

*THE SIMPSONS AND AMERICAN CULTURE*

Dissertation Proposal

by

FirstName LastName

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Erin Smith, Chair

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Adrienne McLean

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Dean Terry

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Daniel B. Wickberg

## Dissertation Proposal

### *The Simpsons* and American Culture

Since its premiere in 1989, *The Simpsons* has earned a steadily increasing notoriety and popularity within American culture, and as the popularity of *The Simpsons* grew—aided in large part by the many controversies surrounding it in the early 1990s—so did its iconic stature in American culture. The show, currently in its nineteenth season, has set records as the longest running prime-time animated show as well as the longest-running prime-time situation comedy, and, as Russell Shorto points out, has simultaneously become a monumental merchandising entity.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, *The Simpsons Movie*, the long-awaited big-screen incarnation of the show, opened to both critical acclaim and great box office success.<sup>2</sup> ¶ Quite simply, *The Simpsons* is one of the most recognizable and celebrated icons of American popular culture and a bona fide cultural phenomenon. ¶ As is well known, *The Simpsons* quickly established itself as a biting satire on contemporary American society and culture; it also quickly made Fox television into a legitimate "fourth network" among the Big Three. This project aims to examine *The Simpsons* as a complex cultural artifact—i.e., as both a consumer product and a satirical artwork—and to understand the meanings it generates as such. In short, I intend to explore *The Simpsons*' satirical engagement with highly politicized social issues, to assess the

**Comment [#1]:** Footnote 2: Needs to provide source of the figures cited.

**Comment [#2]:** Indicates the significance of the topic through anecdotes and other marketing evidence.

Introduces the project's general concerns and states the thesis or argumentative claim of the proposed dissertation.

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<sup>1</sup> Shorto notes that merchandising for *The Simpsons* reportedly tops \$1 billion to date: the show's product endorsements are many (Butterfinger and Burger King head the list); licenses have been created for more than 1000 items, including t-shirts, dolls, PEZ dispensers, CDs, books, video games; and there is a multimillion-dollar market in hand-painted acetate cels.

<sup>2</sup> As of August 20, 2007, only three weeks after its release, *The Simpsons Movie* had earned \$436,491,284 in combined domestic and foreign ticket sales.

tensions inherent in its status as commercial/artistic object, and to analyze the influence the show has had (and continues to have) upon American culture.

As numerous media scholars (e.g., Bogle, Dow, Fiske, Giroux, Jones, Kellner, Taylor) have demonstrated, the mainstream media primarily work to reproduce the dominant norms, values, and practices of contemporary American society. Of particular interest here is the way that television functions as an agent of socialization in American culture. Darrell Hamamoto points out that the television situation comedy, which is America's most popular art form, can be read to reveal "the mores, ideals, prejudices, and ideologies shared-by fiat or default-by the majority of the American public" (10). Hamamoto's claim is applicable to many contemporary television shows, but none more so than *The Simpsons*, which in its lengthy run has engaged more politically charged issues than perhaps any other show in television history. *The Simpsons* also lends itself well to interdisciplinary study: to analyze *The Simpsons*, one needs to have a familiarity with television and animation history, a strong understanding of American social and cultural history, and an ability to employ a variety of interpretive strategies. More particularly, studies of *The Simpsons* can be informed by research on reception theory, gender and queer theory" feminist theory, race and postcolonial theory, Marxism, and postmodernism. This project will provide both textual and contextual analysis of *The Simpsons*, drawing upon a variety of research fields and utilizing many of the theoretical approaches noted above. The details of this research strategy are outlined below.

