration that we argue South Park, in contrast to other prime-time animated sitcoms, places itself among a discursive network of politics, culture, and humor. Nowhere is this network more readily apparent than in the show’s utilization of ethnically offensive humor.

“The Passion of the Jew”

“The Passion of the Jew” provides an ideal example of an episode that might, at first glance, be condemned on grounds of offensive ethnic imagery and rhetoric. South Park character Eric Cartman advances an anti-Semitic position that, while seemingly hyperbolic and comically exaggerated, is actually not uncommon within white supremacist groups. Even when Cartman defends the film The Passion of the Christ by praising its ability to expose the “filthiness of the common Jew,” he employs language that appears regularly on hate Web sites such as stormfront.org. When placed within its larger discursive context, however, the episode’s offensive content can be understood as part of a systemic, comedic critique of contemporaneous public debate regarding anti-Semitism.

To a certain extent, the “hyper-irony” that Dobson suggests mitigates the racism of prime-time animated sitcoms is at work. Although Cartman is given ample time to voice his anti-Semitism, he is rebuked by the end of the episode. Mel Gibson, the director of 2004’s The Passion of the Christ and the inspiration for Cartman’s ideological position, shows up as a character in the episode. He is, much to Cartman’s chagrin, absolutely insane (the episode ends with Gibson defecating on Cartman). This narrative strategy does not provide a clear-cut moment of the seemingly offensive character’s prejudice being negated, as in the case of The Simpsons’ undercutting of Homer’s Japanese zookeeper joke. By attaching Cartman’s anti-Semitism to the mentally unstable Gibson, however, a certain amount of negation does take place. Yes, Cartman is anti-Semitic, but by implication the broader narrative suggests this to be a major flaw in his character. A literary-interpretative reading of this text might therefore conclude that its true meaning is one that shows the similar natures of anti-Semitic and mentally insane worldviews.

Yet, an analysis of the remainder of the episode complicates such a conclusion. Although Cartman’s loathsome anti-Semitic stereotypes may be blunted by Gibson’s insanity, the actual Jewish characters portrayed in the episode serve to re-inscribe such stereotypes. In addition to being big-nosed and loud-mouthed, they are also irrational, clannish, and determined to impose their will on the media by getting The Passion of the Christ pulled from the local theater. After Kyle (a Jew himself) suggests taking a rational approach toward Jewish
culpability in Jesus’ crucifixion, the Jews form a mob and take to the streets. They are met by a group of enraged citizens who have unknowingly been recruited to support Cartman’s pro-Gibson, anti-Jewish crusade. Before the groups are able to engage in any sort of real discussion, however, Gibson shows up, his bizarre behavior destroying whatever limited possibility for dialogue may have existed between the two irrational, uninformed mobs.

Our argument regarding this episode is not that a literary/textual analysis of the episode fails to provide any insight. Indeed, Dobson’s application of Matheson’s hyper-irony shows the multiple levels on which the episode is operating; Savage’s close reading strategy also proves useful, particularly when Kyle, amidst much sensationalism, sneaks in a rarely mentioned aspect of the debate over potential Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. We contend, however, that no matter how deeply one delves into this text, the viewer is likely to come away with a mixed message, including one that potentially reinforces anti-Semitic agendas and action.

In order to come to a fuller understanding of what appears to be virulent anti-Semitism in “The Passion of the Jew,” the episode must be considered in a broader context rather than delving more deeply within the text. Unlike The Simpsons, South Park is produced on a short schedule by a relatively sparse staff. Certainly, this circumstance does not necessarily preclude the program from achieving the sort of deep, complex satire that is often attributed to The Simpsons, but South Park’s manner of production is one built more for timeliness and less for the crafting of multiple textual layers to be peeled back by the close reader. The premiere of this episode on March 31, 2005, barely a month after the opening of The Passion of the Christ, attests to this fact.

Although “The Passion of the Jew” may not feature intricate plotting, it is thoroughly engaged with public debate that was ongoing in the media at the time it aired. This discourse surrounding the potential anti-Semitism of Gibson’s film is one that consistently featured exaggerated and often alarmist sentiment from both sides. On the one hand, Gibson’s discussion of the film’s importance was taken to outrageous lengths, perhaps most strikingly during an interview in which Diane Sawyer very seriously asked him whether God had written the film.5 Elsewhere in this interview, Gibson defends himself by stating that not all Jews are “eternally cursed by God,” underscoring the extent to which discussions of the film and anti-Semitism became interchangeable. On the other side of the issue, Anti-Defamation League spokesman Abe Foxman battled with Gibson, going so far as to associate The Passion of the Christ with the sort of public anti-Semitism at the root of the Holocaust.6

