



'SOUTH PARK' ANGERS EVERYONE SOMETIMES BUT TEACHES US TO THINK

BY JACKIE SIZEMORE



'SOUTH PARK' JABS AT LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE IDEALS AND CONTINUES TO CHALLENGE STRONGLY HELD BELIEFS.

When I was growing up in a suburban conservative home, anytime *South Park's* theme song started playing on our TV, one of my parents would grab the remote and change the channel. Naturally when I got to college in 2006, I assigned myself the entire series, determined to see what I'd missed.

I knew I didn't agree with my parents, but I didn't know just how much I could disagree with them. The forbidden fruit tasted sweet, sour and sometimes even salty.

Sitting in my dorm with yet another pasta dinner, I learned the Comedy Central show's mythology and key answers to questions — like why that kid at my summer camp had a T-shirt saying, "Oh my god! They killed Kenny!" and why some of the characters had rectangular, stick-figure like bodies. Most importantly, I discovered counternarratives to views on politics, social issues and pop culture that I'd grown up hearing. I've kept up with the show ever since.



COMEDY CENTRAL

It would be all too easy for a satirical show to take the position of "Everything is bad, so why bother?" but over the past three seasons, *South Park* appears to have doubled down on their determination to explore controversial topics, such as safe spaces, gentrification and representations of progress.

During season 19, I was in graduate school and decided to incorporate my social justice interests into my studies. Just as in undergrad, I continued assigning myself my favorite shows, including *South Park*, this time to keep in touch with the world outside of school. *South Park* would show me the error of my own ways again and again.

For example, like so many people my age, after watching a bunch of foodie documentaries on Netflix, I'd been drawn to Whole Foods in my quest for food that wouldn't kill me as quickly. You start with the documentary *King Corn*, and it's all downhill from there. "So what is safe to eat?" you ask yourself. The answer is nothing; we're all just trying our best in a sea of convoluted food labeling and smiling farm animals on labels.

In *South Park* season 19's "The City Part of Town," downtown rebrands itself as SodoSopa, and several commercials are sprinkled throughout. Hopeful, upbeat piano music plays as the sun shines over the all-to-familiar Whole Foods logo. A Morgan Freeman-esque narrator explains, "There is a time when a town becomes more than it was, when the people take that old step into making things better. To progress. To change." The first time I watched that episode, I felt split seeing the camera pan up to the Whole Foods storefront.



COMEDY CENTRAL

Whole Foods had become a habit, providing me with the illusion that I had more choice in my food than I would at the other chain supermarkets. For all the critical analysis skills I'd honed in my studies, it hadn't occurred to me to turn this criticism so sharply onto my own shopping choices. Buying milk at Whole Foods certainly wasn't disrupting the dairy industry — it was only shifting my money to another channel with an image I liked more.

Later in the same episode, another commercial displays a hip, progressive, racially diverse downtown filled with modern buildings that dwarf the remaining original structures. The Residences at the Lofts at SodoSopa looked all too familiar. They were the Giant Eagle Condominiums I'd lived near in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the shopping mall/combo lofts I'd driven by in the suburban sprawl of Meridian, Idaho, or the hip condominiums towering over me in Denver, Colorado.



COMEDY CENTRAL

Then the *South Park* "Safe Spaces" episode came out and challenged my views again. I'd been grappling with how complicated the idea of safe spaces could be. It seemed even among the scholars I admired most, no one had one definitive answer. I braced for whatever *South Park* had in store.

Through the long-established main character's traits, *South Park*, in a nuanced and diverse way, was able to poke fun at something I'd been defending. Of course, Cartman would use the concept of a safe space to remove himself from being body shamed by online commenters. Of course Butter's attempts at being involved in social justice work would be exploited by those with otherwise good intentions. Among the jokes were good points. Did the idea that only kindness is allowed in a safe space bother me? Of course. But hearing the perspectives on safe spaces from Stan, Cartman and the character named Reality all aided me in finding my own position.

The character PC Principal gave me a different way to think about how people who are working to dismantle a social system can end up creating a club so exclusive that it demeans and diminishes the very work they set out to do.

What better reflection of the "real world" than to hear opinions that both reflected and differed from my own and then come to my own conclusion?