To begin, this project proceeds from the premise that *The Simpsons* is a unique and sophisticated satire on American culture. Foremost, *The Simpsons* is a satire upon the idealized images of family life depicted in the traditional nuclear-family sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s. But it is also a knowing and sharp satire upon the complex, excessive, hypocritical and often

idiotic state of contemporary American culture. More importantly, *The Simpsons* embodies a progressive politics, and it most commonly offers its satire from a leftist political position; from this position, the show works to lambaste conservative dogma, such as the universality of so-called "traditional family values," and to expose the potential dangers of fundamentalist religion, homophobia, racism, and sexism. Of course, being a part of the commercial television system, there are limitations to the overt political agenda seemingly advanced by the satire on *The Simpsons*. Therefore, the show's satire prompts us to ask questions about the viability of subversive or oppositional content on American network television. **III** To do so, I intend to discuss *The Simpsons* in relation to the televisual system in which it operates, examining the degree to which *The Simpsons*, as a satirical artwork, challenges dominant ideologies and the degree to which the show, as a commercial product of contemporary American culture, might unquestioningly perpetuate such ideologies.

The majority of commentary on *The Simpsons* thus far has come from the mainstream press; the output here is admittedly enormous, but it has largely provided only background information about the origins of the show, the processes involved in creating it, and/or reviews and assessments of its successes and failures. Academic scholarship on *The Simpsons* is, of course, more modest but nonetheless already quite substantial, and still growing. Some of the earliest discussions of *The Simpsons*—such as those found in Allen's *Channels of Discourse* (1992), Jones's *Honey, I'm Home* (1992), and *Spigel's Make Room for TV* (1992)—are, as one might expect, rather limited.<sup>3</sup> However, shortly thereafter, a small body of more rigorous scholarship began to appear, approaching the show from a variety of academic perspectives and

**Comment [#3]:** Argues for the importance of considering topics like television shows by defining the "work" of the mass media, particularly in relation to identity politics.

Also summarizes the topic's theoretical significance, and introduces the "strategy" by which the project will proceed—the writer's method ("textual and contextual analysis") and the interdisciplinary theories upon which he/she is drawing.

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<sup>3</sup> Considering that *The Simpsons* began its first full season in January 1990, I find it remarkable that these works mention the show at all—this fact seems to me a testament to the impact and significance of *The Simpsons* in its very first season.

addressing a diversity of topics (see Berlant, Herron, Parisi, Henry [1994], Rushkoff, Butsch, and Glynn). Within the past ten years, there has been a significant increase in the amount of academic scholarship on *The Simpsons*, in the form of both journal articles (see Scanlan, Mittell, Frank, Henry [2002], Orr, Gray, Dave, Dobson, and Knox) and book-length studies—most notably in *The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D 'Oh! Of Homer* (2000) and *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibilities of Oppositional Television* (2004), both edited collections of scholarly essays.<sup>4</sup> Some useful commentary on *The Simpsons* also appears in select essays collected in *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture* (2003).

Many of the above texts offer insightful commentary on *The Simpsons*, but they do so mainly with a narrow concentration (e.g., genre studies or pedagogical practices) or with a singular focus on a particular topic (e.g., citizenship, postmodernity, commodity culture, religion, etc.). Although each contributes significantly to the overall dialog on *The Simpsons*, none offers a comprehensive treatment of the show as a satire, even though many acknowledge its satirical qualities.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, none of the above texts offers a fully developed discussion of how the show satirically engages with important socio-cultural issues such as class, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or sexuality; those that do touch on such issues (e.g., Butsch, Dobson, Parisi) do so only tangentially, in deference to the author's primary concerns. The aim in this project is to work toward a more comprehensive understanding of the politics of *The*

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<sup>4</sup> Two other books—Pinsky's *The Gospel According to The Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of the World's Most Animated Family* (2001) and Turner's *Planet Simpson: How a Cartoon Masterpiece Defined a Generation* (2004)—are much more mainstream publications, although they are still well-researched and informative texts.

<sup>5</sup> I intend to frame *The Simpsons* within a uniquely American tradition of political satire (rather than classical Greek or Roman satire), a tradition that extends from the 18th century to the present and that proliferates in a wide variety of art forms, including literature, theater, editorial cartoons, film, and television. For more, see Griffin, Kercher, and Weisenburger.

