
Intersectionality in South Park

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Course Design: Counterstory

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South Park is an animated television show produced by Comedy Central and popularized for its boldness in approaching controversial and political subjects. Originally airing in 1997, South Park has three-hundred-and-seventeen episodes, five movies, and nine spin-off video games. The show just aired its twenty-sixth season, with six episodes released between February 8, 2023—March 29, 2023. In its most recent season, South Park tackled Megan Markle and Prince Harry's plea for privacy when inserting themselves into publicity, Kanye West's antisemitic propaganda, and ChatGPT, an AI software that allows users to prompt a chatbot for conversation and information processing. It follows four main characters, Eric Cartman, Stan Marsh, Kyle Broflovski, and Kenny McCormick, as they navigate their way through third grade, fourth grade, and satirical, overdramatized current pop culture and political events. Through the past twenty-three years, the boys have encountered all different kinds of people who face various forms of prejudice. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is the "prism [used] to bring to light dynamics within discrimination law that weren't being appreciated by the courts" (Coaston). Essentially, intersectionality is the way that identities overlap through discrimination and privilege, based upon identity categories such as race, gender and sexuality, and class. Because of the controversial portrayal of minority groups in South Park, many viewers have wondered whether the show is considered counterstory. Jean Stefancic and Richard Delgado define counterstorytelling origins as legal preconceptions about minority groups, like "black criminality and Muslim Terrorism," that lawyers exploit to deliver a guilty verdict (Delgado and Stefancic 49). They

characterize counterstory to "challenge, displace, or mock these pernicious narratives and beliefs" (Delgado and Stefancic 49). Though South Park explores different avenues of intersectional identities, it cannot be defined as counter story as it is told at the expense of minority groups.

South Park was created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone. The two met in a film class at the University of Colorado Boulder and bonded over the renowned comedy *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Parker and Stone have also co-written and co-produced a musical movie *Cannibal! The Musical* in 1993 and the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon* in 2011. Their humor, especially within the bounds of South Park, is described as the interweaving of satire and parody to liberate audiences from conservative and strict thinking (Bruder and Leflein). Essentially, the two co-creators annihilate crude comedy boundaries by attacking political correctness. This has led to many, many controversies, but the two men refuse to be cancelled. In a 2016 interview with *The Vulture*, Stone and Parker discussed the difference between their anti-political correctness and that of former President Donald Trump's ideas on the P.C. movement. Stone said, "I don't think I probably agree with Donald Trump...sometimes you just shouldn't say something. There's a huge difference between what can be said in a cartoon or through the mouths of fiction, and what somebody who's going for elected office should say. Those are two different standards of political correctness" (Riesman). He goes on to clarify that there are things that Cartman, the most antagonistic, manipulative, and vulgar characters of the show, can say, but a future president should never engage with that type of behavior (Riesman). Parker goes on to add that the two are waiting to get sidestepped off comedy radars, citing that the world will mature out of their humor.

Counterstory magnifies prejudiced experiences by subtly attacking the dominant culture's narrative. While South Park flirts with the ideas of counterstory, it never crosses the boundary into it. Instead, South Park capitalizes off its portrayal of minority groups and attacks minority groups' efforts to become equal. They engage in racial stereotypes, mock transgender ideologies, and spit in the face of political correctness. In "With Regards to Jesse Jackson (S11E1)," Randy Marsh, Stan Marsh's father, goes onto the

gameshow *Wheel of Fortune* and makes it to the bonus round. The category was “People Who Annoy You,” and he drops a racial epithet when the word was supposed to be “Naggers.” Subsequently, Randy, a white man, is put into the place of a Black person and forced to face ‘discrimination’ due to his use of the word. The people of South Park, who are almost all exclusively white, begin calling him the “N***** Guy.” In another scene, Randy is schooled by another white man about his use of the word on television, but the man uses the word. Finally, Randy is approached by a group of uneducated redneck men, who are portrayed to be stereotypes of racists, threaten him with their guns and pitchforks. While the episode forces white audience members into the discomfort of being ‘racially profiled,’ the show ultimately uses the N-word forty-three times in twenty-two minutes, which normalizes the word.

