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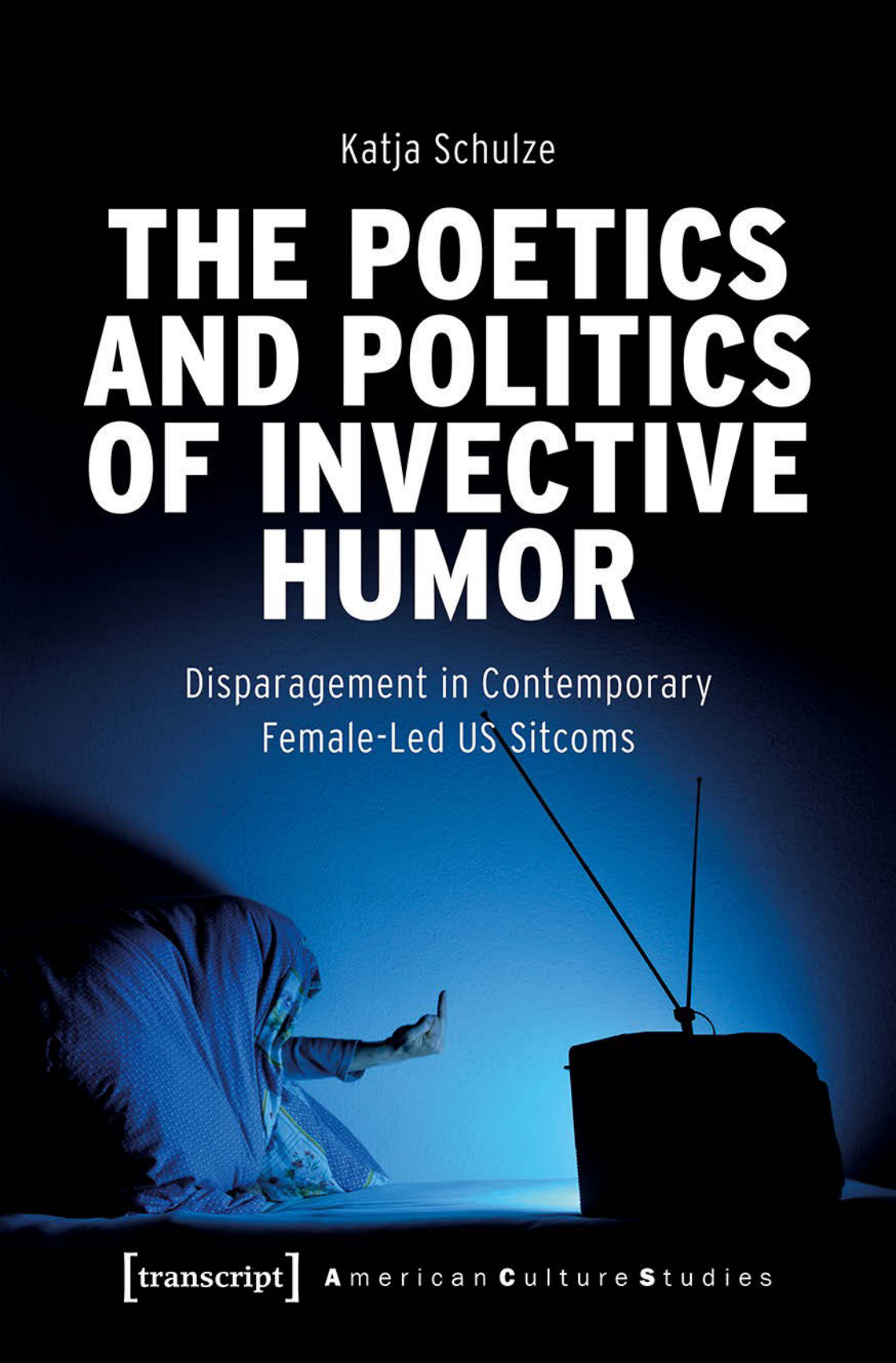
Katja Schulze

THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF INVECTIVE HUMOR

Disparagement in Contemporary Female-Led US Sitcoms



[transcript] American Culture Studies

Katja Schulze
The Poetics and Politics of Invective Humor

American Culture Studies | Volume 39

Be the Leslie Knope of whatever you do

Katja Schulze, born in 1989, studied American and German Studies at the Universities of Dresden and Nashville (TN, USA). After finishing her Master's degree in American Studies, she received her doctorate at and became a member of TU Dresden and University of Leipzig's Special Research Unit »Invectivity. Constellations and Dynamics of Disparagement« funded by the German Research Foundation. Her research focuses on US American popular culture, especially television studies.

Katja Schulze

The Poetics and Politics of Invective Humor

Disparagement in Contemporary Female-Led US Sitcoms

[transcript]

University of Leipzig. Institute for American Studies. Chair of American Literature.
Examiners: Prof. Dr. Katja Kanzler (University of Leipzig);
Prof. Dr. Holger Kersten (Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg)

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1. Introduction

> Ya basic. (Eleanor, *The Good Place* (NBC 2016–20) 1.13)
>
> Robin, girls are like cartons of milk. Each one has a hotness expiration date and you've hit yours. (Barney, *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS 2005–14) 6.01)
>
> You are human tennis elbow [sic]. You are a pizza burn on the roof of the world's mouth. You are the opposite of Batman. (Troy, *Community* (NBC 2009–14) 3.01)

Whether it is slandering a demon that tortures humans in a fake afterlife utopia in *The Good Place*, misogynist world views casually shared with friends in *How I Met Your Mother*, or insulting a fellow student because she did not give advance warning that all characters on a British television show will die in the end in *Community* – situation comedies contain a lot of disparagement, ridicule, and mockery in order to entertain and elicit humor. Disparagement humor – "humor that denigrates, belittles, or maligns an individual or social group" (T. E. Ford and M. A. Ferguson 79) – is not only "pervasive in contemporary society," it also seems to be a highly distinctive feature of the sitcom genre and of American popular culture in general (M. A. Ferguson and T. E. Ford 305). As arguably the most popular comedic televisual genre and one of the comedic pillars of television culture, situation comedies have undergone significant formal and textual changes in the investigation period, indicating, as I later discuss in more detail, a *Quality Turn* in comedy. Since the millennium, comedic formats showed a considerable differentiation and expansion, both in established genres like the sitcom as well as in recently emerging formats like the political late night show and the re-discovery of the dramedy format. The proliferation of disparaging humor becomes evident in recently pervasive techniques of humiliating, exposing, insulting, and embarrassing characters on screen. Especially through distinct disparaging humor principles, like cringe humor,

that constitute a new quality of embarrassment and shame, sitcoms invite viewers to participate in suffering with the characters as well disparagingly laughing at them.[1] Since mass media, and especially television, "are probably the most powerful conveyors of sociocultural ideals," disparagement and disparagement humor are worth examining in more detail (Tiggemann and Pickering 199).

Intervening into these debates, this book introduces the concept of invectivity[2] to analyze disparaging, humiliating, and mocking dynamics and constellations in contemporary US American situation comedies. Through the lens of invectivity, I strive to examine the poetics and politics of popcultural sitcom texts that utilize disparagement both as a narrative device and a major source of humor in order to explore how popcultural practices of debasement echo understandings of social order and hierarchy. Throughout this study, my key argument is that the contemporary situation comedy genre's developmental dynamics are fed by, rely, and depend on an oscillation between the affirmation and reflection on, up to and including the breaking of invective conventions. With the help of a modal approach, I seek to describe manifold invective techniques and their staging. The analyzed sitcom texts unfold their cultural work at the intersection of transgression and taboo. While sitcoms are devised to entertain by lightheartedly trangressing social norms, the genre's humor imminently expresses and emphasizes difference and, thus, a social hierarchy between the laugher and the laughee (cf. Kanzler, "(Meta-)Disparagement Humour" 15). Furthermore, I argue that invective structures and the subsequent invective humor are the grounding of the genre. Moreover, they can function as a catalyst for exploring the genre's own boundaries and self-understanding. The study, therefore, proposes that invective dynamics repeatedly play an important role in the boundary work of the genre – the ways in which the material

1 As Middleton argues, cringe comedy first came to be known with the accomplishments of mockumentaries, like *The Office* (BBC 2001–03; NBC 2005–13), that took advantage of "the mock-documentary framework to heighten [the show's] awkward humor, through devices including long periods of dead air, and contradictions between characters' self-representation in interviews and their behavior captured on tape" (*Documentary's Akward Turn* 2).

2 The term 'invectivity' was newly coined for the purposes of the Special Research Unit "Invectivity. Constellations and Dynamics of Disparagement." The neologism is borrowed from the classical literary and rhetoric form of 'invectiva oratio' or 'vituperatio' (cf. Ellerbrock et al. 7).

adapts the situation comedy's traditional conventions to changing social and discourse-political constellations.

As widely attested in scholarly writings, vituperation, debasement, and disparagement seem to enjoy a particular upsurge in contemporary times (cf. Ellerbrock et al.; Kanzler, "Invective Spectacle"; Ellerbrock and Fehlemann; Kanzler and Scharlaj). According to these articles, phenomena like insults, vilification, rudeness, and symbolic or verbal violence and aggression share the common and pejorative feature of singling out, discriminating against, and changing the social position of the disparaged. TU Dresden's Special Research Unit "Invectivity. Constellations and Dynamics of Disparagement" attends to those elements of communication – "either verbal or non-verbal, oral or written, gestural or graphic" – that are utilized to harm, disparage, or exclude others (Ellerbrock et al. 3). The intellectual framework throughout this book has been greatly informed by and takes its cues from the analytical category of invectivity and Ellerbrock et al.'s programmatic text (ibid.). The central component of the Special Research Unit's concept is that invectivity helps to describe distinct social dynamics and defines the disparaging incidents as *invective*, "identifying quintessential modalities through comparison and highlighting invective characteristics in all kinds of cultural phenomena" (ibid. 6f., translation mine). Based on Fowler's *mode* concept (*An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*), Kanzler introduces an approach to theorize invective forms across media and historical periods, the *invective mode*, to comprise the range and fluidity of invective structures in American popular culture. She argues that the invective mode is able to pour itself into continually developing local formats, transcends media and genre boundaries, and uncovers representational and affective strategies and socio-cultural functions of disparagement and symbolic abuse (cf. "Invective Mode"). For the analysis of invective phenomena in contemporary US American situation comedies, the analytical category of invectivity enables me to examine the complexities of popcultural disparagement and to observe society's view of itself and its own dealings with disparagement. For invective phenomena to be adequately analyzed in sitcoms, then, they have to be examined in their discursive, medial, and social contexts. Comparatively few concepts and notions of disparagement have been argued to zoom in on similar elements of American popular culture – aspects of Middleton's 'Cringe Comedy,' Schwind's 'Embarrassment Humor,' and Mills's 'Comedy Verité' come to mind – yet I propose that introducing the notion of invectivity not only benefits research in Popular Television Studies but it

also addresses the complexities of popcultural texts and counteracts the deficiencies in current scholarship (cf. Middleton, *Documentary's Akward Turn*; Schwind, "Embarrassment Humor"; Mills, "Comedy Verité").

1.1 Methodology

This study locates itself in the field of American Studies and, more specifically, within the field of Cultural and Literary Studies. In order to analyze the constellations and dynamics of invective phenomena in contemporary American situation comedies, I primarily draw from these scholarly backgrounds. The methodological interdisciplinarity characteristic of American Studies is able to explore and investigate the interrelation between my material's formal and textual principles, media-specific conditions and procedures, the politics of affect, and the cultural work it performs. My broad understanding of what constitutes texts, likewise, comes from Cultural Studies. As is traditional in American Studies, Cultural Theorist and Media scholar John Fiske defines a text as "a signifying construct of potential meanings operating on a number of levels […]. [T]hese meanings are determined partly by the structure of the text itself, partly by the social characteristics and discursive practices of [its] reader" (43). Within the framework of this concept, texts are not bound by the medium of print, but they enclose various media, including the moving images of televisual artifacts.

My firm interest in the cultural work of texts greatly informs this study. In her influential analysis of 19th century texts, Jane Tompkins addresses a text's "cultural work within a specific historical situation" by "providing society with a means of thinking about itself, defining certain aspects of a social reality which the authors and their readers shared, dramatizing its conflicts, and recommending solutions" (200). Literary texts, according to her, do work in "expressing and shaping the social context that produced them" (ibid.). Paul Lauter, more than a decade later, further outlines the concept by arguing that the cultural work of a text "helps construct the frameworks, fashion the metaphors, create the language by which people comprehend their experiences and think about their world" (23). The concept of cultural work, therefore, focuses on the interactions between literary texts (in the broadest sense) and society and culture. Based on the assumption that society is not only heterogeneous but also structured

along asymmetrical power relations, this study, on the one hand, assumes that interpretations are always embedded in processes of negotiation that are dependent, among other things, on interpretive claims of the prevalent social conceptions of order. On the other hand, it is assumed that texts offer more or less ambiguous readings in which privileged meanings are nevertheless inscribed. In my analytical chapters, these complexities are carved out meticulously. This study uses the concept of cultural work as a starting point for a range of interdisciplinary methods. Besides approaches from Cultural and Literary Studies, this study, as I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, utilizes insights from several other disciplines and fields throughout the following chapters, that emphasize processes of distinction and devaluation, 'othering,' and the distribution of and claim to power. With regard to the significance of humor in the sitcom genre, I utilize, most prominently, theories and concepts from the field of Humor Studies, with a particular emphasis on superiority theories of humor as well as insights from Media and Television Studies. All of these interdisciplinary impulses facilitate and support my overall goal of describing and analyzing the contemporary situation comedy genre's dynamics of affirming, reflecting on, and breaking invective conventions.

Since humor plays such a significant role in this book, I want to clarify my analytical standpoint. The arguments of this book all hinge on my interest in invective humor as one affordance of the situation comedy genre.[3] Rather than basing my epistemological interest on empirical viewer analyses, this study is exclusively interested in the textual, narrative, and audiovisual elements of the sitcoms that invite implied[4] audiences to laugh. The main approach to humor in this study is through the lens of superiority theories which propose that the "laugher always looks down on whatever [she] laughs at, and so judges it inferior by some standard," while being aware that other humor theories beneficially add to the picture (Monro, qtd. in Lintott 347).

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3 Adapted from design theory, Caroline Levine reads 'affordance' as a "term used to describe potential uses and actions latent in materials and designs" in order to reconsider literary form (6). Ultimately, she invites the reader to ask what aesthetic and literary forms are "*capable* of doing [and] what potentialities lie latent – though not always obvious – in aesthetic [...] arrangements" (ibid. 6f., emphasis in the original).

4 The term 'implied audience' is derived from the concept of the 'implied reader' that "designates the image of the recipient that the author had while writing or, more accurately, the author's image of the recipient that is fixed and objectified in the text by specific indexical signs" (Schmid 301).

Since humor and the semantics of laughter are ambivalent in "functioning either as a tool of the powerful [...] or as a counter-cultural means of subverting, satirizing or ridiculing dominant norms and discourses," they either destabilize or reproduce the predominant discourses and power relations, depending on the dominant reading (Källstig and Death 4).[5]

In order to analyze invective phenomena in sitcoms, I employ close readings of as well as a Cultural Studies approach to the shows' audiovisual and narrative elements. Generally speaking, close reading is "the 'primary methodolody' of literary studies" and constitutes "[r]eading individual texts with attention to their linguistic features and rhetorical operations" (Herrnstein Smith 57). The Cultural Studies approach focuses on the interaction between the poetics and the politics of a text. In the case of this study, this means illuminating the interplay between, on the one hand, invective forms, means, and aesthetics and, on the other hand, the cultural work, the interpretational sovereignty, and the power relations the series depict. The main argument of this book, then, works through close readings as well as analyses and examinations of the cultural reverberations and functions of the fictional popcultural products.

The corpus of this study serves to exemplify many different forms of realizations of the invective mode in situation comedies. In this regard, I follow Mills's argument that "[n]o programme is wholly representative of a genre and, because of the serial nature of television, it's likely that no single episode of any programme is representative of all of its episodes" (*The Sitcom* 3). The study, therefore, illustrates distinct series' exemplary ways of dealing with invectivity from different aspects and perspectives that allow for productive and insightful readings, instead of trying to offer overgeneralized, apparently absolute statements about *the* sitcom of the 21st century. It comprises analytical readings solely of US American situation comedies, produced and broadcast after the turn of the millennium. In addition, all of the texts possess relative cultural reach in that they appeared on popular streaming platforms, national networks, or cable channels, and were, therefore, able to reach mass audiences. Finally, I have opted to concentrate on situation comedies with female protagonists as a deliberate counterbalance to existing research which often focuses on series with male

5 McCabe argues for the idea of a 'dominant specularity,' "a reading position constructed by texts from which the world makes coherent, realistic sense" (Bodroghkozy 106; cf. C. McCabe 39).

protagonists (cf. Good et al.; E. Cooper; Zimdars). Constructions of gender, whiteness, and class intersect all of my primary texts and my analyses point out different facets and dimensions of their representation. Although the analyses in the next chapters work towards the general goal of examining manifestations of the invective mode in the sitcom genre, all nine case studies are capable of standing for themselves and add to the research of the individual television texts. While there is a small range of scholarship on most of the selected texts, my readings nevertheless emphasize their complexities as well as contributing to existing debates.

1.2 Structure

The book's examination of the politics and poetics of contemporary US American situation comedies is divided into four sections. The first chapter provides the conceptual basis and the cultural context of my study, while the three subsequent chapters analyze and examine invective dynamics and constellations. Each analytical chapter focuses on different forms of realizations of the invective mode, either grounding the sitcom genre or exploring its self-understanding and boundaries. As this book demonstrates, it is necessary to examine humorous invective phenomena in situation comedies in relation to discourses of 'otherness,' (self-)reflexivity, and the formal margins of the genre in order to expose the complexity of invective dynamics and constellations.

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 lays the conceptual groundwork and establishes the cultural context of this study. It firstly introduces the concept of invectivity and proposes that the new research perspective is able to invigorate and inform the analysis of popcultural texts, contextualizing selected existing research in a new light. The chapter, in a first section, demonstrates that invective aspects permeate historical and social realities in American culture. In a second section, the chapter explores the relation between humor and invective structures essential for an analysis of situation comedy texts. Finally, it focuses on the connection of the invective with the sitcom genre itself, giving prominence to particular affordances that enable and facilitate invective structures in the genre.

Chapter 3 investigates sitcom texts that heavily rely on discourses of 'otherness' to elicit invective humor in the network situation comedies *Mike & Molly* (CBS 2010–16) and *2 Broke Girls* (CBS 2011–17) in two distinct

subchapters. The first section analyzes the disparagement of the two fat protagonists in *Mike & Molly*, drawing on the literary archetype of the fool. This subchapter reads specific supporting characters as Invective Fools, portrayed as heavily flawed individuals, yet equipped with distinct invective licenses to speak. As an authorizing strategy, the show enforces allegedly socially acceptable norms and devalues undesirable bodies and behaviors. The second subchapter is devoted to gendered self-deprecating or, in the case of audiovisual artifacts, auto-invective structures in the sitcom *2 Broke Girls*. In a first step, this section traces the history of self-deprecation as a successful strategy for female comedians to circumvent gate-keeping mechanisms in the male-dominated domain of comedy. Secondly, it argues that the auto-invective humor of one of the show's female protagonists hinges on a gender-based disbalance of power and, thus, updates and perpetuates discourses of alterity and 'otherness' with regard to gender.

The second of the analytical chapters, namely Chapter 4, examines situation comedies that utilize invective phenomena to reflexively make disparagement (humor) a subject of discussion. Since it focuses on the sitcom cluster of Super Nice comedies, this chapter deviates from the usual structure of this book by examining and engaging with the œvre of television writer and creator Michael Schur's Super Nice sitcoms, organizing the analyses around a central sitcom text: *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009–15). The first section reads Super Niceness as an outbidding strategy in accord with Kelleter and Sudmann (cf. Kelleter and Jahn-Sudmann; Sudmann, *Serielle Überbietung*). In contrast to other texts that increase and intensify invectives to stay culturally relevant, Super Nice sitcoms prominently counterpose invectives with Super Niceness. The second section uses the notion of Super Niceness to highlight an ongoing trend within the genre: Sitcom texts tend to move away from postmodern qualities. Super Nice humor privileges sincerity and a genuine belief in human interconnection in contrast to the cynicism and nihilism of postmodern series. The final section investigates disparagement and humiliation directed at the shows' white, male, middle-aged characters, negotiating their privileges and addressing on-screen representational legacies in the genre's past and present.

Finally, the last analytical chapter analyzes the dynamism of the sitcom genre that is, in the period of investigation, characterized by a breaking

down and disruption of its formerly stable and rigid generic conventions.[6] Invective structures, as I argue, contribute to the exploration of the sitcom's own genre boundaries and traditions. With regard to Quality TV discourses, this chapter frames the genre's formal and narrative developments, like genre mixing, hybridization, and more complex character dispositions and storylines, as a *Quality Turn* in comedy. The first section examines embarrassment as a gendered invective strategy in the mockumentary sitcoms *Parks and Recreation* and *The Comeback* (HBO 2005, 2014), reading it as a culturalized technique of social control to which the protagonists mostly fail to adhere. By introducing *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Amazon 2017–) in the second section, this subchapter argues that invective structures play a significant role in the fusion of comedic and dramatic elements in the period dramedy. Not only are invectives utilized in the protagonist's stand-up comedy to escape the traditional gender roles of the time, they also self-reflexively ridicule and expose the prevailing gender disparity by bypassing moments of narrative conflict. From a media institution and media practice perspective, the final section investigates how the revival of the hit sitcom *Roseanne* (ABC 1988–97, 2018) commodifies and capitalizes on the audience's nostalgia for, among other things, the protagonist's invectives. Being staged as a pioneer of liberal ideals in the original run, the character of Roseanne is utilized as a vehicle for politically conservative key issues in the revival. The protagonist's invectives are nostalgically employed as a political strategy of the network channel ABC to reel in viewers they felt were neglected previous to the 2016 election.

As a concluding section, Chapter 6 summarizes the study's findings, brings together larger contexts from the distinctive chapters, and demarcates further areas of research. All main chapters of this book aim at understanding how the invective mode influences and shapes the popcultural genre of situation comedies.

---

6 I acknowledge that these thoughts are greatly indebted to conversations, internal documents, and working papers of our subproject of the Special Research Unit in which I wrote my book.

2. Conceptual Impulses and Cultural Context

Online articles titled "The 29 Most Iconic Insults to Ever Make Their Way Onto a TV Show" (Marder), "10 TV Show Insults for Everyday Life" (Matta), and "TV Insults So Harsh, They Still Burn" (Grayson) exemplify the ample pleasure and enjoyment that popcultural disparagement brings its viewers. Insults are able to elicit humor. It is no surprise, then, to see that most of the examples of TV shows mentioned in the articles are situation comedies where "something is funny because someone is made fun of," since the most important purpose of the sitcom genre is to humorously entertain with, among other things, the disparagement and symbolic abuse of its characters (Scharrer et al. 2).

The intensity and variety of disparagement and insults in culture, society, and politics have been hotly debated in recent years (e.g. cf. Mendiburo-Seguel et al.; Ott; Colker; Embrick et al.; Black). Apart from growing public debates about hate speech, vile aggression on social media platforms, and political correctness, invective dynamics and constellations are also a highly prominent component of popular culture, and especially of the US television culture where a significant intensification and multiplication of disparagement, mockery, and humiliation can be seen.[1] Expanding representational practices are organized around shaming, embarrassing, exposing, and insulting characters who, although generally individualized, are regularly symbolically stylized as members of distinct social groups. In the period of investigation, the sitcom, as the most prevalent comedic pillar of television, is going through similar processes of expansion and differentiation of invective dynamics. The genre can

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symbolize the spectrum of themes, affect structures, and formal language in which popcultural invectives are realized in contemporary US television.

This chapter, consequently, focuses on the cultural context and conceptual impulses that are important for meticulously analyzing the subsequent case studies of invective phenomena, their dynamics, and constellations in contemporary US American situation comedies. Therefore, I take a closer look at the concept of invectivity below and at its points of intersection with three larger research contexts in the subsequent subchapters: American culture, humor theory, and the sitcom genre itself. I propose that the presented concept of invectivity greatly informs and invigorate the analysis of US American popcultural products since it allows me to contextualize selected existing research in a new light. I present a focused and very specific literature review that is very much aligned with the epistemological interest of this project at all times. To examine how the invective mode – the theorization of invective forms across media and historical periods – manifests itself in the situation comedy genre, I am concerned with media-specific realizations, formal principles, and political and social resonances of disparaging dynamics and constellations in my material. Before presenting the structure of this chapter, I introduce the analytical category central to this book and show the benefits of conceptualizing and framing invective structures as a mode of communication in order to emphasize its own affective regimes, strategies, repertoire, and historical and political resonances.

The concept of invectivity serves as a vital intellectual framework and inspiration throughout this project. In Ellerbrock et al.'s programmatic text, it is introduced as a novel perspective. The article

> understands phenomena of insult and debasement, of humiliation and exposure as – cross-cultural and epoch-spanning – basic operations of societal communication. Due to their disruptive, stabilising or dynamising effects on social order, *invective communication* have [sic] the potential to unite and shape societies. (Ellerbrock et al. 3)

The concept of invectivity, then, comprises "all aspects of communication (either verbal or non-verbal, oral or written, gestural or graphic) that are used to degrade, to hurt or to marginalize others" (Ellerbrock et al. 3). Consequently, it enables a systemic analysis of the dynamics, constellations, social functions, and cultural forms of disparagement of individuals, groups, and collectives of sitcom characters.

The article argues that symbolic and verbal aggression against other individuals or groups is a central manifestation of the social. Disparagement and exclusion are related to attributions concerning national, religious, or ethnic affiliations, gender, sexual orientation, social positioning, or other traits relevant to one's identity construction (cf. 4). Therefore, invective practices are more than deviant forms of social interaction – they go beyond in that they are able to destroy or produce, transform or stabilize. While invectives are usually characterized by a transgression of norms of interpersonal interaction, they simultaneously are able to establish their own notions of normality and assert their own normative claims. According to Ellerbrock et al., invectives serve as a mechanism for fueling social processes of exclusion and inclusion, and producing social orders and hierarchies – even in the storyworlds of situation comedies (cf. 6).

Depending on the historical context and social constellations in which they exist, the functions and manifestations of invectives can be socially, politically, aesthetically, and medially contextualized. They can "only be properly understood as performative events which develop through the interaction of ascription, response and follow-up communication as well as by means of the social, discursive and media conditions in which they arise" (Ellerbrock et al. 3). No comment is, therefore, in and of itself offensive – rather, that depends on the particular circumstances in which it is uttered. Invectives, so Ellerbrock et al., manifest themselves in a network of social norms, cultural knowledge, medial environment, and situational circumstances. They are embedded in a multidimensional context of processes of performance, staging, corporeality, and perception. As a point of departure for the analyses, the ideally proposed invective triad of the invector, the invectee, and the audience helps to emphasize the forms and functions of the respective invectives. Since these roles are highly volatile and interchangeable, the effects of invective communication are not a priori predictable, fixed, or calculable. Invectives are rather the result of imponderable performative processes involving various actors and spectators (ibid. 9).

Different media dispositifs facilitate different manifestations of the invective. Since this project is concerned with the analysis of invective strategies in contemporary American situation comedies, I describe three of the most significant affordances of the television medium that encourage or contain certain invective contingencies on screen. Firstly, television comedies are fictional and the invectives are, subsequently, staged. The analyses of

this project are, therefore, solely concerned with enactments of invectives. This not only enables an examination of how the American society looks at itself but also at its own invective structures and traditions. Since the possible and unpredictable alternation of roles between invector, invectee, and spectator is circumvented by the fictionality of the text, dynamics of invective escalation are of no concern. The second media-specific feature of television I want to highlight is the absence or presence of the spectator in the invective triad mentioned above. There are various staged audiences that could fill the role of the spectator at any given time: the intradiegetic audience in the storyworld, the intratextual audience represented by the genre-specific laughtrack of the sitcom, the implied audience inscribed in the text, and the actual, extra-textual, real-world audience in front of their screens at home. These scalings of presence play an important role in the dynamics and constellations of invective phenomena. The possible reactions of the audience are either prescribed in the text or they are rather futile since the viewers have no opportunity to instantly intervene in a respective situation. Thirdly, invectives can be analyzed on various levels in the audiovisual medium of television. On the one hand, insults and disparagement can be administered through several characters in the storyworld on a figural level. On the other hand, deprecation "can also disappear behind the apparatus of the medium, when the mis-en-scène and storytelling perform the mockery" on an authorial level (Kanzler, "(Meta-)Disparagement Humour" 17). Since the agency of invectives is frequently obfuscated, the political and social meaning-making processes are ambiguated and have to be examined meticulously, as I will explain later in more detail.

With regards to contemporary US American popular culture, Katja Kanzler argues that it

> is ripe with moments of invective: Popular media culture of the 21st century, to a significant extent, organizes around performances of deprecation, devaluation, disparagement; or, the other way around, performances of invective unfold considerable popular appeal in the commercial media culture of the contemporary moment. ("Invective Mode" 1)

In general, invective phenomena and structures make up a highly distinctive component of US American popular culture: They shape its diachronic developments as well as its formal repertoire. Popular culture serves

as an arena in which interpretive patterns of social realities are tested and interpretive sovereignties are negotiated. Since the beginnings of US American popular culture, performances and productions were frequently organized around disparagement. In line with contemporary thinking, the deprecation of an 'other' reflected societal and political circumstances. The contemporary television culture constitutes a particularly virulent context in which a distinct multiplication and accentuation of invective phenomena can be observed (e.g. cf. Mendiburo-Seguel et al.; Ott; Colker; Embrick et al.; Black). Since the arena of popular culture can be seen "as a barometer, mirror, and monument of the world," it is able to both reflect on and shape larger society and societal trends (cf. Hoffmann xi; cf. Ashby vii).[2]

While invective phenomena seem to require ritualization and routine to downplay and minimize their aggressiveness, "[i]nvectivity is uniquely suited for the conspicuous breaking of conventions, for pushing the boundaries of what is usually seen and heard on popular media, for moments of provocation" (Kanzler, "Invective Mode" 3). Along these lines, popular invective phenomena are not generally intended to put down or hurt people – but rather to entertain. To ensure economic profit by reaching and not alienating mass audiences, invective phenomena are "notoriously slippery in [their] rhetorical motivations and meanings […] [and] actively interested in not offending anyone" (ibid. 3).[3]

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2 Popular culture "is full of contradictions and speaks in many voices," generating "liberating and confining, reassuring and unsettling" messages (Ashby vii). It mirrors political, social, and economic changes but can also be understood as a trigger of change, breaking barriers, influencing and facilitating distinct attitudes toward 'the other.'

3 There is a long-standing tradition of stylized and playful disparagement in the English language. In the 15th and 16th century, flyting, "a practice of stylized invective contest that circulated across some of the earliest canonical English texts" – for example, as Hendrick argues, in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and various plays by Shakespeare (cf. 97; 93) – was utilized for competitions between poets to demonstrate their superior language skills through more and more fanciful and elaborate insults directed at their opponents (cf. Kanzler, "Invective Mode" 6). Although a physical battle would traditionally follow the verbal confrontation, the popular 15th and 16th century Scottish verse form constitutes, as Parks argues, a "more playful or 'ludic' type of exchange" (441). Framed as entertainment, the "flytings were typically performed at court and have usually been discussed as light-hearted – albeit vulgar – roasts appropriate for an intimate group of courtiers" (Hendricks 73). Another genre with a lively and potent English-language tradition is satire. According to Kanzler, the genre brings

To locate invective phenomena in the context of different media and historic periods, Kanzler outlines an approach to conceptualize invective structures in American popular culture that comprises their range and fluidity. She argues "that conceiving of popular invective as a mode and as an affordance brings into focus aspects that are quite central to the phenomenon yet hard to grasp with other formalist approaches," like genre ("Invective Mode" 3). Following Alastair Fowler, the mode concept is suited for encompassing invective forms across media and/or historical periods since it implies "more generalized, more flexible and mobile, less formally bound principles" (ibid. 5). Thus, the popcultural invective mode[4] transcends genre and media boundaries, and is able to uncover affective and representational strategies as well as socio-cultural functions of disparagement and symbolic abuse. It remains mobile and flexible, able to pour itself into ever new local formats, accumulating social and cultural semantics and functions. This project not only examines how the invective mode manifests itself in the contemporary US American situation comedy genre, it also shows that meaning-making processes of cultural products are closely related to the formal principles of the invective mode. But what makes the disparagement and marginalization of others so entertaining and appealing?

In the first subchapter, I argue that this new research perspective is able to assist further investigations of American popular culture where disparaging practices have consistently been ritualized, rehearsed, and reflected. I propose that contemporary situation comedies strongly rely on media-specific traditions and legacies of discrimination. Furthermore, I argue that the concept greatly informs discourses surrounding Cultural Studies' notion of 'othering' that is concerned with pejorative representational practices of an inferior 'other,' as well as Goffman's work on stigma and stigmatization that found its way into Disability and Queer

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together the "use of humor and irony" and "the moral motivation that ostensibly drives invective attacks in satire: the conviction that the people, human behaviors, or social formations that are disparaged are wrong" ("Invective Mode" 7). As Frye argues, "[i]t is an established datum of literature that we like hearing people cursed and are bored with hearing them praised" (224). African Americans, furthermore, celebrate and participate in a tradition of "ritual insult-swapping sessions known as 'playing the dozens,'" developing significant linguistic skills related to creativity, humor, and wit (Jay qtd. in Brunvand 395).

4 For a more comprehensive overview of the invective mode that Kanzler proposes, please see her article "Invective Mode."

Studies in recent decades, being conceptualized as negative markings of non-conformity (cf. I. Tyler). Since I focus on female-led situation comedies, I, additionally, argue that the concept of invectivity is highly compatible with notions and ideas of Gender Studies, rooting disparities in status, power, material resources, and symbolic abuse. Secondly, I give a brief review of humor research, focusing on superiority theories and laughter that accentuate disparaging processes of 'othering' and that negotiate positions of privilege and power. Nevertheless, I argue that a conclusive analysis of invective humor in situation comedies includes additional aspects from other humor theories. In the third subchapter, lastly, I zoom in on the affordances of the sitcom genre that facilitate and enable invective dynamics and constellations. I propose two levels on which I subsequently analyze invective phenomena in my case studies: While the figural level subsumes interpersonal and intradiegetic disparagement between distinct characters, the authorial level describes invectives that may disappear behind the medium's apparatus, like humiliating camera settings and the laugh track. This threefold division allows me to show how the selected conceptual impulses and cultural context are informed and educated by invectivity as a novel research perspective, and how this supports the arguments I want to bring forward in the subsequent analytical chapters.

2.1 American Culture and the Invective

The United States of America are honeycombed by deeply entrenched traditions of disparagement and inequality in their society and culture. Symbolic abuse or invective structures and dynamics closely correlate with these traditions and legacies. In the arena of American popular culture, the invective represents a highly unique component that can be observed in longstanding media-specific legacies of debasement and uneven representation. It not only manifests itself when popular culture stages disparaging and invective confrontations between characters in mainstream media. The invective also frequently manifests itself when the narrative or production agency exposes, vilifies, or disgraces its characters, who may be read as representatives of whole social groups. While popcultural invectives

seem to be often talked about in the present, they have a long history.[5] Their prevalence and persistence suggest that they perform significant cultural work across not only eras but also media, like challenging socially reinforced regimes of inequality, allegations of inauthenticity, and as a means of 'othering' and self-aggrandizement. Given their prominence, relevance, and historical reach, invective structures and dynamics seem to represent a fundamental pillar of popular culture that has yet to be examined as such.[6]

In the following, I want to examine how the new research perspective of invectivity can be utilized to aid and assist the further investigation of American popular culture. The concept represents a new approach in Popular Culture Studies that promises to bring into focus the ways in which the popular is not only constructed around the politics and poetics of affection that is typically emphasized in definitions of the popular (e.g. cf. Grossberg 79ff.). Popular culture also presents itself as a prominent field in which invective structures and practices have been rehearsed, tried out, ritualized, and frequently critically reflected on, from entertaining 15th century ritual insult swapping contests to contemporary comedy television. Apart from Popular Culture Studies, I show that the concept of invectivity invigorates, among others, three particular research contexts in the field of American Studies important to the argument of my project. Firstly, the analysis of constellations and dynamics of disparagement that the concept of invectivity is interested in is able to greatly inform discourses of 'otherness.' The concept of 'othering' focuses, among other things, on pejorative representational practices that mark 'others' as different and, thus, demarcate and devalue them (cf. S. Hall 225f.). Along similar lines, Goffman's work on stigma marks and degrades non-conforming individuals as social outcasts. Lastly, in line with the project's focus on female-led television comedies, I show that the concept of invectivity is highly compatible with Gender Studies. According to Ridgeway, those structures of gender inequality that have been at work for centuries involve disparities in power, status, and material

5 Popcultural staging of blackface minstrelsy, for example, deeply entrenched in the festivals and the carnivals of early modern Europe, and the sensationalist and disparaging display of non-normative bodies in freak shows all over the nation enjoyed widespread popularity as early as the 19th century. Processes of minstrelization and enfreakment extend their invective cultural work into the present (cf. Ashby 12).

6 I acknowledge that these thoughts are greatly indebted to conversations, internal documents, and working papers of our subproject of the Special Research Unit in which I wrote my book.

resources (cf. 3). I claim that these stalwart inequalities are frequently and prominently entwined with symbolic invective practices as well. To support this claim, I take a closer look at examples of gendered representational inequalities on television from the beginnings of the medium up to the present. Together with the following subchapters, the next paragraphs will specify the cultural context and serve as a conceptual foundation of the project's analyses of invective strategies in contemporary US American situation comedies. I propose that the shows are built and deeply rely on media-specific legacies and traditions of discrimination. I argue, and later show in my case studies, that symbolic invective structures of inequality still come into play in contemporary cultural artifacts. For this, I briefly and intently focus on reviewing prominent academic literature on topics essential for my arguments, as listed above.

One of the reasons disparagement seems to be so entertaining and inviting for popular culture is that images of an inferior 'other' accompanied US American self-conception and narratives from the beginning. In the mid-19th century, French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville remarked that "the position of Americans was quite exceptional," making reference to the absence of European feudal structures (De Tocqueville qtd. in Paul 14). However, as Heike Paul suggests, political American exceptionalism was quickly decontextualized "to describe the genesis of the American nation in much more comprehensive and sweeping terms" (14). The belief behind narratives of the nation's exceptionality "informs and structures American *self-representations*. It has been important in fashioning internal coherence and has also often been used as an ideological tool to project American hegemony outside the US" (17, emphasis in the original). As a consequence thereof, 'otherness' and difference are scolded and deprecated; the dynamics and processes of constructing alterity can be read as invective. Anchored in postcolonial theory – where Spivak inquires "how Europe had consolidated itself as sovereign subject by defining its colonies as 'Others'" (247) – and fed by Cultural Studies – where Hall asks "[w]hat is the secret fascination of 'otherness,' and why is popular presentation so frequently drawn to it?" (225) –, the concept of 'othering' particularly focuses on the reciprocal relationship between derogatory images of 'the other' and the positive self-design. The basis of 'othering' consequently lies in an imbalance of power, "understood as a social method of identifying individuals thought to be different from one's self or culture, most specifically the majority culture, that creates or emphasizes dominance and subordination" (Epps and Furman 2). Based

upon characteristics such as nationality, culture, religious affiliation, or ethnicity, it can occur as the subject between individuals in distinct social settings or between entire communities, races, or populations, creating a general feeling of 'us' versus 'them.'[7]

Goffman's work on stigma also tries to shed light on the relational aspects between 'us' versus 'them.' He argues that stigma can be understood "as something produced in social settings [that] pivots on the existence of a social consensus about 'what is normal'" (I. Tyler 750). A historically specific power imbalance, then, authorizes normative individuals to invectively devalue and shame individuals who fail to adhere to specific norms. Goffman emphasizes how stigma is learned "through processes of socialization" when "people judge themselves against incorporated norms and anticipate 'the standards against which they fall short'" (ibid. 750). Consequently, and similarly to the roles of the invector and the invectee, the stigmatizer and the stigmatized are also interchangable social roles depending on the interactional context. The difference between 'us' and 'them' is, thus, staged as a "system of confining and discriminating norms" (ibid. 756).

According to Hall, one of the reasons why difference is so fascinating "is that culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to different positions within a classificatory system. The marking of 'difference' is thus the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture" (S. Hall 236). Binary oppositions, like black–white or woman–man, strengthen these classifications. Things that fail to conform to any category, however, "float ambiguously in some unstable, dangerous, hybrid zone of indeterminacy" (ibid.). 'Difference' is, nonetheless, always ambivalent, in both positive and negative ways. While it is

> necessary for the production of meaning, the formation of language and culture, for social identities and a subjective sense of the self as a sexed subject – [...] at the same time, it is threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings, of splitting, hostility and aggression towards the 'Other.' (ibid. 238)

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7 Social theorist and feminist Simone de Beauvoir, strongly influenced by G. W. F. Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic, characterizes "the notion of 'the other' as a construction opposing and thereby constructing 'the self'" (Brons 69). The dismantling of social hierarchies and the relationship between men and women were at the center of her scholarly work.

The representation of difference is frequently combined with stereotypes, a practice described by Cultural Studies as negatively reducing images of marginalized social groups. While some images are sentimentalized or even idealized, the majority are "form[s] of ritualized degradation" and, consequently, linked to the symbolic power of invectives (S. Hall 245). Portraying, for example, female characters one-dimensionally, solely as mothers, wives, or objects of male desire in television series, constitutes a symbolic and invective devaluation of women in general.

As a result of the selection of female-led situation comedies, the construction and representation of gender plays a significant role within the scope of my project. In the following paragraphs, I, consequently, take a closer look at how concepts of gender inequality intersect with the concept of invectivity. According to Ridgeway, gender – the "shared cultural expectations associated with being male or female" –[8] "like race, is a categorical form of inequality in that it is based on a person's membership in a particular social group or category" (7, 3). It has various implications for an individual's life, yet one of the most substantial is "that it acts as a basis for inequality between persons" (ibid. 3). This gender inequality translates to a classification system between women and men in status, power, and material resources. In the United States, as Ridgeway suggests, it "has persisted […] despite major transformations in the way that gender, at any given time, has been entwined with the economic and social organization of American society" (3). In the profound economic and social transformation and reorganization of the US to an industrialized society, women were relatively absent from paid labor, in contrast to men. Yet, as women moved into the job market and, in addition, into positions that were formerly solely filled by men, "a pattern of gender hierarchy has remained in which men continue to be advantaged not only in employment but also throughout much of society" (ibid.). Disparate access to power and material resources are, therefore,

8 Non-binary or genderqueer identities are more and more being recognized in medical, legal, and psychological systems. Non-binary or genderqueer individuals "have a gender which is neither male nor female, and may identify as both male and female at one time, as different genders at different times, as no gender at all, or dispute the very idea of only two genders" (Richards et al. 95). According to Butler, gender is socially and discursively constructed and hegemonically imagined as a binary "fusing masculinity and femininity together as complementary opposites" (Schippers 90). Within the scope of this project, I follow the binary construction of gender for reasons of simplification.

always intertwined with symbolic discrimination, disproportionately and invectively disadvantaging women.

The symbolic detriment of women is frequently explained and justified by the argument that "[w]ithin a patriarchal gender order […] an idealized form of masculinity gains cultural ascendancy over, and at the expense of, all femininities and other forms of masculinity" (Abedinifard 238; cf. Reeser). In other words, scholars frequently argue that femininity is defined by a subordinate position in relation to a hegemonic dominant masculinity (cf. Connell and Messerschmidt). Physical strength, the capability of interpersonal violence, and authority are frequently outlined in empirical literature to "guarantee men's *legitimate* dominance over women only when they are symbolically paired with a complementary and inferior quality attached to femininity" (Schippers 91, emphasis in the original).

Since gender, as Butler suggests, is not something an individual has but rather something an individual performs, the social category can be seen as a discursive construction (Butler 520). It presumes "that there are certain bodies, behaviors, personality traits, and desires that neatly match up to one or the other category […] [–] a whole repository of symbolic meanings" (Schippers 89f.). The social practice, according to Schippers, thus, is the significant mechanism by which gender meanings organize everyday social life: from child-rearing to embodied interaction, passing legislation, executing and developing policy, and generating television programming. The "contextually and culturally specific sets of meanings for what women and men are and should be (masculinity and femininity)" are distinctly tied to the "*mechanism* (social practice) by which those meanings come to shape, influence and transform social structure" (ibid. 92). By symbolically attributing more value to particular performances of gender, namely performances that can be read as male, it invectively devalues and disadvantages non-male performances.

Furthermore, Ridgeway argues that positional and status inequalities are invectively inscribed in the category of gender. She argues that social organizations (i.e. households, workplaces, governmental and educational institutions) "are the major producers and distributors of the resources most of us seek, from the basics of food and shelter to more abstract resources like money or information" (Ridgeway 10). These organizations are structured by relational social positions (i.e. teacher-student, manager-worker); and, as mentioned above, men usually "have greater control over the resources that the organization generates and carry more power" (ibid. 11). Because these

positional inequalities between women and men persist, as Ridgeway argues, status inequality persists as well. Unquestioned, pervasive, and invective beliefs that women are generally less competent and less socially respected partly depend "on people's daily experience with positional inequalities […] that appear to provide evidence for these beliefs" (12). Status inequalities are entrenched in common cultural beliefs and invective presumptions about the social esteem, honor, and respect linked to particular categories of individuals. Thus, a woman filling the CEO position in a company "is not quite equal to an equivalent man in that position, despite the structural equivalence of their positions" (ibid. 11). Although long-established invective distinctions based on gender are more and more at odds with the realities of everyday life in the US, inequalities may only be actually and genuinely eliminated when the unequal access to resources and power is disestablished.

Various scholars address the connection between gender inequality and its invective negotiation on the mass medium television. As a part of American popular culture, according to Media scholar Holtzman, "television interacts with gender in two critical ways[:] It reflects cultural values and it serves as a trusted conveyor of information and images" (76). Film and Media Studies scholar Allison Perlman suggests that there is "a profound connection between how women were depicted in American media and the discrimination and oppression that women faced in their everyday lives" (Perlman 413).[9] Although individual shows in television programming adapted to larger upheavals within American society and culture accelerating in the 1960s, like the Women's Rights Movement, studies of the time show that the majority consistently presented women in invectively diminished and demeaning roles (cf. ibid. 423).

With the help of female comedy star pioneers, the inclusion of women on television was pushed forward. Lucille Ball, for example, opened up possibilities for female talent early on. After starring in supporting roles in numerous movies in the 1930s and 40s, she was cast in the CBS radio comedy

9 Perlman investigates the activism of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and its attempts to file numerous petitions-to-deny the license renewal of various television stations in order to emphasize that media reforms and feminist goals were inseparable (cf. 427). In her article, she describes how reform activism tried to eradicate disparaging representations of women on television in the past in order to bring "the issue of derogatory media images of women into the public sphere" (421f.).

"My Favorite Husband" (1948–51) that focused "on the antics of the boisterous wife of a stodgy bank vice-president" (Doty 8). The show was so successful that CBS developed a pilot episode for television, produced by Ball and her husband Desi Arnaz (CBS 1951–57). *I Love Lucy*'s protagonist comprises Ball's earlier flashy films and vaudeville[10] characters, emerging in "a creation that is both conventional sitcom character and variety show performer" (Doty 4). Although the character of Lucy Ricardo is mostly invectively depicted as rather naive, caring for her husband, and looking after the house and children, she antithetically hungers for a place in the entertainment industry. The carefully manufactured character of Lucy "as a zany, lovable, not-too-bright, talentless housewife and mother" strictly locates and fences the comedic transgression of a female performer in the domestic sphere (ibid. 7). Since the protagonist predominantly fails to successfully enter the entertainment business, contemporary gender roles and values remain untouched, "maintaining an image of domestic contentment through various repressive mechanisms" (ibid. 16). Gendered humor in particular, as I show in Chapter 2.2 in more detail, supports invective "articulations of heteronormativity in […] television comedy, all of which seek to ridicule 'marginalised' or 'subordinated' gender identities as a process of hegemony" (S. Weaver et al. 230). However, the fact that female-led *I Love Lucy* became one of the most-watched television programs of the time attests to female entertainers tediously grinding out spaces for themselves. Following Ball's example of building her own production company, comedy stars like Mary Tyler Moore and Roseanne Barr followed suit, thus "[being] able to construct and exploit their own image and narrative opportunity" (cf. Stafford 5; cf. *Lucille Ball: Finding Lucy*).

The success of *I Love Lucy*, however, could not be immediately emulated. Women in situation comedies were once again restrained to housewives, mothers, and other supporting roles. Even if the 1970s saw a disengagement from these demeaning representations by centering more shows around

10 Derived from a series of French songs, 'vaudeville' came to mean "a ballad or light form of comedy" (Slide xiv). The US American vaudeville circuit had been an extremely popular entertainment format from the middle of the 19th century until moving pictures and the movie industry gained traction in the 1930s. Entertaining and fast-paced acts drew audiences not only to traveling shows in rural areas but also to new elaborate amusement parks (e.g. Coney Island, New York) and dime museums. With the revolution of the film industry, low-price and small vaudeville halls and traveling companies quickly went out of business (cf. Ashby 107ff.).

female characters, "studies also revealed that there were more males in evening television than females, more diverse roles were available to males, and female characters appeared less competent than male characters" (Holtzman 78). A study of the 2005–06 primetime television season shows that "[f]emale characters were more likely to be seen interacting with others in familial and romantic roles" while "male characters were more likely to inhabit work roles exhibiting more agentic goals including ambition and the desire for success" (Lauzen et al. 211). In 2017, Sink and Mastro conducted a systematic analysis of gender depictions on primetime television. While numerous female-led shows, like *Scandal* (ABC 2012–18), *2 Broke Girls* (CBS 2011-17), and *Veep* (HBO 2012–19), could suggest a 'golden age' for women on television, their study still shows that "women appeared significantly less frequently than men," and that "the hypersexualization and hyperfeminization of women on TV appears to remain a staple," underlining the historical depth and contemporary significance of invective media-specific legacies of inequality (Sink and D. Mastro 16f.).

In this subchapter, I have shown that the concept of invectivity, which understands phenomena of disparagement as fundamental operations of social communication, invigorates other concepts in American Studies, like 'othering,' stigma, and gender disparity. This, in turn, allows me to take a closer look at invective phenomena as narrative devices in contemporary sitcoms that echo awareness of difference and its implications for social orders and hierarchies. As I show in my case studies later on, deep-rooted traditions of disparagement in American society and the longstanding media-specific legacies of deprecation still thoroughly influence invective strategies and representational issues in contemporary sitcoms. In Chapter 3, I apply the extensive notions of 'othering' and stigma to describe invective performances of fatshaming in *Mike & Molly* (NBC 1994–2004), and I examine remnants of gendered structures of inequality in the comedic domain in *2 Broke Girls* (CBS 2011–17). In Chapter 5, I describe invective strategies connected to gender inequalities in *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009–15), *The Comeback* (HBO 2005, 2014) and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Amazon 2017–).

2.2 Humor and the Invective

> Dan: What's the whole not drinking thing?
> Ed: I'm a Quaker.
> Jonah: What?
> Dan: Bullshit. No one's a fucking Quaker.
> Jonah: You probably think that staying sober keeps you on top of your game. Well, guess what. I work hard and I play hard, bitch. That's my credo. I got that shit tattooed on my dick with room to spare.
> Ed: Jonah, you're not even a man. You're like an early draft of a man where they just sketched out a giant mangled skeleton, but they didn't have time to add details like pigment or self-respect. You're Frankenstein's monster if his monster was made entirely of dead dicks. (*Veep* 2.06, HBO 2012–19)

This disparaging and humiliating dialogue from the situation comedy *Veep*[11] can be analyzed in myriad ways and on various levels. Primarily intended to entertain and to make viewers laugh and take pleasure in the humor of the scene, the short dialogue is not only comprised of straightforward interpersonal invectives, it also emphasizes the elaborate, intricate, and cunning phrasing of the series' "baroque, obscene" insults (Alter). Since "[b]y definition, sitcoms use humor as a narrative device," analyzing the dynamics and constellations of disparagement in this scene is, therefore, on the one hand, evidently dependent on superiority concepts of humor that are able to capture the depicted processes of self-aggrandizement, 'othering,' and the claiming and distributing of power between the characters (Scharrer et al. 2). On the other hand, additional concepts of humor, like incongruity theories – "based on the discrepancy between abstract ideas and real things" – and relief theories – "the release of nervous energy" – are necessary to appropriately analyze invective phenomena in contemporary American situation comedies in their entirety (Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor").

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11 The seven seasons of the political satire *Veep* were broadcast on HBO from 2012 to 2019. The plot revolves around protagonist Vice President Selina Meyer and her staff attempting to leave their mark and lasting legacy in the everyday politics of Washington. By drawing the protagonist as mostly overwhelmed by daily business, her private life, and looming scandals, the show satirizes the inner workings and political activities of contemporary US governments.

In this subchapter, I focus on reviewing humor research that acts as a foundation of invective dynamics and constellations which I analyze in contemporary US American situation comedies in the next chapters.[12] In the following, I consequently concentrate primarily on superiority theories that claim that the "laugher always looks down on whatever [she] laughs at, and so judges it inferior by some standard" (Monro qtd. in Lintott 347). Although superiority theories occupy a central space in this project's analyses, I argue that, in a lot of instances, a conglomerate of various humor aspects is necessary to consider when analyzing contemporary sitcom texts. So, by using the example of the HBO situation comedy *Veep* above, I illustrate that mockery, ridicule, and humiliation are central for the invective humor of the scene, yet that additional aspects from, for example, incongruity and relief theories are important to analyze the complexity of invective humor that cannot be explained with superiority theories alone.