*Simpsons* and the degree to which the show succeeds as a satire in relation to these key cultural issues. **IV** As a product of the commercial television industry, *The Simpsons* is marked by a large degree of ambivalence and ambiguity on most highly politicized issues. This, of course, can be seen as an accurate reflection of the ambivalence that many citizens have on such issues and of the ambiguities surrounding identity in the postmodern age. Does the show, as a satire, successfully challenge dominant ideologies, or does it merely reproduce and perpetuate them in deference to its commercial interests? The answer to this question is not simple, and it is dependent upon numerous factors, including what particular issue is being addressed, how often it is dealt with in the series, how thoroughly it is interrogated within specific episodes, and, of course, how viewers receive and interpret the messages—all of which I intend to address in this project, although to varying degrees.

**Comment [#4]:** Provides the definition of and evidence for one of the argumentative points of the thesis (that the importance of the topic is related to its nature as satire), and also addresses and undercuts the most likely counterarguments to the proposed claim.

This study, borrowing from Stuart Hall's model of cultural analysis, will concentrate primarily upon the production of texts and their encoded textual meanings in relation to historical and cultural contexts. **V** I am aware that the other half of Hall's model (i.e., audience decoding) is an important element of interpretation as well: attention to reception theory and a concern with "active" audiences was the impetus behind pioneering works such as David Morley's *The Nationwide Audience* (1980), Ien Ang's *Watching Dallas* (1985), and John Fiske's *Television Culture* (1987), and these texts inspired the first wave of significant television reception studies in the early 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, qualitative research on audience reception, which has come to be of critical importance in media studies, is the foundation for a body of

**Comment [#5]:** Summarizes key literature on the topic, and situates the project's importance against a relative dearth of academic (as opposed to commercial) literature but also as part of a growing intellectual dialogue on *The Simpsons*. (This is one form that the "literature review" can take, and it is the strategy employed overall throughout the proposal.) Raises several smaller-scale or discrete questions that will drive the project generally.

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<sup>6</sup> Notable among these are Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Visual Culture* (1992), Lisa Lewis's *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (1992), David Morley's *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (1992), and Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis's *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (1992).

scholarship that has grown increasingly large over the past fifteen years, as it has turned its attention to other forms of new media (such as video games) and to the problems of media globalization. Not surprisingly, a few scholars have begun to conduct ethnographic research on *The Simpsons* (e.g., Alters, Brook, Beard, and Gray). **VI** Although quite recent and limited in scope, these studies offer interesting insights into how various audiences actively read and respond to *The Simpsons*. Where useful and relevant, I will draw upon such qualitative research to help support my claims. However, a full and comprehensive treatment of the reception of *The Simpsons*, which would have to consider both its domestic and international consumption, is tangential to my aims here and simply beyond the scope of this project.

**Comment [#6]:** Continues to explain the project's orientation toward other work on the subject. Provides a discussion of a model for cultural analysis that the writer wants to employ, and the methodology for this model and how the proposed research will differ from it.

The first section of this project will discuss *The Simpsons* in relation to its predecessors on television, reading the show into a history of both television animation and the nuclear-family situation comedy. Most pertinent to my focus is *The Simpsons'* appropriation and re-inscription of the animated family comedy. **VII** *The Simpsons* is part of a trajectory that extends from *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons* to contemporary comedies such as *King of the Hill* and *Family Guy*. Both *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons* offered a vision of the traditional nuclear family in its own version of a suburban environment (respectively, the Stone Age and the Space Age), and through this each provided oblique commentary on modern life.<sup>7</sup> Although the success of *The Simpsons* is in large part due to the popularity of both *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*, it differs significantly from each: whereas the commentary of its predecessors was oblique and mild, the commentary of *The Simpsons* is overt and often scathing. Being firmly

**Comment [#7]:** Begins to lay out the proposed organization of the project, through sections rather than specific chapter summaries, and discusses some of the topic's historical background.