This was a debate waged largely via political punditry and opinionated forms of journalism. As such, it became a staple not only on programs such as The O’Reilly Factor and Countdown with Keith Olbermann, but also The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, a program that runs both before and after each episode of South Park. For the month leading up to the premiere of “The Passion of the Jew,” The Daily Show consistently ran segments pointing to and mocking the way in which Gibson’s film was being discussed in media outlets, thereby commenting on the discourse while simultaneously becoming an integral part of it. As Baym suggests, The Daily Show’s satiric, entertainment-oriented approach to news serves to blur the lines between form and content, news provider and newsmaker (262). The discursive integration of the show creates a permeability, one in which the target of discourse is often discourse itself.

Although no one looking at “The Passion of the Jew” would mistake it for news coverage or a straightforward editorial, it is best considered within the context of the sort of discursive integration that Baym describes. By virtue of its timeliness, its association with The Daily Show, and its strategy of directly paralleling the alarmist sentiments of newsmakers, “The Passion of the Jew” becomes part of public discourse while also commentating on it. It is from this perspective that one might start to consider the
anti-Semitism communicated in “The Passion of the Jew” as well as the anti-Semitic stereotypes that are invoked by the episode.

Whereas the scholars discussed previously suggest that stereotypes and offensive humor are employed in order to teach something about the nature of stereotypes and racism, South Park seems to be doing something else. In this case, offensive elements are employed in the service of making a larger point. The target of the episode’s satire is not the absurdity of anti-Semitism, but the way in which discussions about such prejudice are presented in the media. As evidenced by the episode’s final scene, “The Passion of the Jew” ultimately focuses on the irrationality of the debate surrounding Gibson’s film. The Jewish characters, intent on forming a clan and imposing their will on the rest of the world, serve to underscore and parody one element of this irrational discourse. The stereotype is never, however, negated by the text itself. Whereas Savage argues that those who do not get the Jew jokes in prime-time animated sitcoms are guilty of misinterpretation, it is not clear that this is the case with “The Passion of the Jew.” The Jew jokes are left standing by the end of the episode. Although Cartman’s Nazism is certainly proved unattractive, the paranoid and myopic Jews do not fare much better. Within the context of discursive integration, however, these apparently exaggerated and anti-Semitic representations have a greater purpose—to criticize the overreactions and empty rhetoric surrounding all sides of the contemporaneous media debate over anti-Semitism.

“The Snuke” and Muslim representation in South Park

Whereas the previous case study of “The Passion of the Jew” examines anti-Semitic discourses, the following analysis focuses specifically on similarly offensive representations of Muslims. Analyses of episodes “The Snuke” and the “Imaginationland” series illustrate that South Park’s employment of offensive representations of Muslims is best understood in a broader discursive context. Early scholarship on the representation of Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Eastern ethnicities on television largely avoids any critical consideration of the textual or discursive operations of media texts, favoring a taxonomy of offensive stereotypes over systematic analysis of their formation or function. The attacks of 9/11 reinvigorated the television public’s interest in Muslims, but much scholarly work on the subject has focused on their presence in nonfictional news media. To be sure, both categories of work are useful in considering images of Muslims on South Park, but they often fail to account for readings of these images that extend beyond their superficial offensiveness.

In “The Snuke,” for example, resident bigot Eric Cartman is alarmed at the presence of a new Muslim student in school, instantly paranoid that he is a terrorist. The student, Bahir, is a nondescript, seemingly normal boy from Chicago. Their teacher, Mr. Garrison, implores Cartman to relax—“Not all Muslim people are terrorists!” In a literary reading of the representation, this retort to Cartman’s misguided hostility aligns the viewer’s sympathies with Bahir. Clearly, this thinking goes, Cartman must receive his comeuppance and be taught the lesson that not all Muslims are terrorists. Cartman pursues his initial misgivings about Bahir, however, calling Kyle to check on Bahir’s background for any suspicious activities. In doing so, Cartman and Kyle set off a chain of events that leads to their discovery of a Russian and British (not Muslim) plan to detonate a bomb in South Park. While Cartman interrogates Bahir’s parents about the terrorist plot of which they are not a part, Kyle and Stan assist various government officials in defusing the bomb threat, saving the town from annihilation. Nonetheless, a smug Cartman revels in the fact that his apparently imprudent suspicion of Bahir is what ultimately led to the defeat of the real terrorists—“Today,” Cartman says to Kyle, “bigotry and racism saved the day.” This subversion of the viewer’s expectations established by the storyline undermines Dobson’s conception of
the function that offensive ethnic stereotypes play in reinforcing progressive ideologies in prime-time animated sitcoms. In fact, one might read Cartman’s ostensible victory as supportive of regressive ideologies.