It seems to be a strenuous task to find and articulate one exact definition for humor. Humor theory "comprises work from many seemingly unrelated disciplines, such as sociology, politics, psychology, linguistics, biology and mathematics [...] often discussing [it] as an aside as part of the analysis of other topics" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 76). Due to humor's prevalence, a detailed scholarly consideration seems difficult and has been evaded in the past. For the frame of this project, I follow the argument that "[h]umor is a pervasive phenomenon in the social fabric of most, if not all, societies" and I follow the long tradition of conceptualizing "humor as a means of communication"

12 When it comes to the state of research regarding invective dynamics in television comedies, however, there is not a lot to be found. Cringe comedy, for example, is a recent and general development of televisual humor based on an the excessive staging of embarrassment and humiliation of distinct characters. 'Cringe,' as Middleton argues for the British *The Office* (BBC 2001–03), refers to "how the show conveys the embodied experience of time for the characters, trapped in their repetitive white-collar jobs in perpetuity" (*Documentary's Akward Turn* 18). Schwind's notion of embarrassment humor, in contrast, "challenges an audience's viewing pleasure by negotiating issues of empathy and moral disengagement with the conventions of darker forms of mediated humor and comedy" by analyzing the British original and American adaptation of *The Office* (NBC 2005–13) ("Embarrassment Humor" 49). Lastly, Brett Mills' notion of comedy verité needs to be mentioned in this context. Also adducing the example of *The Office*, Mills argues that the show employs the visual features of cinema verité, indicating that some contemporary television comedies are utilized to examine representations and processes of media formats as well as the staging of humiliation and embarrassment (cf. "Comedy Verité" 74).

(Martineau 101, 102). Social Science scholar Billig, for example, argues that "we belong to a society in which fun has become an imperative and humour is seen as a necessary quality for being fully human" (Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule* 13). Communication scholar John C. Meyer also generally views humor as a social phenomenon and defines it "as a cognitive experience involving an internal redefining of sociocultural reality and resulting in a 'mirthful' state of mind, of which laughter is a possible external display" (311). While Bergson proposes "not [to] aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition," other scholars have tried to delineate laughter in the past (471). Commonly seen as the physical reaction to humor, Billig emphasizes that laughter might not be a 'natural' reaction but rather rhetorical. If that is the case then laughter "has to be learnt and can be mobilized in various ways," i.e. for ridiculing others (*Laughter and Ridicule* 199). As in young children, Morreall argues that "the natural human propensity of derisive laughter is still left in most adults" (*Taking Laughter Seriously* 10). Although it might not be polite or permissible to laugh, "we still enjoy witty repartee, especially well-phrased insults" (10).[13]

Today, humor theory is commonly categorized by three specific theoretical schools: superiority, incongruity, and relief.[14] First and foremost, it is important to note that, following Billig's argument, "no single theory can hope to explain the complexity of humor" (*Laughter and Ridicule* 175). Each of the three theories reveals one factor that seems to be the reason for laughter in a specific instance.[15] Although, as Scharrer argues for sitcoms, "humorous interactions among characters can be considered manifestations of power differences in that they give certain individuals the upper or the lower hand in the exchange," certainly not all instances of invective laughter

13 Unfortunately, in the scope of this project, a more comprehensible consideration of laughter is not feasible. See Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*; see Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* for more information.

14 See Raskin for a conceptually detailed and historically full overview of superiority, incongruity, and relief theories.

15 Billig identifies three paradoxes inherent to humor that prevent a monocausal explanation of laughter. Firstly, humor is simultaneously particular and universal: "It is to be found in all societies, but not all humans find the same things funny" (*Laughter and Ridicule* 176). Secondly, humor seems both anti-social and social: it can reject people by mockery and ridicule as well as bring them together in enjoyment. Lastly, humor "appears mysterious and resistant to analysis, but it is also understandable and analyzable" (ibid.).

can be explained by superiority theories (2). After briefly introducing the three main theories of humor, I will – with the help of the example from *Veep* above – illustrate that, indeed, mockery and direct interpersonal invectives are central to the humor of sitcoms. However, it is also important to pay attention to overlaying and complementary perspectives in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of disparagement in contemporary comedic texts.[16]

As the earliest of the three theories, the superiority theory can be traced back to Ancient Greece and evolved over time.[17] For Plato, as Mills portrays, laughing while feeling superior to other individuals constitutes a negative emotion and an immoral act, "one of combined distress and pleasure for a person's malice [that] shows itself … in pleasure at the misfortune of those around" (*The Sitcom* 77). Along these lines, Aristotle compared laughter to abuse, suggesting that it is always aggressive, explicitly directed at and targeting a victim (cf. Vandaele 225). Morreall also stresses the Bible's

16 Superiority, incongruity, and relief theories analyze 'social humor' that rather differs from humorous broadcasts in that "the joke teller and the joke butt are [usually; KS] in the same place, with the laughter of those who hear the joke giving support to the teller and causing embarrassment to the butt" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 80). Humor theories, however, can be effectively adapted to the specifics and technicalities of television situation comedies. Mills suggests a 'cue theory,' arguing "that the ways in which jokes work in sitcoms is less important than the ways in which the genre signals its intention to be funny, creating a space within which audiences are primed to laugh. […] This is useful in terms of genre theory because such approaches suggest that the conventions of genres assist readers in aligning texts with pre-existing ones, helping them respond to programmes in particular ways." (93) As I will later show in more detail, genre markers, like the laugh track and reaction shots, are the most apparent cues that not only signal particular comic moments of the show but also repeatedly remind the audience of the overall comic intent of situation comedies. While "the three traditional Humor Theories […] foreground the textual elements of specific jokes and comic moments," the analysis of television comedies, moreover, attends to the media-specific realizations, the cultural work, and the social and political resonances a given text encompasses (94).

17 Since the term 'humor' "was not used in its current sense of funniness until the 18th century," philosophers like Hobbes, Kant, and Plato wrote about comedy, as a part of entertainment, or laughter as a physical response to and the primary indicator of humor (Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor"). It is not surprising that most of the early philosophical writings on humor and laughter "focused on scornful or mocking laughter, or on laughter that overpowers people, rather than on comedy, wit, or joking" (ibid.).

attitude towards laughter and argues that it "is usually represented as an expression of hostility [or] as a warm-up to aggression" (*Comic Relief* 4). The trend continues throughout the Christian European Middle Ages in which comedy and laughter are condemned as "ungodly spectacles, and most pernicious corruptions" (Prynne qtd. in Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor").

An integral part of the superiority theory is the social power of humor. In the 17th century, English philosopher Thomas Hobbes suggests, as Mills describes, that "humour is the result of 'sudden glory' […] [and] a tactic employed by those with little power, who mock others in order to assert and demonstrate their dominance" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 77). Similarly, René Descartes argues that the pleasures of humorously pointing out others' flaws are "related to notions of social power, and joking can be seen as a tool for marking social distinctions" (78). Mikhail Bakhtin also examined the "subversive, democratic, potentially liberating social power" of comedy (Soper 90). He argues that in hierarchical societies, seasonal or periodic festivals gave way to "carnival life – a 'second' life that operated according to radically different rules" (90). This second life is marked by a possibly invective emancipation from the prevailing order and a suspension of norms, privileges, and hierarchical rank. The temporary disruption of social order "[acts] as a social steam valve for class discontent" (91). As Billig argues, superiority theory "is basically a theory of mockery, for it suggests that laughter results from disparaging or degrading others," consequently or intently establishing social orders and hierarchies (Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule* 39).

On the basis of the superiority theory framework, Social Science scholars Ferguson and Ford address the notion of disparagement humor, which they defined as "[referring] to remarks that (are intended to) elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target" (283). Under the veil of humor, messages do not need to be interpreted in a serious manner – so "disparagement humor can uniquely denigrate its target while stifling challenge or criticism" (284). Beside the humorous disparagement between individuals, the social identity theory (cf. Tajfel and J. C. Turner), as the two scholars claim, "offers a unique perspective on the effects of disparagement humor on amusement by emphasizing the relationship between social groups" (M. A. Ferguson and T. E. Ford

296).[18] Kersten also argues that sharing a common adversary can "[create] a bond of solidarity among the group of laughers, and [unite] them with a sense of shared values and with a sense of superiority" (Kersten 303). Disparagement humor, thus, can function as a means to "bolster or maintain positive distinctiveness" of one's own group over another relevant out-group (M. A. Ferguson and T. E. Ford 298). By highlighting the relationship between individuals and between social groups, Ferguson and Ford emphasize the link between disparagement humor and processes of claiming power and 'othering.'[19]

According to Weaver et al., the notion and ideas of the superiority theory of humor play an important role in gendered humor "as ridicule is shown to have a role in the maintenance of gender hegemony" (228). Gendered humor, as Abedinifard states, is considered to be "any humour that concerns differences between men and women *qua* men and women" (239, emphasis in the original). Invectively gendered humor may "[serve] to (threaten to) punish any violations of established gender norms […] while certain hegemonic gender norms or normative acts are presumed or implied" (241). In a recent study, Abedinifard analyzes contemporary gendered Anglo-American mainstream humor and argues that its targets are primarily non-normative bodies, such as effeminate men, lesbians, women disputing hegemonic gender ideas, and disabled, aged, and racialized femininities and masculinities. He argues that the invectively portrayed power dynamics

> not only [validate] the notion that gender hegemony is constructed through the abjection of non-hegemonic gendered identities, but also [point] towards *ridicule* as an essential abjecting and policing tool in the processes of construction and maintenance of hegemonic gender norms and identities. (244, emphasis in the original)

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18 Group membership is said to constitute a significant part of an individual's identity. The social identity theory, moreover, "assumes that people want to maintain a positive identity, including a positive social identity […] by judging one's own group as superior to other groups" (Janes and Olson 273).

19 Although Ford and Ferguson argue that disparagement humor does not implicitly initiate prejudice against others, "it changes external sources of self-regulation, creating a social setting that encourages the expression or release of existing prejudice against the targeted out-group" (T. E. Ford et al. 172).

Situation comedies, as part of popular television, provide numerous examples of invectively gendered humor that "is informed by, and informs, the current Anglo-American gender order" or hierarchy, as I show in greater detail later (ibid. 245).

In contrast to humor in superiority theories, the humor in incongruity theories "[arises] from the disparity between the ways in which things are expected to be and how they actually are" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 82). Humor is positioned as a cognitive phenomenon. Therefore, "[i]ndividuals must have rationally come to understand normal patterns of reality before they can notice difference" (Meyer 313). Brett Mills applies incongruity theory to the screen, where he describes that for audiences to appreciate the humor in, for example, genre parodies, they must have the understanding of genre conventions in order to take pleasure in jokes incongruously undercutting expectations (cf. *The Sitcom* 83).

Lastly, relief theory suggests that humor "results from a release of nervous energy" and laughter reduces stress by "subconsciously [overcoming] sociocultural inhibitions" (Meyer 312). Building on Sigmund Freud's ideas, relief theory argues that "comedy and laughter fulfil a vital role within the individual's psyche in allowing repressed thoughts and ideas to be expressed in a manner less problematic than might otherwise occur" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 88). Mills argues that Western cultures utilize televisual comedy formats to offer relief from delicate topics, like death. In HBO's *Six Feet Under* (2001–05), for example, laughter releases repressions and objectifies death in order to "[burst] through the restraints of normally acceptable conduct" (88).

At first glance, an analysis of the above-mentioned invective scene from the HBO show *Veep* supports Scharrer's argument that disparaging jokes and characters insulting each other is a defining feature of situation comedy humor (cf. 2). At second glance, various elements of the invective communication between the characters cannot be explained by superiority theories alone. In the following, I want to argue that, although sitcoms frequently utilize superiority humor, invective phenomena cannot only be read along the lines of mockery and ridicule. In many places in any given sitcom text, invective structures can be read and interpreted with the help of other humor theories.

The scene from a second season episode called "Andrew" involves three characters – Dan, Ed, and Jonah – at a bar in a restaurant.[20] The three men are staged to deride each other on an interpersonal, figural level. So, who laughs at whom? While the first few lines of the dialogue suggest that the character of Ed is staged as the butt or the invectee of the joke, the roles quickly and clearly shift. At first, Ed is verbally attacked ("bitch" (*Veep* 2.06)) and invectively ridiculed and stigmatized for turning down alcohol because he is a Quaker. Not only are Jonah and Dan staged to deride Ed's beliefs, Jonah is also staged to present himself as superior to Ed since he apparently works *and* drinks harder than he does. Jonah is then staged to notch up his brash performance by addressing the apparently above-average size of his penis, trying to further invectively emasculate Ed: "That's my credo. I got that shit tattoed on my dick with room to spare" (ibid.). Superiority theories of humor would suggest that viewers are invectively laughing *with* the characters Jonah and Dan about Ed' shortcomings. Taking into account the context and balance of power of the scene, however, a very different picture is painted. Jonah, *Veep*'s most celebrated victim of verbal abuse, is constantly "targeted [for] his lack of emotional intelligence, surplus of height, and bottom-rung status" (Snierson). The audience consequently does not laugh *with* Jonah insulting Ed but *at* Jonah and another one of his futile and invective attempts to establish dominance over his co-workers. In this scene, the humor does not singularly arise from one character asserting dominance over another, or from one character humiliating another in order to reinforce or establish a distinct social order. It also arises partly from the incongruence of Jonah vainly trying to establish his superiority when, in this episode alone, he is repeatedly professionally rejected by the VP herself, as well as rejected by multiple other women with whom he is misogynously trying to flirt, and partly from the nervous relief of a seemingly grown and professional man freely using the image of his genitals to make a point.

The characters of Ed and Jonah are staged to clearly and quickly alternate their roles of invector and invectee. Not accounted for in any of the superiority theories, these invective constellations and dynamics require meticulous analysis. Ed, previously staged as the invectee, is now stepping into the role of the invector, humiliating Jonah:

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20 In the storyworld, the Vice President and her family have dinner at a public restaurant. Staged to keep an eye on the VP, her staff sits at nearby tables (cf. *Veep* 2.06).

> Jonah, you're not even a man. You're like an early draft of a man where they just sketched out a giant mangled skeleton, but they didn't have time to add details like pigment or self-respect. You're Frankenstein's monster if his monster was made entirely of dead dicks. (*Veep* 2.06)

Ed's harsh and direct disparagement of Jonah is very much in line with superiority theories of humor. Ed, verbally establishing dominance over Jonah, invites viewers to laugh and feel a similar superiority. Jonah's shortcomings are, however, not the only textual invitation to laugh at play in this scene. After noticing that audiences "loved to hate [Jonah]," the writers followed creator Iannucci's guidelines that it was not enough to insult the character, "the language had to be baroque" (Snierson). Artistic invectives like a "tall stack of failed pancakes, the bad guy from *Indiana Jones* only taller, undercooked pool noodle, overcooked pool noodle, Leaning Tower of Loser, upright train accident, and Garbage Pail Adult" themselves are significant sources of humor on account of their unexpected, sometimes incongruent wording (Chaney, "How to Write a Jonah Insult"). Although superiority theories of humor greatly inform the analysis of disparagement in this scene, they are insufficient on their own.

In this subchapter, I have shown that superiority theories of humor are able to act as a foundation for the analyses of invective constellations and dynamics in contemporary American sitcoms. With the help of an example from *Veep*, I was able to show, however, that mockery and humiliation cannot always suffice as an explanation and source of invective humor in all instances. It is, therefore, absolutely necessary to carefully examine the humorous invective dynamics and constellations. Analyzing disparagement via invectivity and via the specific framework outlined above, thus, enables a better grasp at analyzing the functions and cultural complexities of humor as a "narrative device" in contemporary sitcoms (Scharrer et al. 2). Since research regarding disparagement in television comedies does not abound, I use the present disparate approaches and, whenever appropriate and productive, consult research from other disciplines in order to reflect on and analyze the humor of invective phenomena in my material.

2.3 Situation Comedies and the Invective

The situation comedy, also known as the clipping 'sitcom,' is arguably the most popular comedic televisual genre, having entertained large audiences for many generations (cf. Marchin; Kanzler, "(Meta-)Disparagement Humour").[21] As its name implies, the sitcom genre relies, among many other things, heavily on humor. Therefore, one of the most significant and obvious genre characteristics is the sitcom's 'comic impetus': "while it may do other things, and audiences might enjoy it for a variety of reasons, its humour is always of paramount concern" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 5f.). As I was able to show in the previous paragraphs, the sitcom genre's humor relies, for the most part, on superiority theories, frequently utilizing symbolic abuse or invectives in order to elicit humor.

In this subchapter, I zoom in on selected affordances of the situation comedy genre that enable and facilitate invective phenomena like disparagement, humiliation, and mockery. I point out two distinct levels on which I, in the following chapters, analyze the case studies of this project: the figural level describes interpersonal invectives exchanged by characters in

21 According to Dias Branco, the situation comedy "is generally defined as a type of series in which an established set of characters are involved in recurring comic situations" (95). Although such a generic definition cannot, of course, be attentive to particular stylistic properties of distinct sitcoms, it provides a productive framework. According to Mittell, "genres operate as conceptual frameworks, situating media texts within larger contexts of understanding," operating inside cultural practices, audience, and industry ("A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory" 16). The conventions of the situation comedy genre were initially established in radio comedy shows and vaudeville performances. With "the US networks' desire to employ popular comedic vaudeville names," however, performers paved their way into regular timeslots and comedic formats on TV. The situation comedy genre thus "developed as a compromise between its theatrical origins and the necessary strictures of television and radio broadcasting" and eventually resulted in a stable and "repeatable narrative" that the sitcom genre would utilize for a long time (Mills, "Comedy Verité" 63). Individual episodes usually comprise a single, self-contained narrative conflict that will be resolved at the end of the show. The status-quo of the narrative is restored for the beginning of the next episode. In contrast to the 'episodic' form, sitcom productions have begun to carry certain storylines over several episodes or whole seasons. These 'serial' narratives increase the complexity of their stories and enable and allow for character development (cf. Stafford 3). See Mills, *The Sitcom*; see Hamamoto for a more detailed inspection of the situation comedy genre in general.

the storyworld, the authorial level subsumes invective textual elements and editing processes, like the laugh track and camera settings, as the authorial agency of the text that performs the deprecation. For the former, I argue that reductive and stereotypical images make up a large part of figural invectives in sitcoms. Furthermore, I argue that the textual devices of the laugh track and the reaction shot are prime examples of the invective authorial agency in sitcom texts.

As has been established above, situation comedy's laughter is frequently concerned with ridicule, mockery, and establishing the superiority of the laugher over the laughee. To analyze the dynamics and constellations of disparagement in the sitcom genre, it is vital to examine who is laughing at whom. The analysis of the distribution of power and agency in the respective texts seems to be the key to meaningfully analyzing this book's case studies. According to Kanzler,

> [t]he agency behind sitcom-mockery can be both figural and authorial – it can be distributed among several characters in its storyworld, who hand out ridicule to each other, and/or it can also disappear behind the apparatus of the medium, when the mis-en-scène and storytelling perform the mockery. ("(Meta-)Disparagement Humour" 17)

Firstly, the figural level is concerned with characters exchanging invectives in the intradiegetic world. Figural invectives obviously entail verbal insults, humiliation, and abuse but can also comprise other intradiegetic non-verbal and gestural communication that is understood to exclude or ridicule another individual, like giving someone the middle finger or tapping one's forehead at someone. As I have shown above by using the example of HBO's *Veep*, the figural roles of the invector and invectee are prone to alternate during the run of even a single episode because, as Kanzler argues, "every social identification represented in the storyworld may become the target of ridicule" (18). In the second season episode of *Veep*, the characters of Ed and Jonah are staged to swiftly alternate their roles of the invector and the invectee. As targets and agents of disparagement can frequently be obfuscated, social and political meaning-making processes are ambiguated. It is, therefore and as shown above, of the utmost importance to examine the constellations and dynamics of invective processes in order to fully comprehend the cultural work that the scene performs.

Because situation comedies repeatedly rely on interpersonal banter to elicit humor, they frequently utilize invective simplifications, also known

as stereotypes. Communication scholar Schiappa defines stereotypes as "pejorative overgeneralizations" since they invite the categorization of members of a particular group of people "as having the same attributes […] whether such attributes are behavioral (things people do), ethical (good or bad), personality traits, or physical characteristics" (16). Although stereotypes are generally cognitively created to help process and classify unfamiliar information, "they can lead to the [invective; KS] objectification and the invalid categorization of entire groups of people, which can deny people the opportunity to create their own unique and personal identities" (Nichols et al. 107). When sitcom characters, thus, rely on invective stereotypes for comedic purposes, they facilitate, on the one hand, the portrayal of easily detectable characters and their attributes in order to elicit humor. On the other hand, they may propagate and reinforce invective images of the stereotyped individual or group. Mass media, particularly because it reaches such a large audience, "is a powerful influence in the development, reinforcement, and validation of stereotypes," providing possibly invective behavioral scripts and unhealthy attitudes (ibid.).

While Mills argues for "the 'harmless' nature of comedy" and the unwitting contribution "to stereotyped representations of underprivileged groups" (*The Sitcom* 10), Park et al. pointedly inquire "whether viewers laugh *at* stereotyped minority figures or *with* them," stressing the possibility of invective imbalances of power on screen (159, emphasis in the original). When, in the CBS sitcom *Mike & Molly*, for example, myriad invective anti-fat stereotypes are reinforced by fat-phobic jokes, supported by the laugh track, and multiplied in order to elicit laughter at the expense of fat people, audiences are strongly invited to invectively laugh *at* them and their imagined inferiority, manifesting and strengthening anti-fat bias. For *Two and a Half Men* (CBS 2003–15), Scheunemann argues along the same lines. While the protagonist Charlie is staged to readily adopt invective stereotypical beliefs about the inferiority of women, Scheunemann stresses the ambiguity of the laughter on screen: "Either Charlie's comment is seen as a ridiculous reiteration of an old prejudice, resulting in laughter *at* Charlie […] or the audience thinks this was a clever thing to say and agrees with him, laughing *with* him" (115, emphasis in the original). Although the text veils any heteronormative and patriarchal perspectives on gender, it still issues invitations to invectively see women, as Porter argues, as "comic objects… peripheral to the production of humour," possibly perpetuating

and reinforcing invective assumptions about gender disparity (qtd. in Mills, *The Sitcom* 64).

While figural invectives describe "scenarios of intradiegetic confrontation in which invector and invectee are present in and as characters," authorial invectives represent "constellations of invective by proxy in which the devaluation originates from the authorial agency of the material, manifesting itself in patterns of characterization that invectively construct characters as other, debased, inferior" (Kanzler, "Invective Mode" 1f.). Authorial invectives can, among others, take the shape of mocking and humiliating camera shots, editing techniques, and music and sound cues. In the following, I elaborate on two significant tools of the authorial agency, the laugh track and the reaction shot. The invective valency of these textual elements ceases behind the medium's apparatus and invites distinct audience responses connected to the superiority theory of humor: to invectively laugh *at* the misfortune of others.

Emanating from the collective experience of US American vaudeville traditions that were popular from the 19th until the early 20th century, the laugh track of situation comedies usually alludes to "a record of the 'live' responses of those who witnessed the event, recorded and transmitted to viewers at home" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 14).[22] The laugh track generally constitutes an intratextual but extradiegetic phenomenon. While the viewers are aware of it, the characters are staged to be oblivious. Soon, the laugh track would become the genre's distinguishing marker, not only signaling its 'comic impetus' and inviting viewers to join in, but setting itself apart from any other kinds of television programming. As a persistent feature of the sitcom, the laugh track "is testament to the notion that genre expectations become normalised and help create future expectations for genre series" (ibid. 102). Although many contemporary sitcoms abandon the audience's aural embodiment, the laugh track still unerringly signals recognition of the genre.

Kalviknes Bore uncovers two functions of the laugh track (cf. "Laughing Together?"). On the one hand, individual viewers are provided with a sense of laughing together with a collective audience. The situation comedy "invites the viewer to feel at one with the few dozen people s/he can hear laughing,

22 Later and for editing purposes, 'canned laughter' – the "practice of augmenting recorded laughter in postproduction" – is usually added, "[blurring] the boundaries between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' laugh tracks" (Kalviknes Bore 25).

and by extension with millions of others across the country" (Medhurst and Tuck 45). Likewise, Meyer argues that the rewarding and pleasant quality of humor is appreciated more when experienced in a group setting rather than alone (cf. 311). On the other hand, sitcoms create invective spaces where it is acceptable to laugh at transgressions or the misfortunes of others. Since the viewers are laughing along with an imagined community, they are reassured of their innocent reaction – "everything is just a joke" (Kalviknes Bore 24). Since alternative reactions – like guffaws and laughter in improper places – are edited out and dismissed, the final version of situation comedies seems to claim that "there is a collectively agreed-upon notion of when it is appropriate and inappropriate to laugh," and, consequently, what is funny and what is not (Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). Contradicting the notion of individual humor, sitcoms encourage and invite viewers to adopt MacCabe's idea of 'dominant specularity,' "a reading position constructed by texts from which the world makes coherent, realistic sense" (Bodroghkozy 106).[23]

Since popular culture's and, subsequently, the sitcom's desire is to reach mass audiences, they inevitably and invectively sideline "needs and ideologies of minorities and excluded groups" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). Mills notes that there admittedly is a tradition in entertainment and comedy to represent marginalized and underprivileged groups more than in any other social realm. While BIPOC characters were notably absent from early television programming, they appeared in early comedy series, like *Beulah* (ABC 1950–53) and *Andy'n'Amos* (CBS 1951–53). Minority groups are usually invectively staged as the butt of the joke in line with the superiority theory of humor, while the mass audiences of sitcoms "are being invited to find laughable the behavior of marginalized groups, and are doing so through cultural texts assembled by those from privileged positions" (ibid. 83). Furthermore, the laugh track "suggests something is obviously, clearly, unarguably, unproblematically funny, and that such responses are collectively defined and experienced," thereby perpetuating and continuing invective and imbalanced power relations (ibid. 81).[24]

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23 Communication scholars Rhodes and Ellithorpe examine how the laugh track communicates norms of behavior and suggest that it "can communicate normative information about the behaviors exhibited in the narrative, and this normative information can be internalized and influence attitudes and behavioral intentions" (376).

24 Although it is easier and certainly involves a more pleasurable viewing experience to occupy the unambiguous position of the 'dominant specularity,' sitcom texts still

By removing the intratextual device – as has been a trend in the last two decades –[25] the text puts audience members in charge of deciding when to laugh, obscuring the suitable response created by the text itself and opening up alternative readings. By complicating the intratextual power balance and the position of the 'dominant specularity,' sitcom texts hold viewers more accountable for their (invective) laughter, demanding the mental effort to actively participate in meaning making processes. Without the aid of the genre-specific laugh track, the privileged position of the texts and related ideological and invective coloring are more veiled.[26]

Another textual element that the authorial agency utilizes to veil its deprecation of particular characters is the reaction shot. Similar to the laugh track, it is able to establish and invectively depict power disparities and social hierarchies in the intradiegetic world. Described as an editorial treatment,

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afford viewers the opportunity to define their individual responses against a collective consciousness provided by them. The aural embodiment of the preferred audience position, as Mills suggests, even encourages viewers to notice a differing response in themselves. Although the effects of alternative readings might be minuscule and localized, "the laugh track offers the individual the possibility of defining themselves in response to that mass" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 104).

25 With the fragmentation and blending of genres, a growing number of recent situation comedies abandon the laugh track, making viewers and their laughter more accountable. Defying genre parameters, the mockumentary sitcom format, for example, as Nardi argues, "tackles common topics of non-fiction but changes the rules of the game for comedic purposes" (73). Mockumentary sitcoms like *Modern Family* (ABC 2009–20) or *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009–15), then, utilize visual markers of the documentary genre "in order to establish a different kind of comedic discourse" (Schwind, "Embarrassment Humor" 53). *Santa Clarita Diet* (Netflix 2017–19), for example, merges the genre of horror with the family sitcom, "daring the audience to laugh, recognising and successfully navigating the fine line between horror and comedy" (Jowett and Abbott). As *The Guardian*'s Jones suggests, Michael Schur's *The Good Place* (NBC 2016–20) "continues to work as a light sitcom, even as it fearlessly explores weighty philosophical conundrums and peels back the layers of liberal self-delusion," not only including dramatic and fantastic genre markers but also capturing and engaging the audience with the contemporary zeitgeist ("Forking Hell!").

26 Additionally, deviating from the sitcom genre's norms seemingly complicates its identifiable and rigid form. *M*A*S*H* (CBS 1973–84) was one of the first situation comedies to opt against the laugh track, demonstrating "that any deviation from it, no matter how minor, results in a text that then asks to be understood as something else" (Mills, "Comedy Verité" 66).

the reaction shot is "a stylistic feature vital for the semiotics of television comedy" (Schwind, "Chilled-Out Entertainers" 28). Cinematographer Karl Freund was the first to notice how important it is for comedic programming to cut away from the behavior of one character to the reaction of another.[27] On the one hand, the reaction shot elicits humor by cuing the audience "into reading such behavior as abnormal and, therefore, comic" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 39). On the other hand, it can ensure a second laugh related to one joke: "[W]hile a shot of comic behavior would get a laugh from an audience, a subsequent shot of a reaction to that behavior would get another laugh" (ibid.). The reaction shot, like the laugh track, represents a caesura in the narrative, cuing the audience into a viewpoint from which the story and the jokes within it make sense. Mills, for example, argues that reaction shots are vital for the humor in the British *The Office*'s staging of embarrassment "by incorporating many shots of Brent's employees looking aghast at what he says and does," suggesting that Brent's behavior is laughable (ibid. 69).

In this subchapter, I have conclusively examined selected affordances of the situation comedy genre that facilitate and allow for invective dynamics and constellations. While focusing on two distinct levels of invectives enables me to describe various invective techniques, the differentiation of agency, moreover, not only reflects the complexities of humorous popcultural texts but also enables a comprehensive analysis of disparagement that may affirm, reflect on, or break invective conventions.

By establishing the elements that constitute the conceptual impulses and the cultural context of this study, I set out to define the scope of my project and concentrate the subject matter of my analysis on the situation comedy texts that make use of this very construct. In three larger sections, I have shown that the concept of invectivity greatly informs and furthers the analysis of American popular culture since invective practices have continually been rehearsed, ritualized, and critically reflected in this arena. For this, I focused on points of intersection between the novel concept and larger research

27 During the 1950s, Karl Freund was not only responsible for discovering the importance of the now popular reaction shot, he also created one of the most generic camera set-ups of sitcom history, the 'three-headed monster.' This shooting style captures dialogue scenes between two characters: One camera "covered a wide, establishing shot while the other two were each mid-shots of each performer," allowing for quick editing in conversation scenes between two characters (Mills, *The Sitcom* 39).

contexts within American Studies: American culture, humor theory, and the situation comedy genre. The awareness and understanding of the conceptual impulses and cultural context of this study frames and furthers the analyses of the formal principles, media-specific realizations, and political and social resonances of invective dynamics and constellations in contemporary American situation comedies. By introducing these conceptual impulses, the study is now able to focus on invective phenomena in situation comedies that echo an understanding and awareness of difference, establishing social hierarchies. Moreover, the concept of invectivity provides a better understanding of the functions and cultural complexity of humor as a narrative tool. A closer look at the genre's affordances, finally, allows the study to carefully zoom in on and analyze the invective phenomena of contemporary US American situation comedies and their cultural work, whether it is a reflexive questioning of established regimes of inequality or an affirmative consolidation of exclusionary norms.

3. Invective Humor: Discourses of Otherness

This chapter investigates how contemporary American situation comedy texts rely on distinct strategies of disparagement and mockery. Within the sitcom genre, deprecation and humiliation are framed as humorous. When characters are portrayed as deficient in some way or are insulted and devalued because of certain attributes, discourses of otherness and alterity in the respective texts are utilized to invectively elicit humor. This chapter, therefore, focuses on how sitcoms employ invective strategies to draw pleasure from narrative, formal, and aesthetic patterns of disparagement based on 'otherness.' Through a meticulous analysis of the dynamics and constellations of invective practices in situation comedies, I examine the poetics and politics of the texts, emphasizing their cultural work within the present cultural moment.

As argued in the previous chapter, laughter and humor play a significant role in the sedimentation of the invective mode in the situation comedy genre. Essential points of reference have been superiority theories of humor and Ford and Ferguson's associated research on disparagement humor (cf. T. E. Ford et al.; T. E. Ford, "Social Consequences"; M. A. Ferguson and T. E. Ford). Superiority theories emphasize laughter at the misfortunes of others and are used to manifest the superiority of the laugher over the inferior laughee. Similarly, Ford and Ferguson's disparagement humor "refers to communication that is intended to elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target" (M. A. Ferguson and T. E. Ford 171). The Cultural Studies notion of 'othering' and Goffman's concept of stigma also support the arguments for my two separate case studies in this chapter – *Mike & Molly* (CBS, 2010–16) and *2 Broke Girls*. With the outlined conceptual framework, it is possible to exemplarily trace where humorous strategies are intertwined with socially solidified discourses of 'otherness' in the two shows. Invective humor is, therefore, not only utilized

as a means of 'othering' and self-aggrandizement, it is also decidedly used to denigrate others. By way of example, I present the sitcom *Mike & Molly*, which develops humor strategies which enable invective structures through claims of inauthenticity in order to be guarded from criticism. Furthermore, I suggest that the situation comedy *2 Broke Girls* updates legacies of female self-deprecating humor in order to elicit humor while concomitantly perpetuating and manifesting socially entrenched systems of inequality.

The first subchapter revolves around the case study of the sitcom *Mike & Molly*, which aired on the network channel CBS from 2010 to 2016. The plot brings together the protagonists Molly Flynn, an elementary school teacher and later writer, and Mike Biggs, a police officer. The two characters are staged to meet at Overeaters Anonymous, setting the tone of the show. The series follows the different stages of their relationship: from falling in love, to their engagement, marriage, and eventually the planning of their own family – all the while dealing with the protagonists' demanding relatives and friends. Fatness plays a very significant role in the sitcom's plot and humor. In addition to the narrative mostly revolving around the food- and weight-related issues of the protagonists in an intradiegetic world of standardized television beauty, the episodes are well-stocked with anti-fat jokes from the supporting characters and self-deprecating jokes from the protagonists. Drawing from the literary archetype of the fool, this subchapter reads particular supporting characters as Invective Fools who are largely responsible for the fat-phobic remarks and the subsequent tenor of the show. While Invective Fools are portrayed as severely flawed individuals, they are, nevertheless, equipped with distinct invective licenses to speak. Thus, the text invites the audience to laugh not only at the inferiority of the Invective Fools but also at the invective remarks directed at the fat protagonists. I argue that the staging of Invective Fools is an authorizing and cushioning strategy to blamelessly enforce socially acceptable norms and reprimand undesirable bodies and behaviors. *Mike & Molly* utilizes invective humor through claims of inauthenticity that allow the shooting down of any criticism of marking fatness as deficient.

The second subchapter focuses on a case study of the situation comedy *2 Broke Girls*, which was broadcast on CBS from 2011 to 2017. The show revolves around an unlikely friendship between two very different women in their mid-20s in the New York City neighborhood of Williamsburg. The young socialite Caroline Channing was raised as the daughter of a billionaire. When

the cover of her father's Ponzi scheme blows, she is staged to find herself penniless in the middle of New York City on her own. The character ends up getting a job at a Williamsburg diner where she meets Max Black. Max was brought up by her neglectful mother in a single-parent household in a poor working class environment. The two women become friends, move in together, and forge out plans to open a successful cupcake business. In this subchapter, I argue that the sitcom *2 Broke Girls* is strongly informed by legacies of the gendered economy of comedy. I not only give a concise overview of past female humor traditions that show self-disparagement as a strategy to circumvent gate-keeping mechanisms of the male-dominated domain of comedy in order to not threaten patriarchal gender roles, I also reveal remnants of these gender-based comedy traditions in the CBS sitcom. Furthermore, I propose to transfer the term 'self-deprecating' to 'auto-invective' humor since it enables me to substantiate the ventriloquated and multiplied image of the 'self' in televisual texts. In the case study, I argue that the show utilizes auto-invectives directed at protagonist Max Black in order to elicit laughter. The text, as I later argue in greater depth, creates a dominant reading position from which the disparagement of the female protagonist makes sense. While the other characters rarely react to auto-invective remarks, the narrative device of the laugh track unquestioningly signals the respective scenes' humorous intent. I establish connections between Max's auto-invectives and the self-deprecating humor strategies of female US American comedians in the past. Ultimately, I argue that *2 Broke Girls*'s disparagement of one of its female protagonists hinges on a gender-based asymmetry of power and, thus, reiterates and updates discourses of 'otherness' and alterity.

With the examples of *Mike & Molly* and *2 Broke Girls*, I expose invective humor strategies that rely on disparagement and humiliation of an 'other.' In the following two subchapters, I analyze the shows' invective dynamics and constellations, and their poetics and politics, media-specific legacies, and political and social resonances.

3.1 Invective Fools in *Mike & Molly*

For 236 episodes, *Friends* (NBC 1994–2004) entertained audiences across national borders and age groups. Apart from the six protagonists, there was one character in particular who strongly shaped the television culture of the

time – Fat Monica. Although she appears on-screen in only four episodes in total, her uncanny dance moves, her insatiable hunger, and her delicate but awkward names for sexual intercourse and male genitalia entertained and captivated viewers. Actor Courtney Cox slipped into a fat suit for the role, "[depicting] dominant understandings that fat people are lazy, gluttonous, and unable to control their appetites" (Gullage 179). The show marks Monica's fat body as deviant, degenerate, and alarming – as a visual spectacle and a "one-dimensional, comedic gag" (ibid. 180). Most studies convey a somber image of fat[1] characters on screen as the 'other,' "deviant and suffering from character flaws" (Drury and Louis 555) as well as "a target for […] pity, and comedy" (Fikkan and Rothblum 585).

This subchapter analyzes invective dynamics surrounding the situation comedy *Mike & Molly*'s eponymous fat protagonists. I argue that the show frequently denigrates its characters Mike and Molly on the basis of their bodies in order to elicit humor. I show that the series stages its supporting characters to be accountable for most of its fat-phobic remarks. Proposing the figure of the Invective Fool for these characters enables me to uncover and trace the double-laughter that is inscribed in the text. Since the Invective Fools are portrayed as thoroughly flawed and inadequate people, the text, on the one hand, invites audiences to laugh at their failings. On the other hand, *Mike & Molly* provides them with distinct licenses to speak perceived truths – here, the license to reprimand undesirable fat bodies and behaviors. Aided by the narrative device of the laugh track, the text invites viewers to laugh *along* the disparaging comments of the Invective Fools as well as *at* the disparaged protagonists. I therefore read the staging of *Mike & Molly*'s Invective Fools as a cushioning and authorizing strategy to blamelessly implement allegedly socially acceptable norms as well as denounce and humiliate undesirable fat bodies through claims of inauthenticity. Although the invectives are voiced by unaccountable and inadequate Invective Fools, the show, nevertheless, includes fat-phobic remarks that perpetuate and reiterate processes of 'othering' deviant bodies that do not fit the norm. In a first step, I derive the figure of the Invective Fool from the literary archetype of the (Holy) Fool. This proposition enables me to get a better hold

1 Following Fat Studies research, I am using the term 'fat' as a neutral descriptor of the human body. Terms like 'overweight' and 'obese' imply negative connotations and refer to myriad normative and medical discourses I do not have the time nor the space to comment on. See Saguy for further information.

of the complexities of disparagement in televisual texts. I also briefly outline historical and contemporary constructions of fatness, including the attached stigmatization and disadvantaged representation on television screens. This subchapter's case study, then, illustrates *Mike & Molly*'s disparagement of fat 'others.'

Foolishness, as Stott states, "is not the same as idiocy, but rather an expression of the ambiguous, doubled, and inverted ideas of wisdom and folly that existed in the medieval period" (45). Having roots in ancient Egypt, China, and medieval Europe, the Holy Fool was widely incorporated in the Christian religion as the symbol of divine folly, making recourse to Paul's "distinction between worldly wisdom and the one true wisdom which can only be found in God" (Heller 2). The secular version of the fool, the court jester, either "had a physical or mental deficiency and was cruelly employed to provide amusement through inappropriate behaviours," or was portrayed "as possessing wisdom and [advising] the 'noble' by way of jest" (Westwood 786). The either childlike and/or calculating quality of fools, according to Heller, "grants them the freedom to speak painful truths that no one else dares to speak" (6). To legitimately offer criticism, the fool avoids affronting her opposite by "assuming a specific role and by disguising the critique in humor" (Westwood 786). Westwood traces the trajectory of the archetype of the fool, from the Harlequin to the Pierrot, from vaudeville to "more recent mechanisms for the institutionalization of the comic," like comic movies and situation comedies (787).

Some situation comedies install characters who are equipped with distinct invective licenses to speak, whom I conceptualize as Invective Fools. These characters are depicted as heavily flawed, deficient in some way, and possessing child-like qualities. Installed as supporting characters, Invective Fools are staged to invectively enforce social and cultural norms by evoking laughter that acts, as Meyer argues, as a "social corrective" (314). While the court jesters portrayed unwanted manners of conduct themselves in order to "show that such behaviors and beliefs were unacceptable in serious society," the Invective Fool, although depicted as heavily flawed, points out and exposes the social and cultural transgression of others (ibid.). Along the lines of superiority theories of humor, the viewers are invited to see themselves as superior to both disparaged characters, the Invective Fool and its victim of abuse. The humorous deprecation keeps the storyworld "in order as those who disobey are censured by laughter, and people are made to feel part of a group by laughing at some ridiculed other" (ibid. 315). I

propose that the heavily flawed portrayals of these supporting characters are a staged attempt to soften and cushion their invective comments. By portraying the invector as laughable and inadequate, the show is able to deflect any criticism for their invective remarks. The Invective Fools' flawed natures and subsequent inferior status discredit their comments. The show is, however, still able to include the norm-enforcing invectives by shifting the responsibility of judging them to the viewer. I read the staging of Invective Fools as a cushioning strategy that enforces (hetero)normative principles and ideals through the social control of laughter.

As a case study for this subchapter, I have chosen a contemporary network sitcom in which Invective Fools play a significant role: *Mike & Molly* (CBS 2010–16). As mentioned above, the six seasons of the show revolve around the two eponymous fat protagonists and their relationship with each other, as well as with their family and friends. Fatness plays a very important role in the sitcom's plot and humor and is, as I argue, utilized to disparagingly depict certain characters as the 'other.' While the plot mostly revolves around the protagonists' food- and weight-related issues, the first few seasons are especially well-stocked with weight-related jokes from the supporting characters and self-deprecating or auto-invective[2] jokes from the protagonists. The following brief excursion concerning the historical and contemporary constructions of fatness enables me to align and properly analyze the invective processes of the sitcom *Mike & Molly*.

Traditions of humiliating fat bodies and their allegedly inferior morality have a vivid history in the US. According to *The Fat Studies Reader*, beauty standards have frequently changed in the past: Up until the end of the 19th century, being fat, for example, was considered beautiful, healthy, and a sign of wealth, prosperity, and female fertility (cf. Rothblum and Solovay 11). The First World War and substantial industrial advancements in food processing thoroughly changed the image of fatness. In desperate times of war, people considered wasting rationed food a nearly criminal act. As a consequence, fat people were targeted as excessive consumers, and thinness was quickly equated to patriotism (Herndon 131). Furthermore, since food – after the War – was more accessible, "it became possible for people of modest means to become plump" and fatness was no longer seen as a sign of prestige (Fraser 12). Following Puritan traditions of spiritual fasting to prove

2 As I argue in Chapter 3.2, the term auto-invective humor helps me to describe and analyze the ventriloquized self-deprecation of fictional characters.

worthiness and to purge oneself of one's sins, thinness was now believed to be a characteristic of individuals of the upper classes with superior morality (cf. ibid. 12f.). According to Crandall, a psychology professor from Kansas, anti-fat attitudes "[reinforce] a worldview consistent with the Protestant work ethic, self-determination, a belief in a just world, and the notion that people get what they deserve" (884). Medicine, formerly advertising fat as "the most peaceful, useful and law-abiding of all our tissues" (Fraser 11), found more and more theories to support the new fashion of thinness, from money-spinning treatments to pathologized views that identify fat bodies as sick and in dire need of treatment (cf. Sherman 40). While in the traditions of the 19th century fatness served as a spectacle of oddity and uniqueness, the ensuing century exacerbated traditions of humiliating fat people and shifted the "emphasis on fat as a peculiar deformity" (Erdman Farrell 34). Freak shows saturated popular culture with images of a fat 'other,' creating invective spectacles. A noteworthy event that essentially shaped the perception of fat as transgressive was the rape trial concerning the popular, then contemporary actor Roscoe 'Fattie' Arbuckle in 1921. Before the allegations came to light, the fat actor was able to "[create] a cultural space in which fat performativity escaped the traditional associations of sloth, passivity and gluttony – in which the category contradictions enabled by fat were a source of cultural play, rather than a trigger for normate disgust" (Harker 983). Although fully acquitted, the indictment caused society to re-imagine the actor's body size as a monstrous and sexualized fat deviancy that "must destroy what it craves even as it satisfies the craving; the fat male body cannot enjoy what it destroys, [and] is incapable of satisfying itself" (ibid. 984). In light of these discourses, contemporary rhetoric surrounding fatness in the US is closely tied to the rhetoric of crisis and war, "[constructing] fat as a problem that concerns the entirety of society, [requiring] governmental intervention and [being] a threat to economic stability of the United States" (Rompola 4).

Consequently, fat people were and still are harshly discriminated against and stigmatized for their size. Following Goffman's theory of stigma, as discussed in Chapter 2.1, fatness is defined by two distinct components of social interaction: the recognition and devaluation of negatively perceived differences (cf. Goffman, *Stigma*; "Über Techniken der Bewältigung beschädigter Identität"). Without trying to contrast the severity of stigmatization between groups of people, Tomiyama and Mann suggest that fat people might be "the most openly stigmatized individuals

in our society" (4), making them very vulnerable to suffering social and psychological damages as a result of being subjected to stigmatization for a longer period of time (i.e. anxiety, isolation, loss of social support) (cf. Bos et al. 1ff.). Stigmatization, statistically, also leads to discrimination against fat people in areas like employment, wages, and health care (cf. Tomiyama and Mann 4; Maranto and Stenoien 10ff.). Other studies have shown that fat people are linked to lower socioeconomic status (cf. Crandall 883), are culturally believed to be gluttonous and lazy (cf. S. Himes), and are associated with negative features like being sloppy, dishonest, physically unattractive, and sexually unskilled (cf. Greenberg et al. 1342).

The cultural work of the media, especially of television, is often seen as a co-perpetrator in the stigmatization of and discrimination against fat people by "reflecting the social consensus of the culture, but also contributing to the shaping of norms and beliefs about weight" (S. M. Himes and J. K. Thompson 712). Besides the verbal denigration of fat characters on screen, they are frequently marginalized in the storyline. Thus, television narratives act as a powerful combination of modeled discrimination and verbal reinforcement (cf. Fouts and Burggraf, "Female Weight" 926). While fatness has been constructed historically differently for men and women, emerging female beauty standards, in particular, exalt the 'thin ideal,' characterized by a thin waist, large breasts, long legs, and flawless skin (cf. Hargreaves and Tiggemann 367). Sitcoms, according to Fouts and Burggraf, "model (a) 'thin ideal,' (b) delivering positive comments for thinness and negative for being average or heavier in weight, and (c) laughing at derogatory remarks," containing the alleged 'fat threat' ("Female Weight" ibid. 931). As shown in numerous quantitative studies, invectives against fat people, especially against fat women, are still the norm on television (cf. S. M. Himes and J. K. Thompson; Fouts and Burggraf, "Female Body Images"; "Female Weight"; Fouts and Vaughan; Kaufman; Greenberg et al.). In their 2009 article, Giovanelli and Ostertag compared the pervasive quality of mass media and its subsequent control over women's bodies with Foucault's panopticon. While relating initially to sexuality or crime, the term panopticism evolved to "[referring] to surveillance and social control where people control their behavior because they feel as if others are constantly observing and judging them" (Giovanelli and Ostertag 289). Television itself can be seen as a panopticon, defined by patriarchal beliefs and cultural beauty standards that force viewers and audiences to judge themselves based on what they see. Consequently, fatness is constructed as "the antithesis of

what it means to be appropriately feminine" (ibid. 290). In recent years, men have also been increasingly pressurized to fit media beauty standards.

Saguy's book *What's Wrong With Fat?*, that is predicated upon Goffman's 'Frame Analysis,' can shed light on how television works to invectively frame fatness in contemporary American culture. From a sociological perspective, Goffman attempts to analyze the governing structures – frames – of everyday interaction and inquires how these can be used to influence how messages are interpreted. He argues that the "[a]nalysis of frames illuminates the precise way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location – such as a speech, utterance, news report, [or television series; KS] – to that consciousness" (Entman, "Framing" 51). Saguy, likewise, investigates how individuals use frames to simplify and organize actions and experiences to make them more coherent. For fatness there are, as she argues, both positive and negative frames in use. While so-called fat pride or HAES (Health At Every Size) frames advertise a positive and unprejudiced view of body size, blame-frames analyze "who or what is to blame for the alleged crisis" of fatness in America (Saguy 69f.).

As a consequence of invectively advertising the thin ideal, fat people are frequently annihilated as well as misrepresented on screen. Studies strikingly attest to the underrepresentation of fat people on screen (Fouts and Burggraf, "Female Body Images"; "Female Weight"; Fouts and Vaughan). While nearly 40 percent of the American population was considered to be obese in 2017 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services),[3] only three in 100 women classified as fat were represented on screen (cf. Greenberg et al. 1343). Ganz, furthermore, lists various demeaning strategies that help consolidate negative messages about fat bodies on television, "such as infrequently depicting fat bodies, the use of news to perpetuate fat-phobia, as well as using the fat body as a prop to develop a joke" (211). In general, it is more than likely that fat characters are portrayed in a one-dimensional way with a limited set of profiles: as dim-whitted, victims of abuse, or as supporting characters and props for the protagonist. Fat bodies are frequently cast as the texts' villains, used as comic relief, and are more likely to be staged as depressed and sad (cf. Ospina). They are, moreover, also often linked to certain televisual tropes: (1) being fat is a result of poor

3 According to the *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*'s informational brochure, obesity is characterized by a Body Mass Index (BMI) of over 30.

life choices and/or overeating – the so-called fat-as-glutton-myth; (2) being fat is the result of a lack of exercise; and (3) being fat is unattractive. These tropes frame fat as a moral inadequacy, resulting in undermining the moral standards of fat people, as well as fueling overall negative affections (cf. Ganz 212). All these repressive measures preserve and canvas the notion that fat bodies are wrong, outside the norm, deficient 'others.' In their 2012 article on fatness as a feminist issue, Fikkan and Rothblum argue that there are only limited "opportunities for fat women […] to view favorable reflections of [themselves] in mass media" (587). More often, depictions of fat women authorize the denigrating image of fat individuals as sources of humor and pity. Popcultural texts tend to portray fat characters as the 'other,' making them the butt of jokes or staging humiliating physical comedy in order to elicit humor, and simultaneously substantiating the televisual and cultural thin ideal.[4]

In situation comedies, the narrative device of the laugh track, which is frequently directed at fat characters, encourages a superior feeling in the audience since "human beings are moved to laugh when presented with a person or situation they feel themselves to be intellectually, morally, or *physically* above" (Stott 125, emphasis mine). The texts invite viewers to adopt the imagined social and cultural hierarchies they offer. In *Mike & Molly*, a similar imbalance of power between the characters and the audience is staged with the help of the Invective Fools and the immanent laugh track. As I show in more depth in the following paragraphs, the Fools are largely responsible for the fat-phobic remarks of the show, which are sanctioned by the laugh track. By staging allegedly flawed and deficient individuals as invectors, the viewers, as Kanzler proposes, "can equally feel invited to indulge in the stereotypes invoked, to take pleasure at their iteration and laugh with them at particular social and ethnic groups, or they can feel invited to laugh at the practices of stereotyping that the show represents" ("(Meta-)Disparagement Humour" 7). This strategy not only ambiguates the power structures of the show and allows for more freedom to bypass invective taboos and discourses of political correctness, it also manifests and perpetuates disparaging images of fat people as the 'other.'

4 For the few popular fat female (comedic) actors like Rebel Wilson or Melissa McCarthy, their "size is given more attention than any other aspect of [their] professional [lives,] and speculations about weight loss or regain predominate any coverage of [their] activities" (Fikkan and Rothblum 587).

In contrast, the producers behind *Mike & Molly* eagerly try to frame the show as non-invective and authentically viewer-centered. Chuck Lorre, executive producer of the show, defends the plot and casting. The two fat protagonists

> go to [Overeaters Anonymous] because they're on a journey, they want to make a change in their lives. [...] I think that speaks to a lot of people who are unhappy with the status quo in their lives. These are people who are alive. They're in process. They're not at the end of the journey, they're in the journey. And we can write about that forever. (Domanick)

The fact that producers and creators try to frame the show as a realistic American situation comedy cannot conceal the actual invective premise and staging of the characters and plot.[5] This dynamic can be seen as a part of the invective strategy itself: Paratexts[6] are staged to evoke an awareness of discriminatory discourses and are designed to signal an understanding of ever-changing social sensitivities. Besides adamantly defending the fact that *Mike & Molly* is apparently not a fat-phobic show but a sitcom about potentially realistic American life in the present, the series finds myriad ways to ridicule, humiliate, and insult their fat protagonists. Disparaging comments from the Invective Fools, auto-invective blows from the protagonists themselves, or degrading physical comedy are met with laughter in the storyworld or from the laugh track. The canned laughter signals that "there is a collectively agreed notion of when it is appropriate [...] to laugh" and invites the viewers to join in (Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). However, the process of placing the most transgressive comments about fatness in the mouths of the Invective Fools enables a cushioning and authorizing strategy to blamelessly reprimand undesirable bodies through claims of inauthenticity. Any criticism of the show's dealings with its fat characters

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5 Even the protagonist's names indicate and emphasize their appearance: police officer Mike *Big*gs and teacher *Molly* (breed of a female horse and a male donkey) Flynn.

6 The concept of paratexts can be traced back to literary theorist Gérard Genette, who characterized the term as "the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public" (Genette and Maclean). In this book, the term 'paratext' in a broader sense stands for every text on the "threshold" of the respective sitcoms, "[an] undecided zone between the inside and the outside" of the text (ibid.), i.e. interviews, TV listings, and blog entries concerning the series.

can be shut down with the staging of Invective Fools – they are themselves staged to transgress social and cultural norms and are, consequently, also devalued. The staging of fat characters, nevertheless, reinforces the notion that straying from the thin ideal of television results in ridicule, humiliation, and mockery.