Although this paragraph and the ones that follow employ a relatively large amount of historical detail, this may be necessary when the topic might be considered controversial or extraordinary or outside the bounds of "serious" or "traditional" academic scholarship or disciplines.

Here, the writer wants to be sure that readers understand both that his/her topic is significant and also that taking television shows seriously in fact has a quite long and well-established history.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Flintstones* was the first prime-time cartoon made for television and aired on ABC from 1960 to 1966. *The Jetsons* was modeled upon *The Flintstones* and designed to capitalize upon its success; however, *The Jetsons* failed as a primetime show and ran only one year, from 1962 to 1963-it only later became popular as a Saturday-morning children's show (Brooks 310, 453).

placed in the present as opposed to some distant time, it is therefore a much more cogent critique of family life and contemporary culture. The critique of family life is made much more evident when one considers *The Simpsons* in relation to the tradition of the nuclear-family situation comedy. Such comedies were a familiar subgenre on television in the mid-1950s, having been introduced in shows such as *The Stu Erwin Show* (1950-55) and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-66), but they came to fruition in the late 1950s, centered around the three most prominent and popular examples of the genre: *Father Knows Best* (1954-58), *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-63) and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-66). Foremost, these sitcoms offered visions of intact nuclear families headed by a genial patriarch and inhabiting a fictional world in which "the political issues polarizing both communities and families were almost completely avoided" (Marc 13). Curiously, the nuclear-family tradition was carried on in a number of popular sitcoms during the 1980s: *Family Ties* (1982-89), *Growing Pains* (1985-92), and the wildly successful *The Cosby Show* (1984-92), each offering a return to the secure ground of middle-class suburbia and the stable nuclear family. The 1990s, however, saw a surge of shows based in the working class: both critically and economically, the most popular sitcoms of this decade were *Roseanne*, *Married ... with Children*, and *The Simpsons*. Unlike their predecessors, these sitcoms incorporated real-world problems into their stories, thereby problematizing the traditionally hermetic nature of family sitcoms. Moreover, these shows were a revolt against the idealized images of domestic life portrayed by sitcoms like *Leave It to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*.

The next section of the project will discuss the history of Fox Television, the origins of *The Simpsons*, and the contentious relationship that has existed between the broadcaster and its flagship show. Here I will draw principally from the histories of Fox Television (e.g., Block,



Collins, and Kimmel), the biographies of Rupert Murdoch (e.g. Chenoweth and Kiernan), and the mainstream reportage on *The Simpsons*. **VIII** When *The Simpsons* began, Fox was a newcomer to the network game and needed to carve out a niche, which it did by offering "edgy" and provocative fare. Though much of this was in the "reality" television mode, a great deal of it was also very satirical (seen in early Fox offerings such as *The Tracy Ullman Show*, *Married ... with Children*, *The Ben Stiller Show*, and *In Living Color*). Of course, Fox Television is an outgrowth of News Corp., headed by Rupert Murdoch, whose newspapers, although ever-ready to exploit sensational stories, have repeatedly expressed notoriously conservative views and have openly supported conservative political candidates in both England and the United States. Since its inception in 1986, Fox has grown into a giant media conglomerate-in large part as a consequence of the success of *The Simpsons*. In this section, I want to raise questions such as: To what degree has Fox's growth and status changed the quality and/or content of *The Simpsons*? Has *The Simpsons* become more "user friendly"? Has *The Simpsons* become less reliant upon satire-especially satire aimed at its parent-and more likely to offer mainstream fare? To answer these questions, I will examine the role of Fox executives in the production of *The Simpsons* and the struggle for creative control among the show's producers and writers. I will also compare and contrast episodes from the early years of the show (its heyday is considered to be from 1990-1995) and more recent years (roughly 1998 and forward) to demonstrate the shifts in sensibilities and goals.