Similarly, in the three “Imaginationland” episodes, representations of Muslim terrorists take on a regressive, offensive denotation when their meaning is relegated solely to the textual level. In part one of the series, terrorists speaking in an offensive faux-Arabic accent invade the fictional Imaginationland, a sort of dreamlike, collective cultural consciousness inhabited by benevolent cartoon characters and cereal mascots. Most of the South Park boys (except the hapless Butters) escape the terrorist attack, and when the US government finds out, Stan and Kyle become instrumental in saving Imaginationland. Over the course of the subsequent two “Imaginationland” episodes, the South Park boys and various Pentagon officials plan ways to take back control of Imaginationland from the terrorists and save their friend Butters. Their search for a solution, which includes calling on the creative powers of directors Michael Bay and M. Night Shyamalan for insight, leads to several bloody battles and, inevitably, a muddled moral message delivered by the South Park children. Although the fictional town of South Park functions as the stage for most of Parker and Stone’s soap-boxing, Imaginationland is one more step removed from this cartoon world, becoming a surreally mediated battleground upon which Parker and Stone fight a battle against fearmongering discourses. The representations of the Muslim terrorists as bloodthirsty jihadists, however, are real and resonant images analogous to their portrayal elsewhere in popular culture, most notably in the early 2007 season of Fox’s hit 24 being broadcast when the “Imaginationland” series was conceived. Although it is not clear that the “Imaginationland” episodes respond to any particular popular representation of Muslim terrorists, their peculiar characterization as exaggerated and buffoonish caricatures on par with the fictitious inhabitants of Imaginationland begs further inquiry—what do Muslim terrorists have to do with mermaids and Mighty Mouse?

Without directly addressing a topic of public discourse (as “The Passion of the Jew” did), both “The Snuke” and the “Imaginationland” series engage in discursive integration in order to reach similar conclusions. With Cartman’s paranoia from “The Snuke” and the Muslim terrorists of “Imaginationland” both placed within a broader context beyond the show, we can see Parker and Stone hinting at some of the larger issues at stake in representing Muslims post-9/11—namely, the futility of addressing these representations solely through discourses of either paranoid, hawkish conservatism or naïve, bleeding-heart liberalism. Cartman’s actions in “The Snuke” allude to a function of ethnic representation that is, at the level of the text, readily decodable as racist but multivalent in meaning beyond the text. For example, Cartman’s stance brings to mind the “If you see something, say something” campaign launched in 2003 by the National Security Agency, but Parker and Stone clearly problematize this paranoia. Cartman’s suspicions of Bahir are justified after the terrorist plot is defused, but they are also made to seem irrational because Bahir is not actually part of the plot. As Kyle states at the episode’s end, it is dangerous to be suspicious of only one group of people “because, actually, most of the world hates [America].” Indeed, “The Snuke” includes both Russians and British as American enemies, weaving their various vendettas into crosscut sequences parodying the style of 24. In January of 2007, only two months before “The Snuke” was broadcast, members of the Council on American–Islamic Relations and American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (among others) vehemently protested the portrayal of Muslims as terrorists on 24. Fox spokespeople responded by noting that the series’ “villains have included shadowy Anglo businessmen, Baltic Europeans, Germans [and] Russians” (“Muslims Rip”). By not referencing the 24 controversy directly and in-
stead invoking it via mimicry of the program’s formal features, Kyle’s end-of-episode message moves from mere parody of 24 to satire of the ideologies it represents.

But the episode’s satiric target is not the absurdity of Islamophobia (represented in the figure of Cartman); it is the absurd way in which discussions about such prejudice take place in the media—how could the spokespeople of 24 possibly have expected to appease Muslim rights groups by claiming the program has also portrayed other ethnicities in a similar light? Although a viewer may indeed come away from “The Snuke” with a conflicted impression of Muslims, Parker and Stone ask us to look beyond mere surface impressions in order to examine the broader discursive context from which those impressions emerge. The “Imaginationland” episodes make this step to discursive integration a bit more conspicuous by placing Muslim terrorists in a fantastical land of make-believe, separate from the (episode’s) real-world conversations at the Pentagon on how best to attack the terrorists. In placing offensive images of Muslims on par with those of Medusa or Friday the 13th’s Jason Vorhees, Parker and Stone ask us to consider the absurd, exaggerated nature in which Muslims are portrayed in American media. These representations echo Spigel’s conception of South Park’s post-9/11 humor as a series of semiotic breakdowns. Indeed, the surreal qualities of the series make it difficult to decipher Parker and Stone’s ideological stance, but this is perhaps the point: debates surrounding terrorism and its representation in the media are too complex to be understood in “with us or against us” terms. Instead, “Imaginationland” comments on these terms, pointing to the absurdity of trying to reduce so complex an issue to easily decodable images and isolated discourses. Seen through this framework, the images and messages expressed in “Imaginationland” become both a constitutive element of and critical commentary on the discourses we use to understand Muslims, terrorism, and their attendant imagery rather than an attempt to define them.