One of the Invective Fools of *Mike & Molly* is Mike's best and apparently only friend, colleague, and work partner, Carl McMillan. Carl, a middle-aged African American bachelor, lives with his grandmother, Nana. His relationship with Nana is mostly defined by her trenchant comments about his inability to "find [himself] a woman and get out of [her] house" (*Mike & Molly* 1.16). Carl is disparagingly portrayed as incapable of living by himself, let alone maintaining a romantic relationship with a woman. The show, moreover, constantly and disparagingly plays with the possibility of Carl being sexually attracted to men, emasculating and devaluing the character even further. When, for example, Mike and Molly start thinking about their wedding, Carl is staged to get carried away, "I'm thinkin' next spring, sunset, Lincoln Park when the azaleas are in bloom," earning him questioning and belittling looks from his scene partners (*Mike & Molly* 1.24). In Season Four, Mike cannot be bothered by the fact that Carl is out dancing with his wife Molly because "he's not a man. It's Carl," emphasizing Carl's innocuous status as a man (*Mike & Molly* 4.11). Carl's "shemale incident of '08" is not only a constant source of amusement (and humiliation) in the storyworld, it also sparked controversies about the queer politics of the show (*Mike & Molly* 3.14).

Following the logic of Invective Fools, Carl's flawed disposition qualifies him for making invective comments about his partner Mike's weight. During the run of the show, Carl frequently teases Mike about his build, his dietary choices, and his relationship issues with Molly. Carl's character flaws, emphasized and punctuated throughout the show, are usually displayed right before or after he invectively lashes out against Mike. In the pilot episode, Carl is disparagingly introduced as an incapable middle-aged man still living with his grandmother right before making a crude, fat-phobic remark at Mike's expense:

> Carl: Overeaters Anonymous on a Friday night? That is pathetic.
> Mike: Oh, I'm pathetic? Which one of us lives with his grandma?
> Carl: I'm over there because she's old and frail and needs somebody to look after her.

> Mike: She mows the lawn, Carl. [...]
> Carl: I would shoot you right now, but I don't have enough chalk to outline your body. (*Mike & Molly* 1.01)

The laugh track chimes in and signals a humorous exchange between the characters. The viewer is equally invited to laugh at the character Carl, his deficits, and at the invective remark directed at the protagonist. Consequently, the character's lighthearted threat to kill his friend and his invective weight-related comment do not have to be taken seriously and are discredited to some extent. Although Carl's inadequacies as an Invective Fool are strongly emphasized in the scene, the closing punchline, however, is staged to be the fat-phobic comment and is met with canned laughter.

Any conversation topic in the storyworld can trigger disparaging and fat-phobic remarks uttered by Invective Fools. In "Peggy Goes to Branson," Carl and Mike are staged to talk about Mike and Molly's relationship at their usual restaurant. When the possibility of children arises, the protagonist stresses his acumen to reflect on any future plans before making wrongheaded decisions. To Mike's "I'm the kind of guy that likes to think things through," Carl's invective reply is met with canned laughter, "Since when? I once saw you eat a marshmallow that was still on fire" (*Mike & Molly* 2.18). In his relationship advice, Carl is staged to frame his recommendations with the help of food, allegedly so that Mike is able to understand. In "Valentine's Piggyback," Carl tries to explain women's expectations when it comes to Valentine's Day. He is staged to belittle Mike for his ignorance:

> Carl: Yeah, let me explain this to you in a way you might understand. You know how when I go to get a milkshake and you say no? [...] And if I came back without one for you, you'd get all grumpy and mad.
> Mike: Well, we've been together a long time and I don't think I should have to ask.
> Carl: That's why I always get two milkshakes. Otherwise, I'd have to get a second straw and share with you, and that's a race I cannot win. (*Mike & Molly* 2.15)

Carl emphasizes the protagonist's allegedly gluttonous and insatiable nature, contributing to and sedimenting the invective image of fat characters on screen.

The show denies Carl any personal experiences in the areas of life on which he gives the protagonist advice. Up until the end of the show, the character is not able to secure a long-term relationship which is, in turn, marked as inadequate behavior of Carl's faulty character disposition. Regardless, while Mike and Molly go shopping for Christmas presents, Invective Fool Carl is licensed to reprimand the fat protagonists. He manages to unnecessarily insult the protagonist's fixation on food, for example when Molly is looking for Mike at the mall, "He wandered off and came back eating a lemon bar and wearing a bomber jacket. It's like going to the mall with a 300-pound toddler" (*Mike & Molly* 1.12). When Mike later admits that he does not know what Molly could possibly like, Carl counters with "Well, apparently, she likes big dumb guys" (ibid.). Although the invective remarks are seemingly cushioned by the series' staging of Invective Fools, they do not lose their pejorative jibe and serve to reiterate and manifest fatness as an inferior status of being.

The other important person in Mike's life and another one of the show's Invective Fools is his mother Peggy. Separated from her husband, the character fits the sitcom trope of the bitter divorcée who never re-married but instead purchased a loyal canine companion. Nichols argues for her character disposition "that it is in her nature to put people down" (105). The character's flaws and inadequacies surface in racially insensitive comments like "Arizona? Why would I move to Arizona? It's nothing but a furnace full of drunk Indians" (*Mike & Molly* 3.16). She is staged to deeply (over)care for her son and to act hostilely towards anyone who threatens her position as the only woman in her son's life. After reluctantly accepting Molly, she frequently tries to guilt-trip the protagonists for not spending enough time with her, "I don't cook much anymore because of my sciatica, but if giving you kids a nice hot meal means I've got to endure a sharp stabbing pain up and down my spine, then that is the price of admission" (*Mike & Molly* 1.19). She, too, is staged to make numerous invective comments about her son's weight and eating habits. When she is refusing to go to the doctor in one episode, she states, "Oh, I've lived through worse pain than this. Mikey came out 14 pounds and sideways. I'm lucky I can keep any food inside," accounting for and illustrating Mike's apparently enormous size as early as at his birth (*Mike & Molly* 1.6). The character, furthermore, does not even recoil from making invective comments about her son in front of his girlfriend. In one episode, she gives Mike a pair of pants as a present: "I got you the kind that are loose in the crotch to prevent chafing. When he was a boy, I had to butter

his thighs," simultaneously denigrating and humiliating her son, inviting the audience to laugh along, even if Molly does not (*Mike & Molly* 1.12).

The character of Samuel, the Senegalese restaurant owner, also frequently denigrates Mike. When on duty, the two police officers often eat at the character's restaurant. In contrast to the Invective Fools of the show, Samuel's invectives are not cushioned by his deficient character disposition but by his African heritage. The staging of the contradiction between the character's accounts of starvation and the protagonist's apparent gluttonous tendencies acts as a major source of humor, "You live in nice homes, have a car to drive, and clearly enough food to eat" (*Mike & Molly* 1.12). Samuel frequently comments on the dietary habits of Mike, i.e. "If we covered you in vinyl, we could use you as a booth" (*Mike & Molly* 1.14). Although Samuel is depicted as a highly exaggerated character with a thick accent and stereotypical clothing, he is not portrayed as a deeply flawed individual, and therefore cannot be read as an Invective Fool. The character's referenced hardships in the past and his staging as the flagbearer of racially oppressed minorities of the show seemingly justify and cushion his invectives. The laugh track, nevertheless, invites viewers to laugh at the protagonist's disparagement.

Since the narrative is told from Mike's perspective more than from Molly's, relationships outside of her abusive family are rarely depicted. The protagonist still lives with her mother Joyce and her sister Victoria. As the series progresses, Mike and Joyce's boyfriend, Vince, move in as well, making the Flynn house the most frequented place on the show. Both staged as Invective Fools, Joyce and Victoria have similar character dispositions. The two characters are portrayed as heteronormatively sexualized women who are struggling with but rather enjoying addiction. Joyce, a retired flight attendant, is staged as a neglectful and abusive mother. In the pilot episode, she enters her daughter's room and invectively teases her with a juicy piece of chocolate cake while Molly labors on the treadmill in order to lose weight (cf. *Mike & Molly* 1.01). Her alcohol dependency is frequently addressed and met with canned laughter, for example: "Oh, I do love my glass of wine at the end of the day. It's almost as good as the one at the beginning of the day" (*Mike & Molly* 3.11). She furthermore frequently overshares details of her sex life, making the female protagonist and her sister very uncomfortable. The character of Victoria works as an undertaker's assistant, beautifying corpses for their funerals. Most of the time, the character is staged to be on some kind of controlled substance – mostly cannabis. Both Joyce and Victoria

invectively comment on Mike and Molly's weight issues, whether mistaking Mike for a large bear (cf. *Mike & Molly* 1.10) or a sports team mascot (*Mike & Molly* 1.14), or offering Molly a bean bag chair to compensate for Mike's absence (*Mike & Molly* 1.15).

As mentioned before, the laugh track aids and assists the staging of the Invective Fools' double laughter. While many of the contemporary sitcoms relinquished the use of canned laughter in favor of interpretative ambiguity, series like *Mike & Molly*, *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2007–19), and numerous re-boots like *Will & Grace* (NBC 1998–2006, 2017–20) and *Roseanne* (ABC 1988–97, 2018), still rely on "the aural embodiment of the audience […] in order to show that real people found the events on-screen funny" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 102). Studies show that "voiced laughter […] elicits more positive evaluation than unvoiced laughter," anticipating and inviting a reciprocal response of the viewers (Bachorowski and Owren 256). So, whenever one of the Invective Fools of *Mike & Molly* makes a fat-phobic joke, the laugh track chimes in and ensures a thoroughly social experience of being part of a collective audience. The viewer, reassured by the textual device that shows that it is in fact appropriate to laugh along, feels herself situated in a safe space in which crude fat jokes are allowed to be funny and laughed at since "we are all laughing together" (Kalviknes Bore 24). The laugh track holds the promise of pleasure "in going along with the rest of the crowd" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). However, critical voices emerge and warily comment on the device's crippling of polysemic readings by cuing the viewer into laughter. Oleksinski from the *New York Post*, for example, notes that the laugh track is an unnecessary remnant of sitcom history, starting with *The Brady Bunch*, that is an affront to "TV snobs" and "sophisticated" viewers of the modern television age (cf. Oleksinski). Texts usually offer a 'dominant specularity,' a privileged reading position "from which the world makes coherent, realistic sense" (Bodroghkozy 106). Since the laugh track is an audible device, the viewers are able to notice "when the audience position offered by the programme is one that [they] cannot align themselves with" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 104). Since popcultural products depend on reaching mass audiences, sitcoms, for example, might have to "[sideline] those needs and ideologies of minorities and excluded groups" in order to turn a profit (103). Having said that, the comic success of shows like *Mike & Molly* depends on a rather unambiguous and majoritarian reading of the material. The 'dominant specularity,' consequently, is linked to power hierarchies and hegemonic messages that devalue and disparage certain groups of people and, at the

same time, naturalize and solidify, for example, the stigmatization of fat people. The laugh track serves as a source of information and social proof of funniness that guides the audience's response (cf. Lawson et al. 243). Thus, laughter in sitcoms is able to "[communicate] an injunctive norm that it is acceptable to make light of and trivialize the stereotype topic" (Rhodes and Ellithorpe 361). With regards to fatness, Eisenberg argues that invective

> instances paint a picture of the social acceptability of weight stigma as well as the expectation that people should tolerate these abuses without comment, perhaps even to the amusement of others. (764)

Mike & Molly's disparaging comments uttered by the Invective Fools combined with the laugh track enhance the social acceptability of laughing at and along crude fat-phobic jokes. The series works to cushion this mechanism by depicting the originators of the insulting comments as thoroughly flawed, deficient, and therefore laughable individuals in themselves. Hence, the series leaves the evaluating of invective comments to each viewer, abdicating its social and cultural responsibilities regarding the norm of thinness that the series advertises.

Mike & Molly is additionally characterized by numerous contradictions. In contrast to the Invective Fools' flaws and inadequacies, the protagonists are depicted as coping, responsible, and competent individuals. The staging as successful members of society is diametrically opposed to the invective quality of the majority of the show's humor. Giving fat characters positive attributes can furthermore be seen as a cushioning strategy in order to be able to introduce Invective Fools and their disparaging power. The show was additionally widely celebrated as a very progressive television show, while at the same time, harshly critiqued for its normative messages. On the one hand, *Mike & Molly* was marketed as and celebrated for its fat representation and fat pride in an otherwise abnormally thin televisual landscape. Regarding the matter of fat representation, *Mike & Molly*'s two fat lead character can indeed be seen as groundbreaking, especially when it comes to the representation of romantic relationships and sex. Fat sexuality as well as fat desire on screen had been nearly invisible until the hit situation comedy *Roseanne*, where the titular character and her husband "are unthinkable without [sex]" (Mosher 183).[7] In *Mike & Molly*, it is not the fat

7 Usually, fat sexuality is clearly gendered and most often 'shunted' aside in humorous genres. Fat women tend to be portrayed as either desperately under- or oversexualized.

protagonists who are staged as oversexualized characters but the Invective Fools Victoria and Joyce, representing thin bodies and heteronormative sexuality on screen. Their emphasized sexuality is, on the one hand, staged as a source of humor, and on the other hand, as a marker for the characters' transgression of norms (and, therefore, a sign of their flawed character disposition).[8] The special and progressive trait of *Mike & Molly*, however, resides in the very prominent and central topic of the protagonists' neither under- nor oversexualized relationship. The show neither transgressively depicts nor cancels out the couple's sex life. Rather, the series extrapolates the loving and openly physical relationship, stretching the limits of fat representation without invectively exploiting what Mosher calls the "shock value" of naked fat flesh (171). *Mike & Molly* progressively creates a wider representation of bodies on screen, breaking open genre markers of situation comedies and cultural representation. This progressive note stands in stark

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Famously oversexualized movie roles by Melissa McCarthy include Morgan from *Bridesmaids* (2011), which generated her first Oscar nomination, and, for example, Rebel Wilson's character Fat Amy in the *Pitch Perfect* trilogy. The trope of the undersexualized fat woman generally excludes the character from the center of a narrative which places such roles at the margins, i.e. the "fat best friend." Fat male sexuality also tends to be portrayed rather binarily, especially after the Arbuckle rape trial: "fat adult as child or fat man as impotent – in other words, safely either pre-sexual or non-sexual" (Harker 985). Mosher stresses the fat threat to men's patriarchal power: The hidden phallus under protruding folds of fat is "a handy visual metaphor for the impotence of patriarchal power and masculinity under siege" (170). Neither Mike nor Molly are notably over- or undersexualized, whereas most of the Invective Fools are depicted as sexually transgressive in some way or other. Interestingly, when portrayed, fat sexuality is often queered. This can be seen as an invective representation in and of itself. Television dramedy *Huge* (ABC 2010), a show about the lives and desires of fat teenagers at a weight-loss camp, queers characters who resist the weight-loss ideology of the camp and upset the heteronormative order (cf. Kosier and Renfrow 195f.). Protagonist Molly is also staged to be taken for a lesbian woman quite frequently at the beginning of the first season when, for example, mother Joyce invectively recommends extending Molly's dating pool because lesbians "seem to like the beefy gals" (*Mike & Molly* 1.01).

8 A lot of Joyce's comments can be used as examples for this double function of norm transgression and humor, i.e. "You know, when I was young, I was considered quite the catch. And not just because I put out" (*Mike & Molly* 1.11). As an undertaker's assistant, Victoria is supposed to take care of her mother after she passes away, "When I die, pull out the stops; I want to look peaceful but do-able," inviting the audience to laugh at the transgressive comment (*Mike & Molly* 1.19).

contrast to the countless fat-phobic remarks and jokes of the show that perpetuate and preserve anti-fat biases.

The progressive quality of the show can also be seen in paratexts that celebrate representative matters of fatness and that illustrate the cultural significance of fatness on screen. For example, user "radazzle" writes on the review website "Metacritic" that the show

> [is] refreshing because M&M deals with people who are not super thin, like most Hollywood celebrities are now a days [sic]. M&M is realistic and represents the average working class people. ("Metacritic – *Mike and Molly* Season One")

Fat pride blogger "Krzywoszyja" stresses the importance of representation and calls for more female-centered narratives revolving around fat people that are detached and autonomous from fat discourse:[9]

> I want to see fat women in movies and in [sic] TV where their fat isn't an issue. They just are. I want to see them doing normal things, not constantly obsessing about kilojoules with their girlfriends. I want to see them with partners, enjoying each other's company. I just want to see them. ("Fat Women in Television and Cinema")

However, the show also elicited very negative reactions in paratexts, ranging from academic reflections, online articles, and agitated comment sections. One very prominent case is a blog entry on the popular women's magazine *Marie Claire*'s website that sparked a massive controversy surrounding *Mike & Molly*. Maura Kelly published a ruthless and highly invective opinion piece

9 The power behind fat (and queered) representation can be illustrated through the Broadway musical *Head over Heels* (2018, Hudson Theater). Countless articles have been written about fat lead character Princess Pamela, who not only finds love in her lady-in-waiting but is also portrayed as the uncontested beauty of the storyworld. The thoroughly inclusive story about a kingdom, its rulers, their daughters and their suitors, and the non-binary character of The Oracle shows a world in which acceptance and tolerance are not only ideals but lived truths. Written for a fat female actor, the character of Princess Pamela is staged to be the most beautiful individual in the kingdom. This fact is not once contested, allowing her to heartily sing "Beautiful is all I see when I look at me," and to emphasize beauty's fleeting quality: "For Beauty's standard through all time defines inconstancy" (Pamela qtd. in Saint Lucy). Numerous articles and fan practices surrounding the musical stress the importance of representation on Broadway stages.

called "Should Fatties Get a Room? (Even on TV)" about the show and its fat characters. An excerpt reads:

> My initial response was: Hmm, being overweight is one thing — those people are downright obese! And while I think our country's obsession with physical perfection is unhealthy, I also think it's at least equally crazy, albeit in the other direction, to be implicitly promoting obesity! [...] No one who is as fat as Mike and Molly can be healthy. [...]
> So anyway, yes, I think I'd be grossed out if I had to watch two characters with rolls and rolls of fat kissing each other... because I'd be grossed out if I had to watch them doing anything. To be brutally honest, even in real life, I find it aesthetically displeasing to watch a very, very fat person simply walk across a room – just like I'd find it distressing if I saw a very drunk person stumbling across a bar or a heroine addict slumping in a chair. (Kelly qtd. in Stein)

Many articles and comments have pointed out *Marie Claire*'s role in promoting anti-fat and fat-phobic ideas, mostly demanding apologies from the magazine and the author.[10] Although the original post is unfortunately no longer available, other sources refer to about 1,200 mostly exasperated comments on Kelly's blog entry (Goudreau, Blog). Admitting that she had never actually seen *Mike & Molly*, Kelly seemingly took offense by the sheer existence of a show with fat lead characters (cf. Goudreau, Backlash). Controversies like these are able to shift discourses to reach larger audiences, to heighten their visibility, and to impact contemporary culture. Even though the quarrel subsided quickly, it mobilized people to come together and stand up against invective dynamics on screen.

Even on less visible platforms, invective discourses about the show and its fat protagonists arise. A thread on a popular bodybuilding website, for example, illustrates the invective scale of the discourse. User "yolked" writes, misconstruing television's representational importance,

> Look at these disgusting fuks [sic]! Im [sic] seriously raging at how these actors can get ANY praise. We're now teaching society being obese is acceptable. ("Who Else Is Apauled [sic] by *Mike and Molly*??")

10 Maura Kelly published a response, blaming her own eating disorder for her harsh words. *Marie Claire* did not issue any response or apology.

User "LeoDaVinci" agrees that "people on TV should be beautiful, not real," 'othering' the fat characters on screen (ibid.). Bodies, especially women's, "have for a long time been considered to be a matter of social concern: a sign of social decline, a scapegoat for the fear regarding changing political landscapes, and an affront to the patriarchal regime" (Sherman 37). As I have shown, fatness is a fiercely contested topic of discourse in the United States. Ever-changing definitions of beauty and its ideals have governed previous generations, culminating in the 'thin ideal' of contemporary western culture. Since television is such a vital tool in conveying and shifting cultural ideas, texts like *Mike & Molly* achieve a broader representation on screen, "[representing] a departure in an industry that has more recently featured large people mostly on reality weight loss shows" (Serjeant).

This subchapter examined invective dynamics surrounding the eponymous fat lead characters of the situation comedy *Mike & Molly*. I have shown that the supporting characters of the show are staged to be responsible for most of the fat-phobic remarks that are utilized to elicit humor. I proposed conceptualizing these dynamics with the figure of the Invective Fool, which enabled me to uncover the double laughter that is inscribed in the text. Since the Invective Fools are depicted as thoroughly deficient and inadequate, the text, on the one hand, invites the audience to laugh at the Fools. On the other hand, I have shown that they are equipped with distinct licenses to reprimand, insult, and 'other' the fat protagonists of the show. Aided and supported by the laugh track, the text thus invites audiences to join the invective laughter that humiliates the fat protagonists. I have argued that the staging of Invective Fools in *Mike & Molly* enables an authorizing and cushioning strategy to guiltlessly castigate fat bodies through claims of inauthenticity. While the show, therefore, shields itself from any criticism, it reinforces and perpetuates invective discourses about fatness on screen. Further research on Invective Fools in situation comedies could uncover other socially and culturally sedimented norms that are enforced via the double laughter inscribed in the respective texts.

3.2 Ceasing to 'Do' Female: Auto-Invective Comedy from Phyllis Diller to *2 Broke Girls*

With the Netflix special *Nanette* (2018), Australian stand-up comedian Hannah Gadsby came to transnational fame (cf. Remnick; Haaf). *Nanette* largely focuses on Gadsby's experiences with gender disparity in the comedic domain and her everyday life. She incorporates personal stories about sexual and emotional abuse, her experiences as a queer woman in the stand-up comedy world, as well as her attempts to vernacularly theorize gendered comedy. In her special, Gadsby proposes that aggressive humor is traditionally reserved for men while more complaisant humor is utilized by female performers, "I'm not very experienced in controlling anger. It's not my place to be angry on a comedic stage. I'm supposed to be doing self-deprecating humor. People feel safer when men do the angry comedy. They're the kings of the genre" (*Nanette*). Gadsby, thereby, self-reflexively lines up with the comedic tradition of self-deprecating humor – displaying one's own faults and flaws as a source of humor –[11] that is apparently clearly gendered and culturally reserved for women. With the help of self-deprecating humor, women stage themselves as the 'other,' marking themselves as deficient in order to elicit humor.

In this subchapter, I trace remnants of the comedic legacy of self-deprecating humor in the contemporary US sitcom *2 Broke Girls*. I argue that the show depicts similar invective phenomena directed at a 'self' – auto-invectives,[12] as I label them – that culturally update and perpetuate

11 As I later discuss in greater depth, self-deprecating humor has a long-standing tradition, linked to ethnic and minority humor, which has been employed by numerous female comedians in the past (cf. Greenbaum 132).

12 With the term 'auto-invective,' I want to highlight the differences between the self-disparagement of an existent individual and a fictional character from a situation comedy. Although the 'self' of a stand-up comedians like Hannah Gadsby is also staged and governed by the stand-up comedy genre's rules and conventions, it manifests itself without irritating the relation between the performer and the audience. The single comedian on stage is allegedly disparaging herself, inviting the audience to take pleasure in the deprecation. This process is complicated for televized fictional characters. There, the 'self' is multiplied by the rules of the genre and its affiliation to popular culture. The character of a situation comedy who disparages herself is embodied by an actor whose lines have been pre-written and whose movements have been captured on camera. Various groups of people are involved in the processes of editing, producing, and broadcasting the finished cultural product. To get hold

discourses of gender disparity, 'othering,' and associated power imbalances. The series frequently utilizes one of its protagonists, Max Black, to deprecate herself in order to elicit humor. As I demonstrate later, the sitcom text mellows and flattens any moment of reflexivity for the audience to pause and contemplate the resonances of auto-invective situations. I show that the text not only refuses to respond intradiegetically to the cruel remarks of the character, it also inserts the textual device of the laugh track to invite the viewers to adopt a reading position from which the auto-invective jokes make sense.[13] To this end, I firstly review the traditions and legacies of self-deprecating humor in American entertainment, especially stand-up comedy, since this comedic genre singularizes the performer and the 'self.' This allows me to identify similarities with the contemporary sitcom *2 Broke Girls*'s staging of Max's auto-invective humor. The case study, then, analyzes the distinct character constructions of the show's protagonists and their staging as a source of humor. I argue that Max's auto-invective humor, which is largely based on the character's traumatic backstory,[14] is a clear remnant of gender-based self-deprecating humor traditions of the 20th century.

Self-deprecating humor[15] comprises instances in which individuals reprimand themselves by mocking, humiliating, or disparaging themselves to elicit humor. According to Priego-Valverde, these acts "can occur anywhere in the conversation, either as a simple word or an anecdote" (1). Research on self-deprecating humor is scarce and mostly focused on ethnic and minority humor, like Jewish humor traditions. A lot of ethnic and minority humor works along the lines of an asymmetry between culturally hierarchical

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of the ventriloquized self-deprecation of fictional characters, I introduce the term 'auto-invective' to describe humor that is targeted at the originator of invectives on screen. This enables me to analyze these distinct invective structures of television series and their respective contexts.

13 Theorist Colin McCabe argues for a "dominant specularity" (39), a "reading position constructed by the texts from which the world makes coherent, realistic sense" (Bodroghkozy 106).

14 For a very basic understanding of trauma, I follow Cathy Caruth's deliberations of the term "as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" and that it is "not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 3, 4, emphasis in the original).

15 Terms like 'self-disparaging' (Priego-Valverde), 'self-effacing' and 'masochistic' (Juni and Katz), and "self-deprecating" (Marszalek; Russell) humor are used to describe the same phenomenon. In this project, I use the term 'self-deprecating humor.'

groups. According to Juni and Katz, "ethnic humor can be conceptualized as a manifestation of intrapsychic tension" and "an attempt to control victimization" (120). In particular, Precup argues that "Jewish humor can be understood as a retaliation strategy against oppressors, a self-defense mechanism that often conceals hostility" (207). Juni and Katz argue along similar lines that disparaging the self encourages assimilation and association processes with the host culture. In contrast to the Invective Fools in the previous chapter, the authors also suggest that the victim of self-deprecation shows similarities with the figure of the court jester or fool, who cleverly parodies and exposes the spite of her sovereign. Processes of reflecting on sociocultural conditions with wit and humor, therefore, try "to equalize the attacker's hold over the victim" (Juni and Katz 123).

As argued in Chapter 2.1, women have socially and culturally been constructed as a generally inferior group. Similarly to Jewish humor traditions, self-deprecation is known to be utilized by women in order to question the sociocultural conditions of this sedimented gender disparity. As Sandor suggests, "by setting itself as the victim, and this is particularly true of women's humor, the society, responsible for this victimization, is equally questioned" (Sandor, qtd. in Priego-Valverde 20). For the entertainment world, as Joan B. Levine attests in her 1976 study of male and female stand-up comedians, "self-satire can be expected to be women's niche in comedy" (J. B. Levine 174). Various women in the comedy circuit, as I later argue in more detail, have utilized self-deprecation as a strategy to *not* challenge traditional gender roles, and circumvent gate-keeping mechanisms of and gain access to the male-dominated domain of comedy.

Entertainment spaces have not always been gendered. Until the 1920s, the entertainment industry were a rather gender neutral space. Female performers have consistently been, for example, part of vaudeville acts – even though not in superior numbers. The US American vaudeville theater of the 19th century comprised "[a] broad range of female performers [who] utilized a variety of comedic techniques – skits, characters, songs, paired or solo routines – to entertain the customers" (Russell 9). Performers like Mae West lured audiences with their beauty; Sophie Tucker entertained with uninhibited, invective language and a jovial questioning of gender roles; and Eva Tanguay, the highest-paid and biggest star of the vaudeville circuit at the beginning 20th century "was not beautiful; she danced without grace; she sang poorly in a loud, high-pitched voice. Yet the audience loved her" (Lewis 319). Although female African American comedians had barely been

in the popcultural spotlight, Moms Mabley, for example, performed in front of considerable African American audiences in the early 20th century and "became known as a consistently reliable crowd pleaser, developing routines that often centered on ridiculing older black men who try to dominate women" (Rappoport 112). After World War I, the situation for female performers changed drastically due to a newly intense reaction to women in the public sphere. This sensitivity led to the exclusion and segregation of female performers. The spaces for female entertainers, consequently, moved from the spotlight to much smaller venues with less prosperity. With powerful changes in gender role allocations, women were either forced to quit the entertainment industry altogether or adjust to the new disparaging climate (cf. 111f.).

During this time, invective sentiments about the inferiority of women gained traction – including in the sphere of comedy. Based on Social Darwinism, pseudo-scientific articles proclaimed that "it was biologically unnatural for women to have a strong sense of humor" and "that it was mainly unattractive, ungainly women – the 'rejects' – who frequently told jokes and made witty remarks" (Rappoport 110). The image of the 'unattractive' female comedian is based on "conventional definitions of 'femininity' and 'lady-like' behavior [that] render the stance of superiority inherent in stand-up comedy 'inappropriate' for women" (Russell 3). Since women were expected to adhere to submissive, passive, and demure gender characteristics, humor was regarded as too aggressive. These views, only slightly varied, ran through the following decades. In a 1973 article, linguistics scholar Robin Lakoff claims that "[i]t is axiomatic in middle-class American society that, first, women can't tell jokes – they are bound to ruin the punchline, they mix up the order of things, and so on. Moreover, they don't 'get' jokes. In short, women have no sense of humor" (qtd. in Bunkers 82f.). The gendered socio-cultural shifts in society not only devalued women and female performers but also cemented traditional gender roles that left women with little agency. In order to circumvent these ideological gate-keeping mechanisms, distinct strategies had to be identified to create spaces for female performers.

While Lucille Ball opened up opportunities and paved the way for funny women on television in the 1950s, as I have discussed in Chapter 2.1, female stand-up comedians of the time not only challenged women's allegedly fixed place in the private sphere but also the prevalent patriarchal values. Like Ball on television, Phyllis Diller, for example, explored new avenues on stand-up

comedy stages in the 1950s. Only a handful of other female comedians made their way into the industry. Otherwise, Diller was confronted with an exclusively male-dominated space. As the 1992 documentary about female comedians, *Wisecracks*, argues, gender is always "(at least initially) a barrier/obstacle between [the performers] and the audience." For a stand-up act to be successful, as Russel suggests, the relationship between audience and performer has to be collaborative since "the message cannot be heard if the medium is rejected" (Russell 1). In an interview, Diller reveals that she was largely met with suspicion and rejection from colleagues and audiences, "Being a woman, right away you walk out to almost total rejection. Almost nobody wants you to be a female comic and they give you a lot of static just because of your sex" (qtd. in L. Martin and Segrave 341). When she started her career in 1955, a female comedian that "seizes centre stage, actively engages the audience and commands attention" was very much frowned upon (Russell 4). The self-determined and aggressive conduct of female comedians like Diller collided with contemporary behavioral norms that rest on gender. Russel argues that performers consequently "[cease] to 'do' female" in order to bypass the gate-keeping mechanisms that prevented numerous female entertainers from performing on professional stages (ibid. 5).

In order to rebut and counteract the irritation the female comedian causes, a distinct strategy has been proven to be a success: self-deprecation. While Ball debased herself by embodying a ditzy and naive housewife on screen, Diller told self-disparaging jokes on stage that revolved around her alleged stupidity and inadequacies as a woman and wife, for example, "Driving is too complicated for me and I tell you why: I can only handle one thing at a time. See, I have to pull off the road to blow the horn, I can't chew gum and walk, – honest to God, I have to turn off the shower to sing" (Diller).[16]

16 In her early days, Diller's routines revolved around popular topics like food, sex, family issues, and her allegedly defective self. Later on, she ventured into rather untested territory by starting to ridicule her husband Fang in order to elicit laughter from the audience. In her routine, one of her jokes goes, "My mother told me how to cure Fang's hiccoughs. Hold his head unter water," slowly but steadily macerating and opening up gendered restrictions in comedy and freeing herself and other female comedians from the constraints of self-deprecating humor (Rappoport 109).

It is interesting to note that female self-deprecating humor structurally parallels male sexist humor, which elicits laughter by deprecating women (cf. Gray and T. E. Ford 278). According to Ford, "sexist humor perpetuates power imbalances between men and women," therefore cementing and maintaining traditional gender roles as well as the allegedly superior value and status of men ("Effects Of Sexist Humor" 1094). Female self-deprecating humor also elicits laughter by denigrating the female speaker. While the mere uttering of degrading stereotypes may perpetuate and reinforce them, female self-deprecating humor is also able to destabilize the sedimented gender economy of comedy. The fact that the female performer is initiating and controlling the laughter of the audience yields agency back to the speaker. The audience is, therefore, not laughing *at* but *with* the female performer. According to Bunkers, female self-deprecation "often functions not to demean a particular woman but to establish a common ground among women" (84). In contrast to male sexist humor where the butt of the joke has no agency whatsoever, female self-deprecating humor grants agency to the butt of the joke and, thus, has the potential to subvert and ambiguate the meaning of the deprecation. By utilizing self-deprecation, female performers appropriate disparaging comedic traditions and legacies to further their professional advancement and open new ways for women in comedy. Nevertheless, the affordances of female self-deprecating humor comprise a perpetuation as well as a debalancing of gender disparity.

Besides straightforward self-disparagement, Diller also diminished herself via her appearance. In contrast to Lucille Ball's good looks, which opened the door to her television career, Diller and a lot of other female stand-up comedians have used their bodies to strategically transgress gender-based norms and ideals. For example, Diller's baggy, outlandish clothes, the excessive use of make-up, and her protruding hair quickly became her trademark. According to her obituary in the *Washington Post*, "Diller wore those clothes because she had a great body and for a woman telling jokes back then, that wasn't funny" (Curtis). Whereas Ball was able to utilize her normative beauty to advance herself on TV, Diller had to hide her body and her femaleness in order to not distract the audience from her comedy routine. In 1970 in New York City's *The Village Voice*, a male contemporary critic of Diller, for example, complained about the comedian neither striving to seduce nor appealing to the audience "as a woman should" (qtd. in L. Martin and Segrave 343). Although "Diller's very intentions were to mock the whole fantasy of the beautiful, sought-after blonde," gender-based

expectations narrowed and restricted the female comedian's range of possible forms of expression (ibid. 343). Her disguised body, therefore, served to create common ground for the audience and herself as a performer to ridicule her failures of 'being female.' Self-deprecation, as Russel argues, "allows the speaker to adopt what is essentially an authoritative stance without alienating the majority of the audience members. The (implicit) threat of the female speaker is defused when she sets herself up as the target of ridicule" (Russell 8). In concealing the female body on stage, Diller and other comedians created public female spaces in the comedy world.[17]

Contemporary popular culture frequently references the disparate conditions in the comedy world. For example, Amazon's period dramedy *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017–), which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5.2, stages the gender-based hardships of female comedians in the New York City of the 1950s. The protagonist, an aspiring female stand-up comedian, meets the great Sophie Lennon, a stand-up star in the storyworld. Similarly to Diller, Lennon's stage persona is dressed as a working-class housewife with feather duster in hand, wearing a fat suit and a headscarf. Lennon herself, in contrast, is staged as an upper class woman with a noble and lofty demeanor. When the protagonist encounters Lennon in her luxurious townhouse, she explains the gender-based rules of the comedy business of the time:

> It's a very successful charade, isn't it? [...] It's all fat suit and make-up. [...] Fans don't want to see this. They want the *Hausfrau* from Queens. [...] My goodness, you're so pretty. Why comedy? Can't you sing? [...] Darling, look at you. I mean, really – men don't want to laugh at you. They want to fuck you. You can't go up there and be a woman. You've got to be a thing. You want to get ahead in comedy? Cover up that hole. (*The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* 1.7)

17 In contrast to Diller, Joan Rivers stepped into the spotlight well dressed and groomed in the 1960s. Although she did not conceal her normative beauty, her comedy was very much focused on self-deprecation – her bodily inadequacies and her general failings as a woman. As Martin and Segrave suggest, without self-deprecating humor "she probably never would have achieved the popularity that she did [...] The public was not then ready to accept an overly aggressive female who, in some fashion, didn't pay her dues" (347). With female performances becoming more critical of patriarchal standards and norms, the "rise of self-assertive women in comedy," like Carol Burnett and Lily Tomlin in the 60s and 70s, and Ellen DeGeneres, Roseanne Barr, and Whoopie Goldberg in the 80s and 90s, was on its way (Rappoport 111).

Lennon's remarks condense self-deprecating legacies, emphasizing the need for female performers to "[cease] to 'do' female" in order to advance in the comedy industry (Russell 5). Popcultural products, like *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and Gadsby's *Nanette*, self-reflexively theorize the stand-up comedy genre, its rules, and its legacies. The vernacular theorizing of gender disparity in the genre points to deeply entrenched invective structures in the gender economy of comedy. Although the majority of televized female stand-up performances has appeared to emancipate its performers from self-deprecating content,[18] a 2002 study suggests otherwise. Russell reviews 150 stand-up comedy bits, finding that merely 4.4% of the 113 male performers and 21.6% of the 37 female performers included self-deprecation in their routines. Self-deprecating humor, as indicated, is still more prevalent in female comedic performances than in male.

This subchapter's case study now traces the remnants of gendered self-deprecating humor in the contemporary situation comedy *2 Broke Girls*. In the following paragraphs, I show that the series utilizes its protagonist to elicit humor. I argue that the narrative device of the laugh track, as well as the staging in general, impedes and diverts any efforts to reflexively adjudicate on the actual jocularity of the auto-invective situations. As I discuss, the auto-invective comments of protagonist Max are marked as humorous by the laugh track. They have seemingly no effect on the storyworld whatsoever and are brushed aside. However, the frequent depiction of female auto-invective humor and the subsequent 'othering' of women reinforce and perpetuate gendered invective images and discourses about gender disparity. In a first step, I introduce the protagonists of *2 Broke Girls*, describe their character constructions, and explain their staging as sources of humor. After analyzing Max's auto-invective humor, I identify similarities between the show and the comedic legacy of female self-deprecation.

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18 Ali Wong, for example, frequently breaks taboos on stage. While well advanced in her pregnancy, she performed and filmed her Netflix specials *Baby Cobra* (2016) and *Hard Knock Wife* (2018). Her routine frequently touches on sensitive issues like miscarriages and breastfeeding, sex, one-night-stands, and STDs (cf. Sandberg). *Vanity Fair*'s Nast comments on the liberating quality of Wong's comedy, comparing the image of motherhood in her routines to the staged image of Kate Middleton's motherhood in 2013: "In a world where real-life princesses are still radiating perfection from actual palaces, it's nice that Ali Wong has not only made a career demolishing such façades but is thriving by doing so" (Nast).

As mentioned in the introduction to Chapter 3, the CBS sitcom revolves around the two distinctive protagonists, Max Black and Caroline Channing, and their endeavors to earn enough money to set up their own business. Novak argues that the "contrast between the visual aesthetics of the two main characters assists viewers in perceiving the differences" in their character constructions (58). While blonde Caroline is staged as an optimistic, bubbly, and formerly wealthy character who is focused on money, fashion, and outer appearance, dark-haired Max is constructed as a street-smart, feisty, and sarcastic character who dreams small and tries to get by with the little she has.[19] The protagonists' backstories are also very much contrasted in the show. While Caroline's upbringing is staged to be firmly rooted in the economically carefree upper class, Max grew up in precarious circumstances with an emotionally abusive and addicted mother. In an early episode of *2 Broke Girls*, for example, Max is staged to reminisce about a rather disturbing childhood memory that emphasizes the discrepancy between the protagonists: "I don't do impressions. Well, wait, that's not true, I do one – my mom. But to do that I need a Christmas tree, a gallon of vodka, and a lit cigarette" (*2 Broke Girls* 1.03). Whereas the character of Caroline is staged as a happy-go-lucky socialite, "Max's poorer social class limited her ability to focus on anything other than earning enough money to survive" (Novak 58).[20]

The show, aided by the laugh track,[21] utilizes its protagonists' distinct character constructions as particular sources of humor. On the one hand,

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19 University of Houston–Clear Lake's Professor of English, Craig White, traces the archetype of "the fair lady and the dark lady" in Western culture. Physical features like "rosy-skinned with blonde hair, blue eyes, and adolescent or virginal figure" of the fair lady are often contrasted with features like "darker-skinned, brunette, brown-eyed, sometimes with fuller figure" of the dark lady, who "may appear as a temptress" (C. White). These distinctions not only fit the protagonists of *2 Broke Girls*, but they can also be found in numerous other contemporary US sitcoms, like ABC's *Don't Trust the B— in Apartment 23* (2012).

20 Kehya and Serdaroğlu suggest that lower-class individuals are frequently portrayed as uneducated, struggling with drug and alcohol addiction, often involved in criminal activity, and hailing from problematic backgrounds (104). Similarly, protagonist Max, although portrayed as very capable, did not officially graduate from high school (cf. *2 Broke Girls* 2.24), enjoys smoking marijuana (cf. *2 Broke Girls* 2.12), and is arrested for breaking and entering (cf. *2 Broke Girls* 4.11).

21 I discuss the narrative device of the laugh track as one of sitcom genre's affordances that enables invective structures in Chapter 2.3.

many aspects of Caroline's humor can be traced to her former lifestyle, frequently and humorously clashing with her newfound poverty after her father's Ponzi scheme collapsed. Still impeccably dressed, statements like "Good news! I just found $3 in my pocket and a peanut M&M, so we don't have to spend money on dinner" incongruously elicit humor (*2 Broke Girls* 2.12). The character is, on the other hand, also staged to insult and deprecate other characters. In a Season One episode, Caroline is harassed by a customer's son and his friend at a bar mitzvah. When the two boys rap while throwing dollar bills at her, the character invectively yells, "Listen, hit me with one more dead president and you'll be six feet under with Biggie and Tupac. You understand me, Jew-Tang Clan?" to establish superiority over the other characters (*2 Broke Girls* 1.17).

Protagonist Max is, likewise, frequently staged as a source of humor. Similarly to Caroline, aspects of the character's humor stem from incongruous comments and statements. When, in one episode, Max is staged to listen to Caroline's advice and finally plucks up the courage to kiss the man she has started to have feelings for, she finds out that the woman beside him is his girlfriend – so she goes on to kiss the girlfriend as well. To cover up her lack of knowledge, she incongruously states, "I'm Max and, um, that's how I say hi to everyone. I'm incredibly friendly" (*2 Broke Girls* 1.08). Later on in the diner, thoroughly upset, she tells Caroline, "Are you happy now? You got me to admit that I like him and then you got me to kiss him. And then I kiss his beautiful girlfriend who is black and British – the two cool things I can never be" (ibid.). The last part of her remark stands in stark contrast to the anguish the character is portraying in the scene. Nevertheless, the laugh track indicates and supports the humorous incongruence of the protagonist's statements in both instances and the story goes on.

Max's humor can also be linked to superiority theories, invectively putting down the people around her. A lot of Max's insults are based on racial stereotypes of the supporting characters' diverse ethnic backgrounds. Besides oversexualized Ukranian Oleg, Asian American Han, the owner of the diner at which the protagonists work, is arguably Max's favorite victim of abuse. She frequently and invectively makes fun of his stereotypically subpar height:[22]

22 There are also scenes where Max's behavior towards Han could be read as appreciative. When, in Season Three, Han's mother is in town, the protagonists are helping him

> Han: Guess what, everyone? I have a secret.
> Max: You're a woman trapped in a man's body?
> Han: No.
> Max: You're a man trapped in a woman's body? You're a little boy trapped in a little girl's body?
> Han: I am a man in a man's body.
> Max: We're not talking about your night life. (*2 Broke Girls* 1.18)

> Max: If you ever interrupt me while I am studying [...], I will dropkick your baby-powdered ass back to the Shire with the other Hobbits. (*2 Broke Girls* 3.15)

Various paratexts comment on the invective portrayal of the Asian American as "short, asexual and work-obsessed" and him being "ridiculed for his broken English and failing to 'get' US culture" (Elan). Racially insensitive invective phenomena like these appear in every episode. The evocation of stereotypes and the subsequent invitations for audiences to laugh ambiguate, on the one hand, the power structures of the show, yet, on the other hand, reiterate and perpetuate racially insensitive invectives ("(Meta-)Disparagement Humour" 7).[23]

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to cover up the fact that he has been lying to his mother about having a girlfriend. Although there are, again, a lot of invective jokes about Han's height, the two women agree to support and take care of the situation by visiting a strip joint and go to dinner with Han, his stripper quasi-girlfriend, and his mother (cf. *2 Broke Girls* 3.07). Although the viewer is able to notice that the personal relationships in the storyworld are, indeed, based on appreciation, the surface structure of *2 Broke Girls* appears to be organized by (racially insensitive) invectives, with the character of Max at the forefront.

23 Despite *2 Broke Girls*'s long run, the series was harshly critiqued for its use of offensive racial clichés and sexually transgressive jokes. Various online articles cover Federal Communications Commissions complaints from outraged viewers: *Jezebel*'s Stewart, for example, quotes some of the complaints, "It's 8:30 at night on a Monday and I have to explain to my child what 'fingering' is?," or "Two casual references suggesting anal sex on a first date. Are there no standards anymore on broadcast television?" ("Filthy Jokes"). Megan Angelo, writer and blogger for *Glamour*, went to the trouble of counting every single sex or sex-related joke in one episode (*2 Broke Girls* 4.04): "42, or nearly two sex jokes per minute" ("Sex Jokes"). Goodman, from *The Hollywood Reporter*, denounces the show's racist dealings with Asian American character Han: "Each week Han's broken English gets played like some sorry minstrel show" ("The Sorry State"). *New York Times*'s Emily Nussbaum partly shares in the aversion to the series and "the ensemble, which is conceived in terms so racist it is less offensive than baffling" ("Crass

Apart from incongruous statements and invective comments directed at others, protagonist Max's invective remarks directed at herself are likewise accentuated as humorous by the laugh track. *2 Broke Girls* abounds with auto-invectives, yet they are only uttered by protagonist Max. Neither Caroline nor other character are set up to partake. Auto-invective jokes about Max's poor upbringing, negligent family relations, and past traumatic sexual encounters are met with canned laughter that creates a space of "a collectively agreed notion [that] it is appropriate […] to laugh" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). With the marker of the laugh track, a so-called "play frame" is established "that distinguishes itself from serious talk precisely by making humour and laughter admissible" (Messerli 81). In this frame, the protagonist's exemplary auto-invective remarks are uttered:

> Welcome to the Williamsburg Diner, my name's Max because the hospital wouldn't let my mother call me 'Oops.' (*2 Broke Girls* 3.01)

> I was unconscious when I lost [my virginity] and want to see what it's like! (*2 Broke Girls* 3.07)

> Pressure ups my game. I perform my best when there's a gun to my head. Ask any of my boyfriends. (*2 Broke Girls* 3.09)

> If I learnt anything in life, it's that nothing's more flammable than my dreams. (*2 Broke Girls* 3.09)

> Booth one is all yours. If I wanted to deal with a guy who won't even acknowledge my existence, I'd track down my father. (*2 Broke Girls* 5.10)

The show repeatedly places Max's horrifying experiences of being abducted, held at gunpoint, used as a drug mule, and frequently sexually abused on display. Although *2 Broke Girls* often hints at the difficulties and hardships of its protagonist, the respective scenes are ultimately devalorized by the laugh track and their graveness and severity are, subsequently, re-evaluated as comedic.

Warfare"). Nevertheless, she emphasizes the potential of "a deep female friendship [and] raw humor about class" and the viewing pleasures attached to it (ibid.).

Other characters merely function as a blank canvas for Max's auto-invectives, only rarely staged to react to the statements, otherwise waiting for the laugh track to subside and carrying on the conversation afterwards. One of these exceptions occurs in a Season Five episode, where Han invites his employees to a work function in an Escape Room. Max auto-invectively hints at an abduction experience in her past, "What the hell is this place? This looks like the room I was kept in when that trucker 'borrowed' me for three days" (*2 Broke Girls* 5.05). Although Caroline is staged to react, she utilizes Max's horrifying statement to carry on a fight the two friends were having over paying their rent. Caroline is upset that Max has been overcharging her since she moved in years ago, so she reacts disproportionately by asking Max, "Did you overcharge him, too?" (ibid.). The laugh track chimes in and marks the exchange between the protagonists as humorous, inviting the viewers to join the apparent mirth and bypassing Max's auto-invective.

Protagonist Max's humor strategies show distinct resemblance to the discussions on the self-deprecating humor traditions that I have laid out above. In the following, I want to examine two auto-invective strategies of the show, which are evocative of and reflect on the legacies of the devaluation and restrictions of women in the comedic domain. Firstly, Max's auto-invective statements serve as a source of humor. Similarly to past female comedians, the show places auto-invectives on display as a common ground for ridicule and mockery. The protagonist's humor directed at her own traumatic backstory serves as a similar source of humor as, for example, Phyllis Diller's jokes about her bodily appearance and deficits as a woman. Since most of the auto-invective remarks revolve around the character's alleged worthlessness, "[t]he implicit threat of the female speaker is defused when she sets herself up as the target of ridicule" (Russell 8). Aided and assisted by the laugh track, Max's auto-invective comments about her past become common ground at which the viewers are invited to laugh. The protagonist's remarks allow her "to adopt what is essentially an authoritative stance without alienating the majority of the audience members" (ibid. 8).

Secondly, the character's aggressive, racially insensitive humor has to be reeled in. As Martin and Segrave attested for Joan Rivers in the 1960s, an aggressive female performer has to "pay her dues" in order to achieve any kind of success in the comedic domain (347). Following this logic, the series has to counterbalance its female protagonist's aggressive and invective humor with self-deprecation as "part of the price of admission to the ranks"

(ibid. 355). Through auto-invective humor, Max is denigrated and turned into an acceptable object of laughter. The protagonist's aggressiveness, standing in contrast to a traditional understanding of gender roles, is compensated with auto-invective features. Additionally, the show creates a duality in its protagonist. In contrast to Diller's veiling of her femininity, *2 Broke Girls* masculinizes its central figure in a different way. The character's full name, as mentioned in a Season Six episode, is Maxine George Black. The series, therefore, facilitates and encourages its protagonist to "[cease] to 'do' female" by not only giving the character a masculine middle name, it also stages her to abbreviate her given name to Max, which can be read as masculine as well (Russell 5; cf. *2 Broke Girls* 6.22). In line with Gadsby's vernacular theorizing above, the series sets up the protagonist to perform both aggressive and auto-invective humor.

Female auto-invective humor, as mentioned before, can also be read to destabilize and undermine disparaging comments. In *2 Broke Girls*, however, the subversion falls flat. As protagonist Max is constructed as a tough but traumatized individual, a victim of abuse and sexual harassment, the audience, being witness to these confessions, may be able to identify with and relate to the character. Max's auto-invectives can, thus, serve as a basis of female empowerment. Following Priego-Valverde, auto-invective humor can also be a sign of personal strength, deliberately facing one's own imperfections (cf. 3). Max, staged to have experienced trauma, could serve as an inspiring example of coming to terms with and humorously dealing with past mental and physical suffering. The laugh track of the show, however, thwarts any efforts of reading auto-invective humor as subversive. Following Brown's deliberations on "meta-disparagement humor" that "refers to jokes that explicitly target a minority while implicitly ridiculing those who would laugh at the joke at face value," the protagonist's remarks directed at herself could be read as a mocking of existing stereotypes and the people using them (Brown xi). However, as she goes on, meta-disparagement "may, in fact, reinforce and perpetuate" these stereotypes (xi, 2). *2 Broke Girls*'s laugh track instantly marks the protagonist's auto-invective remarks as humorous and laughable, offering, on the one hand, a collective experience of "[feeling] at one with the few dozen people s/he can hear laughing, and by extension with millions of others across the country" (Medhurst and Tuck 45). On the other hand, the laugh track simultaneously marks the auto-invective comments as unproblematically funny (Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). Lastly, the laugh track succinctly follows the auto-invective remarks so that any kind of reflection on

the side of an implied viewer is dismantled and obstructed. The viewer has no time to spend on contemplating the actual jocularity of the comments, let alone the social and cultural resonances of her laughter.

In the comedy special *Nanette*, Gadsby illustrates her personal experience when trauma clashes with comedy:

> What I had done with that comedy show [...] was I froze an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and I sealed it off into jokes. And that story became a routine, and through repetition, that joke version fused my actual memory of what happened. But unfortunately, that joke version was not nearly sophisticated enough to help me undo the damage done to me in reality. Punch lines need trauma because punch lines need tension, and tension feeds trauma. (*Nanette*, Netflix)

Similarly, the trauma in *2 Broke Girls* stays episodic, forgotten once the cash register chimes at the end of each episode. Messerli's "play frame" for situation comedies, "achieved by a number of external and internal humour cues, such as TV programme listings or indeed the laugh track," overrides more meaningful dealings with auto-invective comments and the related trauma in the show and converts productive conversation starters into sources of laughter (Messerli 81f.).

Following the sitcom genre's logic to reach mass audiences, minority group ideologies in *2 Broke Girls* are sidelined (cf. Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). This not only includes the racially insensitive humor for which the show was harshly criticized, it also comprises the allegedly inferior and laughable position of female characters constructed by auto-invective humor. Thus, in line with constructing a superior reading position, the viewers of *2 Broke Girls* "are being invited to find laughable the behavior of marginalized groups" (ibid. 83). The privileged reading position, aided by the laugh track, perpetuates and reiterates imbalanced gender-based relations.

In this subchapter, I have shown that the contemporary situation comedy *2 Broke Girls*'s staging of one of their protagonists is strongly informed by the traditions and legacies of the gendered economy of comedy. Therefore, I have given a brief overview of female self-deprecating humor strategies of the past. By disparaging their appearances and/or their failings as women, female performers were, at times, able to circumvent gate-keeping mechanisms of the male-dominated domain of comedy without threatening traditional gender roles that would prevent them from performing in the first place. I have also proposed to transfer the term 'self-deprecating' to

'auto-invective' humor, which enables me to substantiate the ventriloquated image of the 'self' in televisual texts. In my case study, I have argued that *2 Broke Girls* utilizes auto-invective comments made by its protagonist Max Black in order to elicit humor. I have shown that the text constructs a dominant reading position from which the auto-invective humor of the protagonist makes sense. Although the auto-invective remarks are based on Max's traumatic personal experiences, the laugh track unquestioningly signals humorous intent, and other characters are only rarely staged to react to them. I have also established distinct connections between the self-deprecating strategies of female comedians in the past and the staging of *2 Broke Girls*'s auto-invective humor. In both instances, women elicit laughter by deprecating themselves in myriad ways as well as "[cease] to 'do' female" (Russell 5). The show's disparagement of its female protagonist hinges on a gender-based imbalance of power, and reiterates and perpetuates discourses of 'otherness' and alterity. Gadsby, therefore, states in her comedy special:

> I built a career out of self-deprecating humor. That's what I've built my career on. And... I don't want to do that anymore. Because, do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who is already in the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me. (*Nanette*)

She proposes that self-deprecating and, by extension, auto-invective humor always comes with the risk of degrading already structurally marginalized groups of people.