The remaining sections of the project will approach *The Simpsons* thematically, concentrating on issues of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, and sexuality. **IX** I will situate specific episodes of *The Simpsons* in the historical, social, and political contexts in which they appear in order to explain how the show engages with relevant cultural events and

**Comment [#8]:** Continues to outline the substantive approaches, the intellectual perspectives, that will be employed. Also repeats the proposal's rhetorical strategy of raising discrete questions that portions of the project are designed to answer or address.

**Comment [#9]:** Continues to outline the substantive approaches, the intellectual perspectives, that will be employed. Also repeats the proposal's rhetorical strategy of raising discrete questions that portions of the project are designed to answer or address.

ideological trends in American culture. For this, I will draw on scholarship produced by sociologists and historians (e.g., Coontz, Dow, Faludi, Gross) as well as on mainstream news sources (e.g., Time, Newsweek, The New York Times, etc.) and the wealth of commentary available online at The Simpsons Archive.

On the issues related to race and ethnicity, I will draw from a large body of scholarship on film and television representations, primarily those concerned with "whiteness," "blackness," and the racial "Other" (e.g., Bogle, Brodtkin, Coleman, Frankenberg, hooks, Jacobson, Morrison, Roediger). ✘ My concern here is with the way in which *The Simpsons* constructs "American" identity. As a satire, *The Simpsons* offers sharp critiques of many of the cherished myths of "American" identity, and it often displays welcome expressions of opposition to conformity and prejudice. However, explicitly and implicitly, the show also often relies upon the traditions of assimilation and the myth of "the melting pot," and it often appears to advocate the ideal of a meritocracy. Such observations lead to a host of questions, among them: How does the show define "Americanness"? How does the definition relate to members of the Simpson family (as well as other whites) as compared to other (and "othered") members of the community (i.e., non-whites)? Does the show work to reify and stabilize existing racial/ethnic categories, or does it work to contest and deconstruct them? What is the vision of contemporary American culture offered to viewers? And in what ways does this then help to shape the viewers' vision of America? The intention here is to reflect upon the politics of race, ethnicity, and nationality within the text of *The Simpsons* and to reveal what *The Simpsons* has to say about the processes of adaptation, integration, assimilation, and Americanization.

On the issues of class and social status, I will first return to the discussion of race—specifically, of whiteness—to explore the problematic development of WASP identity, as this

**Comment [#10]:** In addition to asking more smaller-scale questions that will drive specific sections of the project, further situates some of its argumentative points through reference to other literature on theoretical approaches to identity politics.

Note that here and for the next three paragraphs the proposal was criticized for resorting to a vague and repetitive "On the issue of X" rather than working to explain what these "issues" actually consist of.

is central to the construction of normative American identity in the mid-twentieth century. Key studies on the sitcom (e.g., those by Marc, Jones, Hamamoto, and Taylor) are in accord on at least one point: 1950s television was marked by nothing less than the glorification of WASP identity, which was seen as the *ne plus ultra* of Americanness. Given that white identity on television is most commonly yoked to middle-class status, it is important to revisit WASP ideology. I will modify the WASP label to take into consideration the key factor of class, which traditionally has been excluded from discussions of WASP identity. The WASP sitcoms were deeply infused with the American Dream mythology, particularly its tales of class mobility and its promise of a post-war consumer paradise. Firmly middle-class nuclear family sitcoms dominated the airwaves in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>8</sup> As noted above, with the exception of *All in the Family* (1971-1979), such shows remained the norm until the late 1980s, when working-class family sitcoms such as *Roseanne*, *Married...with Children*, and *The Simpsons* appeared. *The Simpsons* is an inheritor of this sporadic working-class tradition, but its own class politics are not without problems and are in need of scrutiny. **XI** The show is often seen as a continuation of the WASP tradition, as many presume that *The Simpsons* are a middle-class family. However, the class status of the Simpson family is not so easy to determine. Economically, *The Simpsons* are very much within the working class; socially, the Simpsons are also positioned as working-class, mainly by virtue of activities commonly (and rather stereotypically) associated with the working-class. The conflicted vision of class on *The Simpsons* is nowhere more evident than in the use of the "white trash" characters Cletus and Brandine Delroy. The Delroys are a blind spot in the otherwise sophisticated satire of *The Simpsons*

**Comment [#11]:** Contrasts the project's approach to others that have been employed on similar television shows or mass-media texts.

