

Ren & Stimpy manages to expertly balance vaguely signified portrayals of gender and sexual subversion with moments of normative sexual and gender policing (such as the heterosexual desire implicit in the frequent portrayal of beautiful-women-as-luxury). This balance, masked in some ways by John Kricfalusi's commitment to animation for its own sake (and without attention to its potential "negative" effects on children), allowed *Ren & Stimpy* not only to air, but to become wildly popular, drawing millions of viewers to Nickelodeon each week. Of course, the series was not universally loved, and critiques from the network and spectators alike were leveled at the series' extreme, visceral aesthetic. After all, Kricfalusi's inattention to the presumed sensitivity of child spectators—in the form of allusions to gay sex or scenes of Ren and Stimpy kissing—was a major impetus for removing him from the program. Still, even after Kricfalusi's ouster, *Ren and Stimpy's* gender transgression continued unabated until the series was cancelled in 1996, after five seasons and fifty-three episodes.

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Emily St

Corrupt Minds, Animate(d) Bodies

Queering Desire and Performance
for the Child Spectator in *Ren & Stimpy*

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And our saddle sores are the best; we proudly wear womens' clothing, and seering sand blows up our skirts. And the buzzards, they soar overhead, and poisonous snakes will devour us whole—our bones will bleach in the sun. And we will probably go to hell, and that is our great reward.

—Traditional Hymn

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“Son of Stimpy,” The Ren & Stimpy Show. (dir. John Kricfalusi, Richard Pursel, wri. John Kricfalusi, Vincent Waller) Nickelodeon. 13 Jan. 1993.’

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“Sven Hoëk,” The Ren & Stimpy Show (dir. John Kricfalusi wr. Bob Camp, John Kricfalusi) Nickelodeon. 15 Aug. 1992.

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Introduction

BIZARRE, VULGAR, & WHOLLY UNREAL

When *The Ren & Stimpy Show* premiered in 1991, nothing on the air looked anything like it. Though its style was derivative—paying homage to an era when animation studios produced visually breathtaking classics—contemporaries could not compare with Ren & Stimpy’s meticulous background paintings and fabulous retro styling. Its characters were more emphatic than cartoons had been in decades, with color cards flashing behind them in moments of intense emotion, further abstracting the nature of the program. Ren, the insect-like asthma-hound Chihuahua and Stimpy, the bulbous, fatuous housecat, ushered in a new era for cartooning, the aftershocks spectators still watch in retro-chic series like *Fairly OddParents* or *Powerpuff Girls*.

Ren & Stimpy was more than visually unique, however. The series conveyed a wholly unreal world: its characters and settings are abstracted and stylized, constructed to conjure animated worlds four decades its junior. It was, by most accounts, a bizarre and vulgar cartoon, relying heavily on bodily humor and regularly depicting graphic scenes of madness. There was a propensity for sexual humor on the show, and in it sex morphs easily from a desired but unspeakable

act to a disgusting prospect, from threat to farce and back again. The show, in many ways, struck adults as “unsuitable” for children—but its unique animation and absurd but smart humor made it wildly popular in its time, for viewers of all ages.

I turn to *Ren & Stimpy* because it stands alone in its field. Its most striking feature is its maturity—its ironic detachment, its bawdiness. John Kricfalusi, the show’s creator, outwardly disavowed the moral value of the series, enjoining anxious parents to “leave the cartoons alone,” for spectators to turn elsewhere for morals and education. The early nineties was a unique moment for children’s animation, a moment that saw withdrawals from the moralism that characterized children’s television as well as frantic action taken to ensure that unsuitable programming was sufficiently marked, so that discerning parents could make sure their children avoided it. Nevertheless, *Ren & Stimpy* created an animated world with which children, teenagers, and adults regularly and repeatedly engaged: a world with its own rules and standards, elastic and nonsensical as they may have seemed.

I want to interrogate these laws as they relate to gender, sex, and sexuality. The amount of queer tension the show seems to portray is striking. To what extent, given John Kricfalusi’s seeming commitment to railing against the corporate animation establishment, were his characters subversive with regards to sex and gender? Do they police the child spectator’s purported desires? Does the rubbery quality of the animation or the absurd nature of the humor correspond to a sexual permissiveness—are there queer or feminist lessons to be learned from *The Ren & Stimpy Show* about how we talk to children about sex and gender on a mass mediated scale?

Here I will engage in a queer reading of *The Ren & Stimpy Show*—investigating the open secret of the series that was only one of the many anxieties the show raised among concerned parent-spectators. I will pay particular attention to the series’ use of humor to naturalize or denaturalize certain ways of desiring and living in a gendered body. I will attempt to discern the laws of sex and gender that govern *Ren & Stimpy*’s animated world, and reckon with the ways in which these laws uphold or undermine mainstream (that is, hetero-patriarchal) norms of

⁶⁵“No Pants Today,” *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. Bill Wray, Bob Camp, wr. Richard Pursel) Nickelodeon. 20 Nov. 1993.

⁶⁶“Lumber Jerks,” *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. Bob Camp, Bill Wray, wr. Jim Gomez, Ron Hauge, Bob Camp, Bill Wray) Nickelodeon. 22 Oct. 1994.

⁶⁷“Space Madness,” *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (directed and written by John Kricfalusi) Nickelodeon. 25 Aug. 1991.

⁶⁸“Magical Golden Singing Cheeses,” *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. Michael Kim, wr. Jim Gomez, Bob Camp) Nickelodeon. 15 Nov. 1994.

⁶⁹“It’s a Dog’s Life,” *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. Ken Bruce, wr. Jim Gomez, Bob Camp) Nickelodeon. 3 Dec. 1994.

⁷⁰Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires*. Durham: Duke Univ. Press (2005): pp. 94-100.

⁷¹I first explored this idea in a short assignment for *Queer Politics & Performance* with Liz Heard, Oct. 2010.

⁷²Nickelodeon famously censored a joke in “Sven Hoëk” [(dir. John Kricfalusi wr. Bob Camp, John Kricfalusi) Nickelodeon. 15 Aug. 1992.] because it purportedly alluded to oral sex between men. The joke involves Ren’s cousin Sven and Stimpy sitting in a closet, behind closed doors, after Stimpy acknowledges the camera and says, “Hey! This is private,” he is heard suggesting that the two play circus. Stimpy then shouts, “I’m a sword swallower!” and gulping sounds are heard, an allusion ambiguous enough to have Nickelodeon cut it (this decision is discussed in Dennis, 138).

⁷³Kricfalusi, John. “Carbunkle 2: Ren’s Romantic Dream” John K Stuff. 12 Apr. 2009. 11 Dec. 2010. <<http://johnkstuff.blogspot.com/2009/04/carbunkle-2-rens-romantic-dream.html>>

⁷⁴Adorno, Theodor. “Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture.” *Television: The Critical View*. Ed. Horace Newcomb. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976: pp. 239-259.

⁷⁵Famously elaborated in Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Screen* 16.5 Autumn 1975, pp. 6-18 (accessed 12 Dec. 2010 at <<https://wiki.brown.edu/confluence/display/MarkTribe/Visual+Pleasure+and+Narrative+Cinema>>).

Hughart, wr. Steve Mellor) Nickelodeon. 9 April 1994.

⁵¹"Big Baby Scam," The Ren & Stimpy Show. (directed and written by Vincent Waller) Nickelodeon. 12 Dec. 1992.

⁵²"A Visit to Anthony," The Ren & Stimpy Show. (dir. John Kricfalusi & Jim Smith, written by John Kricfalusi & Richard Pursel) Nickelodeon. 8 May 1993.

⁵³"A Yard Too Far," The Ren & Stimpy Show. (directed and written by Bob Camp) Nickelodeon. 27 Nov. 1993.

⁵⁴"Rubber Nipple Salesmen," The Ren & Stimpy Show. (directed and written by Vincent Waller & John Kricfalusi) Nickelodeon. 29 Aug. 1992.

⁵⁵"Road Apples," The Ren & Stimpy Show. (dir. Howard E. Baker, wr. Ron Hauge) Nickelodeon. 9 April 1994.