Auto-invective humor, however, is rather pervasive in the US American television landscape. For example, the protagonist of NBC's *30 Rock* (2006–13) Liz Lemon is, as Nussbaum suggests, "rarely [...] an empowering role model" ("In Defense of Liz Lemon"). Her mishaps and self-aware auto-invective comments are a major source of laughter in the show. *Veep*'s protagonist Selina Meyer also auto-invectively diminishes her position as a woman in politics: "No, no, no, I can't identify as a woman! People can't know that. Men hate that. And women who hate women hate that, which, I believe, is most women" (*Veep* 3.2). While auto-invective humor is able to perpetuate stereotypes, it can also subvert existing power relations, targeting not the self but rather societal circumstances (cf. Strain et al.

88f.). In *2 Broke Girls*, however, the protagonist's auto-invective comments rather reinforce and perpetuate notions of 'otherness' and alterity.

In this chapter, I established that situation comedies strongly rely on humorous strategies of deprecation and disparagement of a particular 'other.' In two case studies, I have analyzed invective constellations and dynamics that exemplarily trace where socially manifested discourses of 'otherness' are connected with humorous strategies that invite audiences to laugh.

In the first section, I focused on an analysis of the network sitcom *Mike & Molly*, which exhibits strong deprecation of its eponymous fat protagonists. In proposing the figure of the Invective Fool – a thoroughly flawed character staged to have distinct licenses to speak – I argued that the series establishes invective humor strategies that enable claims of inauthenticity and manifest socially sedimented reservations against fat bodies on screen. The second section addressed gender-based 'othering' in the CBS situation comedy *2 Broke Girls*. I argued that the show updates and perpetuates legacies of gendered self-deprecating humor. One of the *2 Broke Girls*'s protagonists is frequently staged to utilize auto-invective remarks in order to elicit humor, while simultaneously reiterating and manifesting socially embedded and gendered systems of inequality. Through the analyses of *Mike & Molly* and *2 Broke Girls*, I have uncovered invective humor strategies that heavily rely on the disparagement and mockery of an 'other.'

4. Reflexive Invectivity: The Comedy of Super Niceness in *Parks and Recreaction*

To better comprehend the manifold facets of the overall topic of invectivity, this chapter examines situation comedies that reflect on and make invective humor a subject of discussion. While the previous chapter focuses on how invective strategies based on discourses of 'otherness' and alterity elicit humor, this chapter is interested in how the reflection on invective strategies can serve as a source of humor. I define the reflexive use of invective humor as a problematization and revision of symbolic practices of disparagement that then become the engine of sitcom narratives. For this, I have opted to focus on Super Nice sitcoms. I argue that these shows radically invert the familiar and prominent invective logic of television, especially in the sitcom genre, which usually relies heavily on mockery, humiliation, and embarrassment. These shows are recognized by a staged reflexive handling of invectives and the prominent inclusion of Super Niceness as a source of their humor.

As argued before, invectives are essential to the grounding of the sitcom genre – they can, moreover and importantly, act as a catalyst for the exploration of the genre's self-understanding and its own boundaries. The reflexive use of invectives can be described in a broader cluster of sitcoms. At one end of the reflexive spectrum, a show like HBO's *Veep* (2012–19), which has been labeled an "opera of insults," exploits the excessive usage of artful invectives as both an ample source of humor and a self-aware reflection on the intensity and dimension of pressure that the political sphere demands from its occupants (Fallon). Again and again, and in line with Kelleter and Jahn-Sudmann's notion of serial outbidding, *Veep* invectively outperforms itself and other shows (cf. "Die Dynamik serieller Überbietung"). This chapter, however, positions itself at the exact opposite of *Veep*'s excess, namely, in a cluster of sitcoms described by a "Comedy of

Super Niceness" (Paskin). The term was coined by *Vulture*'s Willa Paskin, describing the sitcom *Parks and Recreation*'s reflexive "championing [of] good old fashion[ed] niceness" (Paskin). I utilize Paskin's term for series that, as I argue, radically and reflexively invert the use of invectives and counterpose them with niceness. Super Nice shows, thus, privilege humor that is influenced by a genuine belief in human interconnection and sincerity. Of course, disparagement and appreciation are always interrelated: without one the other could not exist. However, the sitcoms' Comedy of Super Niceness, which I examine in this chapter, reflexively differentiates itself from mere appreciation. As I show in the following case studies, the Comedy of Super Niceness is more than the necessary counterpart to invective humor.

I propose that television series writer and creator Michael Schur can be seen as an auteur-figure of sincere and Super Nice comedies. His creations, *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009–15), *Brooklyn 99* (FOX 2013–19; NBC 2019–), and *The Good Place* (NBC 2016–20) allegedly ring in a "new tone in prime-time comedy," at which I want to take a closer look (S. Anderson). Before shining some light on the divergent structure of this chapter, I introduce the principle texts of the following case studies.

The political satire and mockumentary sitcom *Parks and Recreation* was broadcast during NBC's Thursday night comedy line up from 2009 to 2015. After receiving mixed reviews for a more cynical and darker first season, *Parks and Recreation* ultimately evolved into "a show about togetherness" (L. Holmes, "Return to Pawnee"). The show provides humorous insights into the inner workings of local government by following the extremely ambitious and affectionate Deputy Director of the Department of Parks and Recreation, Leslie Knope. In contrast to *Veep*, *Parks and Recreation* uses, among various other devices, the protagonist's sincere and elaborate compliments as a source of humor. The police procedural *Brooklyn 99* is set in the fictional 99th police Precinct in Brooklyn, New York. It revolves around the gifted but immature detective Jake Peralta and his colleagues. Rather than focusing on "dead bodies with severed limbs in pools of blood," the plot usually covers fraud and robbery cases in order to shift the audience's attention to the heartfelt interpersonal relationships between the characters (Palumbo). The show's source of humor decidedly stays away from disparagement since *Brooklyn 99*'s "specialty is scoring laughs without taking the shortcut of humiliation" (Nussbaum, "Good Trouble"). Schur's *The Good Place* follows protagonist Eleanor Shellstrop into the afterlife, the initial premise of the show being that a bureaucratic mistake has led her to being assigned to

The Good Place – a heaven-like paradise – despite her morally questionable life on earth. The show's laughter, as with Schur's other creations, is hardly ever staged to disparage others, but it is rather "explicitly *about* morality" (S. Anderson, emphasis in the original).

As mentioned before, Michael Schur's œvre preferentially yet not exclusively concerns itself with the Comedy of Super Niceness. I consequently argue for the importance of engaging with a broader scope of his work. This chapter, thus, is structured differently from the other analytical chapters. My research is organized around *Parks and Recreation* as the central text of my analyses, yet it is complemented by Schur's other situation comedies at productive points of intersection. The first subchapter argues, from the perspective of media economics, that *Parks and Recreation* utilizes the notion of Super Niceness as an outbidding strategy in order to stay culturally relevant (cf. Kelleter and Jahn-Sudmann). In contrast to *Veep*, the show does not focus on increasing the amount and/or intensity of invectives in its storyworld, but rather is staged to prominently counterpose invectives with Super Niceness. From a general cultural-historical perspective, the second subchapter argues that the notion of Super Niceness is used as a strategy to move contemporary sitcoms away from the nihilism and cynicism that is often associated with postmodernism. In contrast, Super Nice sitcoms depart from humorous pleasures of invective transgression to instead privilege humor based on sincerity and the genuine belief in human interconnection. Thirdly, from a socio-cultural perspective, I show that in Super Nice situation comedies humorous disparagement and humiliation are frequently directed at white, male, middle-aged characters. I argue that this mockery initiates negotiations of white male privilege, and shifts power imbalances in favor of formerly marginalized characters.

4.1 The Invective Logic of Serial Outbidding

As described in Chapter 2, sitcoms like HBO's *Veep* (2012–19) are well known for their invective bandwidth, from the use of profanities and obscenities to verbal and symbolic abuse of their characters. As can be seen with shows like these, paratexts and fan cultures, as Kanzler argues, "[canonize] certain scenes of invective as 'classics' that they work to keep in circulation, and [deliberate] the creativity of new scenes against the backdrop of this canon" ("Invective Spectacle" 154). From videos on YouTube (i.e. "Collection of Veep

Insults (Vol. 1)") to online magazine articles (i.e. "The 15 Cruelest 'Veep' Insults, Ranked," "5 Best Insults From Veep To Add To Your Lexicon (& 5 That Are Too Savage)," and "26 Insane 'Veep' Insults We're Still Laughing At" (Boucher; Rankin; Stryker)), *Veep*'s paratexts and fan practices constantly curate invective cultural snippets in a variety of media formats. In his 2008 article about aggression on prime-time network television, Glascock reviews a quantitative study from the early 1980s which attests that sitcoms usually have the highest amount of verbal aggressions, i.e. insults, putdowns, yelling, threats, and name calling (Glascock). He introduces a longterm study that shows an increase of specific forms of verbal aggression over time in comedic settings (cf. Scharrer). Glascock thus speculates that "over the years verbal aggression may have increased during prime time" (Glascock 270; cf. Russo 4f.). This supposed trend was further facilitated and fostered by the emergence of cable television networks, like HBO, in the 1970s.[1] In contrast to network television channels, cable TV is not subject to the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) regulations that prevent network channels from, for example, using "'grossly offensive' language" ("Obscene, Indecent and Profane Broadcasts").[2]

In this subchapter, I show that there are several situation comedies that radically invert the allegedly prominent invective logic on television. These shows are, therefore, distinguished by their highly reflexive approach to scenes of invective and their prominent inclusion of Super Niceness. Along these lines, recent trends in television suggest a considerable demand for nice and kind people on- and off-screen. Not only does *The Ellen Show* (NBC 2003–) invite viewers to do good in their lives with its signature slogan "Be kind to one another," television programming is radiant with 'good' shows. In varying degrees of irony, *The Good Wife/Fight* (CBS 2009–16; 2017–), *The Good Place* (NBC 2016–20), *Good Girls* (NBC 2018–), *The Good Doctor* (ABC 2017–), *The Good Cop* (Netflix 2018), *Good Trouble* (Freeform 2019–) and *Good Behavior* (TNT 2016–17) negotiate the inherent goodness of their characters on a variety of network channels and streaming services (cf. Surrey). Furthermore, *Vulture*'s television critic Willa Paskin emphasized the allegedly

1 By 1990, "57% of US households subscribe to cable TV service" and in 2012 "93% of American households have access to cable broadband" (Cable's Story).

2 Furthermore, network channels' depictions of sex and physical violence are seen as "far more tame than programming found on pay TV" (Labaton).

kind humor of situation comedy *Parks and Recreation*[3] (NBC, 2009–15), which she termed "the Comedy of Super Niceness" (Paskin). She demarcates the show from other series in the NBC Thursday night comedy line up that all allegedly share distinct features of discomfort. According to her, shows like *The Office* (2005–13), *30 Rock* (2006–13), and *Community* (2009–15) can indeed be read as "mortifying [and] humiliating," yet she argues that under disgruntlement, embarrassment, or egomania, most characters can be described as good people (ibid.). For *P&R*, however, Paskin asks, "Has a sitcom ever had so many characters that are variations on a 'sweet, kind person'?," emphasizing that nice comedies allegedly "[abandon] mining the uncomfortable for laughs, in order to explore the comedic potential of super nice people" (ibid.).

From a perspective of media economics and following Kelleter and Jahn-Sudmann's concept of serial outbidding, I argue that the proposed concept of Super Niceness is used as an outbidding strategy concerned with radically reversing *P&R*'s usage of invectives. In contrast to other situation comedies that increase the amount and/or intensity of invectives in order to stay culturally relevant, *P&R* is staged to notably counterpose invectives with Super Niceness. Before diving into the subchapter's case study, I take a closer look at the concept of serial outbidding. This dynamic, implemented by various strategies, is concerned with forms of intensification. Usually attested by dramatic series, increasing depictions of explicit physical and symbolic violence allegedly signify "the complex realities of […] life" (James qtd. in J. McCabe and Akass 90). By radically reversing outbidding strategies, sitcoms like *P&R* open up alternative discourses and stay culturally relevant.

In 2014, American Studies scholars Kelleter and Jahn-Sudmann conceptualized serial outbidding as a powerful dynamic at work in US American television (cf. Kelleter and Jahn-Sudmann). They argue that for serials to be considered complex and qualitatively valuable, they constantly have "to reproduce and be innovative at the same time" (Sudmann, "Watching Lost" 101). This logic can be traced back to the poetics and rhetoric of classical theory as early as the first century AD, namely to *aemulatio*. The term displays the relationship between *agon* (meaning competition) and *imitatio* (meaning imitation), highlighting not only the competitive but also the artistic nature of the endeavor to be equal to or, even better, to surpass a previous speaker (cf. ibid. 102). Kelleter and Jahn-Sudmann tried to capture these surpassing

3 From now on, *Parks and Recreation* is referred to as *P&R*.

dynamics in televisual narratives with the concept of serial outbidding that is "understood […] as a form of (visibly) exposed intensification, at work both within a series (intraserial level) and between distinct series (interserial level)" (ibid. 101).

In contrast to classical theory, Sudmann argues that serial outbidding follows the existent logic of outbidding in Quality Television and is, therefore, even more highly connected to capitalist cultural conditions (cf. "Watching Lost" 189). While serial outbidding is not concerned with individual desires and agendas, it is seen as a combined schema, operation, and force that comes to the fore in cultural and social arenas, geared to turn monetary profits for the industry. The concept of serial outbidding, consequently, describes the process of serial narratives striving to outbid each other and themselves in order to be able to meet the requirements of cultural competition (cf. Kelleter and Jahn-Sudmann 207ff.). Since competitively extending complex narrative strands over episodes and seasons entails the risk of limiting the serial continuation because texts may wear themselves out, series are faced with the challenge to balance serial standardization, and aesthetic and narrative innovation with themselves and other series in order to compete in the extensive and comprehensive TV landscape of the US (cf. Sudmann, "Watching Lost" 101). The dynamic of serial outbidding can, therefore, be seen as one of the most successful strategies for series to competitively renew themselves.

Sudmann describes two dimensions of competitively enhancing series: qualitatively and quantitatively. While the former illustrates "how far *qualities* like realism, the transgressive, etc. can be […] visibly intensified," the latter outlines quantifiable forms of expansion, like the number of characters, the width of plot arcs, or the production value of any given series ("Watching Lost" 102, emphasis in the original). For instance, *Lost* (ABC 2004–10), as an established example of highly complex narratives on a network television channel (cf. Mittell, "Narrative Complexity"), distinguishes itself quantitatively from other series by having produced a very costly pilot – "which, at the time, cost $13 million, making it the most expensive to ever be produced" – and, later, by qualitatively relocating the narrative complexity to an intraserial level, namely by addressing the temporality of events in its own narrative (M. Barr).

In the following, I examine the role of Super Nice Comedy in the seven-season run of *P&R*.[4] I argue that Super Niceness is used as an outbidding strategy that radically reverses *P&R*'s usage of invectives and counterposes them with niceness. I read the show's twist on invective phenomena in sitcoms as a means to stay culturally competitive "by operating with and intensifying those aesthetic elements or features that are [...] established by [the show] itself" (Sudmann, "Watching Lost" 102).

One of the most popular 'nice' pillars of the show is the relationship between the protagonist Leslie Knope and her best friend, Ann Perkins. A considerable amount of paratexts address this special bond of female friendship on screen: *Washington Post*'s Elahe Izadi, for instance, describes the two characters as "the Holy Grail of female friendship, and a very rare one for TV" ("On Galentine's Day"). The two characters are staged to meet in the first episode of the show when Ann is complaining about (her boyfriend falling into) an abandoned pit in her neighborhood (cf. *P&R* 1.01). Honored to be asked for help, the protagonist makes the project of turning said pit into a stately park her number one priority for the next seasons. The two characters bond and remain best friends until the end of *P&R*'s run.

The peculiar and uplifting relationship between the two characters is best chronicled by the very elaborate, artistic, and highly sophisticated compliments Leslie is staged to devise for her friend. Compliments like "Oh, Ann. You beautiful, naive, sophisticated newborn baby" (*P&R* 4.01), "You are a beautiful, talented, brilliant, powerful musk ox" (*P&R* 5.06), or "you are the most beautiful glowing sun goddess ever" (*P&R* 6.16) function – just as invectives in other sitcoms – as a major source of humor. The incongruent quality of these compliments is staged to elicit laughter from the viewers. *Netflix* even used Leslie's compliments to advertise the show. In an official promotion clip published on YouTube, the streaming service supposedly cut together "Every Compliment Leslie Knope Ever Gave to Ann Perkins" (Netflix). In this self-proclaimed "Compliment Guide," the protagonist's verbal admiration for her best friend is not only staged to be humorous

4 Since the focus of this subchapter is on the show's Super Nice Comedy, I am not concerned with the well-documented changes in the protagonist's character construction between Seasons One and Two before the show finds its Super Nice format and tone (cf. N. Jones; M. Goldberg; A. Tyler, "*Parks and Rec* Season 1"). I take a closer look at these marked differences in Chapter 5.1, where I examine embarrassment as an invective strategy in the mockumentary sitcom *P&R*.

and easily learnable, it is also depicted as a desirable and hip quality: "Start out simple. […] And then add some flare. […] Now that you're comfortable, let's get weird" (ibid.).

In addition, *Netflix*'s promotion video highlights the marked difference between Super Niceness and invective phenomena. Since insults and disparaging comments have been generously used under the pretext of realism and comedy for decades, and since sitcoms are usually unquestioningly celebrated for their invective actuality and transgressiveness, it seems that audiences are considerably more used to invective excesses on screen than to their appreciative counterparts. This possibly disturbed viewing experience is paralleled by the staged reaction shots of Ann when protagonist Leslie pays her intricate compliments. Although Ann is, initially, frequently staged to be astonished and taken aback due to the unusual appreciation, the character gets to know the protagonist better and is soon able to assess her childlike positive expressions. These reaction shots are staged rather to illustrate Ann's self-consciousness than to emphasize the character's rejection of Leslie's compliments. Ann is, consequently, staged to mirror and accompany the viewers in their learning curve of Leslie's (and *P&R*'s) Super Nice style of communication, which stands in stark reflexive contrast to invective phenomena in other situation comedies.

Another established pillar of *P&R*'s Super Niceness that is frequently negotiated in paratexts can be seen in the show's invention of Galentine's Day. In the storyworld, the protagonist is known not only for her kind words, attentiveness, and affection for the people around her, but is also staged to be very imaginative in making up reasons to celebrate friendship. For example, for Leslie's closest acquaintances, she crafts personalized calenders commemorating shared adventures – like "Haircut Day" to remember the day Leslie and Ann went to the hairdresser together for the first time, or "Salad Day," a "terrible day" that involved eating salad and is now celebrated to "never forget" the suffering (Sharp). One of the protagonist's most popular commemorative celebrations, however, is Galentine's Day, which the protagonist describes as follows:

> What's Galentine's Day? Oh, it's only the best day of the year. Every February 13th, my lady friends and I leave our husbands and our boyfriends at home and we just come and kick it breakfast style. Ladies celebrating ladies. (*P&R* 2.16)

The protagonist is also staged to insist on preparing attentive and highly personal gifts for her female friends:

> If you look inside your bags, you will find a few things: a bouquet of hand-crocheted flower pens, a mosaic portrait of each of you made from the crushed bottles of your favorite diet soda, and a personalized 5,000-word essay of why you are all so awesome. (*P&R* 2.16)

Leslie's made-up holiday celebrating the women in her life is staged to Super Nicely circumvent the invective potential of a heteronormative holiday like Valentine's Day. As *The Guardian*'s Hill describes, Galentine's Day

> states boldly that we are whole and complete beings in and of ourselves – it does not matter what we have "achieved." What better way to proudly assert that just because we are single we are not alone than to go all out this 13 February? Romantic love may come and go with fleeting, sometimes baffling regularity, but our girlfriends remain steadfast, they stick through thick and thin. (E. Hill)

As can be seen with Hill's article, the popularity of the pseudo-holiday Galentine's Day soon overcame *P&R*'s fictional boundaries and entered the international market.[5] It did not take long for the commercial realm to catch up and cunningly exploit a highly capitalist fake feast day, with brands like Walmart and Target providing appropriate merchandise (cf. Garber). Despite articles lamenting the commercial nature of this "marketing ploy" (Eber), most paratexts praise the show's invention as a "festival [that has become] part of the culture at this point" and that "is political, in the gentlest and most cheerful of ways" (Garber). When Izadi gives an account of how the show and its values inspired her "to be better a friend to the women in [her] life, to unabashedly express [her] love for these friends and to actively show them [her] gratitude for their support," the cultural purview of *P&R* can be seen in how the series was able to affect and empathize its viewers in a prosocial way ("On Galentine's Day"). In the world of Pawnee, the fictional hometown of the characters in the storyworld of *P&R*, Galentine's Day is

5 The pseudo-holiday has even managed to be featured in the Urban Dictionary: "Galentine's Day – February 13th, the other half of valentine's day [sic], when you celebrate your love for your lady friends! single or no" (Urban Dictionary - Galentine's Day).

only one of the many Super Nice celebratory days that honor and celebrate genuine human connections, yet certainly it is the one with the most cultural reach.[6]

Although niceness is staged to occupy an important and sizable place in *P&R*'s narrative, the show, indeed, partly relies on the comic potential of disparagement and invective phenomena. This is partly accounted for by the format of the show, the mockumentary. As I examine in Chapter 5.1, the source of humor in mockumentary sitcoms partially relies on the intruding and invective effects of the camera. The common reaction shots in sitcoms are mostly triggered by embarrassment in mockumentaries, panning or cutting to the reactions of characters who have witnessed embarrassing situations (cf. Schwind, "Embarrassment Humor" 65). These awkward moments occur "when an encounter feels too real: unscripted, unplanned, and, above all, occurring in person" (Middleton, *Documentary's Akward Turn* 2). In addition, a fair number of humorous situations in *P&R* are staged to be at the expense of other human beings. However, the majority of invectives are uttered by characters not in the main cast of the Department office, signalizing a marked divide in the moral set-up of the series. Therefore, the show introduces a very distinct separation between two groups of characters: the main characters ultimately and ambitiously fighting for the betterment of Pawnee, and a group of characters trying to invectively obstruct any efforts to improve the living conditions in their town.[7] Since the show does not utilize the genre-specific laugh track, there is no guidance for audiences for when it is allegedly appropriate to laugh.

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6 Another example of *P&R*'s celebratory holidays is 'Treat Yoself-'Day on October 13 (cf. *P&R* 4.04), "a day to pamper yourself and indulge in your most extravagant whims" with your friends (cf. Lang).

7 The characters of the latter group are usually portrayed as not well equipped for the fundamental demands of their professional positions (i.e. in politics, media contexts, and the economy). They are staged as corrupt and incompetent, and stand in stark contrast to the ambitious and attentive staging of the protagonist and her colleagues. Many of the strong figural invectives of the storyworld stem from this group. For example, talk show *Pawnee Today*'s frontwoman Joan Callamezzo is constantly staged to search for sensational stories to bring to her viewers. If she cannot obtain them, she is frequently staged to invectively lash out against the characters who hold her back. In a Season Two episode, she is staged to be furious with the protagonist: "That segment was a disaster. Don't you ever *bleep* with me like that again. This is *Pawnee* *bleep* *Today*. Do you know that I bumped a cat that can stand up on its hinders for you? You disgust me, Knope. Get out of my sight" (*P&R* 2.19).

The invective phenomena of the show can definitely be read as sources of humor, yet I argue that the viewers are invited to morally laugh at the futile attempts of the invector rather than invectively laughing at the invectee.[8]

In this subchapter, I have shown that the concept of Super Niceness can be used as an outbidding strategy that is concerned with radically inverting the usage of invectives. *P&R*, in contrast to other situation comedies, does not increase the amount and/or intensity of invectives in order to stay culturally relevant, but rather, is staged to notably counterpose invectives with niceness. As I show in Chapter 4.2, other sitcoms created by Michael Schur have adopted and refined this reversed outbidding strategy, with *The Good Place* leading the way. In (parts of) its intradiegetic world (the afterlife), for example, characters are incapable of swearing. Although profanities are eradicated, stand-ins are still in place and draw attention to and reflect on invective phenomena, i.e. when protagonist Eleanor Shellstrop is forced to say "fork" instead of 'fuck,' "shirt" instead of 'shit,' and "motherforking shirtballs" instead of its profane counterpart (cf. *The Good Place*).[9]

4.2 Michael Schur's Œuvre: From Postmodern Cynicism to the Metamodern Belief in Human Interconnection

Over the years, not one of Michael Schur's situation comedy creations thrived in television ratings. *Brooklyn 99*'s seventh season, for example, was only ranked number 105 in viewing figures in the 2019–20 television season for broadcast series, while *The Good Place*'s final season was ranked number 92 (Porter). Likewise, *Parks & Recreation*'s second season was ranked number 108 (cf. Gormon), while its seventh season landed on rank 119 (cf. de Moraes).[10] Schur and his creations are, nonetheless, very much valued in the American TV landscape. Not long ago, network channel NBC "offered him a dream opportunity: total freedom for his next project," which would eventually become *The Good Place* (S. Anderson). His shows, furthermore,

8 One intriguing exception is the constant and humorously invective deprecation of character Jerry, which I address in Chapter 4.3.

9 Michael Schur, in an episode of a *Vanity Fair* podcast called "Still Watching by *Vanity Fair*," admits that the eradication of profanities for subsequent replacements is also a profitable way to circumvent FCC regulations (Robinson).

10 From now on, *Parks and Recreation* is referred to as *P&R*.

gathered a sizable and faithful following. When, in 2019, *Brooklyn 99* was canceled on FOX after five seasons, fans were devastated and took to Twitter's social media reach. Even Hollywood greats, like *Hamilton* creator Lin-Manuel Miranda, participated in endeavors to renew the show: "RENEW BROOKLYN NINE NINE/ I ONLY WATCH LIKE 4 THINGS/ THIS IS ONE OF THE THINGS/ #RenewB99" (qtd. in Joseph). One day after the sitcom's cancellation on FOX, co-creator Dan Goor tweeted in relief: "NBC JUST PICKED #BROOKLYN99 UP FOR SEASON 6!!! Thanks in no small part to you, the best fans in the history of the world!" (qtd. in Joseph). Described as "the nicest show on TV," *Brooklyn 99*'s eighth and last season was aired on NBC in the fall of 2021 (L. Goldberg). Schur's other creations have also been described in Super Nice ways. While *P&R* is labeled as "a love letter to America as we wish it could be" (VanDerWerff), *The Good Place* is construed as a show with "an unambiguous moral code – based around friendship, collaboration and principle" (E. E. Jones).

In this subchapter, I analyze the concept of Super Nice Comedies from a general cultural-historical perspective. I propose that the "Comedy of Super Niceness" (Paskin), as prominently displayed in TV-auteur Michael Schur's œvre[11] of situation comedies, is a strategy to move contemporary sitcoms away from the nihilism and cynicism that is often associated with postmodernism.[12] Instead, Super Nice comedy privileges humor that is informed by the metamodern and sincere belief in human interconnection.

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11 It is interesting to note that the Quality TV notion of the TV-auteur is seemingly inextricably linked with "controversial depictions of violence and sexuality" (Later 535). Newman and Levine's definition of the TV-auteur, however, is composed in broader terms. She is said to be "an artist of unique vision whose experiences and personality are expressed through storytelling craft, and whose presence in cultural discourses functions to produce authority for the forms with which [she] is identified. The rise to prominence of television auteurs and of authorship discourses surrounding them functions to distinguish certain kinds of television from others, and, as in cinema, to promote auteur productions as culturally legitimate." (qtd. in 534) Showrunners and creators that deviate from the patterns of 'splatter'-TV are ostensibly overlooked when it comes to Quality TV discourses. This subchapter works towards diversifying the pool of TV-auteurs by including creators of comedic formats consistent with the line of argument in Chapter 5 that describes a *Quality Turn* in comedy.

12 With regard to situation comedies, Defibaugh argues that shows like *Arrested Development* (Fox 2003–06; Netflix 2013–19), *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989–98), and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (FX 2005–13; FXX 2013–) share postmodern qualities like "amoral characters bathed in cynicism and self-referential humor" ("From Cynicism and Irony

I read the departure from televisual performances of postmodern nihilism, irony, and cynicism as a departure from the detached pleasures of invective transgressiveness. The subchapter is, therefore, divided into two larger sections. The first entails a theoretical contemplation of metamodernism as a successor of postmodernism, and Wallace's deliberations on and call for sincere television. The second section, then, takes a closer look at Schur's œvre of Super Nice situation comedies. Starting with a reading of *The Office* (NBC 2005–13), Schur's first job as a television series writer and producer, I exemplarily trace sincere and metamodern features in *P&R* (NBC 2009–15), *Brooklyn 99* (FOX 2013–19; NBC 2019–), and *The Good Place* (NBC 2016–20), which allegedly ring in a "new tone in prime-time comedy" (S. Anderson).

The discussions surrounding postmodernism are numerous, extensive, and seemingly different in every cultural arena: "[T]here is no one such thing as 'the' postmodern" (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 4). Film theorist Jim Collins argues that it is rather challenging to "provide an adequate working definition of postmodernism that allows for diverse applications to television" (Collins 759), and the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* declares that "[n]othing about postmodernism is uncontroversial" (McHale 456). 'Post-,' as a prefix, indicates that the movement or period chronologically follows modernism, which is said to have ended in the mid-20th century. In contrast to modern approaches, postmodernism follows Lyotard's theory that is skeptical of the "master narratives of progress, enlightenment, and human liberation" – instead, it focuses on regional, self-legitimating "little" narratives (ibid.). While modernism prioritizes formal purism and functionalism, and is engaged in imaginations of utopia, linear progress, and reason, postmodernism favors "nihilism, sarcasm, […] the singular and the truth" (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 4). The generations of artists that are attributed with postmodern aesthetics allegedly focus on precepts of parataxis, deconstruction, and pastiche. Postmodernism's most essential features, as McHale suggests, "are hardly 'innovative,' since most if not all of them can be found in narratives from earlier periods," like, for instance, metafictional self-reflexivity (457).

Soon, this postmodern self-reflexive quality found its way into television, as Wallace suggests in his groundbreaking article "E Unibus Pluram:

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to Sincerity"). Farmer stresses, as I later show in more detail, that "[i]rony [has been] a fundamentally dissociative rhetorical technique" in television comedy (104).

Television and U.S. Fiction" in 1993. He suggests that the Watergate scandal and the subsequent resignation of former President Richard Nixon in 1974 are responsible for unveiling the characteristic function of irony in culture and society – being able to see the "'credibility gap' between the image of official disclaimer and the reality of high-level shenanigans" ("E Unibus Pluram" 162). Not to Wallace's surprise, just one year later, NBC's *Saturday Night Live* (1975–) premiered with its "irreverent cynicism, specializing in parodies of (1) politics and (2) television" (ibid.). As *Wired*'s Wattercutter suggests in line with Wallace,

> by the 1980s almost all of television had become painfully ironic because it was a way to alleviate the tension between TV's not-too-subtle message of *Look at all these beautiful people enjoying themselves* and the viewer's status (typically) as lone, and perhaps lonely, observer. Making the viewer feel like he or she is smarter than the entertainment they're consuming then becomes the entertainment. (emphasis in the original)

Wallace comes to the conclusion that "irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture" ("E Unibus Pluram" 171). According to him, irony teaches the viewer to invectively laugh at and ridicule characters who have been put down or humiliated on screen (cf. ibid. 180). Consequently, he argues that "irony, entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function [and is] singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (ibid. 183). TV's ability to mock its own principles as hollow makes it also nearly untouchable to charges of critics: "TV's self-reference means that no one can accuse TV of trying to put anything over anybody" (ibid. 180).

That "cynicism is the natural response to television" can be seen in two postmodern situation comedies of the 90s and 2000s: *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989–98) and *Arrested Development* (Fox 2003–06; Netflix 2013, 2018–19) (Farmer 105). The most prevalent feature of these sitcoms is its lack of human connection between their characters. *Seinfeld*, "the show about nothing," is not concerned about active goals in the narrative or genuine emotional communication between characters, but rather is known as a sitcom in which "there was no hugging and no learning" (Colburn). Both *Seinfeld* and *Arrested Development* are staged to portray superficial, narcissistic, and amoral characters who emphasize the nihilistic and cynic mindset of postmodernism (cf. Defibaugh). *Arrested Development* is said to be "a formalist

triumph that rewards multiple viewings perhaps more than any other in history," while heartily embracing pessimism and leaving little to no room for emotional dalliances (Farmer 104). For American Studies scholar Michial Farmer, these two series "create and reinforce the notion that television comedy is primarily a vehicle for irony," cynicism, meta-referentiality, and detachment – not for deep human relationships, sincere motivation, or earnest communication (ibid.).

Apart from television, a lot of research has been done on postmodernism in film. Jim Collins proposes that "some films become hyperconscious, owning and enjoying the glorious babel of postmodern culture" – paralleling Wallace's critiques – which he labels "eclectic irony" (qtd. in Farmer 105). Collins goes on to describe a different set of films that are staged to stay clear of ironic manipulation, "[attempting] to reject it altogether, purposely evading the media-saturated terrain of the present in pursuit of an almost forgotten authenticity, attainable only through a sincerity that avoids any sort of irony or eclecticism" (ibid.). 'New Sincerity,' as he labels it, rejects postmodernism and posits "a lost but nevertheless attainable golden age into which neither technopoly nor information overload nor cool irony can intrude" (ibid. 106). In line with Collins, Wallace argues that only a few daring artists try to work through postmodern cynicism and irony towards a more naive and sentimental mindset (cf. Zahl). He believes that the

> next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of "anti-rebels," born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point, why they'll be the next real rebels. (Wallace, E Unibus Pluram 192f.)

The 9/11 terrorist attacks, eight years after "E Unibus Pluram," are widely attested as the end of postmodernism (cf. Ahn; Watercutter; Rothstein). The date sent a shockwave through the country, exposing the inappropriateness of the cynic and nihilistic postmodern stance. After the terrorist attacks, postmodernism was not able to provide the clarity that the world demanded. British and American Studies scholar Sunyoung Ahn argues that "the attacks changed the very fabric of cultural life […] [and] rendered postmodernism

obsolete because its core principles of ironical detachment and ethical relativism no longer resonated with the reality of post-9/11 America" (236).

Numerous other currents in literature, architecture, and culture emerged and gathered speed,[13] metamodernism among them. Philosophy scholar Robin van den Akker and Cultural Studies and Theory scholar Timotheus Vermeulen introduced their take on metamodernism as postmodernism's successor. The prefix 'meta,' according to their proposal, does not refer to a self-referential quality but rather to the etymological meaning "amid" and "between." The authors, therefore, argue that metamodernism is located in between modernism and postmodernism, encompassing qualities and utilizing features of both currents and negotiating between them:

> It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 5f.)

Metamodernism facilitates long, repressed narratives of longing that are structured by beliefs. Postmodern skepticism is encountered by a modern naiveté that results in a metamodern "[moving] for the sake of moving, [attempting] in spite of its inevitable failure; [metamodernism] seeks forever a truth that it never expects to find" (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 5). Across the arts, the image of utopia simultaneously reappeared, reinvigorating productive engagement and renewing an appreciation of empathy. In contrast to the postmodern generic 'dystopia,' the trope of metamodern utopia unites a collective fantasy and an individual desire. The oscillating quality of metamodernism allows for "the adoption of postmodern irony to generate a feeling of sincerity;

13 Generally labeled as post-postmodernism, the period describes an extensive set of advancements in architecture, critical theory, art, culture, and literature. Terms like architectural post-postmodernism (T. Turner), deliberations on Russian culture in trans-postmodernism (Epstein et al.), socio-political thoughts in post-millenialism (Gans), and digimodernism or pseudo-modernism, which proposes that the internet's "central act is that of the individual clicking on his/her mouse to move through pages in a way which cannot be duplicated, inventing a pathway through cultural products which has never existed before and never will again," describe the pluralism of post-postmodernism (Kirby).

and […] the use of postmodern melancholy in order to invoke hope" ("Utopia" 55). Following Vermeulen and van den Akker's line of thought, metamodernism "acknowleges that history's purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist" but will nevertheless seek it "*as if* it does" ("Notes on Metamodernism" 5, emphasis in the original). Postmodern irony, as denounced by Wallace, is counterbalanced with the more sincere and authentic stance of metamodernism, consequently proving that the two currents are "not exactly the opposites they initially seem" (Farmer 107).

Metamodern features seem to have popped up "[all] across the pop culture spectrum, the emphasis on sincerity and authenticity that has arisen has made it un-ironically cool to care about spirituality, family, neighbors, the environment, and the country" – television being no exception (Fitzgerald, "Our Age's Ethos"). In 2009, *Glee* (Fox 2009–15) vocally paved the way for a more sincere kind of television comedy. In the musical dramedy's pilot episode, the protagonist Rachel is staged to proclaim, "There's nothing ironic about show choir!" (*Glee* 1.01), asserting the sincere quality of the series that is tailored to "people who actually like singing, dancing, heartfelt moments and rooting for the little guys" (Watercutter). When Conan O'Brian was replaced by Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show* (NBC 1954–) only a year after he took over for him in 2010, he closed his final show with the following words, metaphorically advocating the metamodern age of television and paralleling Vermeulen and van den Akker's notion that "millenials" can see through the postmodern cynicism, yet are "united around the *feeling* that today's deal is not the deal they signed up for" ("Utopia" 58, emphasis in the original):

> All I ask is one thing, and I'm asking this particularly of young people that watch: Please do not be cynical. I hate cynicism; for the record, it's my least favorite quality. It doesn't lead anywhere. Nobody in life gets exactly what they thought they were going to get. But if you work really hard and you're *kind*, amazing things will happen. (Fitzgerald, *Not Your Mother's Morals*, emphasis mine)

O'Brian's call for authenticity stands in stark contrast to earlier, more cynical late night show hosts. Letterman, for example, was notoriously labeled "the ironic eighties' true Angel of Death" by Wallace ("E Unibus Pluram" 180).

While the postmodern comedy approach seems to be centered on "liking something for how awfully unlikable it is," metamodern, sincere – or Super Nice – comedies keep irony in check by constructing characters who set an

example that "it's cool to be sweet" (Szymanski). Sitcoms like *Modern Family* (ABC 2009–) and *Community* (NBC 2009–14, Yahoo! Screen 2015), although mostly focused on the "comedy of discomfort" (Paskin), show signs of "the redeeming qualities of communal experience" (Azevedo 75). These shows utilize features of the postmodern (irony, self-referentiality, intertextuality, etc.) while relying on features of the metamodern (sentimentality, sincerity, authenticity).

This shift from cynicism to sincerity is prominently displayed in TV-auteur Michael Schur's œvre of Super Nice situation comedies. In the following paragraphs and with particular interest in the mockumentary sitcom *P&R*,[14] I will argue that his televisual texts are greatly informed by the metamodern belief in sincerity and the "emphasis [on] personal connections, diverse communities, and an overall optimism" (Dooley). I propose that his shows, in contrast to earlier postmodern sitcoms, move away from cynicism and rather, privilege humor that is informed by metamodern qualities and the sincere belief in human interconnection Wallace had called for.

Majoring in English, Schur attended Harvard University and graduated with honors. During his time there, he presided over *The Harvard Lampoon*, the university's humor magazine whose alumni include famous comedians and comedic writers such as Greg Daniels (with whom he worked on the American adaptation of *The Office* (NBC 2005–13)), late night show host Conan O'Brian (*Conan*, TBS 2010–), and *Saturday Night Live*'s writer and "Weekend Update" host Colin Jost. In 1998, six months after graduating, Schur was hired at *SNL*, where he was part of the writing team and produced "Weekend Update" until he left the show in 2004 (cf. L. Goldberg). Shortly after he began working on *SNL*'s news segment, the 9/11 attacks disrupted and paralyzed the (comedy) world. Schur followed *SNL*'s creator and producer Lorne Michael's call that "[t]his is the world now, and we make jokes about this world. We don't shy away from it, we don't gloss over it" (Schur, "How 9/11 Influenced the Writing").

While attending university, Schur was already devoted to the writings of David Foster Wallace, especially his 1996 epic *Infinite Jest*. Schur not only wrote his undergraduate thesis on the novel's relation to postmodernism, but he also acquired the film rights to Wallace's epic (cf. Hyden; cf. Farmer 107). In 2011, Schur was asked to direct a music video for The Decemberists "that so fully combines [his] favorite book – the first he ever read that [he]

14 I will take a closer look at the comedic format of the mockumentary in Chapter 5.1.

felt was written the way he thought and spoke – and his favorite band" (Itzkoff). In the video to "Calamity Song," Schur orchestrates a version of Wallace's fictional game "Eschaton," to which the author dedicates more than 300 pages in the book.[15] Schur also worked to include allusions to Wallace and *Infinite Jest* in his televisual work. After he announced a reference-packed episode of *P&R* on Twitter (*P&R* 5.17), *Vulture*'s Evans took the trouble to note down every one of them, mostly allusions to character names and locations in the book (cf. "Last Night's *Parks and Rec*"). For inspiration, Schur allegedly keeps numerous Wallace quotes on the walls of his office. One in particular from 1993 points to the nature and core of Schur's work:

> Look, man, we'd probably most of us agree [sic] that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is? In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it. (Wallace qtd. in S. Anderson)

Schur himself declares that "[i]t's not a stretch to say that [Wallace's œvre has] influenced everything I have ever written," devoutly trusting in the conviction that sincerity should conquer irony (Schur qtd. in Palumbo). Like Wallace, Schur loves the wordplay and gamesmanship of postmodern irony but wants authenticity and earnestness to win in the end. According to an interview with him, things fell into place when he heard Wallace talk about the significance of interpersonal relationships: "The scariest possible thing that you can engage in is the very basic human connection where you say 'I feel this way,' or 'I am scared,' and his worldview was: that's what has to win; that's how people should write; and that's how people should connect with each other" (ibid.). In his situation comedies, Schur, therefore, never shies away from genuine human emotions, from what Wallace describes as being

15 "Eschaton" is described as a highly complex computer-aided wargame for adolescents. The players must lob tennis balls (akin to nuclear warheads) across several tennis courts, representing the northern and southern hemispheres (Pille). Wallace ends his excursus and, consequently, the game "with a child […] having his head crashed into a computer monitor" (Itzkoff).

"unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic" instead of being afraid of being human (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 694).

In the following, I exemplarily analyze Schur's œvre of Super Nice situation comedies for metamodern and sincere characteristics. Starting with *The Office* (NBC 2005–13), I argue that apart from individual moments of sincerity that set it apart from the British original, the show strongly relies on postmodern features and the connected pleasures of invective transgressiveness. In contrast, *P&R* (NBC 2009–15) refuses to give in to irony and cynicism and stages its protagonist as an advocate for sincerity and authenticity, adapting invective spaces. The interpersonal connections on screen are not defined or restricted by (political) opinions, but rather are determined by genuine emotions and the characters' respect for each other. While *P&R*'s characters are staged to have to repeatedly justify their professional motivation, sincerity, and earnestness in a still rather cynical storyworld, the intradiegetic world of *Brooklyn 99*'s Precinct (FOX 2013–19, NBC 2019–) leaves no doubt that the characters are not only good at their jobs but also good to each other. Last but not least, Schur's *The Good Place* (NBC 2016–20) centers around the idea of what it means to be a good person and is staged to utilize philosophical teachings to explore morality and human interconnections in the plot.

The Office (NBC 2005–13)

While the American *The Office* adopted the postmodern mockumentary format and a lot of the sarcasm of its British counterpart (BBC 2001–03), it turns away from the more biting cynicism of the original. The American version mediates the sometimes painfully awkward cringe moments and contains "more conventionally comic logical absurdities and plot elements" (Middleton, *Documentary's Akward Turn* 155). Whereas the British version invites the viewers to emotionally detach from the characters to revel in the invective transgressiveness of the plot, the American version's cringe frequently invites the viewer to identify "with the characters and their moments of happiness" (ibid. 160). The more optimistic and hopeful tone of the adaptation can be read as ingrained in American identity and culture. "American exceptionalism" and the "notions of uniqueness and predestination," as comprehensively described by Heike Paul (14), "still determine contemporary discussions [and self-descriptions] of US-American identities" (11).

Another major difference between the shows is the construction of the main characters David Brent and Michael Scott. Schur, still rather inexperienced as a sitcom writer and unsure about following the success of the British original, was convinced of the potential of the adaptation by the changes Greg Daniels had planned for the American version: "We're going to make the endings of our shows optimistic. We're going to make Michael Scott a more sympathetic character" (Palumbo). While the American version adopted the postmodern mockumentary format and a lot of the sarcasm of its British counterpart – for instance, the protagonist's inappropriateness, narcissism, and his insatiable desire for admiration and love – it turns away from the more biting cynicism of the original and stages its characters as intrinsically good people. Although the American adaptation frequently stages its protagonist as an exceedingly politically incorrect imbecile, it shows "effort to make the viewer feel happy for Michael as well, in spite of our discomfort with his awkward and offensive qualities" (Middleton, *Documentary's Akward Turn* 157).

The American version of *The Office* does include moments of authenticity and sincerity between characters but is, nevertheless, hardly able to overwrite the postmodern detachment and irony of the show in general (cf. Palumbo). The romantic tension between characters Jim and Pam is, for example, staged as a constant source of sincere emotionality and as a strong point for viewer identification. While the British original only has a few noteworthy relationships, the American adaptation displays not only different romantic relationships but also sincere platonic friendships. The connection between Michael and Pam, for example, begins "as an awkward and unpleasant boss–secretary relation and developed over the show's many seasons into a true friendship" (Middleton, *Documentary's Akward Turn* 166). Nevertheless, as said before, these moments of sincerity and genuine human interconnection are swept away by the overpowering postmodern and invectively transgressive tone of the show.

Parks and Recreation (NBC 2009–15)

In contrast to *The Office*'s reliance on postmodern and invectively transgressive features, *P&R* is staged to mostly reject nihilism and cynicism. Originally planned as a spin-off of *The Office*, the first season of *P&R* depicts the protagonist Leslie Knope with a distinct likeness to *The Office*'s Michael Scott. After mixed reviews and critiques following Season One, the

character construction of Leslie noticeably changes. Instead of watching the protagonist fail and get embarrassed over and over again, "Schur [allegedly; KS] realized it was far more interesting to watch a competent (if still quirky) woman navigate and occasionally conquer a flawed system in a world of morons" (Arras). Hereafter, I mostly focus on later seasons in which the Super Nice tone of the series has solidified.[16] Apart from direct references to Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), the show's Super Nice Comedy exemplifies the "insistence that fiction should fight the wave of postmodern cynicism and despair with a complicated mixture of sincerity and irony" (Farmer 107). In the following, I concentrate on the protagonist's metamodern quality of caring (about various things, people, and jobs), the oscillation between cynicism and sincerity, the concept of utopia, and the sincere quality of relationships between characters.

When looking at metamodern character values in *P&R*, the protagonist Leslie Knope has to come to mind. She is staged as the flagbearer of Super Niceness in the show, and she has to constantly justify and promote her markedly caring and attentive nature. Freelance author Sebastian Moitzheim (i.e. for the German weekly newspaper *Zeit*), for example, describes her as a heroic figure who encapsulates the show's sincere message that it is, indeed, "cool" to care, to be passionate about something, and to stand up for what one believes in rather than to fight against something (cf. Moitzheim; Fitzgerald, "Our Age's Ethos"). Leslie Knope, Deputy Director of a very small branch of the government in a very provincial town, is staged to care strongly about the people for whom she works. By beautifying their town with the help of the Department of Parks and Recreation, she hopes to elevate the citizens' quality of living. Her passion is epitomized in one of the pilot episode's voice-over narrations where Leslie concludes a public forum with, "These people are members of a community that *care* about where they live, so what I hear when I'm being yelled at, is people *caring* loudly at me" (*P&R* 1.01, emphasis mine). The character is staged to refuse to be discouraged by people giving her a hard time and obviously yelling at her. Rather, she is motivated by people engaging with their surroundings – and, simultaneously, she motivates people to engage with their surroundings. In Season Three, character Ben Wyatt is consequently staged to wonderingly describe the citizens of Pawnee after sitting in on a public forum in which

16 For more details concerning the shift between Seasons One and Two, please see Chapter 5.1.

they are trying to decide what to store in the city's time capsule: "These people are weirdos. But they're weirdos who care" (*P&R* 3.03).

When, in a Season Two episode, the protagonist is staged to be a judge of Pawnee's beauty pageant, the viewer quickly realizes that Leslie is staged to assess the candidates very differently from the other judges (cf. *P&R* 2.03). While the others pay attention merely to superficial and sexual qualities of the competing women, Leslie wants to caringly and purposefully find "the representative of womanhood in our town. […] Whoever we choose is gonna represent the ideal woman for a year. She'll be someone little girls in South Central Indiana look up to" (*P&R* 2.03). Leslie's aspirations are staged to fall short – her favorite, Susan, loses to Trish, the stereotypical image of a one-dimensional woman. Instead of surrendering and ceasing to care, the protagonist phrases a utopian vision for the future of women in Pawnee, "[t]his isn't the first time that Susans have lost to Trishes and it won't be the last. Susan and I will continue on until the women of Pawnee are judged not by the flatness of their tummies but by the contents of their brains" (*P&R* 2.03), highlighting the outdated and detached nature of beauty pageants in general. Even if some of the protagonist's endeavors fail, her ambition, determination, and purpose are often staged to unveil wrongs and to motivate other characters to be better. *P&R*, as a Super Nice Comedy, is a show that invites viewers to actually care about and revel in the metamodern adoration of a miniature horse named Li'l Sebastian. After the horse's sudden death, the memorial ceremony, including a heartfelt rendition of the power balad "5000 Candles in the Wind" (by the intradiegetic band Mouse Rat), is as ridiculous as it is sincerely moving.[17]

The oscillation of irony and sincerity is firmly baked into the set-up of the show. I want to take a closer look at two character constellations that personify this metamodern quality: city planning duo Ben Wyatt and Chris Traeger, and the relationship between Andy Dwyer and April Ludgate. Characters Chris and Ben are introduced as auditors at the end of the second season when the city of Pawnee has severe budget issues (*P&R* 2.23). While Chris is "literally"[18] staged as the most upbeat and cheerful character of the show, Ben is introduced as a strictly professional and pessimistic character.

17 The crowd-pleasing mini-horse was even spotted in a cross-over episode in *The Good Place* (cf. *The Good Place* 3.07; Ivie).

18 The character's verbal trademark is using the word "literally" as often and incorrectly as he possibly can.

Chris is responsible for setting up a lighthearted mood while Ben is in charge of crushing it, staged to sternly propose radical economizing. This opposing dynamic mellows over time when the plot shifts from the actual audit to the characters being integrated into the show. The inital "push and pull" between the utopianism and cynicism of their relationship, however, is generically metamodern (Farmer 113).

An even more quintessential example for metamodern television is the relationship between Andy and April. While Andy, "the lovable human embodiment of a golden retriever" (Wanshel), is marked by childishness, enthusiasm, sincerity, and endearing stupidity,[19] the character of April can be read as "a living embodiment of the sort of cool postmodern irony that Wallace describes and decries in 'E Unibus Pluram'" (Farmer 110). Most of the time, the character of April is staged to seem detached from her surroundings, to frequently revel in the emotional pain of others, and to hide her feelings under numerous layers of snarky comments and petulant looks. This is staged to slowly change when April becomes enamored with Andy in Season Two. When her then-boyfriend Derek and his partner Ben[20] make fun of "meathead" Andy and an old adorable couple dancing, April counters with rejecting their ironic stance, confronting the characters with, "God, why does everything we do have to be cloaked in, like, fifteen layers of irony?" (*P&R* 2.16). The relationship between Andy and April is certainly staged as a source of humor, but it does not invite the viewer to invectively laugh *at* them. At their wedding – "a literal marriage between cynicism and optimism, between corrosive irony and childish sincerity" (Farmer 116) –, Andy's vows are clearly meant to elicit laughter:

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19 For example, Andy Dwyer is staged to break both of his legs by falling into a pit (cf. *P&R* 1.01) and, later, he is too comfortable being pampered by his then-girlfriend Ann to take the casts off his well-healed legs (cf. *P&R* 1.06). The infantile character is also staged to get into rock fights with "a crazy dude" (*P&R* 2.02), to live in the abandoned pit he fell down previously in the show (cf. *P&R* 2.03), to have numerous alter egos (i.e. FBI Agent Bert Macklin (cf. *P&R* 2.07)), and to respond to April's confession of love with "awesome sauce. Dude, shut up!" (*P&R* 3.07). Other characters are aware of Andy's limits but nevertheless embrace him. For instance, Donna is staged to assess him with, "Andy, you're fine but you're simple" (*P&R* 2.15) and his ex-girlfriend Ann describes him as "a baby in a straightjacket – completely defenseless" (*P&R* 2.19).

20 April herself is staged to describe their relationship as follows: "Derek is gay but he's straight for me but he's gay for Ben, and Ben's really gay for Derek. And I hate Ben," emphasizing the ironic quality of the statement behind the odd threesome (*P&R* 2.01).

> April, you are the most awesome person I have ever known in my entire life. I vow to protect you from danger and I don't care if I have to fight an ultimate fighter, or a bear, or [the magistrate; KS], your mom. I would take them down. I'm getting mad right now even thinking about it… I want to spend the rest of my life – every minute – with you. And I'm the luckiest man in the galaxy. (*P&R* 3.09)

Under the Super Nice humor of Andy's words, the moment is sincerely moving. Even April is staged to smile at his words, portraying a rare human and emotional side of her character, once more inviting the viewer to recognize the sincerity and authenticity of the scene and to connect with the characters on screen. *P&R*'s Super Nice Comedy is able to "leave the audience with satisfaction and emotional fulfillment" as a response to the pervasive nature of cynicism and irony (Dooley). The cynicism of April and the sincerity of Andy "balance each other out," without privileging one or the other (Farmer 116).