I thought back to my 18-year-old self working through big questions from the first few seasons — like whether charities really help those in need and why we feel the need to keep glorifying the Confederate army. *South Park* had taught me so much simply by introducing the questions in the first place, even if they were delivered with poop jokes, an incredible amount of swearing and, my personal favorite, the concept of Imaginationland.

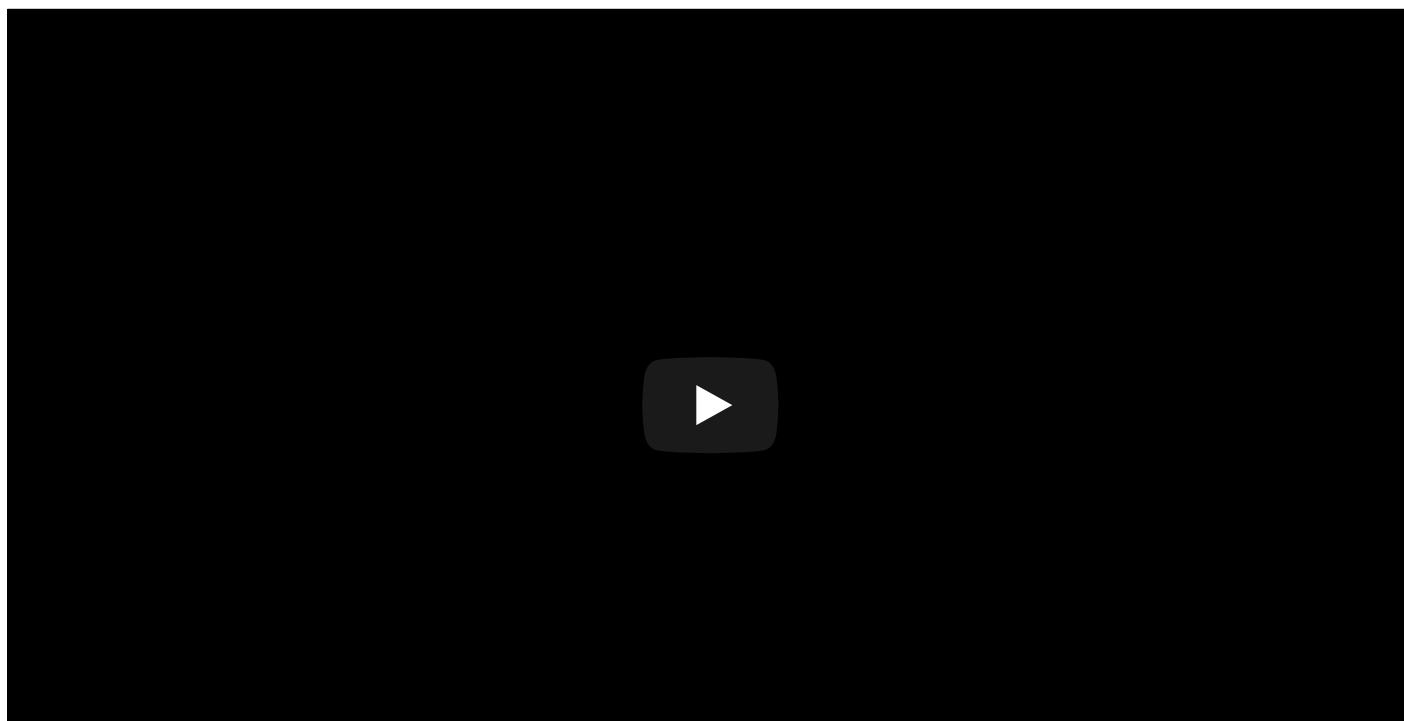


COMEDY CENTRAL

From tackling the infamous Border Wall, to the connections between nostalgia and racism with Memberberries, *South Park* has walked a line of making fun of extremism — from conservative and liberal viewpoints equally — but I believe their continued resistance to any one answer to social problems has been the key to their longevity.

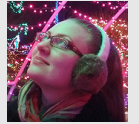
Since the show is **currently scheduled through 2019** and the creators have expressed no interest in stopping it **until Comedy Central cancels it**, I'm planning to keep watching until the end.

South Park taught me how to be critical and, at times, pissed me off. That's why I love it. ■





Jackie Sizemore is a writer, educator and entrepreneur whose work has appeared in *GOOD*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, *Opossum* and more.



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