⁵⁶"Powdered Toast Man Vs. Waffle Woman," The Ren & Stimpy Show. (dir. Chris Reccardi, wr. Vince Calandra, Chris Reccardi. Bob Camp) Nickelodeon. 19 Nov. 1994.

⁵⁷I draw this analysis from Alison Bechdel's comic strip "The Rule" in *Dykes to Watch Out For*, (Ithaca: Firebrand [1986], pp. 22), now a well-known test in feminist film criticism.

⁵⁸Elinor Blake received a writing credit in "Stimpy's Cartoon Show" (1994), "Stimpy's Fan Club" (1993), and "Big Baby Scam/Dog Show" (1992).

⁵⁹"Son of Stimpy," The Ren & Stimpy Show. (dir. John Kricfalusi, Richard Pursel, wri. John Kricfalusi, Vincent Waller) Nickelodeon. 13 Jan. 1993.

⁶⁰"Pixie King," The Ren & Stimpy Show. (dir. Ron Hughart, wr. Ron Hauge, Jim Gomez) Nickelodeon. 14 Jan. 1995.

⁶¹"Ren's Retirement," The Ren & Stimpy Show. (dir. Bob Camp, wr. Jim Gomez, Ron Hauge, & Bill Wray) Nickelodeon. 2 April 1994.

⁶²"Nurse Stimpy," The Ren & Stimpy Show. (dir. John Kricfalusi, wr. by John Kricfalusi, Bob Camp) Nickelodeon. 18 August 1991.

⁶³"Stupid Sidekick Union," The Ren & Stimpy Show. (dir. Tom McGrath, wr. Bob Camp, Jim Gomez) Nickelodeon. 18 March 1995.

⁶⁴"City Hicks," The Ren & Stimpy Show. (dir. Ken Bruce, wr. Vince Calandra) Nickelodeon. 1 July 1995.

gender and sex. Finally, I will attempt to connect these discussions with a larger question of the marketability of the subversive (in the context of animated children's television, what kind of sex sells?) and popular distaste with engaging children in discussions of gender and sex. My goal here is a close reading of a medium too-often written off or critically ignored. If *Ren & Stimpy* was so successful, what can it illuminate about popular discourse of gender and sex as consumed by children?

Part I.

AGAINST THE ANIMATION MACHINE:

John Kricfalusi and the Birth of Ren & Stimpy

The Ren & Stimpy Show premiered on August 11, 1991 on Nickelodeon. Economically, *Ren & Stimpy* was part of Nickelodeon's efforts to develop and air original animated series, which the network saw as a capital investment (the network invested \$40 million in its first three original series, returns on which it expected in ad revenue and product lines based on the series)¹. *Ren & Stimpy*, alongside *Doug* and *Rugrats*, also served as a turn away from the then-popular trend of airing of cartoons based on toys (*My Little Pony*, *GI Joe*, *Transformers*), movies (*Back to the Future*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Beetlejuice*), or celebrities (*Hammerman*). Nickelodeon had for more than a decade been one of few cable channels devoted exclusively to children's programming, and with Viacom's purchase of the network in 1987, the network was finally able to invest in its own animated series, in order to build its brand as a network.² *Ren & Stimpy*, *Rugrats*, and *Doug*, aired on Saturday morning, attempting to establish Nick as viable competition with the cartoons that ran on NBC, ABC and CBS.

Although *Rugrats* and *Doug* were both long running, critically acclaimed series, *Ren & Stimpy* was a breakout hit for the network. The first season, with its scant six episodes, continued to air again and again for the next year, doubling Nickelodeon's viewership among adults under age 50³. Reports from that year describe *Ren & Stimpy* as a cult hit, reaching more than 2 million households every week by the time its

³⁵Smith, Corless. "Sex and Gender on Prime Time." *Journal of Homosexuality*, 21.1-2 (1991): pp. 119-138

³⁶Gross, 33.

³⁷Provenzano, Tom. "Ren & Stimpy: Not Not Gay" *The Advocate*, 652 (1994): pp.55-56.

³⁸"Big House Blues" *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. John Kricfalusi, wr. Bob Camp, John Kricfalusi, Jim Smith) Nickelodeon. 22 Aug. 1992.

³⁹See examples in "The Great Outdoors," *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. Ken Bruce, Vincent Waller, wr. John Kricfalusi, Vincent Waller.) Nickelodeon. 27 March 1993; "Eat My Cookies," *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. Ron Hughart, wr. Ron Hauge) Nickelodeon. 4 June 1994.

⁴⁰"Hermit Ren," *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. Chris Reccardi, wr. Bob Camp, Jim Gomez, Chris Reccardi, Bill Wray) Nickelodeon. 1 October 1994.

⁴¹Dennis, 138.

⁴²See "The Littlest Giant," *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. John Kricfalusi, wr. John Kricfalusi, Bob Camp) Nickelodeon. 1 September 1991, and "Robin Hoök," *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. John Kricfalusi, wr. John Kricfalusi, Bob Camp) Nickelodeon. 18 Aug. 1991.

⁴³"Ren's Pecs," *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. Ron Hughart, wri. Richard Pursell, Peter Avanzino) Nickelodeon. 18 Dec. 1993.

⁴⁴Famously articulated in de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage (1973).

⁴⁵"Fire Dogs," *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (Directed and written by John Kricfalusi) Nickelodeon. 1 Sept. 1991.

⁴⁶"Stimpy's Big Day/The Big Shot" *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (Dir. John Kricfalusi, wr. Vincent Waller, John Kricfalusi) Nickelodeon. 11 Aug. 1991.

⁴⁷"The Scotsman in Space," *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. Bob Camp, wr. Bob Camp, Jim Gomez, Bill Wray) Nickelodeon. 7 Jan. 1995.

⁴⁸"Hard Times for Haggis," *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. Chris Reccardi, wr. Jim Gomez, Chris Reccardi) Nickelodeon. 16 April 1994.

⁴⁹"Aloha Hoök," *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (dir. Bill Wray, wr. Jim Gomez, Bill Wray & Bob Camp) Nickelodeon. 14 Jan. 1995.

⁵⁰"Jerry the Bellybutton Elf," *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. (Dir. Ron

¹⁹Quoted in Cerone, Daniel. "New Kings of TV's Toon Town" Los Angeles Times 17 Oct. 1993, home edition: p. 7.

²⁰Quoted in Gehr, Richard. "You Filthy Worms!" The Village Voice 17 Nov. 1992, p. 58.

²¹Quoted in Smallbridge, 49.

²²Condry, John. "Thief of Time, Unfaithful Servant: Television and the American Child." *Daedalus* 121.1 (1993): pp. 259-278.

²³Minow, N. and Craig L. LaMay. "Abandoned in the Wasteland: Children, Television, and the First Amendment." *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 49.1 (1995): pp. 20-35.

²⁴See Hoffner, Cynthia. "Children's Wishful Identification and Parasocial Interaction with Favorite Television Characters." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 40 (1996): pp. 389-402 and Thompson, Teresa, and Eugenia Zerbinos. "Television Cartoons: Do Children Notice It's a Boy's World?" *Sex Roles*, 37 (1997): pp. 415-432.

²⁵Webster, Alec. "Television Addicts?." *Child Education*, 72 (1995): pp. 20-21.

²⁶Munson, Marty. "Media Mayhem." *Prevention* V.47 (1995): pp. 86-9.

²⁷Axelrod, Lauryn. "TV's Drone Zone." *The Education Digest* 61 (1995): 40-41.

²⁸V-Chip: Viewing Television Responsibly. Federal Communications Commission. 10 Dec. 2010, <<http://www.fcc.gov/vchip/>>

²⁹Foucault, Michel, Guy Hocquenghem and Jean Danet. "Sexuality, Morality and the Law." Trans. Alan Sheridan. Ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings. New York: Routledge, 1988.

³⁰Dines, Gail. "Toward a Critical Sociological Analysis of Cartoons." *Humor*, 8.3 (1995): pp.237-255.

³¹Dines, 240.

³²Dines, 242.