Another metamodern characteristic of *P&R* can be found in the inclusion of the concept of utopia. The best example, once again, is the protagonist herself and the setting of the series: the arena of politics. Her undying and irrevocable belief in the power and meaningfulness of a democratic government stands in stark contrast to the notion of politics "that has been, since Watergate, most open to cynicism and irony" (Farmer 117). Leslie's own political aspirations awaken when, at the end of Season Three, she is approached by administrative scouts. She runs for city council in Season Four, encountering numerous struggles along the way. When her campaign managers resign and abandon her due to her low approval ratings, it seems as if the protagonist must surrender to the political detachment of her potential voters and abort her ambitions. Leslie's friends and colleagues are staged to aid and support her through this tough time. In the words of creator Schur, "The group of people that she was closest to stepped up and said, 'We don't know what we're doing, but we'll help. We'll figure it out together'" – ultimately winning the election for Leslie (Palumbo). Named as one of the themes of the show, Schur wanted to stress that "[t]here's a support system that is a basic requirement of human existence. To be happy and successful on earth, you just have to have people that you rely on" (ibid.). In the face of adversity, the protagonist's unwavering belief in the power of democracy and her ability to change something for the better make up a basic utopian attitude. The metamodern aspect of utopia – committing

to "an impossible possibility" (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 5) – is mirrored in the protagonist's campaign slogan: "Knope, we can." The homophones "Knope" and "nope," a variant of "no," parallel the metamodern utopian catch-22. Inspired by former President Obama's slogan "Yes, we can," the show builds upon the wave of hope on which he was elected. With a gesture to move on from the pessimistic and detached past, Obama inspiringly closed his inauguration speech in 2008, only one year before *P&R* premiered: "With hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents and endure what storms may come. Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested, we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter" (Former President Obama qtd. in Westphalen and Marshall). For the protagonist of *P&R*, this hope translates to working as hard and meticulously as she possibly can because even the "66,218, plus or minus 5,000" citizens of Pawnee, Indiana deserve someone who cares and strives for something bigger (Knope 3). In order to achieve something meaningful, Leslie is staged to "[go] through a series of challenges, and somehow [get] right back up again and [refuse] to turn sour on the process" (Palumbo) – striving for an "impossible possibility" (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 5). Although the viewer is invited to laugh at Leslie's ambition, she, ultimately, "is change we can believe in, even though we suspect it will never actually take place, at least in the cartoonish world of Pawnee" (Farmer 112).

Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory defines utopia as a vision of "a society in which various social, political, and economic ills of the world have been solved, leaving an ideal realm of justice and tranquillity" (Booker 624). In the storyworld of *P&R*, one particular place comes to mind – certainly not Pawnee, but the neighboring city of Eagleton, Indiana. As described in *Pawnee: The Greatest Town in America* (2011), wealthy citizens of Pawnee founded Eagleton on the western outskirts of the town in 1817 because they found Pawnee's "soil untenable and the smell unpleasant" (Knope 125). As the protagonist makes abundantly clear, this was the moment when the bitter enmity between the two cities started. While Pawnee is described as barren and malodorous, as a town with "lots and lots of fissures," Eagleton is staged to be a "vanilla-scented" town on a slightly elevated hill with "natural curative hot springs" that allow for very uncommon palm trees to grow in Indiana (cf. *P&R* 5.08; 125, 136). Eagleton's significantly better living conditions and an overall paradisaic vibe stand in stark contrast to Pawnee, whose catchphrase has rather unfortunately been "Pawnee: First in

Friendship. Fourth in Obesity" since 2009 (Knope 7). According to the town's fictional official website, Pawnee was not named after the Nebraskan Native American Pawnee tribe, but "[l]egend has it, Reverend Howell chose 'Pawnee' as the name for our city accidentally – a functional illiterate, he tried to write 'Paradise' on the city charter and his scrawls were misinterpreted" ("About Pawnee"). At the beginning of Season Six, the protagonist's tireless work to align Pawnee's reputation, wealth, and living conditions to Eagleton's utopian standards is crowned with success. Staged not without a little malicious glee, Leslie learns that Eagleton "accumulated too much debt and the only way to save it […] [is] by reabsorbing it, thus merging both towns" (cf. *P&R* 6.03; A. Tyler, "Why Leslie Hates Eagleton"). Pawnee, or 'Paradise,' is ultimately staged to incorporate the paradisaic and utopian characteristics of Eagleton.

Another greatly sincere characteristic of the show's Super Niceness is the unusually strong interconnection between its characters, which "Schur has always excelled at" (Robinson). Here, I exemplarily examine the relationship between the protagonist and her direct supervisor, Ron Swanson, and the friendship between the protagonist and her best friend, Ann Perkins, mentioned in Chapter 4.1. On the one hand, the former relationship is defined by the characters' opposing political mindsets: "Leslie's naive liberalism […] [and] Ron's cynical and hypocritical Tea Party politics" (Farmer 110). On the other hand, their platonic friendship runs deep and can be read as one of the most grounded relationships of *P&R*. Although frequently staged to quarrel with one another over administrative issues, they are "allies as far as they agree and respectful opponents when they don't" (L. Holmes, "Beating Heart"). When Ron, for instance, finds out that the protagonist figured out that his birthday is coming up, the character is staged to get increasingly paranoid about Leslie's surprise party skills. At the end of the episode and with "Why would I throw an Ann Perkins party for Ron Swanson?," the protagonist leads Ron into a private room with quality Scotch, an underdone steak, and his favorite movies waiting for him (*P&R* 3.12). This authentically caring and sincere gesture is a metamodern and Super Nice affirmation of "just how much these characters know and care for one another," despite not agreeing on everything ideologically (Meslow). The characters oscillate in metamodern fashion "between the poles of optimism and cynicism, sincerity and irony" (Farmer 114).

Apart from the culture of compliments between Leslie and Ann that is analyzed in Chapter 4.1, their on-screen relationship is also based on

sincere understanding and trust. An impressive example is *P&R*'s wedding episode: Because of a disruptive argument with the protagonist's city council nemesis, Jeremy Jamm, the wedding ceremony is rescheduled. In one day, the Parks Department plans an impromptu wedding for Leslie and Ben, with Ann in charge of the protagonist's wedding dress. In a genuinely moving scene, Ann is staged to reveal the dress she made from scratch:

> Ann: I gathered up all the meaningful bills, pictures, documents, and memos from your career. What do you think? Is it okay?
> Leslie: It is the most beautiful object I have ever seen. It is like the Ann Perkins of dresses.
> Ann: Yay! (*P&R* 5.14)

The finished dress consists of "clippings about Leslie's Harvest Festival victory and City Council win, her campaign flyers, and even portraits of her role models Madeleine Albright, Hillary Clinton, and Michelle Obama" (D. Martin). Ann's meaningful gesture is a fundamental endorsement of Wallace's idea of "being really human," of being "unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic" (*Infinite Jest* 694). In the narrative of the show, the deep human connection and love between Leslie and Ann is not manufactured by the scene above, but it is expressively emphasized by it. The show does not shy away from sincere emotional intimacy on screen but accentuates and underscores its metamodern qualities in the Super Nice Comedy.

Brooklyn 99 (FOX 2013–19, NBC 2019–)

The sincerity and authenticity of the characters in Schur's third workplace comedy, *Brooklyn 99*, can be read as a prerequisite and as inherently belonging to the narrative. The allegedly "nicest show on TV" is set in the fictional 99th Police Precinct in Brooklyn, New York (Baessler). Since the last two decades of American TV have been saturated with "hour-long cop dramas […] like, twelve *Law & Order*s and fourteen *CSI*s," Schur noticed that the genre "hasn't really been used recently for comedy instead of drama" (Palumbo). Because horrifying "dead bodies with severed limbs in pools of blood" rarely have anything funny about them, Schur decided that, for the most part, the team will "investigate robberies or fraud cases that don't make you want to barf" (ibid.). The show is filmed as a police procedural, which is also used in conservative, hour-long police dramas.

Brooklyn 99's source of humor is not based on superiority techniques that elicit laughter at the expense of others. On the contrary, the show provides a voice for suppressed and downtrodden groups to not only comment on the realities of their hardships but to depict more empowering narratives.[21] The show's Super Nice and solidary humor does not shy away from quick and lighthearted banter to the left and evident rejection to the right. Television critic Emily Nussbaum suggests that "[t]he setting would seem to call for dark humor, and sometimes the show goes there – but it's reflexively averse to cringe gags. Its specialty is scoring laughs without taking the shortcut of humiliation" ("'Good Trouble'"). Without leaning on racism, sexism, or the like, *Brooklyn 99* "is making you laugh, never laughing *at* you" (Hannemann, emphasis in the original).

The Precinct is made up of a highly diverse ensemble cast of detectives, with Jewish-Italian protagonist Jake Peralta at its center. His best friend and partner Charles Boyle, the only capable Caucasian character (contrary to characters Hitchcock and Scully, whom I analyze separately in Chapter 4.3), sincerely and unapologetically idolizes him. Detectives Diaz and Santiago are both Latinas, the former coming out as bisexual in Season Five. Both the detectives' direct supervisor, Lieutenant Crews, and the Precinct's Captain Holt, are African American. Holt, additionally, is staged to be openly gay from the beginning of the series.

In contrast to *P&R*, *Brooklyn 99* does not have to prove that caring is cool or that being good at one's job simplifies the work, since it is already built into the set-up of the show. As it diminishes almost every sarcastic and ironic character from their main cast (except for Office Assistant Gina Linetti), I propose that *Brooklyn 99*'s metamodern style further emphasizes what I conceptualize as the Comedy of Super Niceness (or 'Super Noiceness,' in the protagonist's words): "[T]he characters are just nice – good people who are good at their jobs and genuinely care about each other" (Boone). When Detective Rosa Diaz, a very tough and mysterious character, is staged to

21 The protagonist's actions and words frequently function as a means to address wrongs and inequalities on-screen. For instance, he is staged to hit his idol and former police officer Jimmy Brogan in the face because he gravely disrespected Captain Holt by calling him a "homo" (cf. *Brooklyn 99* 1.08). In the Season Four premiere, the protagonist is staged to address transphobia in the 90s comedy movie *Ace Ventura* (1994; cf. *Brooklyn 99* 4.01). In Season Five, the protagonist finds himself wrongfully imprisoned. There, he is staged to comment somberly on Antisemitism and the precarious rights and hardships of transgender people in prison (cf. *Brooklyn 99* 5.01).

forcibly come out as bisexual to her colleague Charles Boyle, he, although briefly startled, supportingly replies with: "Oh… That's great. That's great, Rosa! I just want you to know that I totally support –," before being interrupted by her (*Brooklyn 99* 5.09). Later, Diaz, worried about Boyle's ability to keep secrets, comes out to the whole squad, "I'm a private person so this is pretty hard for me, but here we go. I'm bisexual. Alright, I will now field one minute and zero seconds of questions pertaining to this. Go" (*Brooklyn 99* 5.10). The following minute is filled with appreciative and respectful questions; not one joke is made at the expense of the character in this vulnerable situation. The plot line is not only Super Nice and empowering for the character but, as co-creator Dan Goor and actor Stephanie Beatriz – who embodies Detective Diaz and came out as bisexual in 2016 herself – argue, also a vehicle for the audience to see a badly "needed perspective to bisexual representation on TV" (cf. Getz; Nyren).

Around the same time in the plot, the squad finds out that their captain has made a deal with a criminal from the most ferocious crime family in NYC in order to get information which helped to get the protagonist and Detective Diaz out of prison. In his compromised situation, Holt is staged to avoid his chance of promotion to New York City Police Commissioner:

> Peralta: Wait. So you risked everything to get me and Rosa out of prison? [Holt nods.] Oh my God. You did all of this for us? I love you, Da – aptain. Daptain. It's the cool new way of saying Captain.[22] […]
> Diaz: Sir, why didn't you tell us?
> Holt: I didn't want any of you entangled in this. This is my decision, and it's also my responsibility.
> Peralta: Sir, with all due respect, the first thing that you taught me when you came to the Nine-Nine is that we're a team, so your responsibility is my responsibility, too. (*Brooklyn 99* 5.09)

After every other character of the scene chimes in with "and mine" (*Brooklyn 99* 5.09), the squad works together to give Holt a fighting chance at his promotion, staged to deeply care for each other and their work in a sincere and metamodern style. Under a thin layer of playful banter and conflicts, the viewer is frequently reassured of the mutual trust, reliance, and care

22 The protagonist frequently sees Holt as a father figure, as his own father was rarely in the picture. Peralta's father issues are a notable source of humor in the show.

between the characters. *Brooklyn 99* depicts a small part of the world in which the utopian social labor – which shows like *P&R* are exploring – is already completed. As Arras poignantly suggests, *Brooklyn 99* "demonstrates how the familial love of the people in that precinct allow the whole to be much stronger than the sum of its parts" ("The Chemistry of Cluelessness").

The fact that the Precinct functions as a safe and sincere space does not mean that the intradiegetic outside world does not interfere. The community that the detectives are staged to serve and the institution in which the characters work can be thoroughly taxing, "but that's not the defining theme of the show as it was in *Parks and Recreation*" (Arras). In *Brooklyn 99*, the "push and pull [between cynicism and sincerity; KS] typical for metamodernism" is not located between the main characters as it is in *P&R*, but rather is established between the main characters and their adversaries (Farmer 113). Nevertheless, characters like Madeline Wuntch – Captain Holt's longstanding rival – and Detective Pembroke – aka "The Vulture," who frequently takes over almost-finished cases – cannot undermine the sincere and metamodern bond between the other characters. They only serve to reassure the audience that, to use Conan's last words on *The Tonight Show* again: "But if you work really hard and you're kind, amazing things will happen" (Conan O'Brian qtd. in Fitzgerald, *Not Your Mother's Morals*). Following Moitzheim's arguement, *Brooklyn 99* is a consequent manifestation and logical endpoint of Wallace's objective to abandon mere deconstruction and create something new and meaningful: "Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists" (Wallace qtd. in Moitzheim).

The Good Place (NBC 2016–20)

Schur's latest creation, *The Good Place*, moves away from the established workplace comedy and focuses on the afterlife and the philosophical question of what we owe to each other (cf. Scanlon). After her death, the protagonist Eleanor Shellstrop appears to find herself in The Good Place, a very selective and utopian location, evocative of heaven. Based on their moral behavior on earth, humans are assigned a score, which determines their fate

in the afterlife:[23] The Good Place or The Bad Place. Soon, the protagonist realizes that she was sent to The Good Place through a bureaucratic mistake, and is staged to confide in her designated soulmate Chidi, a Senegal-raised Professor of Moral Philosophy, and begs him to help her hide her amoral and selfish past and earn her presence in The Good Place. At the end of the first season, Eleanor ultimately realizes that she, Chidi, and two other humans, Jason and Tahani, are part of a Bad Place experiment imitating The Good Place, in which the four humans are supposed to torture and annoy each other psychologically and emotionally. Michael, a demon and the designer of this particular neighborhood in The Bad Place, repeatedly starts the experiment over and over again. Although the humans' memories are erased a the end of each try, they find out the truth every time. The protagonist and her friends manage to appeal to Michael to get a fighting chance to actually make it to The Good Place and stay there. The four humans are allowed to return to Earth to convince the Eternal Judge of their moral advancement. Eventually, they earn their way to The Good Place and are responsible for instituting new laws for humans to gain access to the intradiegetic paradise.

The Good Place's source of humor is, just like *Brooklyn 99*, not dependent on superiority humor, on exploiting individual characters or particular groups and minorities. Instead, as Anderson argues, "[l]ike any good modern comedy, the show is [indeed] a direct IV of laughs, but the trick is that all of those laughs are explicitly *about* morality" (emphasis in the original). Questions of ethical behavior, morality, and how to be a good person are built into the very premise of the show. More than any other of Schur's sitcoms, *The Good Place* examines sincere and "real human connection and the universal desire to be purposeful and good" (Baessler). The character of Moral Philosophy Professor Chidi Anagonye encapsulates the "philosophical heart" of Schur's latest sitcom (Opam). During the show's run, the character is staged to go through "everything from Jonathan Dancy's theory of moral particularism, to Aristotelian virtue ethics, to Kantian deontology, to moral

23 In the pilot episode, the finely-tuned point system is exemplified. For example, "[stepping] carefully over flower bed" will earn +2.09 points, "[telling] a woman to 'smile'" will lose -53.83 points. "[Ending] Slavery" will earn +814292.09 points, "[committing] genocide" will lose -433115.25 points. "[Fixing] broken trycicle for child who loves trycicle" will earn +6.60 points, while "[fixing] broken trycicle for child who is indifferent to trycicles" will only earn +0.04 points (*The Good Place* 1.01).

nihilism" for the protagonist's ethical tutoring. Schur employed a "consulting philosopher," Pamela Hieronymi with UCLA, who introduced him to T. M. Scanlon's *What We Owe to Each Other* (2000). Schur agrees with the central idea of the book that

> [i]t *assumes* that we owe things to each other [...] It starts from that place. It's not like: Do we owe anything to each other? It's like: Given that we owe things to each other, let's try to figure out what they are. (S. Anderson, emphasis in the original)

Scanlon's book stands in stark contrast to the American ideal of self-interest that Heike Paul examines in her book, *The Myths That Made America*. According to her, the "myth of the self-made man" not only refers to "expressive individualism and individual success," it issues only "little collective responsibility for the well-being of individual citizens" (367f.). *The Good Place*, therefore, counterposes fundamentally American self-interest with an allegedly richer thinking about "morality in terms of cooperative human relationships" (S. Anderson). The protagonist, a personification of self-serving interests in the US, is staged to rebel against The Bad Place and finds a way to improve, despite a system that is designed to reproduce its own hostility (cf. Nussbaum, "Dystopia in *The Good Place*").

The show not only examines sincere human relationships on a philosophical level but on a narrative level as well. As Robinson argues, "Schur's shows hinge around these enormously believable romances grounded in real friendship," and *The Good Place* is no exception ("*The Good Place* Creator Michael Schur"). As Chidi is staged to help Eleanor become a better person by introducing her to myriad philosophical approaches, the two characters grow closer together. After being rebooted[24] countless times, the protagonist is always staged to find her friend Chidi again. At the end of Season One, the protagonist genuinely confesses her romantic love for him: "I was dropped into a cage and you were my flashlight," acknowledging that she wants to become a better person for him (*The Good Place* 1.13). When Chidi is tasked with saving humanity in Season Four (instituting an alternative system for the afterlife before the Eternal Judge wipes out humanity and starts over again), Michael is staged to 'resurrect' him with the entirety of

24 The architect of the neighborhood, Michael, can reboot the experiment and reset the memories of everybody involved at any time. The 'human' characters are, therefore, staged to enter the fake Good Place again.

his memories from Earth and his countless afterlives in order to overcome his compulsive need for the perfect solution. Although Michael is even staged to debunk the intradiegetic soulmate concept, Chidi writes himself a note: "There is no 'answer.' But Eleanor is the answer," manifesting the fundamental idea that humans deeply need each other (*The Good Place* 4.09). The character explains himself as early as in the second season when he spells out why people determine to be good: "I argue that we choose to be good because of our bonds with other people and our innate desire to treat them with dignity. Simply put, we are not in this alone" (*The Good Place* 2.13). The character is staged to overcome his struggles and to save humanity, extrinsically motivated by another human being.

Through *The Good Place*, Schur further artistically examines and applies Wallace's ideas and metamodern qualities to television. The show offers a distinctly philosophical perspective on sincere interpersonal relationships and what it takes to be a good person. As Schur argues, it is certainly tantalizing to just give up when faced with adversity and general badness, "[b]ut the heroic thing is simply to try" (S. Anderson). "The impossible possibility" that the characters strive for in this show, is the literal utopia of heaven (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 5).

In this subchapter, I have carved out the concept of Super Nice Comedy, with its roots in metamodernism and David Foster Wallace's call for sincere television. With the help of TV-auteur Michael Schur's œvre of situation comedies – *The Office*, *P&R*, *Brooklyn 99*, and *The Good Place* – I was able to trace the concept as a reflexive strategy to move contemporary sitcoms away from postmodern cynicism and nihilism towards a kind of humor that privileges metamodern qualities and a sincere belief in human interconnection. Furthermore, I was able to show that avoiding postmodern features leads to a renunciation of invective transgressions as a major source of humor. While still very much contingent on the postmodern features like self-referentiality, cynicism, and irony that are trademarks of its British original, a more mellow American version of *The Office* is rounded out by individual moments of authenticity, sincerity, and sentimentality. *P&R*, however, stages its protagonist as an advocate for sincerity who generally refuses to give in to cynicism. Whereas the characters of *P&R* are staged to have to justify their Super Niceness over and over again, *Brooklyn 99*'s intradiegetic world inherently postulates sincerity and metamodern qualities and rarely deflects from them. Schur's latest sitcom,

The Good Place, approaches human interconnections and morality through philosophical teachings. T. M. Scanlon's *What We Owe To Each Other* serves as the starting point for a fictitious application of humanitarian, metamodern, and sincere ideals in the show. Schur's creations demonstrate that "family, whether bound by blood or created from shared circumstances, remains the central social construct of scripted television" (Arras).

As *New York Times Magazine*'s Anderson argues, Schur's work is a sign of a "new tone in prime-time comedy, an era of good-hearted humanistic warmth" on television ("What Makes *The Good Place* So Good?"). This general trend is frequently associated with the conservative political shift of the nation and, allegedly, "has grown to become a consistent rebuke to the divisiveness of Trumpism" (Arras). Nussbaum goes as far as describing *The Good Place* as "a comedy about the quest to be moral even when the truth gets bent, bullies thrive, and sadism triumphs" ("'Dystopia in *The Good Place*'"). Other shows like CBC sitcom *Schitt's Creek* (2015–20) and Apple TV's *Ted Lasso* (2020–) follow in Schur's footsteps since "[a]fter a cruel 2020, the humane ideas behind Apple TV+'s defiantly good-hearted Jason Sudeikis comedy actually feel kind of… important" (Ryan). A broader analysis of contemporary television shows is needed to confirm the trend outside of "oustanding shows, mostly comedies" that fit the concept of Super Niceness (Dooley).

4.3 Why We Hate Jerry Gergich: Selective Disparagement in Super Nice Sitcoms

In a chapter about Super Nice situation comedies, one might pause at the sight of this subchapter's caption. Headlines like "*Parks & Rec*: Why Everyone Is so Mean to Jerry (& Why It's Bad)" (A. Tyler) and threads with headings like "The Jerry Bullying Ruins this Show" (moviechat.org) would not necessarily suggest a reflexive handling of invective phenomena in the storyworld. This subchapter, therefore, addresses the selective and, as I argue, highly reflexive disparagement of particular characters in Super Nice sitcoms.

In this subchapter, I analyze how disparagement in Super Nice situation comedies negotiates processes of community-building and deliberates

notions of privilege.[25] I argue that the humorous deprecation and disparagement directed at white, male, middle-aged characters in two of Michael Schur's workplace situation comedies is staged to enhance interpersonal relations between the shows' invectors. With the help of William H. Martineau's thoughts on the social functions of disparagement humor, I argue that the deprecation of *Parks and Recreation*'s Jerry Gergich and *Brooklyn 99*'s Norm Scully and Michael Hitchcock, who occupy distinct social roles in the threshold range of the respective office communities, functions to increase the social cohesion between the members of these distinct groups.[26] The characters are indeed regularly ridiculed, are staged to look like fools, and function as a major source of invective humor, but they are nevertheless granted with remarkable intradiegetic privileges. In a second step, then, I examine these privileges that are bestowed on the deprecated characters. I argue that the privileges with which the characters are equipped and the subsequent disparagement are interlocked. These Super Nice shows, therefore, reflexively question socially entrenched power structures. I argue that by deprecating these characters, the respective storyworlds negotiate images of white male privilege in order to shift the narratives' power structures in favor of formerly marginalized character types. In my two case studies, I firstly utilize Martineau's deliberations to analyze the depicted invective phenomena directed at the white, male, middle-aged characters as processes of community-building. While enabling the analysis of microstructures in small social settings, the model cannot be mindful of more extensive reflections on society as a whole. For my case studies, I therefore deviate from the model and examine what the shows' reflection on disparagement and privilege reveals about larger societal contexts.

Disparagement humor, as Ford defines it, "refers to communication that is intended to elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target" ("Social Consequences" 163). Since communication is always embedded in a social situation, it is not at all surprising that humor was analyzed for its social capacities as early as the 1940s and 50s. Antonin Obrdlik, for example, examined "Gallows

25 I understand the term privilege as "unearned advantage[s]" (McIntosh 34) that are assigned to individuals as a result of being "perceived by others as belonging" to a particular group or social category (A. G. Johnson 34).

26 From now on, *Parks and Recreation* is referred to as *P&R*.

Humor" - a "compensatory device" for Czechoslovakian civilians during the WWII occupation by Nazi Germany (Martineau 104; cf. Obrdlik 710). Klapp, moreover, sought to link humor directly to the prevailing social structures in the figure of 'the fool.' Implementing norms and rules by violating them with special licenses to speak, "[t]he fool is the antithesis of decorum, beauty, grace, intelligence, strength, and other virtues embodied in heroes" (Klapp 157).[27] A lot of scholars have also worked to analyze and link invective racialized social structures and humor (i.e. cf. Myrdal; Arnez and Anthony). Boskin, for example, suggested two types of African American humor: external ("predominantly a means of accomodation to white society, a means of survival") and internal ("to reinforce group behavior and to overcome the obstacles of discrimination" (qtd. in Martineau 112).

In 1972, William H. Martineau published his influential sociological deliberations on the functions of disparagement humor in a research context that focused predominantly on amusement. His deliberations "delineated a broad theoretical model for deriving hypotheses about the ways that disparagement humor shapes social relationships" (T. E. Ford, "Social Consequences" 163). From a sociological perspective, Martineau viewed humor either as an 'abrasive' – possibly irritating the flow and the interaction of social life – or as a 'lubricant' – possibly furthering relationships by enhancing social cohesion between social actors. In 2015, Ford edited a special issue on "The Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor" with the purpose of "[highlighting] advancements of humor scholars following Martineau's seminal work with the ultimate goal of initiating a new curiosity and interest in the social consequences of disparagement humor" (ibid.).

Martineau's model describes three distinct axioms of social settings in which the functions of disparagement humor are examined: intragroup situations, internal intergroup situations, and interactive intergroup situations (cf. Martineau). I concentrate on Martineau's first axiom, since it enables me to examine the respective intragroup settings of my case studies' office communities. In the intragroup setting, the disparagement humor targets and is delivered by ingroup members. Following prevalent superiority theories, this situation might "represent a negative social comparison that threatens [the] social identity" of the disparaged individuals (T. E. Ford,

27 Please also see Chapter 3.1 for my reading of *Invective Fools* in the contemporary sitcom *Mike & Molly*.

"Social Consequences" 164). Martineau argues that invectively teasing[28] others can be utilized to control the behavior of ingroup members and assure a state of conformity and consensus in the group. Humor, here, is used as a sign of disapproval, a way of penalizing a deviant while "providing [her] with an opportunity to accept the humorous definition of the situation, [acknowledging] the incongruity of [her] behavior […] and [rejoining] the group without 'losing face'" (Martineau 117). Extremely abrasive humor, in addition, can evoke and foster conflicts, disintegration, and demoralization of the ingroup when the "necessary communication becomes impaired and the basis of social integration destroyed" (ibid. 118). Martineau, however, proposes that ingroup disparagement humor can also be read as non-serious and light-hearted banter. It can affirm and enhance ingroup members' social bonds with each other through positive reinforcement. Humorous banter, so Martineau, is a way of "revealing friendship, approval, and a sharing sentiment, and relieving a somewhat awkward situation" (ibid. 116f.).[29]

The second axiom, the internal intergroup setting, describes social situations in which disparagement humor "is initiated by an outgroup [and] functions within the ingroup depending upon how it is judged by the ingroup members" (Martineau 119).[30] When, on the one hand, the intergroup disparagement humor is understood as amicable, ingroup members may feel flattered and invited to advance courteous relations. It may boost morale and solidify interaction between ingroup members. When, on the other hand, the disparagement humor is understood as deprecating, Martineau proposes three possible consequences. First, the disparagement may be able to strengthen the internal structure of the ingroup "on the basis of a familiar principle[:] To rally in defense against attack, even subtle attack, [as] a common human response" (ibid. 119). Secondly, disparagement humor may

28 Teasing can simultaneously be viewed as aggressive and humorous as it "makes a potentially negative statement about the recipient, but is framed as humor or play" (Alberts et al. qtd. in Meyer 328).

29 Martineau also comments on self-deprecating humor, extensively examined in Chapter 3.2. By humorously admitting to and revealing undesirable characteristics, people can solidify their relationships, proving that conflict does not always have to be disintegrating.

30 Martineau himself indicates that there are a multitude of variables that may influence the social functions of disparagement humor, i.e. cultural context, actors, audience, and their social positions. In his deliberations, he primarily stresses the variable of humor judgment as distinctly significant.

be able "to bring the group in question into conformity, i.e. into line with the higher order of prevailing behavioral patterns in the society" (ibid. 120). Lastly, abrasive humor may be able to initiate and further disintegration and demoralization of the given ingroup.

Martineau's third social axiom, the interactive intergroup situation, decribes the functions of disparagement humor in an intergroup situation in which humor is exchanged by members of distinct groups. Similar to ingroup settings, "esteeming" disparagement humor can possibly lead to maximizing similarities and minimizing differences between groups, so that friendly interaction can ensue (Martineau 122). Abrasive humor, however, may "foster hostile dispositions at a group level, generating intergroup conflict" (T. E. Ford, "Social Consequences" 166).

Martineau's deliberations opened up and broadened the sociological research on humor in the past. They analyze humor as a fundamental medium of social interaction, with many forms and complex functions. Ford's special issue, for example, builds upon Martineau's deliberations on "research on the relationship between disparagement humor and prejudice" (T. E. Ford, "Social Consequences" 166, 167). While Thomae and Pina "elucidate the functions of sexist humor in the Intragroup Situation" ("Sexist Humor and Social Identity"), Montemurro and Benfield apply Martineau's model to television by analyzing disparagement humor on the reality TV show *American Idol* (cf. "Hung Out to Dry").

For my case studies of two of Michael Schur's workplace comedies, I similarly employ Martineau's first axiom in order to analyze the televisual functions of disparagement humor in Super Nice sitcoms. In my analyses of *P&R* and *Brooklyn 99*, I argue that the deprecation and humiliation directed at white, male, middle-aged characters is not depicted as an "'abrasive' for social relationships," but rather strengthens the social bonds between the ingroup members of the respective office communities (T. E. Ford, "Social Consequences" 164). With the help of Martineau's model, I show that the disparaged characters (Jerry (*P&R*); Hitchcock and Scully (*Brooklyn 99*)) occupy specific social roles that allow the surrounding office community to affirm social relations with each other. Furthermore, I identify the social privileges that are bestowed on the characters. I argue that the shows reflexively challenge the depicted power structures of white, male, middle-aged characters and offer a decidedly different vision of society where minority characters are at the center of the narrative.

Parks and Recreation's Jerry Gergich

In the otherwise Super Nice run of *P&R*'s seven seasons, one character is staged as the butt of the joke and the victim of malice more than any other character on the show – Jerry Gergich.[31] He is a middle-aged, white, overweight, frugal employee in the Department of Parks and Recreation, and a passionate notary who is nearing his retirement. As creator of *P&R* Michael Schur admitted in an interview with *AV Club*, "We didn't have a character for Jerry when we started the show" (qtd. in Adams). The admiration for performers like Jim O'Heir (Jerry) and Rhetta (Donna) was apparently so strong that the showrunners hired them before figuring out the backstories of their characters. In the preparations for Season Two, as Schur goes on, they worked hard to envision the nature of the characters. In one of the earlier episodes of Season Two, the show finds Jerry's voice to be "a sad, sad punching bag" that proves to be a steady source of invective humor on the show (ibid.). Myriads of staged disparagement, ridicule, and humiliation ensue. The highly invective treatment of Jerry, therefore, stands in stark contrast to the Super Nice tone of the show that I have argued for in Chapters 4.1 and 4.2.

From the very beginning, *P&R* seems to make an effort to frame the performances of deprecating, ridiculing, and humiliating Jerry in a rather positive and community-building light. Interpreted with Martineau's model of disparagement humor, the characters seem to bond over insulting Jerry. At first glance, the relationship between the invective office community and Jerry could be read as consistent with established superiority theories, "revealing someone's inferiority to the person laughing" (Morreall, *Comic Relief* 7). There are, however, clear signs that the invective on-screen relationship between the characters can be included in Martineau's intragroup setting, where disparagement humor occurs among members of a mutual ingroup. As disparaging as Jerry's colleagues are staged, they care for him when he is in need of help: They organize a garage sale to help pay for his hospital bills, throw him a birthday party (and nearly forget to invite him), and ultimately recommend him to be mayor of their hometown, Pawnee (cf. *P&R* 5.05, 4.16, 7.11, respectively). Their disparaging comments and actions do not "represent a negative social comparison that threatens [Jerry's] social identity" but rather affirm the mutual bond

31 Although I am aware that the character's actual name is Garry Gergich, I refer to him from now on, as the show predominantly does, as Jerry.

amongst themselves (T. E. Ford, "Social Consequences" 164).[32] Jerry is also staged to strongly believe that he is part of the office community. Apart from him, there is one other minor character in the show who is seemingly staged even below Jerry and distinctly outside the margins of the office community – Kyle, another City Hall employee. He is the only character whom Jerry, alongside his co-workers, vigorously disparages.[33] In contrast to Kyle, as I propose, Jerry belongs to the ingroup of the intradiegetic office community. The deprecation of Jerry, thus, "function[s] to increase the solidarity or cohesion among members" of the group (ibid. 164). When he is humiliated or ridiculed for accidentally burning off Ron's eyebrows (cf. *P&R* 3.16) or superglueing his hands together (cf. *P&R* 5.02), the ensuing disparagement humor functions as "a symbol of disapproval," subsequently controlling the behavior of the ingroup member Jerry (Martineau 117). The disparaging humor can thus be seen as a "lubricant" of the staged social situation on screen (ibid. 103).

The character's emotional pain is staged as a source of humor, evidently eliciting laughter and mirth in his colleagues, and clearly inviting the viewer to join the invective fun and interpret the abuse as playful and harmless. In the aforementioned episode called "Practice Date," which settled Jerry's fate as the show's punching bag, the plot opens on the office community watching news coverage on a Pawnee politician's sex scandal (*P&R* 2.04). A few colleagues are immediately prompted to make it a game to find out dirt on each other. Jerry is the only character staged to dislike and decline the offer to play but, apparently, he has no choice but to participate. The disparagement of Jerry in this episode begins when the character of Donna is staged to dive right into the competition by stalking Jerry's internet

32 In the words of *P&R*'s creator Michael Schur, the character of Jerry is staged as a person who is "not striving for anything – he just wants to get by [...] [H]e's just sort of a prop that gets used in order to tell the story" (Schur qtd. in Adams). This might be the reason why Jerry never stays angry at his perpetrators, never tries to retaliate, and always has a warm "smile on his face" (ibid.).

33 At a burger cook-off between Ron and Chris in Season Three, Jerry and Kyle are both part of the jury. When Kyle follows Donna in praising Chris' burger, Jerry is staged to reprimand Kyle with, "Stop being so pretentious, Kyle" (*P&R* 3.10). A second scene in Season Six shows Jerry attending the monthly Wine & Cheese Club where co-workers are able to "get together and vent about what annoys [them] at work" (*P&R* 6.11). Jerry is staged to vent about Kyle repeatedly parking in his spot and indignantly closes with "I just want to choke him until he passes out" (ibid.).

presence; "You guys will never believe what I just found on Jerry's Facebook" is invectively answered by April with, "A friend. Burn!" (*P&R* 2.04). Seemingly under emotional pressure, Jerry is staged to leave, mumbling that he really does not like the game. Things quickly get out of hand when Ron finds out that Tom's marriage is a green card scam for his wife, and Tom figures out that Ron has a saxophone-playing alter ego – both are determined to keep their secrets. When Jerry proudly enters the scene again, he is staged to confront city planner Mark Brendanawicz with an unpaid parking ticket on his record. Mark retaliates by revealing that Jerry's *adoptive* mother had been arrested for drug possession, not knowing that Jerry had no idea that he was adopted in the first place. While Mark is staged to feel bad for distressed Jerry, colleague Tom Haverford reassures him that it was not his fault by saying, "He totally baited you with that unpaid parking ticket," trying to bond with Mark over the humiliation of the character (*P&R* 2.04). Jerry returns for the last scene of the episode, in which Tom repeatedly tries to humiliate him with the knowledge of his plastic surgery. Jerry tries but fails to justify his decision by claiming that he needed the operation because he was "hit by a fire engine" (*P&R* 2.04). Indeed, the character of Jerry remains the punching bag of the office community and is constantly staged as an invective source of humor. He is shamed and ridiculed by his fellow employees and superiors until the very end of the show. Statements like "[l]et's all pretend Jerry wasn't born" (*P&R* 2.06), using the character's name as a term of abuse (cf. *P&R* 3.04) and an invective verb ("to pull a Jerry" (*P&R* 4.01)) are just a few examples of the constant ridicule, indignity, and degradation the character has to endure. The other characters, nevertheless, bond over Jerry's disparagement.

In an episode from Season Five, Jerry is not even meant to be the target of the following humorous banter – but still ends up as the victim of humiliation. When in the Halloween episode Ann wants to cheer up Leslie by scaring Tom as he comes out of the bathroom, Jerry gets in the way. The women accidentally frighten him and he is immediately staged to start loudly passing wind. The protagonist laments, "Jerry! God! Gross!," elucidating the transgression of social norms before realizing the seriousness of the situation: Jerry is having a heart attack while continuing to flatulate loudly (*P&R* 5.15). Tom, exiting the bathroom shortly afterwards, angrily and invectively complains about the smell. Jerry, mid-heart attack, is staged to apologize, seemingly aware of the disparaging social sanctions with which he is confronted. Tom disgustedly responds with, "Apology not accepted […] I wish I could stop smelling […] Seriously, Jerry, did you eat farts for

lunch?," before also realizing Jerry's medical condition. Feeling bad for their behavior, the characters care for Jerry in the hospital where Tom, however, is staged to coax the doctor to humiliate Jerry by saying he had a 'fart attack' in addition to his mild heart condition ("Is that too much to ask?!" (ibid.)). The scene not only exploits conventional scatological humor by staging Jerry in an unflattering light, it also shows that only life-threatening ailments will apparently stop the office community from using disparaging humor as a sign of social disapproval and control.

The most apparent invective attack on the character, however, is his colleagues' staged awareness of and indifference to Jerry's actual name. In Season Four, the office community is staged to find out that they have been accidentally addressing Jerry by the wrong name for decades. At a hearing concerning the protagonist's bribery charges, he is called as a witness. When asked for his full name, the character responds with, "Garry Gergich" (*P&R* 4.09). He explains that his former boss accidentally called him by the wrong name and he was too timid to correct him. Even after checking his identification card and stating that both names are "horrible," the protagonist invectively decides that "'Jerry' is better" (ibid.). In line with Martineau's model, the protagonist and her colleagues build social cohesion by denying the character the dignity of being called by his actual name. They even invectively and joyfully make up new ones: Larry Gengurch (*P&R* 6.03) and Terry (*P&R* 6.20). In the penultimate episode of *P&R*'s seventh season, a flashforward shows white-haired characters Leslie and Ben at Jerry's funeral, noticing that, once again, they had spelled his name incorrectly on his tombstone: Garry Girgich. The protagonist, utilizing the character once more as an invective source of humor, concludes the episode with "Huh. Close enough" (*P&R* 7.11).

Apart from Jerry being disparaged throughout the run of the show, the other characters are themselves staged to argue that the disparaged social role the character occupies is interchangeable. The function of disparagement humor "as a safety valve for expressing grievances or controlled hostility" is apparently not tied to the character of Jerry. The interchangeable social role of the 'Office Jerry,' which invectively demonstrates "that the normative system is reinforced and social cohesion prevails" (117), is illustrated in a Season Five episode called "Jerry's Retirement" (*P&R* 5.20). As the episode's name foreshadows, Jerry is retiring and his social role in the office community thus becomes vacant. The

character of Ron is staged to explain the Darwinian process of replacing 'Office Jerrys' to his colleagues:

> Tom: It's a sad day. Who are we going to make fun of now?
> Ron: No need to worry. Every place I've ever worked in has had a Jerry. When one Jerry leaves, the office naturally selects a new Jerry to fill that role. It's social Darwinism. The strong prey on the weak. Soon, one of you will be ridiculed mercilessly. Ha! Nature. (*P&R* 5.20)

After Ron's speech, the other characters look abashed and worried about their own respective fates. Ron, however, ultimately releases them of their dejection by hiring Jerry for a couple of hours a week to be laughed at, staged to spare one of his co-workers the deprecation and humiliation that apparently comes with being the weakest link or the '(new) Jerry.' *Esquire*'s Marotta, moreover, suggests that an 'Office Jerry' is allegedly also necessary for the work atmosphere in any ordinary office community ("The Office Jerry").

The sheer number of invective paratexts concerning the character of Jerry not only draw attention to the cultural reach of *P&R* but also attest to Martineau's functions of disparagement humor in a televisual setting. While *Buzzfeed* claims that Jerry "Is the Most Annoying Person Ever" (Yandoli) and *Vulture* lists "All 95 Times Jerry Screws Up on *Parks and Recreation*" (Marine and M. Jones), Media Studies community network *MediaCommons* is unceremoniously examining "Why We Hate Jerry Gergich" (Klein). In line with Martineau, Klein points toward the camaraderie that the deprecation of Jerry generates between the office community as well as between the show and the viewers. She suggests that reflexively laughing with the intradiegetic office community *at* Jerry marks an "acquired contempt [that] is an earned privilege for a *Parks and Recreation* fan," drawing her closer to the televisual text (ibid.). Like Martineau, social psychologist Jennifer K. Bosson and her colleagues argue that "shared negative attitudes about third-party others facilitated closeness more powerfully than shared positive attitudes" (J. R. Weaver and Bosson 488). The disparagement of the character Jerry, then, is reflexively used to unite the intradiegetic office community and to consolidate the members' bonds with each other. The viewer is invited to join the invective fun and take pleasure in the active and reflexive "emotional and intellectual involvement" of disliking *P&R*'s Jerry (Jenkins 56).

For *P&R*, I have shown that the staged disparagement humor directed at the character Jerry is frequently utilized to enhance the social identity

of the intradiegetic office community. It works to "affirm people's bond with other in-group members" (T. E. Ford, "Social Consequences" 164). Since Jerry is staged to be a (marginal) part of the office community, grievances on account of his behavior can be expressed through humor and derisive laughter in order to simultaneously sanction the character and control future conduct. The reflexive staging of the disparagement humor directed at Jerry prevents viewers from being invited to read it as profusely abrasive and disintegrating. The humorous banter of *P&R* ultimately invites viewers to find pleasure in laughing at the disparaged character, creating a bond between the show and the viewers, "[making] the world of the show feel more real" (Klein).

During the run of *P&R*, Jerry is staged as a thoroughly dual character. On the one hand, he is portrayed as a clumsy, good-for-nothing office worker who is constantly humiliated and disparaged. On the other hand, the show not only dwells on the character's shortcomings, but it also illustrates his kindness and warmth, his loyalty, his gift for music, and his talent for drawing. *P&R*'s Jerry Gergich, humiliated and ridiculed in the workplace, is equipped with extraordinary and noteworthy privileges that allegedly balance and interlock with the constant disparagement directed at him. Creator Michael Schur suggested in an interview that "[t]o keep Jerry around, he has to have an amazing home life" because "[y]ou can't keep [him] around if his whole world is bad" (Marotta). In the following, I propose that these privileges reflexively negotiate the character disposition of white, middle-aged men in Schur's workplace comedies. I argue that the privileges of this group of characters is reflected on and abstracted on a wider societal and social level. The intradiegetic manifestation of privileges of white, male, middle-aged characters mirrors and reflects on the structural privileges of white, male, middle-aged individuals in the real world.

First of all, the allegedly bland character of Jerry has three beautiful daughters and is married to Gayle, portrayed by American model and actress Christie Brinkley. At the Gergich's annual Christmas party, Ben – and the viewer – get to meet Gayle for the first time. Ben, staged to accompany and mirror the reactions of the viewers, incredulously stares into the camera, paralleling and emphasizing any feelings of surprise or confusion as to how a clumsy and constantly ridiculed character is able to end up with a wife like Gayle. Also baffled, Chris is staged to compassionately turn to Ben and answer the unspoken question, "I've thought about it a lot. There's no logical explanation" (*P&R* 5.09). An episode later, Ben is still distracted and

invectively voices his disbelief to Jerry by asking, "What was it, exactly, that led to you two hitting it off? Was she ill? Or did your father witness her father committing a crime? Or was she temporarily blind?," overtly questioning the genuineness of their marriage (*P&R* 5.10). When Leslie is staged to swing by Jerry's house to apologize for his unceremonial send-off into retirement, Gayle insists on Leslie joining the family breakfast. The protagonist witnesses how happy and content Jerry, Gayle, and their daughters are. At his home, Jerry is not at all staged as clumsy or browbeaten – on the contrary, he, for example, skillfully catches a coffee mug Leslie accidentally knocks off the table. The protagonist finally realizes that Jerry's life has never been "depressing" (*P&R* 5.05) but actually rather "wonderful" and privileged (*P&R* 5.20).

In addition, Jerry's private life becomes something his co-workers aspire to. Without ceasing to humiliate and deprecate him, the other characters begin to recognize Jerry's private accomplishments. When Ben tries to surprise the protagonist for their first wedding anniversary, he is staged to ask Jerry for help because, "[Jerry] has the most successful marriage of anyone [he knows]. To a gorgeous woman. Which, honestly, is still a mystery to [him]" (*P&R* 6.13). Despite the fact that Ben is still trying to conjure up reliable and mostly invective explanations as to how Jerry could have ended up with Gayle,[34] Ben is staged to trust Jerry with the preparations for this special occasion. Furthermore, in a flashforward in the penultimate episode of *P&R*'s run, his co-workers and the Pawnee citizens will have done Jerry the honor of electing him as mayor. He is staged to have died at over a hundred years old, his daughters and Gayle – not aged at all and still as beautiful as ever – by his side (cf. *P&R* 7.12).

In contrast to the long-lasting and frequently emasculating humiliation and deprecation of the character, the following scene biologistically enhances Jerry's virility and masculinity – and bestows another privilege upon the character. At the beginning of Season Four, a lewd picture is sent to the women of the Parks and Recreation Department – and Jerry. Although the offender is swiftly found and dismissed, nurse Ann Perkins is staged to suspect the culprit of having mumps. Corresponding medical tests for

34 For example, Ben asks himself, "[W]as it a hypnosis accident or something, where they put Gayle under and made her fall in love with [Jerry] and never said the magic word to snap her out of it? Like, if I say 'nutmeg,' will she wake up and start screaming?" *P&R* (6.13).

male government employees are arranged and Jerry takes advantage of the public health examination and lets himself be checked. After the screening, the doctor seems astounded in the following talking head segment because "[t]hat man has the largest penis I have ever seen. I actually don't even know if he has mumps. I forgot to look. I was distracted by the largest penis I have ever seen" (*P&R* 4.01).

As can be seen with *P&R* and other shows created by Michael Schur, the narrative center of his contemporary sitcoms gets increasingly diverse and abandons andro- and white-centric perspectives. In *P&R*, it is, indeed, not the male and unremarkable character of Jerry who constitutes the center of the storyworld – rather, the show is led by female protagonist Leslie Knope. On the one hand, female characters have come a long way in sitcoms, from "devoted housewives who dutifully administered to their husband's needs" to objects of male desire, to independent single women, to a growing number of female characters in leading roles on contemporary television (Roman 81). *P&R*'s Leslie is surrounded by other female supporting characters in the show's ensemble cast, like African American Donna, Puerto Rican April, and the "ambiguous ethnic blend [that] perfectly represents the dream of the American melting pot" of Ann (*P&R* 4.22). On the other hand and similarly to the practices concerning women, television "predominantly featured white talent and focused upon the myth of racial tolerance through a process of exclusion" around the 1950s (Roman 62). As can already be seen with the example of *P&R*, the share of BIPOC characters on television in general increased significantly – from 17.8 percent in 1990 to 22.2 percent in 2015 ("Share of People of Color on TV in the US 2015"). More specifically, as Maestro and Greenberg compiled in a 2000 article, African American characters made up only six percent of all roles in prime-time drama and comedy in 1971, while in 1993, some sort of parity had been established when African American people amounted to "11% of the prime time characters and [...] 12% of the population" (690). By the first decade of the 21st century, Colston suggests that the African American and Caucasian population was considered to be "over-represented in prime time, making up 74 percent of all characters compared to only making up 69 percent of the U.S. population" (5). Other minority representations, like those of the Latinx community, Native Americans, or Asian Americans, were still disproportionately depicted around the turn of the century (cf. D. E. Mastro and Greenberg 699). *P&R* is just one example of a contemporary sitcom with an increasingly diverse narrative center, symbolically dislodging white- and androcentric

perspectives. By reflexively disparaging and marginalizing the privileged character Jerry, the show makes narrative space for formerly and structurally underprivileged characters and their stories.

Similarly, the show negotiates legacies of representation in the sitcom past by disparaging and marginalizing Jerry as a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, secular, working-class American citizen. In the storyworld, he is staged as the sole breadwinner of a family of five. His character construction appears to be modeled after an image of men "around the 1950s, [where] dominant ways of doing masculinity tended to centre on breadwinning [and] providing for a family" (D. Miller). While situation comedies in the past have portrayed notions of "white male backlash" or "white rage" that Savran describes as a negative response to gender equality ambitions, racial progress, and unbiased participation of ethnic groups, *P&R*'s Jerry is depicted to be more in line with how father figures were portrayed on screen from the 1950s to 90s (cf. 3f.).[35] "The working class family man on sitcoms," as Scharrer suggests, "has been described as a buffoon whose stupidity is a frequent source of laughter" (24). This is endorsed by the character Ron who, once again, aptly analyzes Jerry's behavior and social role in the intradiegetic office community: "David Myers, the Jewish guy who works at City Hall, once told me a schlemiel is the guy who spills his soup at a fancy party. A schlimazel is the guy he spills it on. Jerry is both the schlemiel and the schlimazel of our office" (*P&R* 2.19). *Schlemiel* and *schlimazel* are Yiddish terms and "representations of Jewish stereotypes" that respectively characterize clumsy and unlucky characters (Harper). Jerry, portrayed as overweight, unremarkable, and decidedly white, would have met the criteria "in any other era", as Grierson suggests, to be cast as "the main character, everyone else in his orbit loving him for how endearingly fallible he was" ("Why the TV Schlub Should Have Died with Jerry"). *P&R*, however, stages Jerry as a continually humiliated and ridiculed supporting character whose role empowers characters who have formerly been marginalized to gain center stage.

I also argue that the show reflects on the deprecation of the white, middle-aged character from a formerly conventionally marginalized

35 This suggested male victimization can be seen on screen in the image of the "hen-pecked husband" who is "fearfully respectful" of his wife like, for example, Al Bundy in *Married… With Children* (FOX 1987–97) or Hal in *Malcom in the Middle* (FOX 2000-06) (Kervin 46; Reimers 117).

perspective. I propose that the show reflexively juxtaposes the social precarity of minority characters to the privileged position of the white, middle-aged, male character of Jerry. In the episode in which Jerry retires, Indian American character Tom is staged to desperately try to pass on the social role of 'Jerry' to one of his co-workers. He does not succeed.[36] In a moment of acceptance, the character opens up to his boss by saying, "You don't understand, Ron. I already was 'Jerry.' I was a skinny Indian kid in South Carolina, and it sucked. It took me 12 years, but I reinvented myself. I'm a business owner. I wear dope suits. I have fur underwear. It was all for nothing. I'm back to being a 'Jerry'" (*P&R* 5.20). His staged deliberations bear witness to the precarious situation of the minority character. Allegedly, the character's past has been filled with disparagement, ridicule, and humiliation – a polar opposite of Jerry's privileged character as a former sitcom blueprint. Tom is even reflexively staged to strongly distance himself from him: "I guess I'm 'Jerry' now. After work, I'll just go home straight to my boring house, kiss my wife, and have a home-cooked meal with my three beautiful daughters. What a miserable life" (*P&R* 4.08). The show reflexively juxtaposes Jerry's privileged life with Tom's far more precarious and unstable minority narrative, emphasizing the disparities between characters and how their respective privileges manifest in the storyworld.

In this section, I described the constant deprecation and humiliation of *P&R*'s Jerry. I argued, on the one hand, that the disparagement humor directed at the white, male, middle-aged character functions to enhance group cohesion and solidarity amongst the office community and that laughter works to sanction and control the character's behavior. On the other hand, I have shown that the invective phenomena are interlocked with Jerry's staged privileges which manifest themselves in the storyworld. I argued that the show reflexively shifts power structures in favor of formerly diminished

36 In the episode, the character of Tom is doing everything imaginable not to spill his drink while entering a meeting with his co-workers. Concerned about his coffee cup, he is staged to mispronounce a word. The other characters immediately start laughing and April is staged to exclaim, "Well, I guess that settles who the new 'Jerry' is" (*P&R* 5.20). Tom, anxious about the label, objects fervently, but the office community gleefully laughs at him in unison until he leaves the conference room. In the following talking head segment, Tom seemingly accepts his future as the 'new Jerry' of the Parks and Recreation Department: "This is how it begins. The next 'Jerry.' One screwed-up sentence, and 30 years later, I'm wearing aquamarine sweater vests and listening to Bonnie Raitt and *The Da Vinci Code* on my iPod. It already started!" (*P&R* 5.20).

characters. The co-workers who disparage Jerry are "by and large, the sorts of people who are usually marginalized on television" (Grierson). The privileged, white, male, middle-aged characters like Jerry in *P&R* are degraded, while already diminished characters can become empowered by a reflexive shift in power structures.

Brooklyn 99's Hitchcock and Scully

By including a reading of *Brooklyn 99* (FOX 2013–19; NBC 2019–), I propose a pattern of the reflection on disparagement and privilege in Schur's Super Nice situation comedies. The characters Norm Scully and Michael Hitchcock are, like *P&R*'s Jerry, white, male, middle-aged, as well as frequently disparaged and humiliated characters. They, too, are equipped with prominent privileges that, in contrast to Jerry, manifest themselves in a work setting. I argue that *Brooklyn 99* further reflects on the structural privileges of white, male, middle-class, cis-gender, heterosexual individuals on screen and in society as a whole.