Tolkien Black, who, shockingly, comes from one of the only Black families living in South Park, is a smaller contention of the show. In season twenty-five’s second episode, “The Big Fix,” Tolkien’s name is revealed to be Tolkien Black, not Token Black, like the previous seasons inferred. When Randy Marsh realizes that his family has no Black friends, he reaches out to the Black family and invites them over for dinner. There, Tolkien’s father drops the bomb that they named their son after his favorite author. Stan attempts to cope with the fact that he might be a racist because he is the only one in their grade who thought Tolkien’s name was Token. Even Cartman, the generally racist, antisemitic ableist, knew what Tolkien’s namesake was. The joke breaks the fourth wall, as the audience has believed that Token Black was a play on the token Black character stereotype. All the while, Randy tries to convince Tolkien’s dad to join the marijuana industry. Humorously, the co-creators corrected all the subtitles of previous episodes to convince the audience Tolkien’s name had always been Tolkien, creating a gaslighting effect on the audience, who are put into Stan’s shoes.

Eric Cartman, the antagonist of the show, comes with the most controversies. Not only does Cartman pretend to have Down Syndrome to compete in the Special Olympics, but he also pretends to have Tourette’s Syndrome so that he can yell antisemitic rhetoric at Kyle and his family. In “La Petit Tourette,” which debuted in 2007 and marked the eighth episode of season eleven, Cartman is shopping with his mom at the grocery store when he sees another boy shouting vulgarities. His mother explains to him that the boy has Tourette’s and cannot help the obscenities. Cartman convinces both a doctor and his mother that he has the disorder, but his friend Kyle quickly deduces that Cartman is faking the disorder. When he brings this up to their principal, she infers that he believes that all people who have Tourette’s Syndrome are faking the disorder. The other children with Tourette’s soon find out that Cartman is faking the disorder when he whispers, “isn’t having Tourette’s awesome?” Cartman then schedules an appearance on *Dateline NBC* with Chris Hanson to spew antisemitic hate speech. The Tourette’s Syndrome Association admitted that while the show did a good job characterizing the disorder, they did criticize Stone

and Parker for spreading misinformation. The Tourette’s diagnosis that forces people to blurt out obscenities, called coprolalia, only effects about ten percent of people who are diagnosed with this disorder (CDC), perpetrating harmful stereotypes. They did, however, prove that they did a lot of research on the disorder, and were praised heavily for that.

Perhaps the most offensive jabs Stone and Parker take are at the transgender community. In more recent episodes, Stone and Parker attacked transgender athletes wanting to compete on the gendered teams they feel most comfortable identifying with. In season twenty-three, episode seven, the town holds a Strong Woman competition. One of the contestants is a “Randy Savage-type character,” with bulging muscles, a full beard, and a gruff voice (Dry). She decimates the competition. This anti-transgender rhetoric has existed in seasons as far back as 2005, when the boys’ teacher Mr. Garrison transitions (Dry). In “Mr. Garrison’s Fancy New Vagina,” Mrs. Garrison introduces herself to the class after her transition. The classroom erupts in questions, and Kyle naively (and very pointedly) announces that he would like to transition to a big Black man so he can be good at basketball. Kyle’s father even goes as far as to get a “dolphinoplasty,” making him half-man-half-dolphin, an age-old dig at the rhetoric that gender is transmutable through species and race (Dry).

These are all examples of South Park’s ability to research and represent minority groups, though they fall short every time. If Matt Stone and Trey Parker truly listened to the groups they humiliate, their show could become a hilarious platform. However, the creators are unwilling to prove their anti-intersectionality intersectionality is harmful, and they do not take a stance against the harmful stereotypes they enforce. South Park is not counterstory, and Matt Stone and Trey Parker weaponize their privilege to take low shots.

Works Cited

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