³³Dennis, Jeffery P. "The Same Thing We Do Every Night: Signifying Same-Sex Desire in Television Cartoons." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 31.3 (2003): pp. 132-40.

³⁴Gross, Larry. "Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media." *Journal of Homosexuality*, 21.1-2 (1991): pp. 19-46.

second season premiered.⁴ MTV (owned, like Nickelodeon, by Viacom) also picked up the series shortly after its premiere, and by the time *The Ren & Stimpy Show's* second season aired, more than a third of its viewers were older than eighteen.⁵ In 1992, after just one season, *Ren & Stimpy* was nominated for an Emmy.⁶

Reviews of the series published during its first season deem *Ren & Stimpy* grotesque, crude, deranged, and disgusting.⁷ They point to Ren's psychosis and violent anger, Stimpy's idiocy, the overwhelming scatological humor and graphic visuals. Nonetheless, the popularity the series attained over the course of its first season was undeniable, and many early accounts refrain from condemning the series for its bawdiness or its violence. The significant attention the series garnered from adults and teenagers is often the focus of these reports—attention that creator John Kricfalusi was "stunned" to have gained.⁸ *Ren & Stimpy*, for its groundbreaking animation style and extreme sensibilities, was one-of-a-kind, and somehow held mass appeal that set it apart from any other animated series on the air at the time.

Critics and commentators generally attributed the insane genius of *Ren & Stimpy* to Kricfalusi, the show's meticulous and principled creator. Born in 1955, Kricfalusi grew up watching and loving Hanna-Barbera cartoons like *The Yogi Bear Show* and *The Huckleberry Hound Show*, eventually enrolling in the acclaimed animation program at Sheridan College.⁹ It was here that Kricfalusi, already passionate about animated television, was introduced to classics of the genre, particularly shorts from the forties and fifties directed by Tex Avery and Bob Clampett. These cartoons deeply impacted Kricfalusi, who describes these cartoons as "the wildest experience [he'd] ever felt, like taking acid or something."¹⁰ Dissatisfied with his course of study at Sheridan ("They teach you some really basic technical things. How to draw? No. How to act? No. How to compose? No. No animation skills do you learn in animation school,"¹¹ he said of his experience there) Kricfalusi dropped out to work in animation studios in Los Angeles. He worked on a revival of *The Jetsons*, *Mighty Mouse*, and *Heathcliff*, among other things, before eventually deciding to found his own studio in 1989. Kricfalusi's description of the founding of Spumco International is

telling: "We said, 'The hell with it. Let's just form our own studio. We'll starve for a while, but we're going to give animation back to the cartoonists.'"¹²

Spumco was on the brink of going under when Kricfalusi managed to convince Nickelodeon's vice president of animation, Vanessa Coffey, of the viability of the *Ren & Stimpy* concept. In the summer of 1989, he sold Nickelodeon the rights to the characters and the network gave him an advance on a pilot. Early accounts of *Ren & Stimpy's* popularity might have foreseen the narrative that would come to dominate accounts of the series. John Kricfalusi was portrayed as rebellious and ruthlessly individual, involved in every part of the animation process from storyboarding (upon which he insisted, as opposed to script-writing, though the practice had largely fallen out of favor in the industry) to animating to voice acting (he provided Ren's Mexican-inflected Peter Lorre-like speech). His episodes cost twice as much as other comparable series to produce, and took, he claimed, nine months to produce from start to finish.¹³

Mark Langer suggests that part of the appeal of *Ren & Stimpy* during its early seasons was Kricfalusi's positioning as an animatophile—a member of the growing subculture dedicated to the study, appreciation, and collection of artifacts from the history of animation. Adults enjoyed the program's concurrent nostalgia for and parodying of animation from their childhoods; an early Nickelodeon press release touts *Ren & Stimpy's* "anarchic physical comedy of the great Warner Brothers [sic] cartoons of the '40s and '50s' with 'loveable stars of animation.'"¹⁴ The series, moreover, was meant to appeal to adults as well as children—with its coded mature humor for older viewers and its elastic, extreme visuals for younger viewers.¹⁵ It is safe to say, however, that Nickelodeon executives probably did not anticipate the tension that Kricfalusi's exacting method and Spumco's particular brand of humor would create.

By September 1992, just after the premier of *Ren & Stimpy's* second season, reports of Kricfalusi's termination by Nickelodeon surfaced. They were confirmed later that month, with Nickelodeon citing at first missed deadlines on Kricfalusi's part as the sole reason for

Endnotes

¹Robichaux, Mark. "Entertainment: For Nickelodeon, Crude 'Toon Is Big Hit." *Wall Street Journal* [New York, NY] 27 Jan. 1992, Eastern edition: p. B1.

²Langer, Mark. "Animatophilia, Cultural Production and Corporate Interests: The Case of 'Ren & Stimpy'." *Film History*, 5.2 (1993): pp. 125-141.

³Robichaux, B1.

⁴Cerone, Daniel. "What Is It With This 'Ren & Stimpy,' Man?" *Los Angeles Times* 9 Aug. 1992, final edition: p. G4.

⁵The voice of Ren in 'Ren and Stimpy' confirms he's out" *Chicago Tribune* 10 Oct. 1992, C edition: p. 28.

⁶Moca, Diane Joy. "Hot Dog And Gritty Kitty Make History As 'Ren And Stimpy'" *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 15 Aug. 1992, final edition: p. C1.

⁷Moca C1, see also Gehr, Richard. "Maim That Toon" *The Village Voice* [New York] 8 Oct. 1991, p. 49.

⁸Quoted in Moca p. C1.

⁹Smallbridge, Justin. "Ren and Stimpy's Big Corporate Takeover." *Saturday Night* Apr. 1992, pp. 46-50.

¹⁰Quoted in Smallbridge, 47.

¹¹Quoted in Smallbridge, 47.

¹²Quoted in Smallbridge, 48.

¹³Smallbridge, 48-50.

¹⁴Quoted in Langer, 134.

¹⁵Langer, 131.

¹⁶Cerone, Daniel. "'Ren & Stimpy' Creator Fired: Former Partner Will Take Over Cult Cartoon Show" *Los Angeles Times* 26 Sep. 1992, p. D1.

¹⁷Langer, 136-7.

¹⁸Quoted in Langer, 136.

presentation. It seems naive to expect that it would be—that any media is free of the problems inherent in representing marginalized populations, especially on a mass scale. On the other hand, assessing a children’s mass mediated series only for its gender and sexual politics is a more simplistic project than I intended to pursue. I have instead attempted to use close readings of *Ren & Stimpy* to highlight cultural assumptions about how children engage with mass mediated discourses of sex and gender. I have pointed to the use of the trope of the corruptible, passive child spectator to police non-normative performances of gender and desiring in *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. Finally, I have argued that animation and humor combine in *Ren & Stimpy* to create spaces for what Gopinath describes as queer spectatorship. The polysemous nature of *Ren & Stimpy*—combined with the show’s necessary moments of normative sexual and gendered representations and policing—allows these spaces to enlarge, taking on ever-stranger faces, as with Stimpy’s fart-child or the pair’s unending, vaguely romantic commitment to each other. Polysemy further expands the market appeal of *Ren & Stimpy*, accessing many signifieds for its complex, shifting signifiers.

his dismissal.¹⁶ Kricfalusi stayed on the show as a “consultant” for a number of months thereafter, and Nickelodeon created Games Animation in Spumco’s stead, allowing Bob Camp to take over the show and tempting as many former Spumco employees to the new studio as possible. In interviews, Kricfalusi was outwardly bitter, blaming his missed deadlines on the consistent rejection of scripts and storyboards due to unsavory content, drastically slowing the pace of production.

By the time the show was wrested from Kricfalusi’s control in 1992, fully two episodes had been shelved: “Man’s Best Friend,” which featured a hypermasculine “real American” character called George Liquor and which depicted Ren beating said character unconscious with an oar, and “Dog Show,” a similarly violent scenario involving Liquor tormenting Ren and Stimpy in order to enter them in a dog show.