As introduced in Chapter 4.2, the police procedural comedy, set in New York's fictional 99th Precinct, is made up of a highly diverse ensemble cast. Therefore, the middle-aged, white, male characters of Detectives Hitchcock and Scully stand out in an otherwise young and diversified cast. The two characters have been working together as partners for nearly 30 years and are staged to be close friends. Similarly to Jerry in *P&R*, the two detectives are disparaged and humiliated more than any other characters on the show. On the one hand, Hitchcock and Scully are portrayed as highly incompetent, exceedingly repugnant, and blatantly inert.[37] Similarly to *P&R* and according to Martineau's deliberations on the social functions of disparagement humor, the Precinct is staged to bond over insulting Hitchcock and Scully. In a sign of disapproval, the Precinct members use disparagement humor as a means to control the characters' behavior and increase the cohesion and solidarity among the office community. The negative social correlations do not threaten the detectives' social identity, due to their status as ingroup members (cf. Martineau 116ff.). On the other hand, these white, male, middle-aged characters come with distinct privileges in

37 The depicted undercurrent indicates invective discourses of fatness and disability that would go beyond the scope of this book. In Chapter 3.1, however, I have examined fat-shaming in the network sitcom *Mike & Molly*.

the workplace that are reflexively juxtaposed with flashbacks to their first years on the job.

The deprecation of the two detectives focuses on two main points: their alleged incompetence and their revolting bodies. For example, when Boyle is involuntarily required to work with them on an important case, Hitchcock and Scully are staged to impede the investigation with unqualified comments and theories about the case. Boyle snaps and yells at them, "Just focus! I'm sorry for snapping. […] Oh, you're useless! You're completely useless! You are without a doubt the most incompetent detectives I've ever seen. And I'm including that bomb-sniffing dog who humps all the bombs!" (*Brooklyn 99* 2.19). Even when Hitchcock and Scully are later staged to have solved the case, they humiliate and degrade themselves even further:

> Hitchcock: Hey Boyle, guess who caught the Tim O's Limos perp?
> Boyle: Jake? Is Jake back?
> Scully: No, we did. Scully and Hitchcock. Signed confession. You called us useless. You called us incompetent. You called us zeros in the sack.
> Boyle: Never happened.
> Scully: Well, someone said it to me last night. Oh, uh, must have been my wife. (*Brooklyn 99* 2.19)

In a later episode, Captain Holt is kidnapped and held at gunpoint by a corrupt FBI agent on the roof of a hospital. When Peralta and Diaz find out that Holt has left a trail of chocolate smudges to help them find him on the roof, Scully is staged to jubilantly cry out "THIS! This is why I became a cop," leaving no doubt that he is considerably more interested in the chocolate than rescuing lives on the job (*Brooklyn 99* 3.23).

Similarly to the reactions to Jerry's heart attack in *P&R*, *Brooklyn 99* also focuses the deprecation of its white, male, middle-aged characters on their bodies. In an early Season One episode, Scully proudly reports his progress on digitalizing old case files ("As of yesterday, I am officially one percent done!" (*Brooklyn 99* 1.03)). Annoyed by her co-worker's laziness, Diaz counters with, "At least you get to sit on your butt all day," which – in Scully's own words – is "the worst part" because the doctor diagnosed him with an "anal canyon" (ibid.). The protagonist, appalled by the character's revelation, is staged to be the mouthpiece both for the intradiegetic characters and the viewer when he interjects with, "God, Scully! Why are you always telling us about your disgusting body?" (ibid.). The scene is followed by a flashback in which Scully is staged to show Peralta a wart on his foot during lunch time:

> Peralta: I don't see it.
> Scully: That's because it's all wart. (ibid.)

The protagonist begins to heave and disgustedly leaves the table, staged to deny Scully a longer conversation about his bodily ailments and possibly paralleling the viewers' reaction to Scully's revelation. An even more invective shut-down of the character is staged in the final episode of Season Four. There, the protagonist and his colleague Diaz are being framed for a bank robbery. On the last day before the trial, Peralta walks into their local pub, where his co-workers are still trying to come up with exonerating evidence:

> Peralta: Guys, I think I found something.
> Scully: Is it my heart medicine? My doctor said that if I miss even one dose, I could have a massive stroke.
> Peralta: No, Scully. *This* is important. (*Brooklyn 99* 4.22, emphasis in the original)

The protagonist is staged to shrug off the possibility of his co-worker having a fatal heart attack with a highly self-centered assessment that his problems are allegedly far more important than his colleague's life.

The "cohesion-building effect of in-group disparagement humor" can be clearly seen in the cold open of a Season One episode (T. E. Ford, "Social Consequences" 164). The whole squad is having a discussion on which cop movie is the best. The protagonist is staged to settle the discussion by inviting everyone to gather around for a dashboard camera recording of Hitchcock getting kicked in the groin by a sex worker. The collective invective experience of enjoying the short cruel recording is expressed by joined mirth and laughter. Hitchcock, present at the time, objects but is powerless (cf. *Brooklyn 99* 1.03).

Another example of this effect can be examined in the cold open of a Season Three episode. Scully excitedly tells the protagonist that "the place on the corner is serving lemonade, and you get to keep the jar" (*Brooklyn 99* 3.07). Since Hitchcock has brought an identical mason jar containing his goldfish to work, Peralta enthusiastically summons his co-workers into the break room to bet on whether Scully drinks Hitchcock's fish or Hitchcock puts fish food in Scully's lemonade first. The humiliating and degrading set-up of the scene is, however, quickly dissolved because "Hitchcock just drank his own fish" (ibid.). Although it is cut short, the scene stages the cast collectively enjoying the humiliation of their co-workers. The protagonist's

prolonged "No!" at the end of the cold open not only closes the scene but collectively mirrors the other characters' disappointment of not experiencing the humiliation unfold, and affirms the characters' bond with each other even more.

However, like *P&R*'s Jerry, the "All-American Idiots," as *Rolling Stone* magazine labels Hitchcock and Scully, are narratively equipped with outstanding privileges in the workplace (Sepinwall). The main plot of the second episode of Season Six, called "Hitchcock and Scully," is concerned with the characters' past as budding detectives in the 1980s. The episode portrays the two young men as ambitious and capable detectives, arresting a notorious drug lord and selflessly helping his mistress, who was simultaneously their informant for the case, up until the present moment. The staged difference between intradiegetic past and present versions of Hitchcock and Scully accentuates the privileges with which the characters are equipped.

The episode's cold open is staged as a flashback. Dated bright brass music ("a *Lethal Weapon* riff") sets the scene for New York in 1986, as the title card reads (L. Ferguson). Two initially unknown but alluring male characters are staged to bargain for a considerable amount of cocaine with apparent drug dealers. The two characters confidently and brazenly draw their weapons, show their badges, and try to arrest the culprits:

> Drug dealer: Did you bring the cash?
> Cop 1: Oh, we brought something much better than cash.
> Drug dealer: What is that?
> Cop 2: Our guns. (*Brooklyn 99* 6.02)

An impressively violent and agile fight ensues. The two cops finally eliminate the henchmen and are staged to detect a hidden room in which the drug dealer is rashly trying to stash away money. At the end of the cold open, when the two cops finally corner the fugitive, they are staged to reveal their identity.

> Scully: You want that drink now, Hitchcock?
> Hitchcock: Don't mind if I do, Scully. Don't mind if I do. (ibid.)

The staged differences between the characters in the flashback from 1986 and the intradiegetic present are significant. Flashback Hitchcock and Scully are staged not only as attractive and hip, but also as extremely competent and

assertive. They made up sophisticated entrance lines and received applause for their arrests, paralleling the protagonist's present behavior and acclaim in the Precinct. In an ensuing scene in the intradiegetic present, however, the two detectives are slouching on a couch in Captain Holt's office. Holt informs them, the protagonist, and his partner Boyle that Hitchcock and Scully's case from 1986 is being reopened because of a personal feud that Holt has with Commissioner Kelly:

> Holt: Gentlemen, we have a situation. […] If you ask me, this old case is only coming up now because the commissioner is trying to drum up a scandal at the Nine-Nine.
> Hitchcock: And to take out your two best detectives in the process.
> Holt: You're not my two best detectives.
> Scully: Oh, that's such a relief. I feel so much safer now.
> Peralta: Good Lord. (ibid.)

The fact that Scully himself is staged to "feel so much safer" by knowing that there are more qualified detectives working on cases stands in stark contrast to the confident and decisive younger versions of the detectives.

The incongruity of these images is not only staged as a source of humor, it also works to establish the privileges tied to the middle-aged white men. It reflexively discusses the characters' past professional ambitions in contrast to their present advantage of not having to prove themselves anymore – which they outrageously exploit with general laziness and lethargy. When the protagonist and Boyle find an old photograph of Hitchcock and Scully while going through old case files, they cannot help but be astonished by the external differences.[38] Peralta and Boyle are staged to eventually find out that Hitchcock and Scully withheld information about an additional duffel bag of cash at the crime scene, which has been missing since 1986. Being accused of misappropriating the money, Hitchcock is staged to counter from a perspective of particularly contemporary white privilege that is clearly inspired by former President Trump's rhetoric and his reactions to various allegations: "This is crazy! We're innocent! […] You're fake news! Sad!," while Scully joins in, calling the investigation a "witch hunt" (ibid.).

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38 Peralta yells out, "Oh, my God! I can't believe I'ma say this, but […] *meow*," emphasizing the incongruous former attractiveness and allure of their colleagues (ibid.).

In an earlier episode, the two detectives spell out their privileges even more clearly. After surprisingly solving a complex case in Season Two, Hitchcock and Scully decline Boyle's offer to spread the news and the praise:

> Hitchcock: The last thing we need is to suddenly be on everyone's A list. The ones to watch. The golden boys. [...] All that investigating was exhausting. Besides, we did our share of that in the 70s and 80s. Now, we like to do paperwork in our comfy chairs.
> Scully: If we're away from our desks for too long, they'll update our computers, and we'll lose Minesweeper. So please, don't tell anyone about the amazing work we did today.
> Boyle: I never said 'amazing.' You kind of just did your jobs. (*Brooklyn 99* 2.19)

The two characters, once the "studs of the Nine-Nine" (*Brooklyn 99* 6.02), are staged to get away with sloppy, apathetic, and laborsaving attitudes. They are staged to fall back on the mundane but enjoyable nature of an office job. Hitchcock and Scully are apparently content with sitting on comfortable chairs[39] and dreaming of being "overfed [so they] can no longer stand," while still being able to participate as members of the police force (*Brooklyn 99* 3.17). I read the invective phenomena directed at Hitchcock and Scully interlocked with the depicted privileges of the characters as a reflection on the social and societal macrostructures that still give white, middle-class, cis-gendered, heterosexual men unearned advantages.

In this subchapter, I analyzed the deprecation and humiliation of a distinct set of characters in Schur's Super Nice sitcoms. With the help of Martineau's deliberations on the social functions of disparagement humor, as well as an analysis of the deprecation of *P&R*'s Jerry Gergich and *Brooklyn 99*'s Norm Scully and Michael Hitchcock, I argued that disparagement directed at white, male, middle-aged characters facilitates processes of community building. I have argued that the deprecation of these characters is strongly and reflexively interconnected with the privileges that are depicted in the respective storyworlds. The shows stage a shift in the power balance of the narrative, empowering formerly marginalized characters and disparaging privileged white men.

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39 Scully proudly gives an account of being "called the Leonardo da Vinci of sitting on [his] ass" (*Brooklyn 99* 4.06).

In contrast to those shows that heavily rely on strategies of invective humor, this chapter showed that particular situation comedies utilize the reflection on disparagement and humiliation to elicit humor. In focusing on Super Nice Comedy, exemplified by Michael Schur's œvre of situation comedies, I argued that these shows can be recognized by a reflexive dealing with invective phenomena and by a prominent inclusion of the "Comedy of Super Niceness" (Paskin).

With *Parks and Recreation* as the central text, I approached this chapter with three distinct research perspectives. From a media-economics perspective in the first section, I argued that the show radically reverses the prominent and familiar invective logic of TV, based on Kelleter and Jahn-Sudmann's concept of serial outbidding by counterposing invective phenomena with Super Niceness (cf. "Die Dynamik serieller Überbietung"). In the second section and from a cultural-historical perspective, I argued that in the period of investigation, the notion of Super Niceness is utilized to move sitcoms away from postmodern cynicism. Super Nice sitcoms, as I argued, deviate from the humorous pleasures of deprecation and transgression by privileging humor that is based on genuine sincerity and the metamodern belief in human interconnection. From a socio-cultural perspective, the last section of the chapter focused on the disparagement of a distinct group of characters in Super Nice sitcoms: white, male, middle-aged characters. I argued that the invectives directed at these characters reflexively negotiate images of white male privilege and empower marginalized characters by shifting the power structures in the respective narratives.

5. Dynamizing Invectivity: The Role of Invectives in the Boundary Work of the Genre

This study's period of investigation was characterized by a particular dynamism of the situation comedy genre, whose formerly rigid and stable structures began to be disrupted and broken down. In this chapter, I argue that invective dynamics and constellations repeatedly play a significant role in dynamizing the situation comedy genre's boundary work. This means that invectives in sitcom texts frequently seem to align the genre's traditional features and conventions with changing political and social constellations. By adapting to, for example, formal trends or emerging public sensitivities to ethnicity- or gender-based discrimination and disparagement, invective phenomena concurrently explore, as I argue, their own genre traditions and engage with their own genre boundaries in the respective texts. As I exemplify in the case studies of this chapter, formats of the sitcom genre have multiplied, and genre boundaries have softened and become hybridized which, as I discuss below, indicates a *Quality Turn* in comedy.

As mentioned before, invective dynamics and constellations are responsible for the footing of the sitcom genre, and they are able to serve as catalysts for the genre's self-conception and for an exploration of its own boundaries. While Chapter 3 concentrates on how invective strategies use discourses of 'otherness' to elicit humor, and Chapter 4 focuses on how the reflection on invective dynamics can serve as a source of humor, this chapter investigates the role of invective dynamics in the genre's margins. Each of the texts that I adduce in the following paragraphs shows how invective structures lead to a wider range of thematic and formal conventions, and generally dynamize the perimeters of the genre. This chapter explores how deprecating gendered stereotypes, hyperbolic enactments of embarrassment and shaming, and provocation through offensive plot lines and language in conjunction with formal and thematic alterations and innovations dynamize

the situation comedy genre and its developments. The exemplary texts of this chapter, the mockumentary sitcoms *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009–15) and *The Comeback* (HBO 2005, 2014), the dramedy *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Amazon 2017–), and the 1990s sitcom classic *Roseanne* (ABC 1988–97) and its revival (ibid. 2018) offer productive insights and they present a platform to discuss the recent dynamizing of the genre. Apart from being a formative text in Schur's œvre of Super Nice sitcoms, discussed in Chapter 4, *Parks and Recreation*'s formal characteristics as a mockumentary sitcom and its thematic orientation towards gender disparity put themselves forward for inspection in this chapter. Before presenting the structure of the chapter in more detail, I briefly introduce the main sitcom texts.

HBO's mockumentary *The Comeback* revolves around the middle-aged actor Valerie Cherish as she tries to revive her career as a sitcom actor. After years of not booking any jobs, the protagonist is offered a humiliating supporting role on a new network sitcom called *Room and Bored*. With this offer, she agrees to simultaneously let a reality TV crew shamelessly chronicle every step of her comeback to the television industry. As previously mentioned, *Parks and Recreation* follows civil servant Leslie Knope and her colleagues' seemingly futile endeavors to build a park on an abandoned lot in town. The mockumentary also revolves around the protagonist's political aspirations, shedding light on gendered discrimination in local government. Amazon's *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is a period dramedy set in the New York City of the late 1950s and 60s. Protagonist Miriam 'Midge' Maisel, Upper West Side housewife and mother, finds herself distraught and alone after her husband leaves her for his younger secretary. She finds herself on a stand-up comedy stage, inebriated and ready to rant about the injustices of (her) life. The dramedy eventually follows her quest to become a successful female comedian during a time in which gendered access to material resources, status, power, and reputation was a path of trial and tribulation. ABC's revival of the sitcom classic *Roseanne* invites viewers to meet the Conner family again after a 20-year-hiatus. The 2018 season nostalgically portrays the blue-collar family in their old house, still trying to make ends meet. Besides the well-established working-class issues, the revival takes on contemporary political and social troubles like the 2016 election, derogatory anti-Muslim attitudes, and the national opioid crisis.

In this chapter, I explore the role of invective structures in the recent dynamic development of the situation comedy genre. In order to do so, I have selected three points of departure for this study: the mockumentary

sitcom, the dramedy, and the revival. This chapter is, therefore, divided into three larger sections. Each of the subchapters explores particular texts that engage with the genre's traditions and boundaries in particular ways. The first section examines the use of embarrassment as a major source of invective humor in the mockumentary sitcoms *The Comeback* and *Parks and Recreation*. I argue that the visual mockumentary characteristics enable and facilitate authorially-staged embarrassment of the show's female protagonists by inviting audiences to invectively laugh at their conduct. Furthermore, I argue that embarrassment is staged and utilized as a social control mechanism. The following subchapter argues that invectives play an important role in the fusion of dramatic and comedic elements in the dramedy *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. On the one hand, I argue that the protagonist's invective stand-up performance at the end of the pilot episode serves as an escape from traditional gender roles that keep the character prisoner in her precarious status as a woman, mother, and homemaker in the intradiegetic world of the 1950s. On the other hand, I argue that the dramedy frequently bypasses moments of narrative conflict in order to self-reflexively expose and ridicule prevailing structures of gender inequality. Focusing on media practices and institutions, I use the revival of the hitshow *Roseanne* to examine how sitcoms commodify nostalgia for the pleasure of revisiting familiar characters, places, as well as invectives. While the protagonist is staged to pioneer liberal ideals in the original run, the revival utilizes Roseanne as a vehicle for politically conservative key issues. I therefore argue that the capitalization and commodification of nostalgia for the protagonist's invectives is a political strategy of the network channel ABC to reach audiences that they felt were neglected previous to the 2016 election. I highlight significant similarities between the rhetorics of Trump, Barr, and ABC in order to unravel the shift in the character construction of the protagonist which ultimately led to the cancellation of *Roseanne*.

Before diving into the case studies, I emphasize the notable contrast between recent US American situation comedies "that often cross genres or combine tropes from disparate, seemingly ill-fitting forms," and the majority of 20th century sitcoms (VanArendonk, "Post-Comedy Comedy"). As I argue later in more detail, the primary goal of a large number of sitcoms after the turn of the millenium is no longer tied to making viewers laugh. The "comedic impetus," as Brett Mills calls it, has been suspended (Mills, *The Sitcom* 5; cf. "Post-Comedy"). In contrast to sitcoms that contain a laugh track – through which the audience is explicitly invited and encouraged

to laugh – many contemporary sitcoms create "a feeling of ambiguity — am I allowed to be laughing?" (VanArendonk, "Post-Comedy Comedy"). With the example of the following case studies,[1] I not only argue that invective humor plays a significant role in dynamizing the margins of the genre, but I also propose a *Quality Turn* in comedy. The Quality Television discourse emerged in the 1980s as "the Golden Age of Television" and was characterized by "better, more sophisticated, and more artistic [programming] than the usual network fare" (R. J. Thompson 12). Although Media scholar Robert J. Thompson aims at establishing defining features of Quality TV, it is hard "to apply [them] with any degree of objectivity" (ibid. 13). His list of characteristics include, among others, a sizable ensemble cast, particular attention to realism in the narration, controversial and ongoing storylines and arcs, and a tendency towards self-referentiality and a mixing and hybridizing of genres (cf. ibid. 13ff.). However, instead of applying to all televisual genres, Jane Feuer voices that

> from the standpoint of quality TV, the charge leveled against stereotyped characters has always been that they lack psychological realism and the potential for identification from the 'quality' audience. The sitcom remains forever on the far side of quality for this reason, since a certain amount of stereotyping is necessary to get laughs. (Feuer 37)

The sitcom and other comedic formats, therefore, have previously been excluded from the Quality TV discourse. In recent years, however, sitcoms have been "focusing on tone, emotional impact, storytelling, and formal experimentation," emphasizing a new complexity in the genre (Fox). As is shown in the following case studies, recent shows feature more ambiguous protagonists who "[refuse] to skirt around bodily realities" instead of stereotypical sitcom characters (VanArendonk, "Post-Comedy Comedy"). "[Lacking] clear places to laugh," sitcoms "are increasingly pushing the bounds of what it means for something to be a comedy in the most basic sense, rewiring the relationship between comedies and jokes" (Fox). Recent developments in the sitcom genre that I exemplarily describe in the following case studies indicate a *Quality Turn* in comedy.

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1 In the case of the revival of hit-sitcom *Roseanne*, this chapter shows that a formally antiquated and morally unseasonable sitcom format experiences difficulties in facing the zeitgeist and remaining culturally relevant.

5.1 Embarrassment as an Invective Strategy in the Mockumentary Sitcoms *The Comeback* and *Parks and Recreation*

David Brent and Michael Scott are probably the most popular but also the most embarrassing bosses in the English-speaking world. From online magazines and innumerable threads on the discussion website *reddit* to references in the successful song "When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?" by singer-songwriter Billie Eilish, the British (BBC 2001-03) and especially the American (NBC 2005-13) version of the mockumentary sitcom *The Office* are still hugely beloved (cf. C. Holmes). In scholarly writing, a lot of attention is paid to the documentary-like visual features of the mockumentary sitcom and the pleasure and staging of embarrassment, cringe, and awkwardness (cf. Middleton, *Documentary's Akward Turn*; Mills, "Comedy Verité"). In this subchapter, I take a closer look at the role of invective dynamics in two distinct mockumentary sitcoms as one trend that gathered pace in the period of investigation in which this book is interested. As suggested before, I argue that invective dynamics generate an exploration of the self-conception as well as the liminal spaces of the genre. For the mockumentary sitcom in particular, I argue that invective dynamics and phenomena of embarrassment are closely linked and geared towards each other.

In this subchapter, I argue that the genre-specific characteristics of the mockumentary sitcom are in close communication with the invective strategy of embarrassment. I analyze the depiction of embarrassment as an invective strategy in case studies of the mockumentary sitcoms *The Comeback* (HBO 2005, 2014) and *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009–15).[2] I show that these series stage embarrassment as an invective strategy in order to elicit humor. Since the hybrid generic features of the mockumentary sitcom heavily rely on the intrusive qualities of the camera, they enable and facilitate a systematic exposure of embarrassment in its narratives. I argue that authorially-staged embarrassment invites viewers to read the depicted behavior of characters as humorous, since it obstructs feelings of immersion and affiliation between viewers and characters. Rather, authorially-staged embarrassment invites audiences to temporarily abandon feelings of empathy in order to revel in the invective and transgressive pleasures of others' embarrassment in these scenes. This subchapter is divided into

2 From now on, *Parks and Recreation* is referred to as *P&R*.

two larger sections: After zooming in on concepts of embarrassment and after examining the features of the hybrid mockumentary (sitcom) genre, I analyze the depiction of embarrassment in the case studies of *The Comeback* and *P&R*. The HBO-mockumentary analyzes embarrassment as an invective source of humor and discusses how the protagonist frequently defies embarrassment as a "social control mechanism" by failing to display socially appropriate behavior (Schwind, "Embarrassment Humor" 56). While the first season of *P&R* works in similar ways, I argue that changes in the character construction of the protagonist and a decreasing number of mockumentary features in Season Five lead to a decline of authorially-staged embarrassment, and, subsequently, a reduction in the use of embarrassment as an invective source of humor.

To analyze embarrassment in televisual texts, as I do in this subchapter, multiple variables are important to consider. First of all, the majority of concepts concerning embarrassment are not specifically tailored to televisual texts. Nevertheless, I use these concepts as a frame of reference to approach the invective phenomena in my case study. As a starting point of my discussion of embarrassment as an invective strategy, I use the pioneering work of sociologist Erving Goffman. Building on that, I consult the work of Michael Billig, who examined and included the role of humor in his notion of embarrassment. In addition, I utilize the few scholarly texts that address embarrassment in televisual texts, for example, Schwind's work on 'embarrassment humor' in the American adaptation of *The Office*.

Goffman points out that individuals in social situations of any kind are usually concerned about the display of their own an acceptable presentation to others. In his 1967 article "Embarrassment and Social Organization," he argues that embarrassment

> occurs whenever an individual is felt to have projected incompatible definitions of [herself] before those present. These projections do not occur at random or for psychological reasons but at certain places in a social establishment where incompatible principles of social organization prevail. In the forestalling of conflict between these principles, embarrassment has its social function. (Goffman, "Embarrassment and Social Organization" 264)

Throughout the social interactions of everyday life, individuals are, according to Goffman, frequently confronted with unfulfilled expectations of themselves and their surroundings. The imposed social organization of

interactions can, therefore, be seen as a matrix of conduct. Not following this matrix of conduct may lead to a breach of "the codes of expected behavior," causing the individual to experience embarrassment (Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule* 217). One of embarrassment's social functions is, according to Goffman, to save 'face.' He defines 'face' as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for [herself] by the line others assume [she] has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes" ("On Face-Work" 222). 'Face-work,' then, describes the "actions taken by a person to make whatever [she] is doing consistent with face" (ibid. 226). Not being able to save 'face,' therefore, leads to embarrassment, a – as Goffman describes – somatic feeling of discomfort and anxiety, accompanied by "blushing, fumbling, stuttering, [and] an unusually low- or high-pitched voice" ("Embarrassment and Social Organization" 264).

Billig suggests that embarrassment is an inherently social reaction that "has to be learnt:" Children absorb knowledge about embarrassment and the social appropriateness of any given behavior through social interaction (Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule* 221f.). Displays of embarrassment and the fear thereof are seen as disciplinary measures to ensure social compliance in everyday life. He also argues that embarrassment is highly culturalized: What is embarrassing in one culture might not be embarrassing in another (cf. ibid. 218f.). While Goffman's actors of social interaction are rather passive and seemingly "programmed to fit in with social life and to help others do so," Billig explores the potential of laughter and embarrassment as a means of moral correction (Billig, "Humour and Embarrassment" 26). Based on Goffman's research, he emphasizes the crucial link between embarrassment and humor that Goffman neglected, determining that the humiliation of others is humorous or comic to observers. In Billig's constellation of actors, the social transgression of an individual is observed by one or more onlookers. The ensuing embarrassment of the individual, as Billig suggests, stems not so much from the violation of the prevailing social rules but from the fear of the onlookers' possible laughter (cf. *Laughter and Ridicule* 206f.). He distinguishes between "disciplinary humor" and "rebellious humor" (ibid. 203). The former stresses the corrective quality of invectively laughing at the transgressor in order to maintain a given social order, while the latter describes individuals deliberately transgressing shared social conventions in order to elicit laughter and/or to question and undermine the imposed matrix of conduct or social organization.

Billig argues that there is "an internalized force to protect codes and ensure routine social compliance" (*Laughter and Ridicule* 215). Schwind adds the characterization of embarrassment as a "social control mechanism" that structures social relations between individuals on- and off-screen in a hierarchical manner ("Embarrassment Humor" 56). While Goffman primarily focuses his reflections on the workplace, where people of different levels of a given hierarchy come together, Billig goes as far as to suggest that embarrassment is one of the most important means for "the continuation of social life" in general (*Laughter and Ridicule* 215). Since embarrassed behavior is culturalized and learned in relation to cultural norms, I argue that embarrassment can be seen as a culturalized technique of social control. In smaller social settings, I suggest that embarrassment can be strategically and invectively utilized to discipline others by instilling the fear of humiliation and chastisement in order to ensure compliance with shared social conventions. On a societal level, I suggest that embarrassment's claim of social control is very much linked to 'embarrassability,' "a person's general susceptibility to embarrassment" (Modigliani 316). 'Embarrassability' has frequently been utilized as a signifier to construct essentialist differences in civilization, i.e. constructed racial and gendered disparities. Following Darwin, scholarly discourses in the 18th century argued that African Americans are less culturalized and less morally competent since they are supposedly unable to show signs of embarrassment; that is, they are said to be incapable of blushing (cf. Fernando; Darwin; Fredrickson). Although white women are supposedly exceptionally good at blushing (cf. Fredrickson 59), emotionality – like embarrassment – is marked and "works to construct women as inferior (weak, natural) beings relative to (strong, cultural) men" (Holland and Kipnis 337).[3] Embarrassment, therefore, has a longstanding tradition of being used to oppress individuals as a culturalized technique of social control. Furthermore, Billig argues that concepts of shame need to be demarcated from notions of embarrassment since "shame involves a general and enduring sense that the self is unworthy, whereas embarrassment is much more temporary and tied to particular situations" (*Laughter and Ridicule* 218f.).

3 Studies show that women usually feel more embarrassed than men in social situations (cf. R. S. Miller; Parrott et al.; Bragg and Buckingham; Withers and Vernon; Gross and Stone).

In televisual settings, embarrassment can occur on a figural and authorial level. As discussed in Chapter 2.3, Kanzler argues that mockery, like embarrassment, "can be distributed among several characters in [a show's] storyworld, who hand out ridicule to each other, and/or it can also disappear behind the apparatus of the medium" when the storytelling stages the embarrassment ("(Meta-)Disparagement Humour" 17). Characters, therefore, might not be staged to be aware of their own embarrassing behavior, which viewers are, however, invited to find funny. Media scholar Schwind identifies another level of embarrassment tied to audiovisual products. He argues that "the actual embarrassment experienced by the audience watching the series, effecting each viewer's moral judgment and personal feelings of empathy," interacts with the embarrassment depicted on screen ("Embarrassment Humor" 53). Furthermore, seeing staged embarrassment of characters on screen also entails an informative quality. The viewers are able to deduce appropriate and inappropriate conduct in order to maintain socially acceptable behavior.

Located in the safety of their homes, shielded by the screen, and unable to actively influence the narrative, audiences are, as Schwind argues, nevertheless, affected by embarrassment on screen. He argues that "[l]aughing at embarrassing situations as part of any kind of mediated narrative requires the temporary suspension of feelings of pity, compassion and empathy for the ridiculed individual" (58). The German term *Schadenfreude*, for example, describes the individuals' "pleasure at the misfortune of others and illustrates that people not only experience sympathy toward the suffering of others but sometimes also enjoy it" (Van Dijk et al. 168). The described pleasure of *Schadenfreude* ties in well with the superiority theories of humor in which the "laugher always looks down on whatever [she] laughs at, and so judges it inferior by some standard" (Monro qtd. in Lintott 347). According to Van Dijk, *Schadenfreude* "provide[s] people with an opportunity to protect, maintain, or enhance their feelings of self-worth" by a favorable social comparison between themselves and the transgressor (Van Dijk et al. 172). Another distinct and recurring constellation of actors, especially on screen, is called 'vicarious embarrassment' or German *Fremdschämen*. It describes the state of "[f]eeling embarrassed on someone else's behalf" when an individual deliberately or unsuspectingly transgresses shared social conventions, possibly facing social consequences (Schwind, "Embarrassment Humor" 58). Audiences in front of a screen, principally not effected by any social transgression on-screen, may

nevertheless be affected because "maintaining face in social interactions is of such central concern that envisioning oneself in the place of an embarrassed other might cause one to suffer empathic embarrassment" (Krach et al. 1). Although studies show that "vicarious embarrassment is evoked even without any connection between observer and the protagonist's predicament and without any responsibility of the observer for the protagonist's situation" (ibid.), social ties and feelings of affiliation to a show's characters can cause affective responses to invective moments of staged embarrassment (cf. Müller-Pinzler et al. 466). Jason Middleton labels phenomena of vicarious embarrassment "embodied and affective responses" (*Documentary's Akward Turn* 15).

In his analysis of the British mockumentary sitcom *The Office* (BBC 2001–03), Schwind examines what he terms 'embarrassment humor.' Taking into account historical and cultural perspectives on embarrassment, Schwind proposes that "[c]ontemporary forms of embarrassment humor are not solely restricted to transgressions of social class but focus on *faux pas* and mishaps in interpersonal and psycho-social relations" ("Embarrassment Humor" 52). Usually, this goes hand in hand with friction between the characters' self-representations and their generic exposure by the cameras – the difference between what is said in the storyworld and what the viewer actually gets to see. Middleton argues that "[w]hen a subject's discourse is juxtaposed through the editing with other footage that ambiguates, contradicts, undermines or just provides a broader context for it, a differential in perception is created between subject and viewer" (Middleton, "Documentary Comedy" 61). One technique to expose differences is the so-called reaction shot that I discussed in Chapter 2.3. Schwind suggests that, for mockumentary sitcoms, reaction shots are mostly triggered by embarrassment, cutting or panning to the reactions of characters who have witnessed the embarrassing situation (cf. "Embarrassment Humor" 65). Mills emphasizes the reaction shot's significance for comedic formats since he argues that characters' responses are "as vital to the comedy as the events themselves are" ("Comedy Verité" 69). According to Schwind, 'embarrassment humor' offers a relief from social norms by allowing viewers to temporarily suspend empathic feelings (compassion, pity, etc.) for the embarrassed

individual in favor of laughing (cf. Schwind, "Embarrassment Humor" 56, 58).[4]

Laughter and humor, as Mills argues, are "always of paramount concern" in situation comedies (*The Sitcom* 6). The laugh track has been one of the genre's most stable and distinguishing feature since the 1950s. However, over the last decades, as Mills suggests, the sitcom began to develop and mutate in response to changes and developments in other televisual forms, especially with regard to the documentary, the docusoap, and reality television (cf. "Comedy Verité" 65). New styles of storytelling and visual aesthetics challenged the sitcom's stable and conservative genre characteristics, including the laugh track. Mills noted these changes and coined the term 'Comedy Verité.' He was inspired by the discourse of media researchers and filmmakers who differentiated between 'direct cinema,' where the camera is assumed to be capable of unbiased record, and 'cinema verité,' where the filmmaking process is shown "intervening in the events filmed, with participants not only looking at, but also addressing, the filmmakers" (Corner qtd. in 74). 'Comedy Verité,' then, focuses and adopts these visual characteristics for the sitcom and its comedic purposes, "[indicating] a use of television comedy to interrogate the processes and representations of media forms" (Mills, "Comedy Verité" 75). The hybrid comedic format is also known as a mock- or fake documentary, or *mockumentary sitcom*. Creative Industries scholar Craig Hight defines mockumentary as

> a fictional audiovisual text […] that looks and sounds like a documentary. [It features] fictional characters and events that appear to have been 'captured' on location and through interviews by a documentary film crew. […] In doing so, it adopts the formal features of documentary while rejecting two of its main assumptions: that the facts depicted are factual and that they deserve serious attention. (qtd. in Nardi 73)

4 In his book, *Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship*, Middleton introduces his concept of *awkward humor* which is related to *embarrassment humor*. He defines it as "rooted in differentials in perception and affect among filmmaker, subject, and spectator, sometimes fostering a sense of superiority in the spectator" (*Documentary's Akward Turn* 26). Middleton reads awkwardness as a trope describing interpersonal situations in everyday life. In reality-based media, like the mockumentary, awkward moments occur "when an encounter feels too real: unscripted, unplanned, and, above all, occurring in person" (2).

A mockumentary sitcom, then, is a combination of mockumentary aesthetics and the sitcom genre's 'comic impetus' – which means that the texts "may do other things" but their humor is of the utmost importance (Mills, *The Sitcom* 5f.). In general, many mockumentary sitcoms conform with expected sitcom characteristics like the ensemble cast, the setting, and the single narrative problem per episode. The visual techniques and styles of the text are usually linked to the conventions of the documentary genre, i.e. hand-held cameras and 'talking head segments' in which the characters are speaking directly to the camera. In contrast to the fake documentary, which suggests a traditional reading along the lines of the documentary genre, the mockumentary sitcom encourages its audiences "to recognize and appreciate the fiction" (Hight 18). In the mockumentary sitcom, the generic laugh track is abandoned in order to compel viewers to engage with the texts and take responsibility for their laughter. Without the laugh track, the audience of mockumentary sitcoms has to find a way to make sense of the text – "by using the characteristics of other genres, and removing those traditionally associated with [the] sitcom, the pleasure offered requires at least a working knowledge of other television forms" (Mills, "Comedy Verité" 77). Cinema and Television scholar Ethan Thompson suggests a shift in "the source of humor in the television comedy from the constructed joke to the observation of a comic event" (E. Thompson 67). The source of humor in the mockumentary sitcom, hence, heavily relies on the intrusion of the camera and its effects on the intradiegetic world, including embarrassment. This proposed shift in the construction of humor in television comedies, consequently, greatly facilitates the use of embarrassment as an invective source of humor.

My analyses of the mockumentary sitcoms that I have chosen for this subchapter's case study, HBO's *The Comeback* and NBC's *P&R*, revolve around embarrassment as an invective strategy and a source of humor. In the following, I show that authorially-staged embarrassment obstructs pleasures of immersion in the storyworld and prevents an affective affiliation with the texts' characters. I argue that rather, it invites viewers to suspend feelings of empathy in order to be able to laugh at the depicted humiliation. In my analysis of *The Comeback*, I examine how authorially-staged embarrassment functions as a source of humor, and I discuss how the protagonist is staged to defy embarrassment's gendered social control mechanisms by not subsequently displaying appropriate behavior. In my analysis of *P&R*, I argue that decreased mockumentary features lead to a decrease in the utilization of embarrassment as an invective source of humor.

The first season of *The Comeback* was broadcast in 2005; a second season was aired in 2014, nine years later. For my argument in this case study, I focus solely on the first season of the show. As detailed in the introduction of this chapter, the show revolves around protagonist Valerie Cherish, portrayed by former *Friends*-star Lisa Kudrow, who is trying to revive her career as a comedic actor. After years of not booking jobs, she is offered the role of Aunt Sassy on a new intradiegetic network sitcom named *Room and Bored*. She simultaneously agrees to let a reality TV crew chronicle her comeback to the television industry. The intradiegetic reality TV show is also called *The Comeback*.[5] At the beginning of each episode, the viewer gets to see an introducing title card labeled "The Comeback - Raw Footage," informing the viewers that they are now, allegedly, seeing raw material recorded by the intradiegetic reality show's mobile camera crew as well as by stationary cameras in the protagonist's home. This furthermore presages the broadcast of an edited version of the reality TV show in the storyworld.[6] The title card as well as a very prominent and visible camera crew are staged to offer the documentary and mockumentary genre's sense of authenticity. The audience sees Valerie fail at almost everything while she joyfully and very dedicatedly over-performs for the cameras – supposedly in order to keep up with her younger and hipper sitcom co-stars at all costs. Most of the first season of *The Comeback* depicts Valerie trying to navigate her grand career ambitions and the bleak and ageist reality of the Hollywood industry. The protagonist is hyperaware of the cameras and seemingly anxious to appeal to an imagined viewer in the intradiegetic world.

Embarrassment plays a very prominent role in the first season of *The Comeback* – in the intradiegetic reality show as well as the series in general. The protagonist is staged as the butt of the joke almost constantly: She is humiliated, taken advantage of, made to look like a fool, and ridiculed. The protagonist is not only embarrassed when she is staged to over-perform for the cameras; Valerie's embarrassment is also

5 In the following, please note that when I am talking about *The Comeback*, I am referring to the series as a whole unless stated differently.

6 Within the frame of the first season, more specifically in the last episode, the reality show *The Comeback* is aired in the storyworld. It becomes clear that there is a huge gap between the raw footage the audience supposedly got to see and the finished reality TV product, even in the storyworld. These processes are, of course, mirrored for the mockumentary audience: What the viewers get to see is a highly edited performance for the HBO-mockumentary starring Lisa Kudrow.

precipitated by other characters in the storyworld. Frequently, however, the embarrassment is induced by the authorial agency of the series – the focus of this case study. *The Comeback* stages situations where the audience's shared social conventions would typically raise expectations that characters display embarrassed behavior. In the majority of cases, however, I suggest that the protagonist is staged to be unaware of her embarrassment; therefore, she is unable to display the subsequent socially appropriate behavior. The authorially-staged embarrassment of the protagonist thus obstructs the viewer from establishing meaningful relations to Valerie. On the contrary, it invites viewers to favorably socially compare themselves to the protagonist in order to enhance their sense of self-worth, and, as I argue, invectively laugh at Valerie (cf. Van Dijk et al. 69; cf. Müller-Pinzler et al. 466).

These invective dynamics can exemplarily be examined in the second episode called "Valerie Triumphs at the Upfronts." There, the cast and the crew of *Room and Bored* are invited to an event called 'The Upfronts' where the casts of new television programs are introduced to the media. On the plane ride to New York, multiple conflicts arise around Valerie that lead to her embarrassment on various levels. The scene begins with the protagonist and the sitcom writers, Tom and Paulie G., being seated in first class while the rest of the sitcom cast and the camera crew are placed in coach. Logically, this poses a problem for the filming of the intradiegetic reality show. Before take-off, they are staged to capture a moment of embarrassment for Valerie. The protagonist proudly and excitedly tells the camera that she is very lucky to be sitting across from the sitcom's "first-class show writers" (*The Comeback* 1.2). The camera pans to the two characters, apparently leaving Valerie out of earshot. It is staged to not only capture Tom's half-hearted and fake response but also the subsequent invective blow that Paulie G. directs at his writing colleague: "Why don't you just blow reality TV and get it over with?" (ibid.). Paulie G.'s remark not only reflects badly on Tom, who is apparently selling out his talents, it also emphasizes and personifies the show's hierarchical ranking of genres: Reality TV is beneath sitcom's dignity. Although the two writers seem to be aware of the fact that there is a lot of money in the reality TV business, they obviously and invectively look down on the genre – and, hence, they invectively look down on Valerie, who brought the camera crew into their professional lives.[7] Once the camera pans back to

7 From the beginning of the show, Paulie G. is staged to dislike the protagonist. In episode six, Valerie sets out to thank the writers for their hard work. When she

Valerie, she seems baffled and laughingly asks the camera: "What did they say? I couldn't hear" (*The Comeback* 1.2). She insecurely gestures to her ears, obviously still wanting to inquire what the writers said about her. The editing of the scene juxtaposes the invective conversation between Tom and Paulie G. with the protagonist's ignorance and, therefore, provides "a differential in perception [that] is created between [Valerie] and [the] viewer" (Middleton, "Documentary Comedy" 61). In contrast to the protagonist, the audience is aware of the invective phenomena directed at her. The protagonist's agitated reaction to her lack of knowledge subsequently invites the viewers to invectively laugh at her. An approaching flight attendant quickly deflects and terminates the situation by sending the camera team to their seats in coach, leaving Valerie in an unresolved and embarrassed state.

In a subsequent shot, the camera person, staged to be physically restricted by the seat belt sign, zooms up the aisle and captures Valerie self-consciously raising her glass and pouting as if extremely sad that she cannot entertain the cameras anymore. By phonily mouthing "I'm sorry," the protagonist, clearly staged to over-perform for the camera, creates an embarrassing moment. The over-performance of Valerie clashes with possible viewer expectations (the protagonist might be relieved to have time away from the camera). Her staged behavior likely stunts feelings of empathy in the audience, rather inviting viewers to invectively laugh at the awkward scene and at Valerie's conduct.

Later, when the protagonist realizes that the reality TV camera is trained on her younger co-star Juna to conduct an interview, she is staged to giddily prance along the aisle, animatedly and flatly singing the refrain to "I Like That" by African American R&B artist Houston (featuring Nate Dogg, Chingy, and I-20). Juna is staged to cut her off and complains, "God. That song is just so done, though," questioning the appropriateness of the protagonist's performance in its entirety (*The Comeback* 1.2). The song choice and its reception by Juna highlights the staged generational discrepancy between the two women, indirectly and invectively pointing out that Valerie

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arrives at the set, she witnesses Paulie G. and other writers invectively making fun of her and her husband's latest sexual encounter (*The Comeback* 1.06). An episode later, Paulie G. insults Valerie's acting in front of the whole crew: "Boy, does she suck" (*The Comeback* 1.07). Towards the end of the season, he is even staged to leave rooms when the protagonist enters. The show not only invectively juxtaposes the characters Valerie and Paulie G. in the storyworld, the show contrasts what they stand for: reality television and the situation comedy.

might also be 'done' in the entertainment industry. The social script of the scene calls for signs of embarrassment in Valerie's conduct. In the following brief moment of intradiegetic silence, the camera intrusively zooms in on the protagonist's face. Valerie's authorially-staged reaction shot, however, may briefly look like fleeting embarrassment but is quickly replaced by a feigned and cocky look of disappointment that the popcultural reference did not work to her advantage. The protagonist's authorially-staged embarrassment is overridden by an over-performance of the character while she is eagerly trying to compensate for the difference in age and generational knowledge. By not showing characteristic behavior tied to embarrassment, i.e. backing down and deflecting, she is staged to resist the social control mechanisms of embarrassment. Once again, the viewer is invited to invectively laugh at Valerie's failure to adhere to the social script of the scene.[8]

The scene is carried to extremes when the protagonist and her co-stars are taken by surprise by turbulence. Valerie is staged to overconfidently refuse all precautions with a wave of her hand, assuring her co-stars that, "if [she] just stay[s] low, [she's] fine" (*The Comeback* 1.2). It seems that Valerie does not want to interrupt the ongoing discussion about their appearance at 'The Upfronts' in New York under any circumstances after Juna tells her, "Paulie G. said we should just go out and look hot" (ibid.). Staged to be aware of the fact that she might not be considered as 'hot' as her co-stars, Valerie is staged to rudely hijack the conversation by bringing up her past prime-time experiences in the industry. While the protagonist tries to come up "with something fun to do" (ibid.), the plane is staged to suddenly jolt. Valerie bites her tongue, thwarting her plans to make a good impression on her co-stars. Staged to admit that it might be better to head back, she insincerely waves to the camera before crashing into her male co-star's lap with another jolt of the plane. The reality TV camera is invectively trained on the protagonist's arduous way back to her seat. With "You know what, I think I better go down," the protagonist is staged to get on all fours (ibid.).

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8 *The Comeback* frequently stages Valerie's younger sitcom co-stars as invectively ageist, degrading the protagonist for her choice of outfits, popcultural references, and personal preferences. I suggest that her co-stars, Tom, and Paulie G. can be read as proxies for the entertainment industry, trying to assert power through processes of degradation. By denouncing production practices, *The Comeback* is staged as an industry satire (cf. Williamson 118; cf. Kocela 162; cf. Schwind, "Chilled-Out Entertainers" 22).

Even after Valerie pleads with the reality TV team to stop the recording, the camera is fixed on the protagonist's crawl to first class. For nearly 20 seconds, the camera invectively captures the protagonist painfully bumping into seats and other people, authorially staging embarrassment. Valerie's conduct, as I argue, does not invite empathic viewer reaction, but rather invites invective laughter at the protagonist's recklessness and ensuing embarrassment.[9]

The case study of *The Comeback* analyzed the staging of embarrassment as an invective strategy to elicit humor. I have shown that the visual mockumentary features embodied by the intradiegetic (reality TV) camera crew exposed and exhibited the protagonist's embarrassment. I argued that the authorially-staged embarassment of the show stunts feelings of empathy and invites viewers to invectively laugh at the protagonist's conduct. Furthermore, I have shown that the embarrassment of the protagonist can be read as a culturalized technique of social control. Since *The Comeback*'s protagonist is frequently staged to be unaware of as well as to resist feelings of embarrassment, she fails to exhibit a shared repertoire of socially appropriate behavior.

The second case study of this subchapter revolves around NBC's mockumentary *P&R*. Although the show was analyzed in the previous chapter, its formal features put themselves forward for an examination of invective strategies in the border area of the genre. In the following paragraphs, I show that *P&R*'s first season stages embarrassment decidedly differently than the show's fifth season. While the pilot episode stages embarrassment similarly to the *The Comeback*, Season Five does not rely on authorially-staged embarrassment as an invective strategy. I comparatively argue that a decrease in mockumentary features goes hand in hand with decreased authorially-staged embarrassment used to elicit humor. In Season Five, *P&R* utilizes embarrassment on a figural level, disambiguously inviting the viewers to take to the protagonist and to immerse themselves in the narrative.

The creators of *P&R*, Greg Daniels and Michael Schur, worked on the American adaptation of *The Office* together, and *P&R* was initially planned as a spin-off series. In the first season of *P&R*, there are palpable similarities

9 The emphasis placed on the invective gaze of the camera, exploiting the protagonist's vulnerability, underlines reality TV's possibly intrusive and cruel quality. At the same time, the audience is held accountable for their laughter by being positioned as accomplices and voyeurs of the staged embarrassment.

between the two NBC comedies, especially when it comes to the construction of their protagonists. In Season One, Leslie Knope, like Michael Scott, is staged as an ambitious character who is tolerated rather than respected by her peers. She is nominally quite powerful, but it is not clear whether she is actually any good at her job. She is often portrayed as clueless, sabotaging her own plans and meetings (cf. N. Jones).

The two exemplary scenes from Seasons One and Five show protagonist Leslie Knope dealing with prejudice against and standing up for women in politics, a recurring theme of the show. The cold open of the pilot introduces Leslie to the viewers. As Deputy Director of the Parks and Recreation Department, she is conducting a poll at a local playground when a sensitive situation arises: A drunk man is staged to be stuck in one of the slides. The source of humor in this introductory scene is repeatedly and predominantly Leslie's authorially-staged embarrassment. The protagonist is not aware of transgressing shared social conventions, nor is she staged to exhibit the kind of embarrassed behavior the social script of the scene calls for. For example, the pilot begins with Leslie kneeling down to survey a young girl who is playing in a sandpit. The social script of the scene calls for Leslie to adjust the elaborate questionnaire to fit the language and demeanor of her opposite. Expectations are thwarted when Leslie proceeds with the survey and the intricate rating system of her questions. When the protagonist receives only questioning looks instead of full-fledged answers, the viewer is invited to expect Leslie to develop an awareness of her errant behavior in the situation. The protagonist, however, is seemingly unfazed by and unaware of her transgression of this social convention. The humor mainly stems from her ignorance of the noticeable gap between her behavior and the social expectations of the scene.

The visual mockumentary style is most apparent in the cold open's talking head segments, where Leslie is directly looking and talking into the camera, as if she has been asked a question that the audience did not hear. Although the viewer cannot see the camera crew at any time in the narrative, hand-held cameras, peculiar angles and zooms, and Leslie's repeated glances to the camera support the stylistic features of the mock-documentary genre. It is interesting to note that only the main characters of the series take any notice of and perform for the camera. Other people, for example those who observe Leslie's dealings at the playground, do not pay any attention to the cameras, clouding the show's and format's claim of authenticity.

In the ensuing talking head segment of the cold open, the editing of the scene stands in clear contrast to what the protagonist is saying. Through undermining, ambiguating, and contradictory images – through authorially-staged embarrassment –, "a differential in perception is created between [Leslie] and [the] viewer" (Middleton, "Documentary Comedy" 61). The protagonist is staged to claim that she is very proud to work for the government, she believes in the power of democracy, and she feels confident that women in politics are on the rise. However, what the audience gets to see in this scene totally undercuts this message: Leslie is fervently conducting a poll with uncooperative children at a local playground, and she is forcefully freeing a drunk man from playground equipment. With the help of mock-documentary features, I argue that the show utilizes authorially-staged embarrassment in order to portray the protagonist as laughable. When she, for example, claims that the government is no longer a boys' club but that "women are everywhere. It's a great time to be a woman in politics" (*P&R* 1.01), her voice-over is accompanied with images of her forcing the drunk man out of the playground slide with an old-fashioned wooden broomstick. When she lists herself as a rising woman in politics among popular names like Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi, the images are staged to undercut and ambiguate her message. The protagonist is denigrated through the authorially-staged gap between her message and the editing of the scene. Leslie is staged as the butt of the joke.

Although the scene from Season Five is thematically quite similar, the protagonist is portrayed very differently. The character and the show in general underwent major changes after the first season. Most paratexts attribute the change of *P&R*'s tone to a shift in the character construction of the protagonist Leslie Knope (A. Tyler, "*Parks and Rec* Season 1"). Of the first season, *Vulture*'s Jones observes that "the series' worldview is hard to pin down [and] the tone never really coalesces until the finale. In general, it's a little bit darker and more cynical than […] the series would become" ("What We Learned from Revisiting Season One"). While Season-One-Leslie might have come across as "unintelligent and silly," and "too intense," the protagonist is depicted as a self-assured, sincere, and competent government official in Season Five (A. Tyler, "*Parks and Rec* Season 1"). In addition, the visual characteristics of *P&R*'s mockumentary format underwent changes throughout its seasons. In the pilot episode, the protagonist is staged to pay a considerable amount of attention to the cameras and her performance for them. In Season Five, except for the still

frequently used talking head segments, the protagonist is mostly staged to ignore the cameras, allowing the viewers to immerse themselves in the narrative without being disrupted by mockumentary features.

With the shift in the character construction of the protagonist, the show invites viewers to identify and sympathize with Leslie. Since *P&R*'s visual mockumentary characteristics were noticeably reduced over the course of its seven seasons, the show invites audiences to immerse themselves in the fictional world of Pawnee. I argue that the changes in the show thwart the transgressive pleasure of authorially-staged embarassment as an invective strategy to elicit humor.

In an episode called "Women in Garbage," the protagonist finds out that it is apparently customary for male members of the Pawnee city government to, among other very degrading things, keep calendars of their female colleagues' menstrual cycles (*P&R* 5.11). Leslie, keen on changing the gender dynamic in City Hall, is staged to initiate a gender equality commission to add more jobs for women in government. The protagonist and her friends, however, are stunned when only male employees show up for the start of the commission. When Leslie addresses the obvious drawback and calls for a re-balancing of the commission, elderly councilman Milton is staged to chime in, and he tries to embarrass Leslie in front of her colleagues: "Listen. You did a great job setting it up and getting the snacks ready. But we'll take it from here" (*P&R* 5.11).[10] The protagonist's response is divided into two parts. Firstly, the protagonist is staged to take Milton's comment about her snack-making abilities as a compliment. This is a characteristic response of Leslie in the course of the Super Nice sitcom as a whole: Compliments, even with questionable intent, will fall on sympathetic ears with the protagonist.[11] With "Round of applause for the girl. But she has to leave to get more snacks," Milton encroachingly tries to embarrass Leslie once again, attempting to establish superiority and social control over her (ibid.). The protagonist's pride in her snack preparation skills is staged to subside quickly, to be replaced by anger about Milton's sexist behavior.