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<sup>8</sup> The only exceptions were the working-class sitcoms *The Honeymooners*-notably, a critical bomb that ran for only one season, from 1955-1956-and *The Flintstones* (1960-1966). After *The Flintstones* left the air in 1966, no other working family series appeared on television until *All in the Family* in January of 1971.

in that they are used primarily to provide an affirmation of middle-class status for the Simpsons and to re-establish middle-class identity as normative.

On the issues of sexuality and gay identity, I will draw upon key works in gender theory, queer theory, and feminist scholarship (e.g., Dyer, Gross, Ringer, Russo, Signorile, Walters). **XII** Contrary to most mainstream media, *The Simpsons* enacts a gay sensibility by making abundant allusions to gay life and sexual orientation, flaunting a camp sensibility, toying with the fluid nature of sexuality, incorporating peripheral gay characters, and patiently charting the coming-out process of its one recurrent gay character, Waylon Smithers. *The Simpsons* also appears to promote a progressive political agenda by foregrounding a gay sensibility, maintaining a gay character in a major recurring role, and overtly critiquing the oppression of sexual "minorities" in American culture, most recently by confronting the controversial topic of gay marriage. On issues of sexuality, *The Simpsons* seems to be most clear in its position; however, the ways in which questions of sexuality have been addressed and dealt with on the show over its run raise questions once again about the tension between political satire and commercial interests. In this section, I will talk again about the differences between representations in the early years (1990-1996) and in more recent years,' with specific regard to the increased commodification of gay identity in American culture.

In examining gender and female identity, I will draw upon key works in gender theory and feminist scholarship, particularly that which focuses on representations of women in media (e.g., Douglas, Faludi, Haralovich, Landay, Lotz, Taylor, Wolf). **XIII** This section will specifically explore the representation of women on *The Simpsons* and examine how the show engages the politics of feminist movement within its satire. Of course, *The Simpsons* ' engagement with feminism is not simple, since the show both reflects and reflects upon the

**Comment [#12]:** Continues to explain the projects theoretical antecedents in relation to subsets of identity politics.

**Comment [#13]:** Situates this particular section within other work on the subject.

ideological preoccupations of the culture, which are invariably complex. Understandings of feminism in popular culture are imbued with a great deal of confusion and contradiction, a fact made quite evident by the current proliferation of "girl power" rhetoric and the varied articulations of female "empowerment." Given *The Simpsons*' regular engagement with contemporary issues and its reflection of American cultural values, it is not surprising that much of the ambivalence and ambiguity that currently surround female identity is often reflected in characterizations and storylines on the show. Such conflicting ideologies and representations are in keeping with the times in which *The Simpsons* appeared, for the 1990s itself was an era of great ambiguity about women's lives and widespread confusion over gender norms. I will thus examine select episodes of *The Simpsons* in close relation to their historical context and to events taking place in American culture that were reshaping ideas about women's experiences and lives and to explore how fully the show articulates a feminist sensibility.

As noted above, this project aims to examine *The Simpsons* as a complex cultural artifact—i.e., as both a consumer product and a satirical artwork. **XIV** My primary interest is in exploring the function of the show within American culture, examining the degree to which *The Simpsons* works to challenge and oppose dominant ideologies and the degree to which it might unquestioningly affirm and perpetuate such ideologies.

**Comment [#14]:** Restates the goal and thesis of the project.

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