Several episodes from the second season were only partially completed at the time of Kricfalusi’s ouster, their finished products cobbled together by Games Animation. Nickelodeon further refused to air “Son of Stimpy,” the story of Stimpy’s search for his lost first fart. (The episode eventually made it to air on MTV in January of 1993.)¹⁷ It became increasingly clear that Nickelodeon fired John Kricfalusi not simply over a matter of missed deadlines, but because of a fundamental disagreement about what content was suitable for its younger viewers. Bob Camp, Kricfalusi’s former part-ner, noted in August 1992 that “...Nickelodeon’s target market is 10-12 year olds—but we’re not aiming the stuff at little kids...We want to really push the envelope—disembowelment gags and all.”¹⁸ Nickelodeon’s senior vice president of programming for Nickelodeon countered, a year after Kricfalusi’s ouster, “In the world of animation for kids, you must remember that your first audience is always kids. And a situation that comes up time and time again here—people have the impression that we are making ‘Rocky and Bullwinkle’ and we’re not. People think they can make a show for adults and kids will get it. But we’re in a kids-first medium.”¹⁹

Part II.

LEAVE THE CARTOONS ALONE: Social Anxiety and Child Spectators

Two central conflicts emerge, then, from the narrative of *Ren & Stimpy's* creation and eventual cancellation, after five seasons and more than 50 episodes, in late 1996. The first is the artist vs. corporation trope that Kricfalusi's time at *Ren & Stimpy* so easily reproduces. Kricfalusi saw himself as a rebel for his dedication to a specific quality of animation, modeled after the classics of the genre. When Nickelodeon meddled with his process, the situation became untenable: they did not respect his art—the rights to which he had already sold to them—and so Nickelodeon fired him, keeping most of his former partners at Spumco, creating a situation of betrayal. Kricfalusi's artistic method was insufficiently suited to what were ultimately capital interests of the network, and Kricfalusi famously commented that Nickelodeon “didn't really deserve *The Ren & Stimpy Show*.”²⁰

The second conflict echoes the long-standing culture wars around what constitutes “appropriate” media for child spectators. Kricfalusi understood his work as appealing to children on some level, but he was also loyal to his adolescent and adult fans. Further, Kricfalusi was explicit about the amoral nature of his work: “You want to learn? That's what school's for,” he said in 1994, “You want people to have morals and ethics? That's what parents are for. You want to have a good time? That's what cartoons are for. Leave the cartoons alone.”²¹ Kricfalusi's outward disavowal of the moral value of cartoons is unique for someone in his position, the creator of an animated series broadcast on a major cable network. If other animators of his era held similar views, it was less apparent, both in the content of their series and their commentary on their work. The creator of *The Ren & Stimpy Show*,

series that did not condescend to them and that featured some of the most visually interesting (if sometimes disgusting) animation available at the time; teenagers and college students found an iron-ic, self-aware sensibility that would go on to characterize nineties humor. I do not mean to suggest these characteristics of the series appealed exclusively to spectators along these age lines. Rather, I want to assert that the elasticity (and semiotic flexibility) that defined *Ren & Stimpy's* aesthetic and sensibility allowed the series to conjure a wide array of signifieds—from nostalgia to potty humor—and therefore a wide audience. Ultimately, the series would have disappeared if it had not been profitable for the network, and ironically, the same polysemy that opened spaces for subversive portrayals of gender and sex seemed to also expand its market appeal, and in turn produce profits for Nickelodeon.

Theodor Adorno's “Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture”⁷⁴ asserts that mass media is necessarily disposed toward reproducing the social norms of the culture from which it comes. Feminists have long critiqued the role mass media plays in upholding patriarchal ideals through its erasure, isolation, and cursory treatment of female characters and the omnipresence of the male gaze, the violence of which men and women alike are expected to identify.⁷⁵ Indeed, I am inclined to agree; media featuring active, engaged women or queer figures or the non-male gaze are marginalized, rarely produced on a mass scale. Animation and humor in tandem, however, allow for abstracted characters to act through absurd (that is: non-normative) premises with nonsensical (that is: subversive or progressive) logics—like the idea that men can easily and comfortably switch from traditionally feminine performances of gender to traditionally masculine ones, without fear of social or physical violence. Of course, in many ways, the violence is implicit in the “absurdity” of the premises: the men in dresses are funny because they're men in dresses. Nonetheless, the space for queer spectatorship can be important and generative for spectators whose desires and gender performances are considered non-normative—as well as those who fit into hetero-patriarchal standards of enacting gender and desiring others.

The Ren & Stimpy Show is hardly a beacon of queer feminist re-

rather than pleasure—or else so vaguely signified that it could as easily be read as non-sexual and therefore nonthreatening. Non-normative performances of gender must be marked with humor and absurdity (implicitly advising spectators to enact normative gender expressions in order to avoid ridicule) or else included alongside instances in which performing in line with one’s “given” gender is rewarded. Children are protected spectators—due ultimately to their presumed corruptibility—and as such children’s media that addresses sex or gender transgression arouses anxieties in parents, networks, and advertisers alike.

Indeed, Kricfalusi would go on to resurrect the *Ren & Stimpy* franchise in 2003 with his *Ren & Stimpy Adult Party Cartoon*, in which Ren and Stimpy’s sexual relationship is explored. It aired on Spike TV, a male-oriented network also owned by Viacom, and by all accounts Kricfalusi took the freedom that an adult audience allowed him and ran with it. The series was cancelled within a month of airing and received even more strident criticism than the original *Ren & Stimpy* for its gross humor and animation style. Ren and Stimpy’s homosexuality can be portrayed to adults because adults are presumed to be discerning spectators, allowed to consume media for entertainment value only, and immune to the “dangers” of portraying non-normative modes of enacting gender and desire. Even then, though, Kricfalusi’s access to a mass audience was fleeting; the series seemed to have crossed a line with former *Ren & Stimpy* fans: its ability to more definitely signify modes of desiring for adult audiences was perhaps overkill, for censors and spectators alike.

If the characteristic polysemy of *The Ren & Stimpy Show* allowed the series to create spaces for queer and gender transgressive spectatorship (in the tradition of Bugs Bunny’s repeated and expert drag performances, or Yogi and Boo Boo’s implicit romantic partnership), I submit that the polysemy of the series was also its most marketable trait. The aesthetic, pacing, voice acting, writing, and humor of the series were successful not just because they radically departed from the animation styles of the previous three decades, but because they appealed to a wide range of demographics. Parents enjoyed the nostalgia the retro sets and gags inspired; children found a

with its fart jokes, innuendo, willful absurdity, and graphic images, would almost have to be against teaching children through mass media. The show has a wildly variable moral calculus that mostly involves Ren and Stimpy going to whatever lengths they must in order to survive.

The controversy surrounding John Kricfalusi’s positioning as a rebel-artist against a corporate machine, especially with regards to the role that children’s television does or should play in our culture, is one reason to examine *Ren & Stimpy* in particular. At the historical moment in which *The Ren & Stimpy Show* premiered, the question of how much and what kind of television children “should” view was very much on the minds of parents and critics. A Proquest search of articles related to children and television in the early nineties reveals a particular stigma surrounding the idea of children’s unmediated spectatorship of any television at all, much less programming that deems itself amoral. John Condry argues in his “Thief of Time, Unfaithful Servant: Television and the American Child” that “there is something wrong today with American children, in the way they are growing up,” which he connects directly to high rates of television viewership among children²². Condry, writing in the academic journal *Daedalus* in 1993, argues that television viewership stands in for crucial methods of socialization and education from days of yore—namely observing the adult world and attending school. Because children uncritically watch television during much of their free time (he cites viewership rates of around 40 hours per week), Condry argues, they suffer socially and morally, unable to distinguish televised hyperbole from reality.

Though Condry’s article is rather unscrupulous, with its viewership statistics bearing no citations and its assumption that, before television, children’s lives were universally filled with unproblematic opportunities for leisure and education, it conveys an academic iteration of the modern truism that Media Source X is Ruining Our Children. Other articles from that era espousing the same rhetoric abound: Newton N. Minow and Craig LaMay’s “Abandoned in the Wasteland: Children, Television, and the First Amendment” decries “television’s failure to serve children’s needs.”²³ While psychologists in the nineties take a lot of care to examine the development of gender

roles and stereotyping in children's programming, as well as children's reactions to such programming,²⁴ commentators (particularly in education-related media) constantly express anxiety or outright disgust with the potential of television to communicate the "wrong" messages to children.