10 The character Fielding Milton was first elected to the city council in 1948 (cf. *P&R* 5.03). His conservative and sexist views fervently clash with the tone of the series and are, thus, exhibited as ridiculous and antiquated.

11 The series' focus on compliments is examined in Chapter 4.1. Chapter 4 examines *P&R* as a Super Nice sitcom and analyzes what Paskin termed the "Comedy of Super Niceness."

While the protagonist does not back down and succumb to the inferior and embarrassed role Milton is offering her, she is staged to insist on her hierarchically superior role as chairwoman of the committee. Milton, in a last attempt to embarrass Leslie, is staged to inquire, "Ouch. Why so ornery? It's not the seventh yet," revealing the character's disturbing knowledge about Leslie's menstrual cycle (ibid.). The ensuing reaction shot of Leslie encapsulates the tone of the scene. For about two seconds, the audience sees the protagonist incredulously staring at Milton, her mouth half open. I argue that this brief caesura in the narrative invites viewers to reflect on the previous scene and its invective quality. Since *P&R* ceased to authorially stage the protagonist's behavior as laughable, I suggest that the viewer is invited to identify and empathize with Leslie. I argue that the scene invites the audience to read Milton's attempt to embarrass Leslie as preposterously unsuccessful. Leslie's staring is not only a source of humor in the scene, but it also invites viewers to mirror feelings of anger and rage toward Milton, who has misogynistically tried to degrade her.

As a "social control mechanism," Milton tries to establish a distinct social hierarchy through embarrassment that excludes women and, consequently, the protagonist (Schwind, "Embarrassment Humor" 56). He is staged to utilize embarrassment as a (figural) invective strategy to make Leslie comply with his image of conservative and exclusively male politics. By raising the subject of menstruation and alluding to symptoms of premenstrual syndrome, the character utilizes biologistic gender differences to construct and maintain a patriarchal hierarchy in his favor. The staging of Leslie, who resists the gendered embarrassment as a technique of social control, invites viewers, in contrast to the scene from the pilot, to identify and sympathize with the protagonist. In Season Five, it is not Leslie who comes off badly but her opponent Milton: He is staged to fail in his attempts to misogynistically control the protagonist through embarrassment as an invective strategy. The changed character construction of the protagonist and the decreased mockumentary features curb *P&R*'s strategy of authorially staging the protagonist's embarrassment in a humorous and invective light. The show invites its viewers to instead read Milton's invective attitude and behavior as embarrassing.

This case study of *P&R* analyzed scenes of embarrassment in two episodes of the first and fifth season. The Season One episode authorially stages the embarrassment of the show's protagonist as an invective strategy. In order to portray Leslie as laughable, the first season utilizes

mockumentary features to obstruct viewers' feelings of affiliation and sympathy. In contrast, Season Five's changes to the protagonist's character construction and a decrease in mockumentary characteristics invite audiences to immerse themselves in the narrative. Therefore, embarrassment as an authorial invective strategy is no longer staged as a major source of humor.

In this subcapter, I have analyzed the use of embarrassment in two mockumentary situation comedies: *The Comeback* and *P&R*. I argued that embarrassment is staged as a major source of humor. Visual mockumentary features that rely on the invasive nature of the camera facilitate, as I have shown, the exposure and exhibition of embarrassment of the show's protagonists. In addition, they thwart the immersion of viewers in the respective narratives. In *The Comeback* and *P&R*'s first season, the protagonists' embarrassment is frequently authorially staged, inviting the viewers to invectively assess the characters' behavior as laughable. In contrast, *P&R*'s fifth season registers a shift in its protagonist's character construction and a decrease of visual mockumentary features. These alterations enable the viewers to enjoy a more meaningful and profound immersion into the narrative that, in turn, thwarts efforts to authorially stage embarrassment as an invective source of humor. The hybridization of the sitcom genre allows a distinct use of invective structures. I have shown that the hybrid generic features of the mockumentary sitcom and embarrassment as an invective strategy are in close communication and are geared towards each other.

5.2 Deconstructing the Dramedy: Invective Structures in the Fusion of Drama and Comedy in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*

Amazon's *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is very much linked to the contemporary discourses surrounding the #metoo and #timesup movements, as a lot of headlines suggest: "How Multiple Emmy Nominee *Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* Made a Mark in #MeToo Times" (D'Alessandro), "*Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* Is the Best Show of the Time's Up Era" (Sarner), and "'It's About a Woman Finding Her Voice': Mrs Maisel Star Rachel Brosnahan on Great Roles […]" (Aroesti). The depicted patterns of inequality and discrimination against women in the intradiegetic world of New York City in the 1950s seem to speak to a wider contemporary audience. Since the cultural work of the dramedy – a genre

mix of drama and comedy – is, as Havas and Sulimma argue, "frequently associated with lifestyle and identity politics in scholarship as well as in public discourses," I focus my analyses in this subchapter on the dynamizing role of invective phenomena in contemporary dramedy texts (77).

This subchapter analyzes invective processes in one particular dramedy text, namely *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Amazon 2017–).[12] The subchapter is divided into two larger sections that both argue that invective structures play a significant and negotiating role in the fusion of comedic and dramatic elements in the plot of *MMM*. In the first section, I argue that the dramatic framing of the pilot episode highlights various invective phenomena in order to emphasize the protagonist's precarious status as a woman, homemaker, and mother in the intradiegetic world of New York City in the 1950s. Although she is initially staged as content with her role as the impeccable housewife, more ambiguous frames challenge this view as the episode goes on. The pilot culminates in her first comedic stand-up performance, where she is staged to aggressively and invectively challenge the prevailing highly gendered intradiegetic structures of inequality and discrimination that determine her life. The stand-up performance, however, is framed and justified as a necessary part of breaking out of the traditional gender roles that keep the character prisoner. I utilize Communications scholar Robert Entman's concept of framing to analyze the places where invective phenomena play a role in the framing of the pilot episode of *MMM* and in the priming of its audience. The second section argues that the dramedy *MMM* frequently bypasses moments of narrative conflict by transferring them to the comedic realm. In line with Mittell's operational aesthetics, I suggest that the series' moments of performative spectacle self-reflexively offer pleasures of marveling at the artistry of the script by depicting comic and fast-paced dialogue (cf. Mittell, "Narrative Complexity"). Moments of conflict are triggered but then eluded by comic elements. I argue that the performative spectacles comically and self-reflexively circumvent underlying macro-structures in the plot that reference gender-based institutional, social, and political power imbalances in the American society of the 1950s. Thus, both foci of my case study of *MMM* stress the negotiating role of invectives in a genre hybrid like the dramedy by examining the framing of the pilot episode and by analyzing the performative spectacle in moments of

12 From now on, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* will be referred to as *MMM*.

intradiegetic conflict. Before zooming into my analyses, I briefly introduce the dramedy format and the invective discourse surrounding it.

In May of 1987, NBC aired a new show as part of its summer replacement programming. *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd* (NBC 1987-88, Lifetime 1989-91) depicts the life of its titular character in a rather unprecedented form: The show was shot, in contrast to other past half-hour programs, with a single camera and was broadcast without the usual laugh track. ABC and CBS – the other channels of the then "three-network oligopoly, the so-called 'classic network system'" (Sewell 237) – followed this trend in the fall of the same year with stylistically similar shows. Quickly, these series were referred to as 'dramedies' and described as a hybrid genre between situation comedy and drama. Sewell argues that the "[d]ramedy harnessed the situation comedy, arguably the foundation genre of the classic network era, to the set of industrial practices, textual features, and cultural dispositions that cohered around mid-1980s notions of quality," highlighting the complexity of the format (ibid.).

Eight months later, President of NBC Entertainment, Brandon Tartikoff, brought the successful discourse surrounding the dramedy to a crashing halt. He not only called the new format "a camel, a horse by committee," he also disparagingly accused its creators of lacking talent in comedic as well as dramatic writing (qtd. in Haithman, "Dramedies"). Since NBC's branding strategy strongly relied on discourses surrounding Quality Television, the newly lucrative dramedies challenged NBC's symbolic rule over Quality TV and its potential economic profits. Tartikoff, consequently, tried to protect the network's franchise as well as authority by publicly and invectively alluding to the 'dromedary.' Dramedy's marked status as being different from ordinary television was labeled as being an "awkward hybrid" that Tartikoff likened to Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes," accusing "the dramedy of being an ill-made, insubstantial fabrication – in other words, a gimmick" (Sewell 247). Soon, although the ratings of the dramedy shows were more than respectable, the majority of critics agreed with NBC's entertainment president, opening up an uncommon but wide-ranging discussion of what Quality Television constituted at the time. The writers' strike of 1988 deferred and disrupted much of the ongoing discourse and, consequently, the dramedies of the 1987-88 television season were all canceled, except for ABC's *Hooperman*, which was dropped in 1989.

A lot of scholarly work shied away from clearly defining the characteristics, features, and conventions of the genre hybrid. As the

neologism *dramedy* suggests, it is a "weaving together of comic and dramatic elements across storylines, thus creating a highly complex text" (Lancioni 131). Havas and Sulimma observed that dramedies "[link] together TV comedy's established aesthetic practices […] with quality drama's expectation of character 'complexity'" (Havas and Sulimma 77). Although there had been previous formats that linked comedic and dramatic elements, the term 'dramedy' was coined in the wave of late 1980s shows (M. Hill). The format deviates from the classic sitcom genre in that the formerly indispensable laugh track that networks demanded up until then has been relinquished, inviting audiences to decide on their own whether something is funny or not. The more cinematic style of the one-camera set-up supersedes the multiple-camera set-up that was used to shoot the theater-like performance of sitcoms on a studio stage. Furthermore, the shows demand a particular literacy from their viewers: Topics can reference high culture and philosophy while at the same time invoking stereotypes and clichés. This form of realism "[manifests] itself in the form of addressing serious social issues," not only distinguishing themselves from light-hearted sitcom narratives but also aligning themselves with a more respectable TV canon (Sewell 245). In line with the Quality Television discourse of the late 80s, dramedies attracted popular writers and gained the status of authored texts which, in turn, appealed to more sophisticated and supposedly upscale audiences who were seen as more desirable and profitable than the mass audience (cf. ibid. 243ff.).

The politics of the dramedy, as scholars have argued in the past, have been highly gendered since the 1980s. The invective negotiation and consequent dismissal of the complex genre was based on "individual aesthetic assessments to assert institutional authority and dispute the articulation of quality" (Sewell 248). Not only were the policymakers at the time exclusively male, Haithman also observed that the Nielsen television ratings, a measurement system for audiences, were "[skewed] toward a young, urban, technology-savvy, predominantly *male* audience" ("Bochco-ization," emphasis mine). For contemporary times, Media scholar Albrecht suggests in his 2016 book *Masculinity in Contemporary Quality Television* that "the fact that the recent spate of Quality television series is dominated by male protagonists and [that] intricate treatments of masculinity is not happenstance; rather, it works to identify certain programs as Quality" (7). Contemporary and past discourses surrounding Quality Television are shaped and strongly influenced by gender and

gender-based power imbalances. According to Havas and Sulimma, dramedies of the 1990s and 2000s were the preferred serial format to address individualized politics around community, gender, and sexuality. The authors link this to the Women's Movement's slogan "The personal is political" (qtd. in Havas and Sulimma 77) – so it is not surprising that a considerable number of television dramedies around and after the turn of the millennium center on and celebrate the identity of their female protagonists, working to revise the centrality of white men at the heart of the Quality TV discourse (examples include *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998–2004), *Weeds* (Showtime 2005–12), *Nurse Jackie* (Showtime 2009–15), *Grace and Frankie* (Netflix 2015–), and *Fleabag* (Amazon 2016–19)). Dramedies, as well as predominantly male 'quality' TV, can be seen to "function within a cultural climate that genders humor and comedy, as evident in the cultural amnesia regarding the history of female comedians, or in the persistent cultural fascination with the question, 'Can women be funny?'" (ibid. 76).

As established in the introduction to this chapter, dramedy *MMM* was first available on Amazon's streaming service Prime in March of 2017. Amy Sherman-Palladino's newest television production was predominantly met with praise, and the fast-paced dialogues were frequently compared to the work she has been best known for, *Gilmore Girls* (The WB 2000–06, The CW 2006–07, Netflix 2016; Chaney, "Charming *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*").[13] The series' central topic revolves around the protagonist's stand-up comedy in its periodic setting of New York City in the 1950s. The stand-up comedy world, as described in Chapter 3.2, has been a male-dominated domain starting from a restructuring of the entertainment business after World War I. Gate-keeping mechanisms considerably complicated the progress and success of female performers. *MMM* thoroughly addresses the discriminatory cultural tradition of thinking that women cannot be funny and are allegedly inferior to men.[14] In contrast to the arduous and disparaging realities of female comedians in the 1950s and 60s, *MMM*, as many critics argue, "doesn't ever pretend to mirror to reality" but rather depicts "an exaggerated fantasy" (Lange; cf. Gilbert; Powers; Flanagan).

13 The decisive promotion of the series with the author's name points towards a *Quality Turn* in comedy. Quality TV is, according to Media scholar Thompson, "writer-based" and, as I later show in more detail, "usually more complex than in other types of programming" (R. J. Thompson).

14 In Chapter 3.2, I elaborate on gate-keeping mechanisms in the domain of comedy.

Richardson claims that the show utilizes renditions of past and present female comedy to create "sort of 'what if?' parallel histories where women get more screen time than men" ("*The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* and Co"). Although the show is staged in a fictional New York City of the 1950s, there are numerous interconnections to the actual comedy world of the 1950s. In the pilot episode of the show, the viewer is introduced to the popular and groundbreaking comedian Lenny Bruce (1925–1966), who becomes an inspiration and mentor to the protagonist.[15] Other contemporary comedians like Bob Newhart and Moms Mabley, and popcultural references like Sylvia Plath's psychoanalysist (*MMM* 2.1) or Liberace famously playing the typewriter (*MMM* 1.4) add to the picture.[16]

In the following paragraphs, I introduce Robert Entman's concept of framing, which will subsequently enable me to analyze where and how invective phenomena play a role in the fusion of comedic and dramatic elements in the framing of the pilot episode of *MMM*. I propose that the framing of the show's first episode familiarizes the audience with the precarious status of the protagonist and the underlying institutional, political, and social macrostructures of inequality in the intradiegetic world

15 Lenny Bruce has frequently been identified as one of the "'sick' comedians [who] started revolutionizing comedy" with culturally based and political humor in the 1950s (Taylor 1).

16 Numerous paratexts also speculate about the inspiration for the protagonist as a stand-up comedian (cf. Richardson; Powers; Nussbaum, "The Cloying Fantasia"; Chaney, "Charming *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*"; Foussianes; Zuckerman). Most of the texts address the similarities to comedian Joan Rivers. Also of Jewish heritage and embracing the prominent image of the Jewish American Princess stereotype (JAP) in popular culture (cf. Caplan), she was fearless in pejoratively breaking taboos on stage, degrading the butts of her jokes. In contrast to many other female comedians, she made a point about being smartly dressed and well-coiffed. Rivers's impeccable appearance and taboo-breaking qualities are shared by *MMM*'s protagonist. Rivers's more disconcerting qualities, "her vengefulness, her perception of women as competitors," as Nussbaum argues, "get displaced onto Midge's foe, fat-joke Sophie, who lives in an opulent French-themed apartment, like the one Rivers lived in, collects furs, and, like the real Joan, wanted to be a serious actress" ("'The Cloying Fantasia'"). Jean Caroll, a Jewish vaudeville performer, is also associated with the protagonist (cf. Foussianes). After singing and dancing in the 1920s, she began doing solo stand-up work in the 1940s. Although audiences frequently complained about her audacious routines, she championed her refusal to utilize self-deprecating humor: "I can't say I'm fat, I can't talk about my mother, my husband, my child. You know, there is really very little left to say" (qtd. in L. Martin and Segrave 295).

of the 1950s.[17] I argue that the protagonist's precarious status is ultimately revised by framing her invective and transgressive stand-up comedy performance as a symbolic remedy and breakout from the discriminatory state in which she is kept.

Sociologist Erving Goffman was among the first scholars to develop a general concept of framing. He argues that "frames help people organize what they see in everyday life" (Borah 248). These "schemata of interpretation" therefore help to focus attention on some facets of reality while precluding others (ibid.). Differently applied frames for the same piece of information will consequently lead to differences in people's perceptions. While Goffman focused his research on everyday communication, Media and Communications scholar Robert Entman introduced his concept of framing for "communicating texts […] such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel," in order to expand Goffman's ideas (Entman, "Framing" 51f). In this case study, then, I apply Entman's notion of framing to the audiovisual television text *MMM*. He generally argues that framing "illuminates the precise way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted" in a text (ibid. 51). He furthermore suggests that framing typically performs four functions that, as I show, parallel the structure of any given narrative. Frames

> *define problems* – determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; *diagnose causes* – identify the forces creating the problem; *make moral judgments* – evaluate causal agents and their effects; and *suggest remedies* – offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects. (ibid. 52, emphasis in the original)

In the exposition of a text, the problem (or conflict) is defined. In a series of narrative events (rising action), motives and causalities of the conflict are analyzed. The dramatic climax of the narrative goes hand in hand with the moral judgment of the given textual problem, while the denouement of the narrative equals the promotion of a suitable remedy for the initial problem. Audible (i.e. dialogue, sound, music, songs) and visual (i.e. selection of images, camera settings, filters) frames "[work] to

17 In Chapter 2.1, I outline structures of gender-based inequality in American society's past, which the show utilizes as a blueprint of its plot.

shape and alter audience members' interpretations and preferences through *priming* [...,] activating schemas that encourage target audiences to think, feel, and decide in a particular way" ("Framing Bias" 164, emphasis in the original). The narrating agency of a televisual text is responsible for the process of selecting elements of a given reality and constructing a narrative that emphasizes connections between them to build up a particular interpretation. Although frames can have collective effects on larger parts of the audience, they are unlikely to have universal effects on all viewers. This can be described by McCabe's notion of a 'dominant specularity' – a viewing position "which sets up 'reality' as unproblematic" (Calvert et al. 142). The narrating agency, therefore, selects images, chooses specific camera work, and focalizes through distinct characters to offer a preferably unambiguous reading of the text. Although televisual texts certainly offer more than one possible reading, they are arranged in a "hierarchy of discourses, defined in terms of an empirical notion of the truth" (ibid.).

By analyzing the framing of *MMM*'s pilot episode, I am able to examine the role of invective phenomena in this particular dramedy. I argue that they are not only utilized to fuse and negotiate comedic and dramatic elements of the plot, but that invective phenomena are also strategically placed to support the priming of the audience. While the beginning of the pilot introduces the intradiegetic world as pleasantly constricting for women, the ensuing framing of the episode highlights the underlying institutional, political, and social structures of inequality of the time. The series increasingly illustrates the social constraints and hardships of the protagonist and, seemingly, leaves it up to the viewers to morally judge the events. The comedic aspirations of various characters not only play a significant role for the narrative of the pilot, but also offer what Entman calls the "remedy promotion" (Entman, "Framing Bias" 164). The protagonist's venture into stand-up comedy is consequently framed as a solution to her caged status as an upper-class housewife in the storyworld, and it illustrates her breaking out of the intradiegetic constrictions.

The first episode of a series, the pilot, is the most significant tool to introduce the viewers to the plot, the characters, and the tone of a given series. *MMM*'s pilot opens on a black screen; the tapping on a glass indicates a speech. The protagonist, dressed in white, appears on screen and, in a voice-over narration, is staged to reminisce about her life and what brought her to this particular day, her wedding day. Although she states that she had not allowed herself to eat properly before the wedding – "because fitting into

this dress required no solid food for three straight weeks" (*MMM* 1.01) –, the protagonist proclaims: "This day is perfect. It's like a dream" (ibid.). Miriam 'Midge' Maisel goes on, revealing that she had always had a strong will and clear vision of what her life was going to look like. Although the character mentions that women were "kindred spirits who would explore the brave new world with [her]" (ibid.), a back and forth between flashbacks and the 1950s present reveals that relations to other women might have been restricted to exploring the possibilities of beautifying and perfecting the female body with her college friends. Very much linked to Patricia Hill Collins's suggestion that femininity is commonly identified with "milky white skin, long blonde hair, and slim figures," they are joyfully staged to dye their hair blonde (including their crotches) (qtd. in S. K. Cooper 50). The depicted image of women in *MMM* is modeled after Betty Friedan's influential writing in *The Feminine Mystique* from 1963, where she claims that "[across] America, three out of every ten women dyed their hair blond. They ate chalk called Metrecal, instead of food, to shrink to the size of the thin young models" (Friedan 17). This is carried to extremes when the protagonist declares that "all of these marvelous adventures were simply the preamble to [her] ultimate destiny. [She] was going to meet a man – a perfect man" (*MMM* 1.01). The protagonist is staged to mirror what Friedan attested for post-war America: True women do not aspire to higher education or careers of their own; they devote their entire lives "to finding a husband and bearing children" (16).

Four years later, as a title card informs the audience, the protagonist is staged to be upbeat and content with her life as a housewife and mother. Contrastingly, *The Atlantic*'s Flanagan describes learned viewing experiences in which the viewer now "wait[s] for the [symbolic] crash: her plaintive discovery that she's been left with the laundry and the children, the realization that the college girl full of potential is gone, and that no one else seems to miss her" (Flanagan). The underlying music of the following scene, furthermore, reflects the precariousness of the protagonist's situation: "A Wonderful Day Like Today," from the 1965 musical *The Roar of the Greasepaint – The Smell of the Crowd* (Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley) is playing in the background. The plot of the musical allegorically examines the maintaining of class differences in Britain, paralleling structures of inequality in the intradiegetic world. The song describes the protagonist's "joys of being in life's driver's seat," while other characters are involuntarily forced to stand still ("The Roar of the Greasepaint"). Midge, however, excited about the rabbi coming to the family's Yom Kippur festivities, is staged to be in "life's driver's

seat" – for now. She is not only portrayed to swiftly and confidently run errands for the feast day, she is also staged to take good care of her husband's problems. As an aspiring stand-up comedian, he is anxious for a good spot in the club's line-up. The protagonist, sure of herself, exclaims, "[d]on't worry. We'll fix it," meaning bribing the stage manager with her homemade brisket. The acoustic framing of the scene, however, emphasizes the ambiguous and precarious nature of Midge's status in "life's driver's seat."

Entman's "agenda setting" – the introduction of a distinct conflict in the narrative – is increasingly highlighted in the subsequent scenes. When Midge and her husband Joel are leaving for his stand-up performance at The Gaslight Café, the protagonist is increasingly 'othered.' In one of the first scenes, Midge incredulously observes Joel's secretary (and – unbeknownst to the protagonist – his mistress) trying and failing to sharpen a pencil. Midge is staged to see herself as different from other women in the storyworld, and the audience is invited to do so as well. This is emphasized in the next scene, in which the protagonist is amusedly looking out the window of their cab and seeing a variety of roles for women in the intradiegetic world of the 1950s: A young and elegant woman is catcalled by an older man; elderly housewives are yelling at young, apparently cannabis-smoking men from their balcony; middle-aged women are handing out treats to corpulent police men; a woman is seemingly fighting with her significant other; a young mother is walking her children with a stroller; an elderly woman is gloomily looking out of her window; and three young women are dancing ecstatically on a flight of stairs. The apparent multitude of roles for women is, again, supported by the audible frame of Barbra Streisand's "Come to the Supermarket (in Old Peking)" (1963). In it, Streisand sings of the myriad products available at the supermarket, paralleling the seemingly endless female roles for the protagonist in the intradiegetic world of the 1950s. Midge, although seemingly interested as well as amused by the apparent range of roles, is portrayed as markedly different from those roles when the cab arrives at the venue. She enters the night club and is staged to confidently assure her husband that she will get him a better spot on stage: "Let the master work" (*MMM* 1.01).

Back at home, after a sound performance by Joel, the image of the protagonist changes considerably. In contrast to the formerly confident and autonomous portrayal of Midge, she is now, for the first time, unquestionably depicted as a woman of her time. In two powder room routines, the protagonist is staged to be every bit as dependent on patterns

of inequality and discrimination as other women in the intradiegetic world. After the two characters go to bed and Joel falls asleep, the protagonist is staged to quietly get up again, putting her hair in curlers, removing false eye-lashes and make-up, scrubbing her face, and putting on lotion and a headscarf. The protagonist then sneaks back into bed, staged to withhold her apparently imperfect looks from her husband. To wake up before the alarm sounds, she cracks open the blinds. In the morning, the routine begins anew - the protagonist quietly sneaks into the powder room, beautifies herself, slips back into bed, and pretends to be fast asleep when her husband's alarm goes off. Her successful portrayal of the effortless and undisputed image of female beauty, as well as Joel's cluelessness, seemingly elates the protagonist. In contrast to the self-determined and sovereign image of Midge in the preceding scenes, she now parallels an image of women that Friedan and other Second Wave Feminist scholars described at the beginning of the 1960s: "This mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture" (Friedan 18). This contrast is encouraged by humor strategies that highlight the manifold differences between the intradiegetic world of New York City in the 1950s and the social realities of 21st century audiences, especially when it comes to gender roles and gender inequality. The dramedy *MMM*, as I argue, "spotlight[s] societal conditions" in the storyworld, highlights discriminatory structures as a narrative conflict, and depicts the fine line between inequality and the contentment of accepting one's place in society (Entman, "Framing Bias" 164).

The next cornerstone in Entman's framing concept is to "identify the forces creating the problem" in the text ("Framing" 52). In *MMM*'s pilot, this begins in the following scene, when the viewer is introduced to the protagonist's parents for the first time after the wedding scene. Instead of the protagonist having "A Wonderful Day Like Today," as the song suggests in an earlier scene, Peggy Lee now sings, "Yes, it's a good day, how could anything be wrong" in the background, marking a gradual shift in the narrative ("It's a Good Day" 1946). When Midge walks into her parents' apartment, the viewer is introduced to the protagonist in her seemingly insufficient role as a mother: After calling out to her son Ethan five times without getting any reaction, she wearily turns to her own mother, complaining about the welcome. Her mother Rose is staged to dismiss the comment with a tired, "Men" (*MMM* 1.01). The scene, however, emphasizes

the apparently contrasting gender-based rules of etiquette when Rose is staged to turn the Midge's attention to her daughter Esther's supposed flaws:

> That forehead is not improving [...] It's getting bigger. The whole face will be out of proportion [...] The nose is not the problem. The nose you can fix. But this gigantic forehead [...] I'm just afraid she's not a very pretty girl. [...] I just want her to be happy. It's easier to be happy when you're pretty. (ibid.)

Like the powder room routines, the scene emphasizes the significance of female beauty. Women's beauty capital, which the *Dictionary of Human Resource Management* defines as a "determinant of earnings and career," is portrayed as crucial in the intradiegetic world (Heery and Noon).

Midge's daughter, however, is not the only one being invectively commented on. Rose is also staged to criticize the protagonist's body with, "[s]ix to nine more months left on those arms. [...] Buy a bolero," estimating the date of expiry of the Midge's capital of beauty (*MMM* 1.01). For the contemporary viewer, the comedic quality of these invective moments arises when the characters' matter-of-fact discussion about the defective appearance of the protagonist and her young child incongruously clashes with the viewer's expectations of the scene. The protagonist is staged to have been raised with a strong emphasis on the necessity of having a perfect physical appearance as a woman, in order to be able to marry a worthy husband – and keep him interested. Although Midge is staged to be highly aware of the intradiegetic standards for women, her mother Rose functions as a relentless and thoroughly invective critic to keep Midge in line with the image of "the American woman, [...] placid, sheltered and sure of her role in American society" (Friedan 23). It is then not at all surprising when the ensuing scene depicts Midge taking pride in her own bodily proportions as she notes them down with a measuring tape at hand. In a self-perpetuating manner, the protagonist is also staged to monitor her daughter's supposed malformations in order to ensure a preferably uncomplicated life for her. *MMM* marks traditional gender roles and their consequences in everyday life as the forces behind the discourses of inequality and discrimination in the intradiegetic world.

Parallel to Entman's concept of framing, *MMM* encourages and invites the viewers to get morally involved in the narrative. After being introduced to the protagonist and her life, and being invited to sympathize with her, the viewer is confronted with more pronounced invectives against Midge. In

a subsequent scene, the dynamics between the protagonist and her husband change after Midge learns that Joel is stealing jokes from Bob Newhart's routine. Joel, however, is staged to invectively belittle the protagonist for not knowing how stand-up comedians supposedly work: "It's fine. Everybody does it. […] It's how it's done. […] You'll learn" (*MMM* 1.01). Midge leans into the provided inferior role by voluntarily offering that she is feeling "a little silly now" and suggesting that she is new to the comedy circuit (ibid.). Although deprecating herself, the scene emphasizes her natural comedic talent when she remarks that Newhart's faster rendition of the act is qualitatively better than Joel's and invites viewers to side with the protagonist (ibid.).

Joel's next performance at The Gaslight Café functions as a turning point for a variety of events. The viewer learns that Midge's responsibilities for her husband's act not only entail bribing the Gaslight staff to assign him better stage times, they also include bringing his show attire. When Joel finds holes in his favorite performance sweater and panics, the protagonist is staged to turn the mishap into jokes on the spot. She encourages him to do the same, providing him with personal and original material for his act, concomitantly showing more comedic potential and understanding than her husband. On that night, and in front of the characters' friends, Joel 'bombs' – he fails to deliver an enjoyable and funny performance and is staged to be devastated. On the way home, he blames Midge for throwing him off by making him talk about his sweater. Once again, Midge is burdened with guilt and apologizes, perpetuating intradiegetic gender roles. I suggest that the characters' behavior is staged to stir up reactions of dissent in the viewers of the 21st century. On the one hand, Joel's arrogant and hurtful behavior clashes with the sympathies of the viewers. He should not blame his comic inabilities on his well-meaning wife, and Midge should not accept the blame without questioning its justification. On the other hand, the audience is invited to see the protagonist's gift for stand-up comedy and her willingness to refine performances with the help of a notebook in which she keeps her comedy ideas. Thus, I argue that Joel's allocation of blame is refuted by the moral judgment and subsequent affective reaction of the audience.

Similar processes occur when Joel subsequently leaves the protagonist for his secretary. Back at home, the character is staged to pack his suitcase to escape his current life: "I thought my life was going to be something different. I thought I was going to be someone different, but tonight was just so terrible" (*MMM* 1.01). The character goes on to describe his failings

at comedy, which he likens to the failings in the characters' marriage. The argument culminates in the reflection on Joel's joke-writing abilities: Midge symbolically and assertively takes over the comedic reign when she declares that her joke bombed onstage for Joel "because [he] killed it" (ibid.). When Joel signals that he is going to leave, the protagonist tries, once more, to restore the traditional gender roles by backpedaling: "I'm sorry. […] I love you. We have a home. We have children. […] Wait. I will be better. I will do better. I – I'll pay more attention" (ibid.). The argument concludes by Joel confessing to his affair and the protagonist attesting that he has "the worst timing ever" (ibid.). Throughout the conversation, the protagonist dazzles the viewers with witty comebacks to her husband's reasoning of why he allegedly needs to leave, consolidating and foreshadowing her looming comedic career. I argue that, again, the sympathies for the protagonist morally guide the viewers through this scene, devaluing Joel's rationale and rejoicing over the protagonist's poignant interludes. The viewer is invited to not only feel wronged and disappointed along with Midge,[18] but to also feel proud of her moral fiber when she shows her husband the way out.

However, the moral judgment of the viewers reaches its climax with the ensuing scene, where Midge seeks help from her parents. The tone of the scene is set when Rose, before the protagonist can even talk about her husband leaving, invectively comments on the protagonist's choice of wardrobe for the nightly visit – it is not flattering. When Midge finally tells them about Joel, Rose immediately counters with a barrage of questions targeting the protagonist: "Why? What did you do? […] Did you know this? Did you know he was having an affair? […] Did you talk like that around him? Did you use sailor talk?" (*MMM* 1.01). Drawing on traditional gender roles, the character invectively pits the success of the parents' marriage against her daughter. Abe, the protagonist's father, goes even further and blames his daughter directly: "Of course it's your fault" (ibid.). Although the excessive wailing and stomping around of characters invites laughter, the viewers are encouraged to see not only the innocent powerlessness of the protagonist but also the discriminating mechanisms of gender roles in the intradiegetic world of the 1950s. The audience is invited to side with the protagonist and to feel enraged by the inequalities of the storyworld. Entman's moral evaluation

18 This is encouraged by the underlying song "L'étang" (Blossom Dearie, 1959), that translates to: "On the moor, by the pond/ Where the mist is blue/ Alone, I float and the shadow spreads."

of the "causal agents and their effects" in the text (Entman, "Framing" 52) are met with "associated affected responses" by the viewers ("Framing Bias" 164). The series' invective structures, therefore, function to encourage a moral positioning of the audience of *MMM*.

Although the protagonist is staged to start drinking and to walk out into the rain in her nightgown and coat, Entman's promotion of a remedy is ingrained into the text. The viewer gets to see Midge at the episode's low point – wet and gloomy, staged to scare people away on the subway car. The contrast between the respectable, well-adjusted, and focused image of Midge in the beginning of the episode and the desolate, inebriated shadow of the protagonist at her low point strikingly invites the viewers to sympathize with her. She walks into The Gaslight Café, demanding a cooking dish she left there earlier, staged to defend her weakened status as a good housewife, as well as to seek out the place where her marital problems apparently escalated. Due to an error in the set list, the stage is empty and the protagonist is free to set foot on it. Murmuring, "So this is it. This is the dream – standing up here on this filthy, sticky stage all alone" (*MMM* 1.01), the protagonist ponders her husband's decision to leave. Spurred on by the audience, Midge begins to talk, enjoying the audience's reaction and picking up the pace. The viewers are invited not only to see the full comedic potential of the protagonist unfold, but also to consider Midge's ensuing thoroughly invective rant as a means to regain the footing in her life. The protagonist's venture into stand-up comedy is portrayed as the remedy to the text's narrative conflict.

The fusing of the plot's dramatic and comedic elements in the protagonist's invective stand-up act self-reflexively highlights the hybrid nature of the dramedy itself. Midge's emotionally draining story is artfully wrapped in piercing comments and met with audience laughter. For example, the protagonist's heartfelt question, "Why wasn't I enough?," is followed by her agitated inquiry about the Gaslight's placement of the bathroom in relation to the stage: "And why didn't they put the stage over there against that wall instead of over here by the bathroom so you wouldn't have to listen to every giant bowel movement that takes place in there?" (*MMM* 1.01).[19] Midge, as Russell characterizes stand-up comedians, "seizes

19 Self-reflexivity not only plays a significant role in the dramedy series' fusion of drama and comedy, it is also an issue in the plot. *MMM* self-reflexively references the prevailing gendered double-standards in stand-up comedy in the post-war

centre stage, actively engages the audience and commands attention," in contrast to the simple, submissive, and rather passive image of women at the time (Russell 4). Seemingly at ease, the protagonist is staged to make fun of her husband's mistress, Penny Pan, by attesting that she should not be trusted with meaningful tasks when she cannot even dress herself correctly, and by comparing her to household equipment: "She's 21 and dumb as a Brillo pad" (*MMM* 1.01). With transgressive and invective comments about beauty standards, sexuality, and female despair, Midge is staged to unfold the inequality of the gender economy of the time, claiming that men prefer naive and dull women in order keep the upper hand and to elevate their own status and value. The hard work of conforming to prescribed and ill-fitting standards, yet still being judged and left high and dry, does not seem to be worth the effort.

Later, when Midge is bailed out of prison by Susie after being arrested for baring her chest in front of The Gaslight Café's audience, the remedy of the episode's conflict is settled. Susie is staged to insistently point out Midge's comedic talent; she is skillful enough that she did not have to stoop down to stealing someone else's act. Susie encourages the protagonist to pursue a stand-up career by saying, "I just don't want to be insignificant. Do you? Don't you wanna do something no one else can do? Be remembered as something other than a mother or a housewife […]?" (*MMM* 1.01). Although the protagonist leaves soon after the conversation, Susie's words are staged to have an effect – Midge, too, can now see stand-up comedy as a possible remedy to her problem of being an insignificant attachment to her husband.

Thus, Midge's first stand-up performance is framed as the necessary symbolic "remedy" to the inferior status of women in the intradiegetic world (Entman, "Framing Bias" 164). With an invective rant about the troubles in her recent life, the protagonist transgresses the rules of traditional gender roles and offers a symbolic solution: If, in contrast to common belief,[20]

US that were highlighted in Chapter 3.2. This is most clearly conveyed by the protagonist's conversation with intradiegetic comedy star Sophie Lennon, about the requested appearance of female comedians (see Chapter 3.2). Again, the humor of this scene arises from the incongruous and self-reflexive clash between dramatic and comedic elements: Lennon's gloomy mindset about the intradiegetic conditions, their resemblance to the actual US American past, and the protagonist's naive desire to eat a macaron.

20 In Chapter 3.2, I argue that the remnants of distinctly female American comedy traditions, like self-deprecating humor, can still be found in contemporary situation

women can actually be funny, other conceptions surrounding discourses of inequality and discrimination in the intradiegetic world in the 1950s (as well as veiled but underlying discourses in the 21st century) might be questioned, or might be outright false. The protagonist's invective performance and those to come in the following episodes "offer and justify treatments for the problems" in the text ("Framing" 52). The invective comments in the protagonist's performances are staged to aggressively challenge the intradiegetic system of a gender-based hierarchy. They are, therefore, framed as a necessary and justified part of breaking out of the traditional gender roles that keep the character prisoner.

MMM illustrates invective dynamics in conjunction with the institutional, social, and political structures of the time again and again in various ways. Up until the middle of the first episode, the protagonist is staged to be content with her role, to know her place, and to enjoy the performance as an impeccable wife. Gradually, however, she is staged to notice the prevailing double standards of the intradiegetic world of 1950s American society and starts questioning them. I have shown that Entman's concept of framing selects and highlights different invective phenomena in the course of the first episode of *MMM* in order to encourage the audience to feel, think, and make a judgment against the prevailing patterns of inequality and discrimination, – and in favor of the protagonist's invective comedic talents. Invective structures, therefore, function as tools to prime viewers to promote a particular interpretation of Amazon's *MMM*.

In the second section of this subchapter, I examine another role of invective structures in *MMM*'s fusion of dramatic and comedic elements. In the following paragraphs, I argue that the dramedy frequently begins to stage dramatic moments of conflict, only to self-reflexively reveal their comedic quality. Many of these emerging moments of conflict can be read as invective by 21st century audiences, but they hinge rather on the depicted macrostructures of the political, institutional, and social inequality in the narrative, which is firmly set in the 1950s. As I later show in detail, *MMM* does not fully relish these moments of narrative conflict but transmits the dramatic outlook of the scene to a comedic one. I propose that the show invites viewers to direct their attention to what I call 'performative

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comedies. Female performers have had to cope with systematic disadvantages to succeed in the highly gendered domain of comedy.

spectacles' that are based on what Mittell labels the "operational aesthetics" of a scene ("Narrative Complexity" 35). Parallel to "narrative special effects [that call] attention to the constructed nature of the narration […] asking us to marvel at how the writers pulled it off," performative spectacles draw attention to the performance of particularly complex and fast-paced dialogues. These not only invite viewers to laugh, but they initiate the transfer from the dramatic to a comedic outset of a scene. These instances in *MMM* "forgo realism in exchange for a formally aware baroque quality in which [audiences] watch the process of narration as a machine rather than engaging in its diegesis," marveling at the swift back and forth between characters (ibid.). Performative spectacles, therefore, focus on the negotiations of comedic and dramatic elements in the genre hybrid *MMM* as well as speak to the narrative complexity and self-referentiality of the series, pointing towards a *Quality Turn* in comedy. The humor of these scenes arises from a distinct incongruous structure: While the viewer is initially invited to read the scene as confrontational, the prospect of the scene briskly changes and invites the viewers to revel in the humorous incongruence and the rapid exchange of the performative spectacle, leaving the conflict crackling in suspension.

The first set of scenes I analyze are part of the second season's third episode, "The Punishment Room." In one of the sub-plots of the episode, Rose is staged to audit art classes at Columbia University, where her husband teaches in the Department of Mathematics. While inquiring about her fellow female students' future, she is staged to unintentionally disillusion them about the meaningfulness of their studies and, consequently, motivates half of them to transfer to another departments or to quit their studies altogether. In a later scene, Abe is called into the administrative office because of his wife's disruptive behavior. The ensuing conversation between the characters of Abe, Rose, and the faculty director illustrates, as I suggest, the performative spectacle of the dramedy *MMM*. The humorously incongruent back and forth of the dialogue triggers an affective transfer from the confrontational outset of the scene to a comedic one. To examine the disparaging structures that are at work in this sub-plot, I analyze the attendant scenes of the episode.

When Rose asks her fellow female students about their future plans once they graduate from their master's program in arts, the younger characters are initially confused, as if they have never thought about life after university. As Rose goes on to describe, intradiegetic social, political, and institutional

structures will most likely obstruct any ambitions the young women may have of becoming full-time artists or teachers. There are no female art teachers at Columbia, and the very few female artists Rose knows suffered a hard fate and eventually quit. Staged to disillusion the younger characters, Rose reminisces about her own daughter's educational path: "Oh, sure, she wanted to make friends and take classes, but her *real* goal was to meet a man, and she met one" (*MMM* 2.03, emphasis in the original). In an intimate conversation, Rose advises the women to look for eligible men "studying something with real potential," with enough money to comfortably support their future wives and families. By addressing and paralleling the popular discourse surrounding post-war American women, Rose is staged to promote the idea that all women "had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband" (Friedan 16). In promoting the image of marriage, Rose is staged to offer her fellow female art students a more realistic perspective on life in the intradiegetic world of the 1950s. The character, thus, resembles Friedan's account of an older generation of women who deliberately gave up other dreams to concentrate on their husbands and families. For the younger female characters of the intradiegetic world, as Friedan suggests, "this was the only dream" (ibid. 27).[21]

In a subsequent scene, Abe is called into the faculty director's office to talk about his wife's expulsion. Since "Rose has been very disruptive" and inadvertently motivated her fellow students to transfer or quit the arts program, the director threatens Abe that his wife "can no longer audit these classes" (*MMM* 2.03). The looming expulsion marks the dramatic conflict in the scenes. Although the character has helped her fellow students by opening their eyes to the intradiegetic destiny for women of the time, Rose is staged to be reprimanded. Based on the depicted institutional, political, and social structures of inequality in the storyworld, the viewer is invited to read the looming expulsion as wrongful and invective. Intradiegetic gender roles essentially prohibit the character from speaking her mind and getting

21 According to Friedan, college attendance for women dropped to 35% in comparison to men in the mid-1950s, and more than half terminated college to get married and have children, forfeiting higher levels of education for responsibilities in the home. Friedan also emphasizes the psychological components of the unilateral dream of being the perfect wife and mother. "The problem that has no name" describes the limitations of women in the 1950s as "chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices" that lead to depression and a strong sense of dissatisfaction later in life (Friedan 15; 31).

involved in the university's administrative processes. While Rose is staged to promote the intradiegetic image of femininity, she is still reprimanded for the unintentional consequences of her behavior. The director, worried about his faculty, ultimately reveals what Rose has caused: "You don't understand that we count on these ladies' tuition payments to keep the place running," unveiling the sublime double standards in the storyworld that account for the female students' monetary value but not for their educational careers (ibid.). The director's comment is followed by a brief moment of silence that invites audiences not only to contemplate the situation but also to anticipate Abe's reaction. The character is typically staged to be a strong advocate of distinct gender roles and patriarchal hierarchies. However, various preceding episodes depict the character's loss of patriarchal power to his wife and daughter.[22]

When Abe is staged to briskly counter the director's pleading with, "No… No. […] No. Sorry, she's not stopping," the performative spectacle of the scene is set up (*MMM* 2.03). With "I would love her to quit," the character continues, voicing absolutely no concerns about his wife's disruptive behavior or ways to scold her (ibid.). Rather, he is staged to pivot the conversation towards his unease about his wife having to paint other men's genitalia in class, propelling the argument out of the director's hands. Abe stops paying attention to the reasons for Rose's looming expulsion altogether. Instead, he is staged to explain – almost to himself – the personal reasoning behind his wife's decision to audit classes in the first place. In contrast to exerting his patriarchal powers, the character is staged to reveal his deep insecurities concerning his marriage. Having recently earned another chance with his wife, the character is staged to work hard to keep her happy: "If she doesn't get to do this, she'll go back to Paris, and Paris is chock-full of schlongs. French schlongs. This would be very bad for me," comically inverting gender-based expectations that wives have

22 For example, Abe is staged to occupy an inferior position to the women of his family. Once the protagonist moves back into her parents' home, power structures change: In a discussion about a second television set for the Weissman home, he helplessly yells, "I'm still controlling this house!" (*MMM* 1.04). His impotent tries to control his daughter's life as he sees fit, "[y]ou know the rules of this house. […] You get back by eleven pm. […] Ten if you keep arguing," is met with laughter from the protagonist (*MMM* 1.04). Only a few episodes earlier, the character is staged to fly to Paris to yell at and plead with his defiant wife to obediently come back to New York with him (cf. *MMM* 2.01).

to humor their husbands (ibid.). The performative spectacle continues to unfold when the director insists that "this isn't [Abe's] call" (ibid.). Abe shouts to his wife, who is waiting outside the office. After Rose recounts the events once more, Abe is initially staged to paternalistically rectify his wife's behavior for the sake of the director. However, the character pauses and shifts gears. All of a sudden, he is genuinely convinced that his wife is correct. The ensuing dialogue increasingly ignores the faculty director's point of view with a fast-paced back and forth between the characters of Abe and Rose and fleeting shots staged to capture the director's overwhelmed expression. Without the director's participation and in rapid succession, the characters are staged to soberly summarize the events and conclude that Rose's discussion with her fellow students was, indeed, very reasonable. After once again communicating his unease with Rose seeing other men's genitalia, Abe is staged to conclude the meeting with, "Okay. So, basically, we're on the same side about everything and in complete agreement, yes? Good? Are we done?" (ibid.). The faculty director, looking on helplessly, has no other choice than to give into the characters' argumentation.

It is exactly the performative spectacle of this rapid exchange of dialogue that triggers the transfer of a dramatic into a comedic perspective. The accelerated dynamic between characters in dialogues like this invites viewers to relinquish the scene's claims of reality and to marvel, instead, at the actual performance of actors. The scene starts by inviting the viewers to feel the looming dramatic injustice of Rose's expulsion, only to self-reflexively change their perspective of the scene through the introduction of an array of comic elements. By touching upon the complex issue of women's inadequate and insufficient educational opportunities in the 1950s and 60s, the episode references institutional, political, and social inequalities of the American past. The swift change in perspective allows the viewer to marvel at the artistry of this performative spectacle, which draws attention to the series' generic composition as a dramedy, negotiating comedic and dramatic elements in its plot.

Performative spectacles are frequently woven into the depicted patterns of inequality and discrimination of the intradiegetic world in *MMM*. Later in Season Two, for example, the protagonist is staged to tell her family and former in-laws that she has started a career in stand-up comedy while the Weissman's Yom Kippur festivities of breaking fast are under way (cf. *MMM* 2.07). As discussed in Chapter 3.2, female comedians had been disadvantaged and disparaged since gender expectations basically prohibited

them from performing in the US in the 1950s. After a lot of time and effort, the protagonist is actually able to reveal her secret to the other characters, and then is still confronted by hostility on all sides. With more then ten characters seemingly staged to speak at once, the scene forfeits its dramatic notion and replaces it with a performative spectacle where the audience can marvel at the conundrum of the scene – once again self-reflexively fusing comedic and dramatic elements, emphasizing the hybrid generic status of the dramedy.

In a Season Three episode called "It's the Sixties, Man!," patterns of inequality are even more apparent. In one of the subplots, Rose travels to Oklahoma, where the rest of her family lives, to ask for a raise in her allowance. The matter is taken to the family board meeting, where Rose is staged to be invectively called "Little Rosie," not allowed to put forward the claims herself, invectively belittled, and encouraged to sit in the corner of the room while the all-male table debates her request. A discussion about filling seats on the board ensues, emphasizing the degrading patterns of gender roles in the intradiegetic world. A fast-paced rant from Rose is staged to highlight the absurdity of the situation. It self-reflexively halts the plot for the viewers to marvel at the "operational aesthetics" of the scene and changes the perspective thereof (Mittell, "Narrative Complexity" 35).

Performative spectacles, moreover, frequently occur without indicating specific macrostructures of inequality. This is the case when Susie is staged to be abducted by two hired thugs and befriend them in the process (cf. *MMM* 2.01), when Abe is being interrogated in a windowless room with a buzzer going off at the most inappropriate moments (cf. *MMM* 2.09, 2.10), and when the protagonist teaches Susie how to swim in a Florida swimming pool while on tour (cf. *MMM* 3.05). The pleasures of these scenes are not impaired by the missing references but, nevertheless, allow viewers to admire the craft behind the script while the narrative briefly comes to a halt.

In this subchapter, I have analyzed invective processes in the popular dramedy *MMM*. In two sections, I argued that invective phenomena play an important role in fusing and negotiating the format's comedic and dramatic elements. Firstly, I utilized Entman's concept of framing communicating texts in order to examine the protagonist's invective stand-up performance in the pilot episode of the show. I argued that invective phenomena encourage audiences to notice and judge the depicted intradiegetic structures of inequality. Furthermore, I argued that the protagonist's

invective stand-up act is staged as a necessary challenge to prevailing gender norms and roles in the storyworld. Secondly, I have proposed the notion of performative spectacles to analyze instances where the dramedy bypasses moments of conflict by self-reflexively offering the humorous pleasure of marveling at the artistry of the script as it depicts comic and fast-paced dialogue. While these performative spectacles frequently hinge on *MMM*'s depiction of structures of inequality that can certainly be read as invective by 21st century audiences, they negotiate and fuse the comedic and dramatic elements of the genre hybrid. The self-referentiality and "explicit reflexivity" of the show stresses the complexity of the narrative and its form – reminiscent of Quality TV programming and indicative of a *Quality Turn* in comedy ("Narrative Complexity").

5.3 Reviving *Roseanne*: Capitalizing Nostalgia and Invectives in Times of the Trump Presidency

Promising the pleasures of revisiting familiar and well-known characters and places, the contemporary trend of nostalgically reviving past television texts has been widely embraced by viewers. On May 29, 2018, however, the successful albeit stylistically and morally conservative revival of ABC's hit-sitcom *Roseanne* was canceled after just nine episodes, although being renewed for a second revival season of 13 episodes just three days after its premiere (cf. Davis and Peiser). The reason for the ungraceful exit was a Twitter rampage by the show's leading actress Roseanne Barr[23] in which she invectively spoke out against Hillary Clinton's daughter, Chelsea, and – most significantly – against former Senior Advisor to President Barack Obama, Valerie Jarrett. In her notorious tweet, Barr references the Muslim Brotherhood, the sci-fi movie *Planet of the Apes* (2001), and African American Jarett: "muslim brotherhood & planet of the apes had a baby=vj," supposedly, as she later argued, "comparing the movie to Iran's repressive regime" instead of insulting Jarrett (Edgers). With the tweet gaining massive attention on social media platforms, network channel ABC saw itself forced to publish a statement, condemning the tweet as "abhorrent, repugnant and inconsistent with [their] values," and – hours later – to cancel *Roseanne*

23 To avoid confusion, I use '*Roseanne*' to talk about the series, 'Roseanne' to address the character in the show, and '(Roseanne) Barr' when I talk about the actor and comedian.

altogether (ABC Entertainment President Dungey qtd. in Edgers). Claiming to be a victim of contemporary "cancel culture,"[24] Barr was sent into media's pseudo-exile (cf. Gibson).

In this subchapter and with a focus on media practices and media institutions, I examine the role of invectives in how contemporary sitcom revivals commodify nostalgia for the pleasures of recognizing and revisiting familiar characters and places. The hit-sitcom *Roseanne* serves as my case study. I argue that the nostalgic revival of the successful 1980s and 90s sitcom is part of an overarching political strategy by the network channel ABC to gain new audiences. This subchapter is divided into three larger sections. The first compiles research on the origins of nostalgia and, specifically, televisual nostalgia – emphasizing its conservative "notion of the safe return" in an economic as well as stylistic way (Holdsworth 97). This is followed by my case study of *Roseanne*, whose protagonist, as I later argue in detail, is staged as an invective working-class symbol of insight and symbol of corrective. While the original series pioneers liberal ideals, the revival uses the character as a vehicle for conservative key issues.[25] In the third section, I argue that the commodification and capitalization of nostalgia for *Roseanne*'s invectives are a political strategy of the network channel ABC to reach out to audiences they felt they had neglected previous to the 2016 election. Furthermore, I highlight significant similarities between the rhetorics of former President Trump, Barr, and ABC in order to unravel the shift in the character construction of *Roseanne*'s protagonist.