Conclusion

It has often been noted that discussions of racial and ethnic prejudice in America lay blame on small numbers of flawed individuals while forgoing valuable opportunities to discuss the more systematic elements of discrimination that are latent in social structures and discourse. For example, after Don Imus’s infamous “nappy headed hos” comment in reference to the 2007 Rutgers women’s basketball team, critics complained that the ensuing uproar focused too much on getting the perpetrator off the airwaves and not enough on broader concerns. As scholars Stephen Maynard Caliendo and Charlton McIlwain observed, “this isn’t about Imus, it’s about racism, sexism and classism, which are bigger than any individual or even the sum of all individual attitudes or intentions.” What is needed, they argue, is a critical consideration of the way racial discourse is structured, not just the excising of one problematic voice.

Similarly, in this article we have argued that existing models of understanding offensive ethnic humor in prime-time animated sitcoms have focused largely on close textual analysis while ignoring important elements of discursive context. Whereas the work of Hart, Savage, and Dobson suggest that South Park’s ethnic insensitivity is made acceptable through the way it blames, and then undermines, the bigoted positions of Cartman and other characters, we contend that through discursive integration, the show actually does much more than this. The episodes we have discussed do not always undermine the positions of its prejudiced characters. In fact, sometimes these positions help save the world, as in “The Snuke.” By using a rapid-fire production schedule, however, South Park’s creators are able to put their work in direct dialogue with discussions of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, racism, and other prejudices. When the characters in the “The Passion of the Jew” stake out outrageous positions that comically resonate with the words of public figures such as Mel Gibson and Abe Foxman, they serve to mock and criticize not just anti-
Semitism itself, but also the way anti-Semitism is discussed and mediated. *South Park* does not take the easy way out by blaming one bad apple, but instead takes aim at the structure of American discourse on prejudice.

There is, of course, a danger in this. In the process of comedically exaggerating the positions of others, *South Park* has a tendency to make things such as anti-Semitism and Islamophobia seem like a lot of fun. Cartman's offensive rants, in addition to serving as a comment on American discourse, are also creatively crass new ways to insult members of marginalized or minority segments of the population. As such, there is little doubt that they could be used as tools for those who wish to authentically advance bigoted agendas. In the case of his Islamophobia, there is certainly enough real fear of Islam in the Western world that Cartman may well be taken seriously by those looking for such a message. In the case of anti-Semitism, his rants reintroduce old ideas of hatred and prejudice to a population that has advanced tremendously in its attitudes about Jews. These depictions should not be dismissed as merely crude or potentially regressive jokes, however. When placed in the constellation of the larger media universe, these representations can be understood as important critiques of the ways in which controversial issues are debated. In a contemporary mediascape rife with bloggers, 24-hour news, and constant (meta)commentary, *South Park* relies on offensive representations in order to capture our attention. In doing so, it invites the viewer beyond its cutout world to give critical consideration to the way society and the media engage ethnic prejudice.

**Notes**

1. Throughout the article we refer to jokes focusing on Jews and Muslims as "ethnic humor." Strictly speaking, this is not accurate, given that both Jews and Muslims come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. We choose the term ethnic humor as opposed to religious humor, however, because *South Park*'s engagement with Jews and Muslims tends to relate to cultural stereotypes as opposed to questions of faith or theology. As such, the humor is more closely aligned with traditions of ethnic comedy than those of religious humor.

2. Stan delivers this line at the end of the episode. Similarly, in a September 1997 episode of *The Simpsons* ("Homer's Phobia"), gay filmmaker John Waters guest stars as an eccentric toy collector who teaches Homer tolerance.


5. After a hesitation, Gibson responded, "God ordains everything.


7. For an example of this type of work, see Jack Shaheen, *The TV Arab* (1984).


9. Cartman’s response to Mr. Garrison’s insistence that not all Muslims are terrorists is "No, but most of them are. And all it takes is most of them.”

**References**