With titles like "Television Addicts?"²⁵ "Media Mayhem,"²⁶ and "TV's Drone Zone,"²⁷ concerned critics explored in depth the potential detrimental effects of television on young viewers and advise parents on how to choose the least violent and/or sexual (and therefore most acceptable) television for children. As programming for children proliferated and psychological studies sought to connect certain kinds of behavior among children with the content of the television they viewed, culture wars waged about the extent to which the Federal Communications Commission was obligated to regulate children's programming. By early 1996, while *Ren & Stimpy* was airing its final season, the FCC had responded to widespread angst about children's television viewing habits by establishing the TV Parental Guidelines—ratings which continue to appear during the opening sequences of shows indicating the age range for which the program was deemed appropriate by networks, from TV-Y for ages two through five to TV-MA, for audiences over seventeen only.²⁸

Though much published praise of *The Ren & Stimpy Show* survives the series, it is impossible to imagine that *Ren & Stimpy* did not inform (and indeed, conflict with) the ongoing conversation about children and television spectatorship. For perhaps the most subversive charge that John Kricfalusi leveled against children, parents, and spectators of all ages was to leave cartoons alone: to leave children to engage with his work in their own way, on their own terms. In the debates surrounding what television children should view and how, a constant premise is that of the uncritical child spectator, doomed to absorb totally whatever a given show ekes out. Moral panics tend toward a simplification of both perceived problem and perceived victim: the rendering of the child-spectator as a subject without critical agency is characteristic of these early discourses of how to regulate children's mass media.

removing him from the program. Still, even after Kricfalusi's ouster, *Ren and Stimpy's* gender transgression continued unabated until the series ends in 1996, after five seasons and fifty-three episodes.

Here I want to highlight the anxiety with which Nickelodeon treated *Ren & Stimpy's* vaguely signified queer desires and gender performances. By the time Kricfalusi was fired, Spumco was submitting finished episodes that Nickelodeon would then have to censor. Perhaps the best example of all is "Big House Blues"—the pilot of the series, which actually aired at the beginning of the show's second season in 1992. The episode had originally included a scene of a dreaming *Ren* caressing and kissing a sleeping *Stimpy*, thinking him to be a beautiful woman. Kricfalusi comments in his blog: "Unfortunately this beautiful scene got cut when the cartoon first aired. It was deemed too "homosexual." Even though I think there were gay people working on both sides of the production. It actually isn't remotely homosexual. If anything it's "homophobic." Once *Ren* wakes up and realizes he's kissing *Stimpy* and not a girl, he freaks out."⁷³ The network, uncomfortable with the explicit portrayal of non-normative desire, cut the scene. Uncut versions of the episode exist and circulate among fans, to whom censored scenes are of utmost interest. Of course, even Kricfalusi is aware of the cut scene's professed homophobia. Nonetheless, even so explicit a portrayal and rejection of queer desire was deemed unwholesome for child viewers. Recall that Nickelodeon also shelved "Son of *Stimpy*"—with its foregrounding of *Stimpy's* earnest maternal feelings and actions—allowing it only to air on MTV, therefore presuming a slightly older (and less corruptible) audience.

The censorship of *Ren & Stimpy* demonstrates the ways in which anxieties about child spectatorship and mass media are bound up in impulses to portray and police normative enactments of gender and sex. Decisions to cut scenes from or not air episodes of *The Ren & Stimpy Show* evidently presume that gender transgression is more acceptable for older audiences than younger ones. To the extent that sex can ever be directly addressed in mass media directed at children, that sex must be normative—heterosexual, occurring between adults who are married or otherwise committed to one another, for procreation

ces in Bollywood films lend themselves to moments in which a lack of definitely gendered/sexed signifiers opens a space for queer spectatorship to take place. Viewers watching the intimate and elaborately staged musical segments are allowed to read queer desires into the movement and music they witness.⁷¹

The Ren & Stimpy Show, of course, doesn't encompass the diasporic complexities of Gopinath's discussion of Bollywood and Hollywood. It does, however, highlight a familiar Western example of an antirealist turn in media allowing for queer desire to flourish, or at least exist without comment, interpreted as a normal enough happening for it to appear on a children's cartoon. The designation of *Ren & Stimpy* as a nonsensical, humorous program allows for the use of "absurd" premises (like two men sharing a bed, or Stimpy adopting a male clown who then has and nurses puppies, or Stimpy's many forays into drag) in the name of humor. While Dennis sees Ren and Stimpy's relationship as an unkind caricature of heterosexual relationships, I see the medium of animation—particularly humorous animation—as uniquely suited to conveying non-normative modes of enacting gender and desire. If Ren and Stimpy were animated as young human men, or in a more realistic style, would their sleeping in the same bed or wearing dresses be as acceptable to network executives and viewers as such acts were when the series aired?

Ren & Stimpy, then, manages to expertly balance vaguely signified portrayals of gender and sexual subversion with moments of normative sexual and gender policing (such as the heterosexual desire implicit in the frequent portrayal of beautiful-women-as-luxury). This balance, masked in some ways by John Kricfalusi's commitment to animation for its own sake (and without attention to its potential "negative" effects on children), allowed *Ren & Stimpy* not only to air, but to become wildly popular, drawing millions of viewers to Nickelodeon each week. Of course, the series was not universally loved, and critiques from the network and spectators alike were leveled at the series' extreme, visceral aesthetic. After all, Kricfalusi's inattention to the presumed sensitivity of child spectators—in the form of allusions to gay sex⁷² or scenes of Ren and Stimpy kissing—was a major impetus for

Ultimately, of course, different children will engage more or less critically with the media they consume. Granting children agency as spectators is not a wholly unproblematic project. But it is one we might consider as we closely examine at *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. The media adults construct for children adhere to certain standards of what a given creator deems appropriate for children to consume, in form and content. For this reason, I want to examine the logic and values that rule the world of *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, particularly with regards to gender, sex, and sexuality. Whether or not John Kricfalusi cared to prescribe what was or was not appropriate for children to engage with in his cartoon, producers, advertisers, and network executives labored under the idea that Ren & Stimpy was, somehow, a children's cartoon. Kricfalusi's opposition or indifference to this idea was ultimately his downfall: what about his series got him fired? And what does the story of *The Ren & Stimpy Show* tell us about how gender and sexuality are represented in children's media?

Part III.

NOT NOT GAY:

Children's Coded Access to the Discourse of Gender and Sexuality

My analysis of *The Ren & Stimpy Show* focuses on gender, sex, and sexuality. As a child, I loved *Ren & Stimpy*; it was one of many animated series that I watched over and over until its episodes were no longer in syndication. Returning to *Ren & Stimpy* as an adult, however, I was struck by the overt, often implicitly queer sexual humor that the show often displayed. While sexual humor is new to no one, the use of this sort of humor in a series ostensibly produced for children surprised me. This led me to my first research question: that of how *Ren & Stimpy* contributed to the discourses of sex, sexuality, and gender that children accessed directly.

Central to my inquiry is the question of children and their relationship to sex and sexuality in contemporary American society. Michel Foucault, among other historians of sexuality, has attempted to wrest the idea of a passive, untrustworthy, undesiring child subject from its academic and legislative binds. Foucault contends that societal anxieties surrounding children's (consenting, honest) expressions of their own sexuality has produced a powerful moral panic around which all sorts of child-centered institutions have been organized, from the physical setup of a classroom to legislation on the age of consent.²⁹ Whether or not we agree with Foucault's characterization of the child as a desiring subject, his accounts of anxiety and indeed panic surrounding child sexuality is illuminating. My project, ultimately, is not to use animated television to prove or disprove a certain conception of

identify with.

How do we make sense of Stimpy's performance of gender? Is he gay, transgender, queer, bisexual? This is a non-question in the world of *Ren & Stimpy*—a world where sex can never occur, and desire can only be conveyed and alluded to. Gender rules—for the ostensibly male characters, at least—are fast and loose. (A notable act of female gender transgression occurs in “Lumber Jerks,”⁶⁶ when Jacques LaPierre introduces his wife, Fifi, a huge, muscular, attractive lumberjill, to whom LaPierre refers as “a man.” Stimpy replies, “I wanna be a man like the nice lady!”) *All* of the rules that govern *The Ren & Stimpy Show* are fluid: Ren and Stimpy are sometimes aware that they're naked, sometimes not; sometimes they acknowledge that they're stars of a cartoon show, other times Ren claims that cartoons will rot the minds of spectators. Sometimes they live in a donut box; sometimes they live in a house in the suburbs. Several episodes have ended with the two dying or the world ending (“Space Madness,”⁶⁷ “Ren's Retirement,” “Powdered Toast Man vs. Waffle Woman,” and “Magical Golden Singing Cheeses,”⁶⁸ “It's A Dog's Life,”⁶⁹ to name a few)—and yet the two appear, alive, inhabiting a world, in subsequent episodes.

With such an evident lack of continuity or necessary logic in the series, viewers are forced to accept the circumstances that define each episode as isolated to that episode and are allowed to create their own meanings and logic to make sense of the absurd scenarios in the series. Perhaps Jim Ballantine thinks Ren and Stimpy's sexual orientations are “not important” and Jeffrey Dennis considers their queer actions disingenuous: the abstract quality of both the art and the writing in *The Ren & Stimpy Show* allows spectators to find multiple divergent, even conflicting meanings from exactly the same images and scenarios. Gayatri Gopinath, in her *Impossible Desires*, discusses notions of “queer spectatorship” and “retrospectatorship” in her analyses of Bollywood⁷⁰ that I find useful in my inquiry. For Gopinath, Bollywood, with its necessarily “anti-realist” aesthetic, is a cultural site for diasporic queers to imagine and understand the homoerotic and homosocial. That is, despite the fairly conservative nature of sex and sexuality representations in Bollywood, the traditionally lengthy song-and-dance sequen-

fewer visual gags or goofy lines—instead, the premise of Stimpy’s motherly dedication to his fart is supposed to inspire laughs as we watch Stimpy’s painful separation from and search for his son.

Stimpy often dons feminine attire—he and Ren both wear tutus in “Pixie King,”⁶⁰ for example; he is seen wearing a dress in “Hermit Ren” and “Ren’s Retirement”⁶¹ (in the latter, he plays Ren’s widow, wearing a black veil at Ren’s funeral and weeping); he plays a female character (Maid Moron) in “Robin Hoëk”; in “Nurse Stimpy,”⁶² he wears a traditionally feminine nurse’s outfit as he takes care of Ren; in “Stupid Sidekick Union,”⁶³ he tricks Ren by dressing up as a woman in order to audition for the role of Ren’s sidekick (thus crossing his own picket line, since he is on strike); in “City Hicks,”⁶⁴ he and Ren wear dresses in order to fit in when they venture into the big city; at the end of “No Pants Today,”⁶⁵ he, Ren, and a squirrel sport dresses in order to address Stimpy’s sudden sense of nakedness, and Ren suggests that the three “go down to the malt shop and show off [their] outfits, eh gals?” In each instance, characters do not comment on the apparent gender transgression they witness or enact; they go about their business as if nothing about their attire were noteworthy. Though these instances do serve as visual gags, highlighting the aesthetic absurdity of either character’s particular sartorial choices, these jokes are roughly on par with depictions of the characters wearing masculine clothing. To be sure, Ren or Stimpy in women’s clothing is a more absurd premise than either of the two in men’s clothing; but the two never experience violence caused by their cross-dressing. Ren often berates Stimpy for whatever he does, but never does he call Stimpy out for being feminine, or for wearing dresses and skirts. The way one chooses to enact one’s gender through adornment, in the world of *Ren & Stimpy*, is less strictly policed than the world in which its spectators live. Just as the cartoon logic of the show allow Stimpy to create powerful inventions in his basement (despite Stimpy’s inability to read or write) or cause feathers to fly out of Stimpy as Ren picks him up and fluffs him like a pillow, in *Ren & Stimpy*, one’s sartorial choices can cross gender lines without eliciting even a raised eyebrow—much less the outward hatred many trans people experience for simply enacting the gender they

how children enact their own erotic wishes and needs. I instead want to look to animated television to interrogate the sexual discourses that we *do* entrust to children: the things we (as adult subjects who allow children under our care to consume certain media, as subjects who produce media, as subjects who patronize or boycott advertisers associated with various television shows) approve of children hearing and saying about sex and sexuality, as reflected in the television we produce for or show to them. These discourses, because they are directed at children, are necessarily charged; further, they are imbued with the particular communicative, normal-izing power that mass media demands. Throughout my inquiry into how humor and animation influence and inflect these discourses, then, the specter of panic will never be far behind: children occupy a unique social position with regards to sexual and gendered discourses, a position I intend to reckon with in the course of my project.

How, then, do I look at *The Ren & Stimpy Show*? Gail Dines, in her “Toward a Critical Sociological Analysis of Cartoons” outlines the complexity of critical cartoon scholarship.³⁰ Though she is engaging with printed cartoons, her account remains useful: cartoons, she argues, have historically been analyzed on three levels. Cultural theorists, first, emerged with a Marxist analysis of the relationship of mass media to consumers, citing the capital interests of media producers as inextricably linked to the messages and readings of those media.³¹ Later, semioticians emerged taking an opposing view, and studying cartoons as complex visual texts first, paying less attention to socioeconomic influences on their content and reception.³² Still later, socio-logists became interested in larger audience reactions to the deeply interpretable medium of the comic. For printed comics and animated cartoons alike, argues Dines, a full analysis must incorporate at least an acknowledgment of each of these methodologies, if not a fuller combination of the three.

With this complexity of approach and scope in mind, few texts readily offer the sort of analysis I want to pursue. Jeffrey P. Dennis, in his “The Same Thing We Do Every Night: Signifying Same-Sex Desire in Television Cartoons,” is a notable exception: he constructs a

genealogy of queer desire in TV animation since its inception.³³ Dennis works from a semiotic framework, drawing from Roland Barthes, and argues that images in animation are necessarily polysemous, or indefinitely signified, allowing spectators to conjure many signifieds in the face of a given sign. Animators use varying degrees of economy and abstraction to signify familiar situations, but especially in early (fifties and sixties era) animation, the loose signification of the relationship between same-sex main character dyads opened a space for viewers to intuit queer desire. Yogi Bear and Boo Boo, as well as Ruff and Reddy (of an eponymous Hanna-Barbera series) represent, for Dennis, the perfect amount of symbolic vagueness to depict necessarily queer male relationships without inspiring fear and outrage among adults who entrust their children to Hanna-Barbera's moral world. Dennis traces trends in animation tending toward the anxious heterosexualization of cartoon characters, with dyads giving way to ensemble casts without romantic pairings (*Josie and the Pussycats*, *Scooby Doo*), or lone protagonists with them (*Underdog*) through the sixties and seventies and the gendered turn in animation of the eighties (from *GI Joe: A Real American Hero* to *Strawberry Shortcake*), to the nineties, where my project is situated.

Authors like Larry Gross³⁴ and Corless Smith³⁵ discuss, without particular attention to animation as a medium, the problems of representing non-normative sexualities in mass media. Gross points out that unlike other, more bodily-visual means of dividing and subjugating bodies (race, gender), sexuality and sexual object choice must be acted out or overtly revealed. To this extent, queer subjects can look and seem “just like us” in the mass media, while their sexualities can be dealt with (usually mocked, but occasionally taken seriously) or not.³⁶ Where sexual minorities are visible, he argues, they are usually stereotyped and/or used to buttress implicit or explicit praise of heterosexual protagonists. Since Gross was writing in 1991, much has changed for queer representation; still, his perspective, which also deals with the ambiguity inherent in performances of queerness on television and the possibilities of queer spectatorship, informs my analysis.

Dennis discusses the heavy homosexual imagery and suggestion

it portrays. Though women are omitted or relegated to stereotypically passive, feminized roles, Ren and Stimpy's relationship is always haunted by the specter of same-sex desire. Stimpy, as the consistently feminized main character, also tends toward competence and empathy, despite his stupidity. If Ren is a caricature of masculinity, he exaggerates the worst of how men are expected to act, and is frequently driven over the edge by the imperative to compete, repress his emotions, and appear strong at all times. While the world Ren and Stimpy inhabits seems to be devoid of non-men, Ren and Stimpy themselves demonstrate complex, dynamic gender performances that are in some ways iterations of the ever-changing logic by which their world is ruled. Just as seemingly physically impossible things take place in every episode, Stimpy especially tends toward “impossible” ways of enacting his gender: performing feminine despite a male embodiment, to different degrees at different moments, and without being punished or policed for his choice of gender performance.

Stimpy stands alone as a genderqueer character, often appearing in different degrees of drag, and taking on various feminine-coded roles in the program. “Son of Stimpy”⁵⁹ exemplifies this well: Stimpy's first fart turns out to be sentient, and Stimpy expresses a great deal of concern for and dedication to his fart, Stinky, which he loses soon after he creates it. Stimpy falls into a deep depression, from which Ren attempts to wrest him, reminding him of things he used to love and even coming onto Stimpy, pointing suggestively to some mistletoe the two are standing under and batting his eyes coyly. “Gosh *darn* it, Ren! That's all you can think about!” Stimpy shouts, and ventures into the snowy night to find Stinky, claiming, “He needs me.” For days, Stimpy searches desperately for Stinky, and Stinky for Stimpy; Ren laments his partner's absence. Stimpy comes home empty-handed and frozen, and Ren joyfully thaws him out; Stinky returns shortly thereafter, addressing Stimpy as “Dad” as the two tearfully embrace. Stinky has taken a fish-head as his fiancé, and the episode ends after the two marry with Stimpy's blessing. Though Stinky refers to Stimpy as “Dad,” Stimpy's actions are marked as maternal—moreover, he performs them with utter sincerity. The episode is less funny than most, because there are

Part V.

ALL YOU CAN THINK ABOUT

Typical Cartoon Misogyny

or Radical Gender Transgression?

What do we make of the scant portrayal of women in the series? *The Ren & Stimpy Show* is unique in that neither of its main characters are particularly sympathetic; they are both extreme in their nature. While spectators may think themselves as irritable or cynical or empathic or stupid, Ren and Stimpy take these traits to such lengths that they are somewhat unrelatable—entertaining to watch but so exaggerated and abstracted that spectators are not expected to relate to them—nor do they desire to. So if even men and boys watching *The Ren & Stimpy Show* do not find the titular characters identifiable, does the dearth of women on the show matter?

Men's domination of the animation world is no-thing new; the animation canon consists entirely of male directors and artists. No woman ever directed an episode of *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. Of the dozen or so writers credited on the series, only one is a woman.⁵⁸ Woman spectators of the series, to the extent that they identified with any characters at all, were expected to identify with the male-identified characters on the series—or else to look to the scant and one-dimensional female characters featured on the show. *Ren & Stimpy* may be “revolutionary” in its commitment to animation for the sake of animation, but the series could hardly be considered progressive in its portrayal of women.

Still, what the series lacks in active female characters, it seems to make up for with the amount of gender transgression and queer desire

in *The Ren & Stimpy Show* and argues that homosexuality is used as the punch line to the series' many vulgar jokes. He cites Tom Provenzano's “Ren and Stimpy: Not Not Gay,” *The Advocate's* profile of *Ren & Stimpy* producer Jim Ballantine (who was openly gay at the time *Ren & Stimpy* was airing) to affirm that Ren and Stimpy are not *not* gay—but neither, he argues, are they gay. Dennis reads the couple as a parody of homosexual relationships, while Ballantine, in Provenzano's article, dismisses the issue, calling the nature of Ren and Stimpy's relationship “a joke.” Ballantine also denies rumors that Nickelodeon fired John Kricfalusi because of the show's frequent, overt portrayal of homosexuality.³⁷ Whether or not these rumors are true is perhaps less important than the popular concern surrounding the ostensible sexuality of these characters, which Dennis dismisses as inauthentic. Notably, Dennis and other authors point to the trend in nineties animation toward a sort of cartoon which readily proffers jokes for adult audiences even as it is still marketed at and “intended” largely for children.

My analysis draws on close readings of *The Ren & Stimpy Show* in its entirety, which have taken place over the course of writing this paper. I viewed each episode at least once and took notes during viewings, revisiting episodes as necessary in order to describe them for this analysis. I further draw from archival material, mostly in the form of entertainment news, about the series' run on Nickelodeon. Finally, I use the conceptual tools outlined above as my framework for exploring issues of sex, sexuality, and gender in *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. My aim is to make sense of the queer tensions that characterize the series and assess the extent to which *Ren & Stimpy* upholds or undermines normative, hetero-patriarchal understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality, and how the figure of the child spectator affects these representations.

Part IV.

I WANNA BE A MAN LIKE THE NICE LADY: Queering Ren & Stimpy

I begin my analysis of *The Ren & Stimpy Show* with the pilot of the series. “Big House Blues” clocks in at a scant eight minutes; it is familiar to any regular *Ren & Stimpy* viewer as the episode from which all the images in the show’s opening sequence are drawn (as well as, for that matter, the music that plays over the opening sequence). This pilot, we must remember, laid the foundation for all other episodes of the series to come; it was the approval of this pilot, funded with an advance from Nickelodeon, that convinced the network to produce *Ren & Stimpy*’s first season. It explains the origin of Ren and Stimpy’s friendship—though their species are natural enemies, they unite in the face of adversity, explains the drawling narrator—as scenes of Ren and Stimpy scrounging for food flash across the screen.³⁸ Two important things happen in the first few seconds of the episode. First, the narrator refers to Ren and Stimpy as “strange bedfellows,” perhaps the most apt description one might apply to the entirety of their portrayed relationship. In subsequent episodes, Ren and Stimpy are always shown sharing not only a household, but also a bed. Second, the narrator refers to Ren by his full name, Ren Hoëk, which he pronounces “hoak.” Ren looks at the camera and says, “That’s *Hoëk*, you eediot!”—a moment that aptly encapsulates both Ren’s particular brand of constant ire and the show’s commitment to self-awareness and absurdism, unusual for a so-called children’s cartoon.

Ren and Stimpy find themselves captured by a dogcatcher and imprisoned in a dog pound. Ren realizes that death awaits Stimpy and himself in the form of “the big sleep” if someone does not adopt them

Stimpy are their children, “A Visit to Anthony,”⁵² where both characters are actually shown as entire humans from head to toe, “A Yard Too Far,”⁵³ “Big House Blues,” “Rubber Nipple Salesmen,”⁵⁴ and “Road Apples.”⁵⁵) This particular female character is generally used to parrot whatever her husband says, or else to slightly temper her husband’s extreme opinions; she is attractive and one-dimensional, a parody of the idyllic 1950s house-wife.

With few exceptions, female characters are insignificant and passive, with none of their own opinions, desires, or back-stories. Episodes that break this rule include “Powdered Toast Man vs. Waffle Woman,”⁵⁶ which features a sexualized, femme-fatale-style villain, who challenges Powdered Toast Man (a recurring superhero on *Ren & Stimpy*) to a battle, which devolves into a personal argument about each character’s failure to maintain their former friendship and does a great deal of collateral damage to institutions like hospitals and schools, and ends with Powdered Toast Man accidentally destroying the world. She never reappears in the series. “Eat My Cookies” is one of the only episodes in the series that features multiple female characters talking to one another;⁵⁷ in it Ren and Stimpy are at a Barette Beret Girl Boot Camp, which is run by intimidating, butch, girl scout characters, who only allow Ren and Stimpy into their select social circle after they earn a number of painful merit badges and sell numerous Barette Beret Girl Cookies. At the end of the episode, the girls unzip their outer layer and reveal themselves as old men in suits. Stimpy does the same, and the episode ends.

es heterosexual desire, which is realized or reciprocated only when his body is sufficiently masculine, his occupation sufficiently lucrative.

In fact, outside of these fantasy scenarios, women are nearly absent from the world of *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. This is not uncommon in children's programming not directed specifically at girls, demonstrating the long-held feminist critique that Man is an unmarked category, with which all subjects are made to identify, while Woman is a marked category, with which male subjects are not expected to identify.⁴⁴ Where women appear, they are portrayed as either extremely undesirable—as with the recurring character Mrs. Buttloaves, a gigantic woman in a pink nightgown who first appears in the first season episode “Fire Dogs,”⁴⁵ wherein she crushes the main characters after jumping from a burning building—or as extremely desirable. In either case, female characters rarely have more than a few lines in an episode, and usually only one appears in a given episode. Women are frequently used essentially as props, appearing silently around one of the main characters in a fantasy to signify luxury or success. This can be seen in “Stimpy's Big Day/The Big Shot,”⁴⁶ the premiere episode of the series, after Stimpy gets famous, again in “Ren's Pecs,” after Ren becomes famous, in “The Scotsman in Space,”⁴⁷ when Ren encounters a genie and wishes to be surrounded by beautiful women, in “Hard Times for Haggis,”⁴⁸ when puppets of Ren and Stimpy become famous, in “Aloha Hoëk,”⁴⁹ as Stimpy relaxes on an island beach, and in “Ol' Blue Nose,” when Stimpy becomes a famous lounge singer.

Between the extremely desirable woman-prop and the disgusting female semi-character of Mrs. Buttloaves (and other such iterations of the trope of the failed feminine, as Muddy Mudskipper's slovenly, unattractive wife Bimby, who appears in “Jerry the Bellybutton Elf”⁵⁰ and has no lines at all, serving only to make the visual joke of a fat, gluttonous female who gobbles up all the clam dip she had brought to Ren's dinner party), *Ren & Stimpy* also features a fifties-style housewife character. She is usually portrayed only with her husband and only from the waist down. (She and her husband appear in “Big Baby Scam,”⁵¹ as parents that Ren and Stimpy con into thinking Ren and

soon. They are eventually adopted after Stimpy coughs a hairball onto Ren, which sticks onto him in a manner that causes him to resemble a poodle, making him appealing to a little girl browsing for dogs in the pound. Ren demands that she also adopt Stimpy, because he cannot bear to be separated from his best friend. At their new home, Stimpy receives a litter box, his first and most valued material possession, and the episode ends.

The pilot sets up the format that would characterize the series: each episode opening with Ren and Stimpy in a different, often desperate situation, the absurdity of which viewers are expected to accept. Ren and Stimpy are the only real constants in the series: characters disappear and reappear in different episodes, playing various roles, but there is no sense of linearity to the progression of episodes. Each portrays a suspended moment in time, irrelevant to the happenings of subsequent or preceding episodes. The atomistic nature of episodes, combined with the show's proclivity for absurd humor—in which jokes emerge from the serious assumption of nonsensical circumstances—makes it difficult to discern a particular logic of the series. Ren and Stimpy seem to change sizes indeterminately, sometimes living in a birdhouse, or a cow, or a “real” house; sometimes interacting with non-animal characters that are shown only from the waist down, sometimes with humans with faces, arms, and torsos; sometimes they wear select articles of clothing (Ren tends to wear a hat and a tie, no shirt, Stimpy is prone to wearing only aprons), sometimes their apparent nudity upsets them, sometimes they unzip their skin in order to undress.³⁹

This commitment to inconsistency of setting and logic in the series makes the few constants in *Ren & Stimpy* all the more significant. Ren and Stimpy are themselves steadfast characters, reliable in their relationships to one another and the wildly variable world they inhabit. Ren is irascible, prone to fits of madness and rage, and arrogant: he thinks highly of his own intelligence and taste, and finds the faults of others insufferable. Stimpy is his perfect foil, stupid and kind, empathic and rather more emotionally intelligent than Ren; his sometimes-idiotic unflappability often translates to competence in times of

intense stress. While Ren goes insane, Stimpy, by chance or through momentary lapses in his idiocy, tends to come upon the solution to whatever problems he and Ren are facing.

Ren is consistently gendered male to Stimpy's female. The source of Ren's constant stress is sometimes portrayed as his unnamed day job, from which he is often shown returning home, briefcase in hand, demanding to know the whereabouts of his dinner. Stimpy frequently acts as a wife to Ren, wearing frilly aprons and keeping house while Ren is at work, as well as cooking meals for Ren and serving them to him. Ren and Stimpy's commitment to one another is also a constant of the series. Though Ren is frequently incensed by Stimpy's idiocy (in particular, his taste for lowbrow television), his anger at Stimpy is never sustained. In every episode, Ren and Stimpy end up together; their love for one another is total. They are unable to survive without each other.

An instrumental episode to this extent is "Hermit Ren," the first episode of the series' fourth season.⁴⁰ Ren, fulfilling the role of man of the house, comes home from work one night to find Stimpy singing loudly and tonelessly. The dinner Stimpy has prepared for Ren is literally in flames; their bathroom is disgusting; and Stimpy's idiocy drives Ren over the edge. He decides to become a hermit, shutting himself in a cave and promising not to have any contact with anyone else forevermore. While in the cave, Ren comes across a mummified bog man (a clear and bizarre reference to Denmark's Tollund Man, a corpse from the fourth century B.C.E. whose soft tissues were preserved by lack of oxygen and peat moss in the bog), whom he befriends in his growing madness. He eventually constructs a statue of Stimpy out of guano he finds in the cave; Stimpy, similarly lost without Ren, constructs a figure of Ren out of earwax back at the house. Despite Ren's anger, he hates being separated from Stimpy. He is eventually kicked out of the cave because he has made imaginary friends, which violates the hermit code to which he swore when he entered the cave. They joyfully reunite (Ren returns home to find Stimpy in a dress, cowboy hat, and lipstick, his earwax sculpture sitting on his shoulders), and the disgusting sculptures also hug and wink at the camera as the episode concludes.

Dennis argues that *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, in the tradition of Hanna-Barbera cartoons from the sixties, presents "signs [of the nature of a dyad's relationship] without sufficient contextual markers to fix the dyads as friends, siblings, or coworkers, but with the added awareness that there was another possibility"⁴¹—that of same-sex desire. He goes on to cite the series' tendency toward vulgar humor and suggests that allusions to same-desire in *Ren & Stimpy* are relegated to the punch lines of scatological jokes, while their consistent partnership is supposed to be a parody of fifties-style heterosexual relationship—Stimpy as a failed June Cleaver, Ren as his irate, hypermasculine Ward Cleaver. This reading, though, seems insufficient given Ren and Stimpy's deep commitment to one another, besides their consistently portrayed cohabitation. The show also portrays either character occasionally expressing desire for human women, complicating the sexual logic of the program. The sexualities of the title characters is never definitively stated, and even if it were, could viewers expect it them to remain constant?

Indeed, for all the queer tension portrayed between Ren and Stimpy, the series also does its part in policing hetero-patriarchal standards of embodying and enacting gender. Ren is himself a parody of masculinity: angry, active, fearless—but also a miserable breadwinner, frequently breaking down mentally, and above all, physically insufficient. He is portrayed as scrawny and mosquito-like; a running joke in the series is Ren's ultimate desire for "huge pectoral muscles"—he prays for them before he and Stimpy go to bed in "Robin Hoök" and "The Littlest Giant,"⁴² episodes from the first season. In the third season, Ren's prayers are answered when Stimpy donates fat from his buttocks toward Ren's pectoral implants. After consistently being emasculated due to his size and emotional instability, Ren is finally able to attract women and compete with other men.⁴³ In "Ren's Pecs," Ren literally uses his new pectoral implants to beat a gigantic man who had kicked sand in his face at the beginning of the episode. Ren becomes a Hollywood actor, whose fame brings him beautiful women with exaggeratedly tiny waists and huge hips and busts. Such scenarios are often portrayed as Ren's ultimate fantasy: in other words, he actively express-