The term 'nostalgia' has undergone a lot of connotative changes since it was coined by Swiss medical practitioner Johannes Hofer in 1678 (Armbruster 19). Derived from the Greek terms *nóstos* (meaning 'homecoming, returning home') and *álgos* (meaning 'ache, anguish'), Hofer used the term to replace

24 Ng defines 'cancel culture' as "the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues" (623).

25 I read the liberal versus conservative dimension as "[i]ndividual differences in ideology [that] guide how people interpret and respond to aspects of their political and social environments" (Malka and Lelkes 158). While the particular views that go with the terms changed over time, "pairs of contrasting 'cultural' stances, such as those on abortion and homosexuality, have become increasingly conceptualized on the conservative–liberal dimension" in contemporary terms (ibid.).

the German term *Heimweh*, the painful longing to return home. At the end of the 17th century, nostalgia came to signify a corporeal condition with "symptoms such as insomnia, anorexia, melancholic madness or abjectness" that were frequently diagnosed in students and Swiss soldiers away from their homes (ibid.). While this corporeal condition was said to be curable by returning home, significant changes in the discourse surrounding nostalgia in the 18th century lead to the belief that it was, rather, an incurable and intense mental depression "connected to the societal changes brought about by industrialisation, migration, and urbanisation" (Kalinina, "What Do We Talk About" 9). Soon after, this yearning was not only understood to include geographical locations but also distinct points in time, "such as the personal past in the form of childhood or adolescence" (Armbruster 20). The politicized[26] and medicalized concept of nostalgia had, moreover, been highly gendered, especially at the end of the 19th century. Surrounding the discourses of the American Civil War, suffering from nostalgia was recognized to be a rather feminine quality and "forced men to hide or deny their *so-called mental illness*, fearing neglect and shaming, which in turn made it more difficult to diagnose" ("What Do We Talk About" 9, emphasis in the original). The term only found its way into the public discourse as late as the middle of the 20th century. Since then, 'nostalgia' signifies "a response to a temporal and spatial displacement […] constructed discursively in the process of narration" (Kalinina, "The Flow of Nostalgia" 5329). It describes a person's sense of loss regarding a place, time, or cultural artifact, a "desire to go back in time [to] spur sensations and recollection of [her] personal past" (Ju et al. 2064). Societies, according to Davies, "tend to become nostalgic in times of 'disruption,'" when the present seems unsatisfactory and fundamental convictions and beliefs are shaken (qtd. in Kalinina, "The Flow of Nostalgia" 5329). Through sensory stimuli (i.e. objects, smells, media artefacts), nostalgic narratives are able to produce and are produced by affective and emotional experiences tied to the past. They are frequently able to reinstate a perception of continuity by triggering a sentimental yearning

26 Several contemporary scholars used the term 'nostalgia' to describe socio-cultural phenomena in Eastern Europe, describing a yearning state of mind caused by "market changes and the persistent assault of the capitalist economy, accelerated globalisation, and the imposition of Western values" (Kalinina, "What Do We Talk About" 9).

for a soothing and consoling past. To escape present disorder, nostalgia, consequently, tends to smooth over troubles and idealizes the past.

The concept of nostalgia plays a significant role in various contexts: Nostalgic marketing, for example, provides products that activate "a preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favorable affect) towards objects […] that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood)" (Holbrook and Schindler qtd. in Ju et al. 2065). As I later show in greater depth with the example of former President Trump, political nostalgia has a restorative function that is able to seemingly reconstruct the homeland or nation as an ideal place worth protecting against internal and external agents. According to Polletta and Callahan, it helps to build collective and national identity "by way of a selective version of one's personal past" (395). American Studies scholar Kathleen Loock focused her research on television series revivals throughout the American TV landscape. She describes how these revivals "seek to negotiate the televisual heritage of original series, feelings of generational belonging, as well as notions of the past, present, and future in meaningful ways" (299). To elicit a nostalgic viewing experience, TV narratives are updated and repackaged. In her book *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, Film and Television scholar Amy Holdsworth describes nostalgia in US television as "the dominant framework through which television remembers and refers to itself," generating a historically, generationally, and nationally specific memory (96). Through a visual repertoire of nostalgic iconography referring to specific periods or eras, television texts are able to re-encounter, reposition, and re-contextualize cultural memories of the past.

Although revivals are usually economically low-risk because of their assumed built-in viewership, they are also usually accompanied by very high expectations and anticipation on the one hand, and "a sense of unease that cherished memories of the past might be overwritten by the new media texts" on the other hand (Loock 305). Nevertheless, the key pleasures of nostalgic television can be traced in the eagerness to return to familiar places and beloved characters to reinstate the idealized past with "positive emotions" (Ju et al. 2064). This goes hand in hand with Loock's argument that revivals of older popular and successful TV series have to meaningfully ground the shows in the present (cf. Loock 303). This not only means that the historical gap of time needs to be addressed properly, but also that television's norms and aesthetics have changed and

need to be incorporated. Critics of this 'nostalgia mode' concentrate on its conservative and regressive notion in which "manipulative and commercial functions [are] clearly apparent in the economic 'good sense' of re-presenting or repurposing archival material" (Holdsworth 98). As mass media, the televisual strategy of nostalgia can be used for its manipulative qualities (cf. Kalinina, "What Do We Talk About"; Oullette; Armbruster). It is, therefore, "involved in the process of 'taming' more difficult histories and memories, couching the past in the safety of the anodyne" (Holdsworth 101). The functions of nostalgic narratives in television reside not only in escaping the present for an idealized past but also in highlighting "the complexity of the relationship between past and present individual, cultural and national identities, becoming a 'rear view mirror' on who we were and how we have changed" (ibid. 110). However, it is important to note that televisual nostalgia is a highly individual phenomenon; its analysis, therefore, needs to integrate its polysemic character and interpretative nature (cf. Kalinina, "The Flow of Nostalgia" 5329).

Particularly discernible in popular culture, nostalgia is said to not only repackage and echo but also commercialize, capitalize on, and commodify the past (cf. "What Do We Talk About" 10). To lead to my case study of ABC's revival of *Roseanne* (2018), I highlight Loock's research on revivals in American TV series in the context of nostalgia. She differentiates between derivative (reboots and spin-offs), repetitive (reruns), and renewed (reunions and revivals) forms of "televisual afterlives of series," describing how shows transcend their own textual death in a variety of different ways (302). She argues that TV texts are no longer completed or finalized but "dormant" and, therefore, still meaningful and able to overcome their "narrative mortality" (ibid. 300f.). This trend is especially important when it comes to the contemporary competition between new televisual forms and evolving media technologies to attract audiences (i.e. online streaming, genre mixes, and the general abundance of programs). Therefore, institutional strategies frequently involve the capitalization of nostalgia "for a specific notion of the past and access [to] the (presumed) existing audience of the earlier series" (J. Ford). Hence, nostalgia "responds to fears regarding the dematerialization of digital culture," promoting televisual productions with familiar nostalgic value (Holdsworth 125).

The preservation of what has been established in the past is not only characteristic of nostalgic revivals of television series but is also a cornerstone of conservatism. As Holdsworth suggests with regard to US

American television, nostalgia can be seen as "the notion of the safe return," referring not only to economic decision-making and the commercial safety of returning to familiar forms and past successes, it also refers to a conservative notion of idealizing the past in an anodyne style (cf. "Safe Returns"). This is paralleled by the idea that nostalgia "operates as a meta-generic structure:" Although the strategy of re-contextualization is frequently interpreted as a marked difference from the original, distinction and innovation often fall short, due to "an over-reliance on winning formulas and past successes" (ibid. 112). As I later show in more detail, ABC's decision to bring back their successful 1980s and 90s sitcom *Roseanne* was also partly based on economic profits, banking on audiences who long for familiar faces and who want to be transported to a seemingly simpler time in the past. Nostalgically reviving the show was allegedly also part of the network's strategy to address the conservative shift after the 2016 election (cf. Madison; Koblin and Grynbaum; V. E. Johnson; Oullette).

The 2018 revival of *Roseanne* dates back to the eponymous domestic sitcom that was broadcast on ABC from 1988 to 1997. After being off the air for 20 years, the revival nostalgically invites viewers back into the home of the Conner family with its matriarch Roseanne (portrayed by comedian Roseanne Barr), husband Dan, their now adult children Becky, Darlene, D.J., and Jerry Garcia (who is away on a fishing boat in Alaska), and the protagonist's younger sister Jackie. Both the original series and the revival depict the rather dysfunctional but still loving Conner family, staged to raise their children, and now grandchildren, on a limited income – with all the associated challenges. As a remnant of the original run, the laugh track still guides the audience through the revival.

Invective phenomena, as advertised in the introduction of this chapter, play a significant role for the analysis of the show's revival. In the case of *Roseanne*, I argue that the nostalgic value of the show's invective phenomena was commodified by the network channel ABC in order to gain new audiences, as I later explain in more depth. Roseanne and other members of the family use invectives not only to fight, but "[insults] usually [occur] in everyday conversations, essentially making them a part of their lives" (Ghanoui 10). While the disagreements between characters are usually generally mild, the invectives provide a major source of humor in the series. Invective phenomena, however, can be found not only in the intradiegetic world, but additionally, in Roseanne Barr's career. After an arduous childhood in Salt Lake City, multiple stints at mental health

institutions, and leaving her very religious parents after having given up her firstborn child for adoption at the age of 16, Barr moved to Colorado, got married, and refocused her life on the art of stand-up comedy (cf. "Roseanne Barr - 'E' True Hollywood Story"). Deeply influenced by radical feminist writings that her sister provided her, she included the sentiment of the Women's Movement's slogan "The personal is political" in her stand-up material (qtd. in Havas and Sulimma 77). After her successful appearance on the *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* in 1985, she was known for elevating "the statue of the American woman and the American housewife" (former manager Herb Nanas, qtd. in "Roseanne Barr - 'E' True Hollywood Story"). With her 'Domestic Goddess' routine, she not only gained national recognition but also made herself a name as an insult comic because her act mainly consisted of disparaging other performers or her audience. Since Barr was largely involved in *Roseanne*'s production and creative processes, Gibson argues that her past as an insult comic facilitated the inclusion of invectives in the show (cf. "*Roseanne* Re-Boot"). The protagonist's invectives range from frequently scolding, belittling, and deprecating husband Dan, their children, her sister, and their parents to spitefully standing in front of the movie theater, telling incoming moviegoers the endings of movies (cf. *Roseanne* 4.24). Characters frequently self-reflexively comment on Roseanne's fondness for deprecating others, including her sister Jackie: "You're gonna spend all night ragging on everybody and making them miserable – sure! Fun for you! What about the rest of us?" (*Roseanne* 5.12). The protagonist herself comments on it when she self-ironically states, "I joke around, too. But I don't believe you have to be mean to be funny" (*Roseanne* 7.08), which is immediately met by uproarious laughter from the intratextual audience.

In the following paragraphs, I show that in both the original series and the contemporary revival, the character and her working-class background function as a symbol of social insight and corrective. The protagonist is, therefore, frequently staged as a counterbalance to the contemporary mainstream discourse. While the original series pioneers liberal ideals, the revival uses the character as an invective vehicle for conservative ideas. I argue that the original's intradiegetic viewpoints indirectly challenged the social wrongs in the American mainstream discourse at the time it was broadcast, and that the protagonist is staged as a progressive and liberal character by symbolically negotiating issues on an individual-interpersonal level. With the help of invective phenomena, she assists other characters to broaden their mindsets. While nostalgically maintaining the invective tone

of the show, the revival changes the direction of *Roseanne*'s protagonist from a mouthpiece of liberal ideas to a symbol of social insight and corrective that support rather conservative ideas. The protagonist's viewpoints are staged as a counterbalance to other characters' ideals, which act as stand-ins for the contemporary mainstream discourse. Deeply conservative talking points are symbolically negotiated on an individual and interpersonal level, marking the revival's narrative discontinuation of the show (cf. Loock). Before zooming into the case study of *Roseanne* and highlighting select differences in the construction of the protagonist in the original and in the revival, I start by focusing on the generic roots and characteristics of the sitcom's original. Since the series was formerly considered to be completed, I closely examine the transition from the original to the revival before ultimately focusing on my case study.

Media scholar Judine Mayerle suggests that *Roseanne*'s original run has a "distinct look [that is] significantly different from its comedic counterparts" of the time (82). Given its generic rigidity, the sitcom of the 1980s was not known for its innovative and experimental quality. Viewers' expectations were mostly met with a satisfactory resolution at the end of each episode, restoring order once again. While other comedic programs, like *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989–98),[27] work to distance their audience from being immersed into the action in order to properly laugh at the humorous narrative, *Roseanne* "shrugged off the formulaic constraints and expectations of the genre and […] invited its audience to come in and sit around the sticky kitchen table" (ibid.). The series' roots can be traced in a stylistic amalgamation of 1950s variety shows and the archetype of the domestic sitcom from the 1950s and early 60s. The blue-collar show *Roseanne*, as Mayerle suggests, "moved the situation comedy more firmly into the reality of its viewers' lives, its realistic situations, dialogue, and sets appealing to a large and diverse audience" (ibid. 83). While situation comedies during the 1970s and 80s attempted to depict the changing familial structures of US American families (i.e. shows with single parents or surrogate families in the workplace), sanitized domestic comedies centered on nuclear families were still on the air (i.e. *The Cosby Show* (NBC 1984-92)).

The blue-collar reality of a lot of viewers is rarely shown on television. The most popular past representation of a blue-collar character was *All*

27 In Chapter 4.2, I focus on the postmodern cynicism of shows like *Seinfeld* and the contemporary shift to a metamodern and sincere belief in human interconnection.

in the Family's Archie Bunker (CBS 1971-79) who, unlike the white-collar majority of television characters, displayed his low educational status and his absence of wisdom "by mangling common words and by spouting bigoted remarks" (Reimers 115). This unfortunate stereotype is one of the rare portrayals of the working-class population on television. For TV in general, historian Ghanoui argues that "the poor were constructed as an Other[28] going against the dominate of the middle-class or wealthy family," emphasizing a white-collar-centric paradigm in popular culture (Ghanoui 10). A study showed that only eleven percent of 262 domestic situation comedies broadcast from 1946–90 had working-class protagonists (cf. Bettie). Since popular culture and, especially, television programs are "a site of struggles over meaning and over the power to represent and establish preferred meanings" (ibid. 126), the consequent class inflation and bias is evidence for Sociology scholar Stanley Aronowitz's argument regarding the displacement of blue-collar representations in mass media. He suggests that "there are no longer direct representations of the interactions among workers on American television" (qtd. in Bettie 125). In a later study from 1994, eight out of 35 sitcoms were coded as blue-collar with a working-class lead, while only four sitcoms featured female working-class characters, substantiating class inflation claims but refuting working-class invisibility on television. One of these sitcoms was ABC's *Roseanne*, whose characters vocally (and certainly ironically) embraced their affinity to 'white trash.'[29]The show is said to be the first serious, allegedly realistic, and unique depiction of a middle-class family with both parents having to work outside the home (cf. Mayerle; Bettie). Apart from uncharted territory surrounding class discourses on television, the sitcom was frequently lauded for its liberal transgressiveness, challenging conservative notions linked to gender roles, motherhood, heteronormativity, class, and race (cf. Bettie; Mayerle; Ghanoui; Gibson).

After underwhelming viewers with an unsatisfying ninth season by symbolically betraying the very people it had depicted, *Roseanne* was canceled in 1997 (cf. VanArendonk, "What Should We Do With Season 9 of *Roseanne*?"). In the first episode of this particular season, the Conners win the lottery with

28 I discuss the notion of 'the other' in Chapter 2.1.

29 As Hartigan argues, 'white trash' is characterized "as a rhetorical identity in a discourse of difference that white Americans deploy in deciding what will count as whiteness in relation to the 'social bottom'" ("Unpopular Culture: The Case of 'White Trash'").

over $100 million. Although the original concept of the show was based on the economic struggles of a working-class family trying to make ends meet, the series then redecorated the Conner house with stylish and expensive furniture and delved into outlandish plots, dislodging the protagonist and top seller Roseanne Barr from the 'Domestic Goddess' image that resonated so thoroughly with American audiences. Barr defended the decision on her blog, arguing that *Roseanne* "was based on [her] real life, and she wanted the show to represent the changes she went through, including becoming rich" (qtd. in Ghanoui 7). The last episode of the original, however, took another major turn, announcing that everything up to that point had been a fabrication of the protagonist's creative mind. In a voice-over, Roseanne is staged to ascribe the plot of the entire season to her creative coping with her husband's previously revealed fatal heart attack at the end of Season Eight. Writing as a productive outlet is staged to have gotten the character through the tragedy of Dan's death. The voice-over goes on, self-reflexively criticizing other half-hour formats on television that misrepresent the demographic structure of American households and smooth over the tragedies of 'real life:'

> When you're a blue-collar woman and your husband dies, it takes away your whole sense of security. So, I began writing about having all the money in the world and I imagined myself going to spas and swanky New York parties, just like the people on TV where nobody has any real problems and everything is solved within 30 minutes. (*Roseanne* 9.24)

When in April of 2017 rumors of the series' revival spread (cf. Andreeva), people started wondering how *Roseanne* would be carried forward. As it turned out, the pilot episode of the revival "ended up simply ignoring most of the original series finale" (Bradley). Twenty years later in the intradiegetic world, the character of Dan is alive again and well. In the first scene of the episode, the character is self-reflexively staged to address his potential death with "[w]hy does everybody always think I'm dead?" (*Roseanne* 10.01). Later, Dan is staged to find a manuscript that Roseanne has been working on, suggesting that, in fact, the ninth season had been depicting the fabrications of her mind. The instant success of the revival seemingly confirms what the character of Dan nostalgically proposes in the pilot episode of the tenth season: "Classics really do hold up" (*Roseanne* 10.01). *Roseanne* opened to 18.2 million viewers, "a bigger audience than it attracted with its original series finale back in the pre-DVR, pre-Netflix TV stone age of 1997 (16.6 million)"

(Adalian). Although, as *Vulture*'s Adalian suggests, revivals "tend to fade as the nostalgia factor wears off," *Roseanne* remained in the top ratings of the 2017-2018 TV season (ibid; Otterson).

Beside the main cast – who all returned, with the exception of Glenn Quinn (who portrayed Mark Healy, Becky's boyfriend and later husband), who tragically died from a heroin overdose in 2002 – there are other similarities between the original *Roseanne* and its revival (cf. Lynch). For example, the Conner home appears, once again, back in its familiar blue-collar setting and economic situation from Seasons One to Eight. All characters are struggling to make ends meet, emphasized by single mother Darlene having to move back into her parents' house with her two children after loosing her job. Moreover, one of the most prominent aspects of the original series was the blurring of lines between its leading actress Roseanne Barr and the eponymous protagonist: The creative vision of her character seemingly aligned with and capitalized on her working-class background and the accounts in her previous stand-up routines in the 1980s and 90s (cf. Gibson 4). The revived tenth season of *Roseanne* "continues that tradition of ambiguity by bringing Barr's infamous support for Trump into the Conner's world" (ibid.). Barr defended this creative decision by stating publicly at a press tour event that "it's just realistic […] it was working-class people who elected Trump" (qtd. in Ohlheiser). As I later argue, ABC tried to capitalize on nostalgia for televisual comfort, familiarity, and a simpler past to reach and engage a specific audience that is apparently largely congruent with the Trump voter base.

In the following paragraphs, I zoom in on my comparative case study of the original run and the revival of *Roseanne*. By exemplarily analyzing the shows' constructions of homosexuality and race, I argue that the protagonist functions as an invective symbol of insight and corrective supporting liberal ideas in the original, while the revival utilizes the character as an invective symbol of insight and corrective supporting deeply conservative ideas.

In a Season One episode called "Dear Mom and Dad," Roseanne's father Al is staged to mirror the views of the mainstream discourse concerning homosexuality in the show (*Roseanne* 1.22). When the character is staged to say good-bye to his son-in-law, he explains that "[he'd] give him a big kiss, if [he] liked boys" – instead, he shakes his hand (ibid.). Staged as a source of humor, the comment about the possibility of men kissing each other is met with intradiegetic laughter from Dan and Al, as well as intratextual guffaws from the laugh track. Roseanne's expression, however, is staged to remain

unchanged. The scene's playful but decisive rejection of two men kissing can be read as the mainstream discourse in the US in the 1980s. Homophobia, as Magruder argues, is "a product of socialization patterns and gender issues embedded in our culture [and is] enlisted to protect fragile heterosexual identities linked to traditional gender roles" (49). Fueled by misconceptions about the AIDS epidemic, the 1980s were characterized by a comprehensive homophobia in the US. An *LA Times* survey from 1985 revealed that roughly 25% of Americans thought AIDS was "God's punishment for homosexuality" and people suffering from it were "getting what they deserve" (qtd. in Magruder 50). The protagonist, therefore, abstains from buying into and reflecting mainstream views, indicating a different, more liberal approach to the discourse.

Starting with a Season Three episode called "Dances with Darlene" (*Roseanne* 3.23), homosexuality is directly addressed for the first time in the show by having a male character (nearly) coming out of the closet. Leon Carp, the protagonist's boss while waiting tables in the mall, and later (co-)owner of her restaurant 'The Lunchbox,' is picked up by his significant other at the end of a strenuous day at work while the credits roll at the end of the episode. Although their relationship is not labeled, the audience is tipped off when the protagonist and her co-worker voice an "aaahh" of recognition (ibid.). The protagonist, although later staged to strategically utilize Leon's fear of being outed to his superiors in a work context for her own personal gain, frequently makes fun of Leon but never belittles him. They remain friends until the end of the original series' run, when Roseanne appoints herself as the wedding planner for Leon and his boyfriend in Season Eight. Although offending Leon by going overboard with stereotypical decorations (feather boas, topless ushers, and drag queen impersonators), the protagonist eventually saves the wedding when Leon is staged to get cold feet. She also liberally convinces Leon's mother that marrying a man is the right path for her son: "I'm sure when you pictured his wedding, you also pictured him with somebody that really loves him – and that is what's happening. You know, love is love" (*Roseanne* 8.11).

In Season Five, the protagonist tries to set up her friend and colleague Nancy with one of her husband's acquaintances, when Nancy is compelled to reveal that she is dating someone named Marla. While Roseanne and her sister Jackie are staged to silently and confusedly stare at Nancy, the intratextual reaction from the imagined studio audience ranges from startled gasps and overwhelmed laughter to wavering applause. For roughly

30 seconds, the scene invites the viewers to join the characters in accepting the fact that Nancy identifies as a lesbian woman. While Jackie is staged to react poorly by feeling threatened, the protagonist serenely declares that it is, indeed, surprising, but, "We'd react the same way we react when you tell us anything personal: We make fun of it until it gets old and then we move on" (*Roseanne* 5.08), stressing Roseanne's invective style and the show's invective humor.

The most notorious episode in this context is a Season Six episode called "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" in which the protagonist is staged to be kissed by Nancy's new girlfriend in a gay bar (*Roseanne* 6.18). In the episode, Roseanne is staged as an invective symbol of social insight in contrast to the homophobic mainstream discourse that is represented by her sister Jackie. After being invited to a gay night club, Roseanne repeatedly disarms Jackie's concerns like, "[w]hat if everybody there thinks I'm gay?" with neutralizing comments like, "[w]ell, then you could just think 'they're gay' right back at them," comically unveiling stereotypes and prejudices while making fun of and denouncing outdated presumptions (*Roseanne* 6.18). The protagonist is staged to engage in a conversation with Nancy's partner, who then unexpectedly kisses Roseanne. The protagonist is visibly taken aback and gets into an argument with Nancy the next day, concerning insecurities about her own sexuality: "I am not afraid of any… uh… small percentage of my gayness inside" (ibid.). Reprimanded by her sister for being excessively 'cool' with her friend being a lesbian, Roseanne invectively lashes out: "Oh, I'm not cool? You were the one sitting there at the bar, telling everyone you were from PBS doing research" (ibid.). The episode takes its time to depict the protagonist's process of reflecting on her behavior in the light of a mainstream culture that usually does not consider the sensitivities of queer people, but rather works to diminish and refuse their representation on television. At the end of the episode, Roseanne and Dan are staged to "vent both their blind fears and erotic curiosity about homosexuality even as they unpiously reaffirm the strength of their heterosexual marriage" (Rich).

ABC and the show's production team discussed beforehand "how the kiss — between Roseanne [Barr's] character and a lesbian played by Mariel Hemingway — will be depicted" (cf. Silverman). Then-Executive Producer and Barr's husband, Tom Arnold, claimed beforehand that the kiss might not be included in the episode. He then "started the controversy by taking his beef with the network public [to] a newspaper interview" (Lowry). ABC, consequently, saw itself in a crossfire between the political factions

of GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) and the rather conservative MRC (Media Research Center), as well as Barr herself, who threatened to take the show to another network if the episode was not broadcast in its original state. Barr also spoke out against the massive media backlash, which dubbed the kiss "disgusting" (Walters 69). ABC ultimately decided to screen the full episode but added a parental advisory. Whether *Roseanne* exploited this topic "as a means of self-promotion" as the show had supposeldy done before with other topics or whether Barr and others had to fight for the same-sex kiss to be included does not deflect from the exceptional queer representation the episode provided (Lowry).

On the one hand, critics lauded *Roseanne* for including characters who happened to be gay instead of motiveless "gay-of-the-week" appearances (B. White). The recurring characters of Leon and Nancy were more than the protagonist's gay friends. As White argues, "[v]iewers got to see [them] date and get married, and [they] participated in stories that had nothing to do with [their] sexuality," normalizing televisual representation of queer characters in situation comedies (ibid.). The protagonist is staged as an invective voice of insight, addressing homophobia as one of the social wrongs of the time on an interpersonal and individual level. On the other hand, however, a few scholars judged the above-mentioned kiss and the protagonist's subsequent "mouth-wiping and grimace [as] signs of [her] robust heterosexuality, and of her homophobia," apparently underestimating the cultural work of the material (Maddison 121). Following Walters's argument that "the episode both parodied homophobic assumptions and dealt with Roseanne and husband Dan's own reckoning with their own homophobia," I argue that the protagonist functions as an invective social corrective, inviting processes of reflection in the audience (*All the Rage*). Roseanne, not staged as an infallible pioneer of equality on television, is portrayed as grappling and coming to terms with her inhibitions concerning a popular discourse that has readily and frequently inflamed tensions in society. Her invectives both problematize and redeem her behavior, "acknowledging her flaws and her efforts to improve" (McLeland 171). The show was among the very few network shows to feature queer characters in recurring roles in the 1980s and 90s. Its dealings with queerness might seem inadequate and latently homophobic for liberal audiences and scholars of the 21st century. For the 1980s and 90s, however, *Roseanne*'s exceptional status was cemented when "blue-collar families are casually thrown together

with gay men and women without the walls tumbling down […] These steps are small. But collectively they do suggest a change in the weather" (Rich).

Over 20 years later, there is more queer representation on television than ever before: In the TV season 2019-20, 10.2% of all characters on broadcast television were regular queer characters, 2.4% more than the last season (Townsend). In 2018, when *Roseanne*'s revival season was broadcast, the mainstream discourse surrounding queer issues had supposedly changed. Nevertheless, the revival is still able to make headlines with regard to queerness. In the first episode of Season Ten, Darlene, now a single mother of two who has recently lost her job, moves back into her parents' house with her children to save on expenses. When Darlene's son Mark is introduced to the viewer by walking into the kitchen wearing boots, pink leggings, bracelets, a necklace, and a grey shirt with a colorful unicorn on it, Dan and Roseanne are staged to look at each other in utter disbelief. The protagonist provocatively uses Darlene as a pretext to tell Dan that it is supposedly acceptable for Mark to explore his personal expression through his appearance. Dan is staged to invectively answer with, "[m]ay the winds fill his sails and carry him to the boy's section of Target," mockingly voicing concerns for his grandson and his masculinity (*Roseanne* 10.01). This culminates when the grandchildren's first day at the new local school approaches. While Darlene is staged to support her son with whatever he chooses to wear, Dan makes fun of him after Mark asks whether his outfit needs something else: "Yeah. Fast shoes and a head start" (*Roseanne* 10.02). Dan's comment is met with roaring intratextual laughter, inviting the viewers to laugh along.

Roseanne, constructed as a character of insight and corrective for liberal ideals in the original, is now staged markedly differently. Her views are expressed through comments, seemingly lacking in empathy or the will to reach a better understanding: "I don't get why he's wearing clothes like that to school" (*Roseanne* 10.02). Like Darlene, Roseanne's sister Jackie represents the opposing perspective, voicing, as I suggest, the mainstream discourse of the 21st century. Jackie is staged to dismantle connotations of gender by explaining the man-made construction of gender differences with the example of linking colors to genders as late as the 19th century in order to boost the textile industry. However, her character is intradiegetically discredited, belittled, and ridiculed by Roseanne and Dan for her decision to become a certified life coach. Again, the laugh track completely supports the characters' incomprehension, not only inviting viewers to join the laughter

but also disambiguating the reading of the scene, namely: Boys are supposed to wear boys' clothes, and girls' clothes are for girls.

In a heart-to-heart talk between Roseanne and Mark, the protagonist is seemingly staged to come to terms with her grandson's queerness. After a few questions, the protagonist seems to be content for the moment, hugging Mark, and assuring him, "We'll back you up" (*Roseanne* 10.02). The interaction between the characters can certainly be read as Roseanne supporting her gender-fluid grandson (cf. Chaney, "*Roseanne* Is a Political Series"; Arceneaux). Even a later scene seems to support this reading: When the protagonist and Mark enter the boy's classroom at school, one classmate laughingly calls him a "freak." Roseanne, staged to worry about her grandson being bullied further, addresses the class with:

> I think you guys are really gonna like Mark 'cause he is a lot of fun, and he's very fashionable. Sometimes he wants to wear a dress or a real fancy top. I think he's gonna grow up and be a fashion designer. A really famous one, like, uh, T.J. Maxx or, um... or that Ross guy. So I'm counting on you guys to make the new kid feel welcome. And if you don't, I have ways of finding out about it. I'm a white witch. (*Roseanne* 10.02)

However, I argue that the power structures of the series have changed significantly. By indirectly threatening a class of ten-year-olds, Roseanne is staged to make sure that her grandson will not be bullied by his classmates. She unnecessarily links her grandson's choice of wardrobe to her idea of his future career in fashion instead of tackling and familiarizing the intra- and extradiegetic audiences with the issue of gender-fluidity. During the original run, both Barr and her character Roseanne frequently risked their (creative) careers to be staged as invective working-class symbols of insight and corrective, standing up against conservative and long-established notions about gender and sexuality that were perpetuated by the mainstream discourse. In the revival, however, the protagonist's reasons to stand up against conservatism and homophobia only seem to be directed towards the safety of her family. Instead of treating diverse sexual identities in all their forms with a "sincere attempt not only to represent, but speak to, a queer subcultural constituency," the revival stages Roseanne and Dan as conservative and degrading voices that make it socially acceptable to make fun of and ridicule characters on the basis of their gender on television in the 21st century (Maddison 114). The laugh track aids and assists this dominant reading.

Slate's Tannehill mounts the aforementioned argument that one of the show's characteristics entails the blurring of lines between the protagonist and the public figure of Roseanne Barr ("*Roseanne*'s Gender Nonconforming Character"). He argues that Barr is involved in anti-transgender feminist ideology, exemplified in an excerpt from one of her many autobiographical books: "You haven't lived until you've seen a huge guy with boobs talking about hormones and deciding to keep his penis, and how that was a feminist issue" (R. Barr, *Roseannearchy* 107). Barr is said to identify with "self-proclaimed 'gender critical feminists,' also known as trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or TERFs" (Tannehill), supporting views that "the problem of transsexualism would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence" (Raymond). In this context, one of the protagonist's questions in a heart-to-heart talk with her grandson stands out in particular: "Do you feel like you're a boy or a girl?" (*Roseanne* 10.02), emphasizing the protagonist's (and perhaps actor's) perception of a normative gender binary. The staged gender-fluidity of character Mark on *Roseanne* can, therefore, be read as an concession of pseudo-progressive voices and radical feminist tendencies. Tannehill suggests "that Mark is meant to further a specific narrative about the 'correct' kind of gender nonconformity," opening up the protagonist to a reading that appoints her as an invective symbol of insight and corrective for utterly conservative notions (Tannehill).[30]

Roseanne's dealings with heteronormativity in terms of gender are paralleled by its constructions of race. While the original run stages the protagonist as a thoughtful, yet invective, pioneer for liberal ideals concerning the integration of homosexual characters in the show, the revival, however, positions Roseanne as a vehicle for conservative notions of gender and queerness. Similar observations can be made when examining the shows' dealings with the category of race. Once again, I exemplify that the original series champions its protagonist as an invective liberal symbol of insight and progressive reflection on her own behavior, while the revival stages Roseanne as a mouthpiece of conservative ideals and unfounded invectives against BIPOC characters in the intradiegetic world.

In a Season Seven episode of the original run, called "White Men Can't Kiss" (*Roseanne* 7.09), the protagonist's son D.J. is staged to star in

30 In Season Two, or rather Season One of *The Conners* (ABC 2018–) as it is now called without Roseanne Barr's involvement, when Mark is staged to come out as gay, he is supported by his whole family, including Dan (cf. *The Conners* 1.02; Gilchrist; Kelleher).

a school play. After the casting is completed, however, the character is eliminated from the play because he apparently refused to kiss his co-star. The protagonist is called in and learns that D.J. was joyfully aware of the kiss all along but refused to kiss the African American girl ultimately cast in the role. Embarrassed, Roseanne is staged to monosyllabicly apologize for her son's behavior. The teacher, however, retorts with, "I see a lot of this around here. It always starts with the parents," insinuating racial bias in the protagonist (ibid.). Accused of being prejudiced, Roseanne is staged to hurry home and tell her husband "[w]e gotta make him kiss her, everybody will think we're a bunch of racists […] I don't care what his reason is, everybody will think it's because she's black and then I will never be able to buy sheets again," inconsistently worrying about being judged by her neighbors and friends (ibid.). Roseanne and Dan are staged to have a talk with their son, trying to get to the bottom of the problem. After listing many possible and partly ludicrous reasons why D.J. would not want to kiss a girl, Dan is staged to ask whether it has something to do with his classmate's skin color. When D.J. grudgingly admits to his reasoning, the protagonist lashes out with, "I didn't raise you to be some little bigot […] Hey! Black people are just like us. They're every bit as good as us, and any people who don't think so are just a bunch of banjo-picking, cousin-dating, barefoot embarrassments to respectable white trash like us!," humorously and invectively condemning white supremacist ideology (ibid.). After D.J. is sent to his room, Roseanne and Dan are staged to discuss the matter further, also unveiling racist tendencies in Dan's thinking and staging the protagonist as the liberal mouthpiece for racial equality in the storyworld. Later, when Dan and his friends meet for their weekly poker night, the issue of bigotry is staged to come up again. The four white men aid one another in clearing their consciences and start objectifying black women until their last fellow player arrives – their African American friend Chuck. Dan, pressured by his wife's invectives, is staged to ask Chuck where his son might have picked up on prejudices while ostensibly fishing for his friend's reassurance of his own behavior. Chuck is staged to reply with: "Why do you care how I feel so much more than everyone else? Because I'm black? […] So if I feel okay, *all* black people feel okay 'cause we are all the same?" (ibid., emphasis in the original). Dan, taken aback, is staged to realize his shortcomings and responsibility in his son's latently racist behavior and is later staged to make it clear to his son that it is morally wrong to refuse to kiss someone because of the color of her skin. The white characters at the

poker table in the Conners' kitchen can be read as stand-ins for the white mainstream discourse. They are staged to shut their eyes to the facts of their own internalized racism.

The depiction of the protagonist as the liberal spokeswoman for racial equality does not remain unaffected all the way through to the end of the episode. Working with Jackie at their restaurant, she is staged to still be worried about their family's bigotry and being married to a 'cracker,' a term that "first appeared in the 1760s [meaning] 'poor white trash'" and was later "widely used in news accounts and by civil rights activists to emphasize the backward-looking racism of southern lawmen and townspeople who fought integration" (Harkins 367, 368). Having no customers, the characters are staged to close the restaurant 15 minutes early when an African American man appears in front of the locked door. The protagonist, who is visibly uncomfortable, is staged to swiftly turn the man away. Commenting on how scary the situation was, both characters are staged to go through with preparing to leave the restaurant, when the African American man appears at the door again. Staged to be noticeably scared, the protagonist and her sister hurriedly move the cash back into the register. When Roseanne hears that the man is, in fact, the father of D.J.'s classmate, Geena, whom he refused to kiss in the school play, she is immediately staged to relax. She asks him why he did not simply say his name while moving to open the door. The protagonist's bigotry is revealed when the girl's father retorts, "You need to know all your customers' names before they come into your restaurant?" (*Roseanne* 7.09). Lost for words, the protagonist is aided by her sister, trying to pass off their racially insensitive reaction as a general fear of men. Not convinced, Mr. Williams leaves – but not before paralleling the protagonist's bigoted inhibitions to her son's. Instead of simply following her sister's lead to reinterpret the situation, the protagonist is staged to take a hard look at herself. The scene and episode close with the following dialogue:

> Jackie: If he was a white guy with the exact same built in those exact same clothes, you would have done the exact same thing.
> Roseanne: Yeah, well, I'm glad one of us is sure.
> Jackie: Look, now, don't beat yourself up over it, Roseanne. You know, anybody else would have done just what you did.
> Roseanne: Well… isn't that great. (*Roseanne* 7.09)

Even more explicitly than the show's dealings with queerness, this episode stages the protagonist as a character with liberal social insight, inviting

processes of reflection in the viewers. The audience is able to track Roseanne's attitude at all times: genuinely aggravated by one's bigoted surroundings until one's own bigotry catches up. Once again, the protagonist is staged not as an impeccable pioneer of racial equality but as a character beginning to reflect on her own latent internalized racism. She is staged to invectively educate her son and her husband but comes to the conclusion that she is as accustomed to the internalized racism as the people in her surroundings. The character, therefore, is staged to problematize her own as well as the audience's relations to racial issues, once again "acknowledging her flaws and her efforts to improve" (McLeland 171).

Quite differently from the dealings with racial issues in the original series, the revival stages the protagonist as a conservative mouthpiece for racial stereotypes and slurs. It is interesting to note that there is not one central plotline that revolves around racial issues concerning African Americans, even though D.J. ultimately married his African American classmate Geena. Her and their daughter's presence in the Conner house can certainly be read as an attempt to rewrite not only D.J.'s racially biased tendencies in the past but also diversify the predominantly homogeneous ensemble cast of the original. Whitney Cummings, *Roseanne*'s co-showrunner for the revival, stated in an interview: "This season, we decided it's not about her being black" (qtd. in V. Miller). Nevertheless, the revival of *Roseanne* 'others' different BIPOC characters, staging other particularly pressing contemporary racial conflicts in the US society of the 21st century.

In episode three of the tenth season, Roseanne and Dan are staged to take a long nap on the couch, sleeping through several television programs. When he wakes up, Dan notices they have "missed all the shows about black and Asian families," referring to ABC's own *Black-ish* (2014–) and *Fresh off the Boat* (2015-20). Standing in complete opposition to the protagonist's liberal fight for racial equality in the original, Roseanne is staged to echo but simultaneously invectively distort and ironize her past beliefs: "They're just like us. There, now you're all caught up" (*Roseanne* 10.03), depriving the shows of being more than a televisual tool to 'normalize' ethnic minorities for the white majority. The stories, the characters, their developments in complex plots, and the humor of these diverse shows are brushed under the carpet by a seemingly racially insensitive and uncaring protagonist.

The seventh episode of the revival, however, eventually introduces the narrative racial conflict of the show: American Muslims have moved in next door to the Conner family. In just under three minutes of the cold

open, the episode voices a myriad of potentially harmful stereotypes against BIPOC characters. The episode starts with Jackie lecturing the protagonist that "[she] can't just stand on the front porch staring at [her] Muslim neighbors" (*Roseanne* 10.07). Roseanne, staged to worry about the amount of fertilizer her neighbors have purchased, claims that "that's how they make bombs" and insinuates that their neighbors are part of a terrorist sleeper cell, planning to destroy the neighborhood (ibid.). Although the character of Jackie and African American friend Anne-Marie are staged to make fun of the protagonist's fixed ideas, Roseanne continues to sputter invective and preposterous allegations like, "I'm telling you, this is what people from Iraq and Talibanistan [sic] do!," not only exhibiting a disturbing lack of knowledge, but also showing unsubstantiated, racially biased fears (ibid.). Jackie, fed up with her sister, is staged to invite Anne-Marie to join the conversation but is shut down by, "Oh, because I'm black, I'm the expert on racism?" (ibid.), paralleling the Season Seven scene where her on-screen husband Chuck shared the same sentiments (cf. *Roseanne* 7.09). While the original run invited processes of reflection, the revival stages a 'hierarchy of races' since, now, Chuck is staged to be on the protagonist's side, worrying about their potentially dangerous Muslim neighbors. By staging African American characters to witness and not to interfere, but to openly side with the protagonist's invective rants about her Muslim neighbors, they are ultimately portrayed as the model-minority of the scene and pitted against other ethnic minorities.

Aided by the laugh track, the protagonist's unfounded prejudices are marked as unquestionably humorous. This culminates in Roseanne coming into direct contact with her neighbors. One night, when her granddaughter is supposed to skype with her mother, who is a soldier serving overseas, at the protagonist's house, the Wi-Fi is staged to break down because of unpaid bills. Trying to make the call happen, Roseanne suggests using the "the terrorist's" Wi-Fi. She invectively and unsuccessfully tries to guess their password ("DeathToAmerica," "DeathToAmerica123" (*Roseanne* 10.07)) and is eventually staged to grudgingly ask her neighbors. She is not only staged to take a baseball bat for protection, but is also armed with the laugh track, which joyfully and invectively cheers on comments like "I'll go and wake up the enemies of America" (ibid.). When the Al-Harazis are staged to generously offer their house for the Skype call, Roseanne reacts nervously, prompting husband Samir to suspect her fears: "You don't want us to see the Skype, so we'll know where in Afghanistan her mother is, right? Because

you think we'll find out her coordinates and give them to our ISIS friends on Facebook," calling Roseanne out on her invective and racially biased mindset (ibid.). The protagonist counters with, "[w]e don't hate you. We're scared of you," not only 'othering' the two BIPOC characters and symbolically all American Muslims, but also simultaneously modeling and naturalizing invective, aggressive, and prejudiced behavior, aided and assisted by the laugh track (ibid.). Not even the emotional story of the Al-Harazis' frightened son wearing a bulletproof vest to bed because "some people yelled some pretty terrible things at [them] the other day" can shift the protagonist's narrow-minded and conservative perspective (ibid.). The Al-Harazis are staged to generously give Roseanne the password, offering an alternative solution because helping others "is the right thing to do. The ignorance of adults shouldn't punish children" (ibid.).

In a later scene, the protagonist is staged to meet Fatima Al-Harazi at the grocery store checkout, where the two characters are staged to bond over the injustices of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; more commonly known as Food Stamp Program) for people on no- and low-income. When Fatima wants to pay with her EBT card (Electronic Benefit Transfer), the female cashier is staged to maliciously and invectively inform her of the card's insufficient funding: "Maybe the American taxpayers forgot to fill it up last week" (*Roseanne* 10.07). The protagonist generously offers to pay for the rest of the groceries but immediately counterbalances this act of kindness by confessing to stealing the Al-Harazis' cable TV. The most disparaging and invective moment of this scene, however, is initiated by the cashier's racist comment: "Maybe you can help her carry the groceries out to her camel, too" (ibid.). The intratextual laugh track, usually cheering on racially insensitive comments, is replaced with an imagined audience's quiet disagreement and clamor. In the following ten seconds, Fatima is staged to defeatedly gather her things and leave, while the protagonist remains completely passive. Not before Fatima is out of earshot, Roseanne is staged to engage with the cashier:

> Hey, you know that saying, "See something, say something?" Well, I saw something and I'm gonna say something to your manager. You are ignorant. That woman is twice the person you'll ever be. And she's dealing with a lot of stuff you don't even know about. So, next time she comes into the store, you keep your damn mouth shut. She's got

> enough fertilizer to turn this place into a smoking hole in the ground. (*Roseanne* 10.07)

Although the admittedly kind undercurrents of the protagonist's speech can be interpreted as championing anti-racist attitudes, the reflection processes of the protagonist that I argued for in the original are adumbrated in this scene. As *The Washington Post*'s O'Haver argues, with 'See something, say something' the protagonist quotes "the unofficial slogan of post-9/11 America" that turns Americans "into amateur anti-terrorism crusaders" ("Our National Motto"). Given the fact that the protagonist unreasonably and insistingly suspects the Al-Harazis to be terrorists in the first place, her redeeming speech has little impact on the reading of the episode. Furthemore, Roseanne is staged to wait for Fatima to exit the store before speaking out against racism, leaving her neighbor emotionally high and dry. She is, then, ultimately staged to invoke the invective and detrimental image of Muslim Americans building and using bombs to pressure the cashier into being nice to Fatima. Following O'Haver's argument that 'See something, say someting' "makes us vigilant, but it also makes us paranoid," I suggest that this episode results in the protagonist being staged as an invective vehicle for conservative issues (ibid.). The direction of the character has changed. The scene invites the viewer to laugh alongside the intratextual audience, bypassing the emotional turmoil of the racially disparaged character while still perpetuating damaging stereotypes of Muslim Americans.

This case study took a closer look at the differences in the character construction of *Roseanne*'s eponymous protagonist in the original (1988–1997) and its 2018 revival. The protagonist, staged to deliberately reflect on her behavior and ideals in the original, is replaced by a character who is staged to be profoundly self-opinionated: "It is not my fault that I just happen to be a charismatic person that's right about everything" (*Roseanne* 10.01). In a feeble attempt "to make light of a now-outdated understanding of Barr's persona" as an invective but liberal symbol of social insight and corrective, the comment seems out place, "tone-deaf and lacking self-awareness" (J. Ford). While Film and Cultural Studies scholar Kathleen Rowe referred to Barr as an "unruly woman" in 1990 – "a *topos* of female outrageousness and transgression" (Rowe 409, emphasis in the original) – her "unruliness has become less associated with empowering working-class women and more with railing against minorities and immigrants, [exemplified by] her Twitter presence, which is pro-Israel, pro-Trump, and anti-immigration" (J. Ford).

Television's nostalgia for *Roseanne*'s familiar form and characters, for a piece of a safer and more manageable past, and for humorous and informative invectives is symbolically paralleled by the politics of former President Donald J. Trump. Part of the Republican strategy for Trump's presidency, as Goldstein and Hall argue, was "the surreal mix of gendered and racialized nostalgia embedded in Trump's iconography and message" as well as the racially charged "rhetoric of patriotic nationalism" (398). MAGA, short for 'Make America Great Again,' simulates and imagines a nostalgic return to a qualitatively better past and version of America that, as Maskovsky argues, "can indeed be temporalized to the mid-twentieth century, and to the industrial economy and welfare statism of that era [–] a nostalgia (a collective dream?) to return to that era *as it actually existed*" (qtd. in 402, emphasis in the original). These "nostalgia narratives," as Poletta and Callahan labeled them, "build collective identity by way of a selective version of one's personal past" (395).

In the summer of 2016, Roseanne Barr publicly endorsed Trump in an interview, saying that Americans would be lucky if Trump got elected (cf. Ohlheiser). Trump, in his own style, thanked her on Twitter. When the revival of *Roseanne* premiered on ABC at the end of March 2018, the White House not only instructed its social media director to congratulate Barr and the ABC crew, the President himself tweeted his compliments before calling her about the impressive and "huge" ratings and thanking Barr for her support (ibid). At a rally near Cleveland, Trump even mentioned the revival during a campaign speech, gesturing to the audience, praising that the show "was about us," monopolizing and claiming the series' audience for himself, the Republican party, and working-class US America (Kelsey).

Indeed, one day after Trump was elected president, network channel ABC reportedly called in a meeting, trying to determine what Trump's victory over Hillary Clinton meant for its future (cf. Koblin and Grynbaum; Davis and Peiser; Madison). Asking themselves which American viewers they were neglecting, ABC mapped out a strategy that centered "on a show that had a chance to appeal to the voters who had helped put Mr. Trump in the White House" (Koblin and Grynbaum). The choice would fall on *Roseanne*. This so-called 'Heartland Strategy' was based on a preexisting and invective cultural division between a mid-western but geographically vague 'Heartland audience' and critics, regulators, and politicians, especially located on the East Coast. Since television was speedily finding its way into American households all over the country in the 1950s and 60s, "the

promise of national cultural integration through television programming was engendering broad, public conflict" (V. E. Johnson 59). Television, as the fundamental medium for entertainment and information at the time, linked political ideology, market success, and aesthetics. While mid-western programming was perceived as an "aesthetic impoverishment" and its audience's cultural tastes were "presumed to reflect misplaced priorities of the times" (ibid. 63), public television claimed the socially legitimated status of the "cultural tastes and practices of the educated upper-middle class" (Oullette 218). The cultural conflict between low- and highbrow programming was still in full force in 1997, when ABC launched an advertisement campaign called "TV Is Good." *TV Guide* displayed one of the network's prominent ads:

> For years the pundits, moralists and self-righteous, self-appointed preservers of our culture have told us that television is bad. They've stood high on their soapbox and looked condescendingly on our innocuous pleasures. They've sought to wean us from our harmless habit by derisively referring to television as the Boob Tube, or the Idiot Box. Well, television is not the destroyer of all that is right in the world. In fact, and we say this with all the disdain we can muster for the *elitists* who purport otherwise, TV is good. (Oullette 218f., emphasis mine)

By embracing the rhetoric of 'ordinary people' instead of stressing the enlightening cultural potential of television fought for by cultural elites, ABC countered "discourses of aesthetic 'quality' in TV – often used to distinguish the 'class' programming preferred by critics and a selective, well-educated audience" with the networks lowbrow programming (V. E. Johnson 66). The original run of *Roseanne* fit ABC's mold perfectly, defending the televisual representation of those people who supposedly made up a lot of its actual audience – working-class people from the mid-west. Reviving *Roseanne*, as ABC Entertainment President Dungey stated, "was a direct result of the post-Election Day initiative to pursue an audience that the network had overlooked" (Koblin and Grynbaum). ABC thus commodified Trump's election success with similar and familiar strategies. While new media technologies are able to address more fragmented audience niches, the network channel ABC, like Trump in his election campaign, banked on the mass appeal of nostalgia. The dominant markets of the revival's premiere "read like a political pollster's red-state checklist: Cincinnati, OH; Kansas City, Mo.; Tulsa, Okla. Liberal enclaves like New York and Los Angeles did not crack the top 20," suggesting a considerable overlap of Trump

voters and viewers of *Roseanne* (ibid.).Just like Trump's public persona, ABC had the opportunity to capitalize on the invective phenomena of the sitcom *Roseanne* as well. At the end of the 1990s, gender researcher Jennifer Reed characterized Roseanne Barr's presence in popular culture "as a loud, aggressive, overweight, working-class woman who always says what is on her mind, who will not be pushed around, who tells her own uncomfortable truths" (Reed 123). This is paralleled by Trump supporters all over the country who reverence his ability to, as one opinion piece argues, "simply [say] what many are feeling but don't have the guts to say" (Fahler). Tactfulness seems overrated, invectives welcome. The country had been divided on socio-political issues for a long time when Trump and his rhetoric amplified these issues with his campaign in 2016. The revival of *Roseanne* tried to piggyback on the image of a divided nation, staging its protagonist as an invective "flash point in the nation's culture wars," openly celebrating and defending Trump's politcs (Koblin and Grynbaum). The ABC show ultimately provided representation for rather conservative viewers, "weary of being portrayed unflatteringly or ignored altogether on network shows" (ibid.). *Roseanne*, Roseanne, and Roseanne Barr seemed, as Adalian suggested after the premiere of the revival, "to Make ABC Great Again" (Adalian).

In this subchapter, I have analyzed the role of invectives in the contemporary trend of reviving old television texts. These revivals capitalize on the notion of televisual nostalgia. I began by looking at the notion of nostalgia, highlighting the conservative nature of reprocessing narrative texts. The nostalgic pleasure of recognizing and revisiting beloved situation comedy characters also resurrected ABC's hit-sitcom *Roseanne*, the basis of my case study. There, I argued that the protagonist Roseanne and her working-class background function as a liberal and conservative symbol of social insight and corrective in the original and the revival, respectively. In the original, the protagonist is constructed as a liberal voice among more conservative characters, who serve as stand-ins of the mainstream discourse of the time. On an interpersonal level, Roseanne not only invectively invites the intradiegetic characters and the audience to reflect on their own privilege, she is also staged to unveil her own faults and commitments to improve. The revival, indeed, works similarly to the original. Roseanne is staged as a symbol of corrective to surrounding characters, who serve as stand-ins for the mainstream discourse. In contrast to Seasons One to Nine, however, the protagonist is staged as an invective vehicle for deeply conservative issues that is challenged by liberal characters who personify

the contemporary mainstream discourse. Gone are scenes of reflection – now, the character is constructed to be narcissistically sure of herself (cf. *Roseanne* 10.01). In the last step, I have argued that the network channel ABC mainly revived *Roseanne* after the 2016 election in hopes of reaching new audiences – apparently the same people who made up the voter base of former President Trump. In their so-called 'Heartland strategy,' ABC was able to piggyback not only on the protagonist's familiar and popular invective phenomena but also on Trump's invective rhetoric, based on the nostalgic longing to 'Make America Great Again.'

As a domestic sitcom of the late 1980s and 90s, *Roseanne* was staged to transgressively tackle socio-political issues. At the end of its ninth season, a voice-over of the protagonist claims that "as a modern wife I have walked a tightrope between tradition and progress and, usually, I failed by one outsider's standard or another's" (*Roseanne* 9.24), describing not only the the intra- and extradiegetic events of the original run but foreshadowing the broadcasting of the revival. As one of her tweets show, Barr was never content with being called a liberal: "4 those who wonder-back in the day when I was called a 'liberal' by journalists, I used to answer-'I'm not a Liberal, I'm a radical' & I still am-I voted Trump 2 shake up the status quo & the staid establishment" (qtd. in Ohlheiser). What has frequently been read as Barr's invective liberal mindset may well have been an attraction to invectively transgress, to contest the mainstream discourse.

In this chapter, I established that invective phenomena as well as their constellations and dynamics play an important role in the dynamization of the situation comedy genre in the period of investigation that this book considers. Formerly rigid and reliable features of the genre have been disrupted and broken down. In three sections, I have focused on three distinct sitcom formats that emerged or gathered pace in the period of investigation: the mockumentary sitcom, the dramedy, and the revival of a previously completed sitcom texts. I have argued that invective dynamics give rise to the sitcom texts' exploration of the genre's self-conceptions and its boundaries.

In the first section, which was concerned with the analysis of two mockumentary sitcoms, *The Comeback* and *Parks & Recreation*, I read embarrassment as an invective strategy to elicit humor. I argued that the visual mockumentary features foster the disparagement of the show's protagonists through authorially-staged embarrassment. I also argued that

embarrassment can be utilized as a technique of social control. In the second section, I focused on invective dynamics in a generic hybrid, the dramedy. In a case study of Amazon's *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, I argued that invective phenomena support the framing of the protagonist's stand-up performance in the show's pilot as a necessary and justified breaking out of the intradiegetic structures of inequality that keep the character prisoner. Invective phenomena help negotiate the fusion of the format's comedic and dramatic elements. In the third and last section, I turned my attention to the revival of the popular 1980s and 90s situation comedy, hit-sitcom *Roseanne*. I argued that the character construction of the protagonist changed significantly in the revival. While the protagonist is staged to be an invective symbol of liberal ideals in the original run, the revival utilizes her as a vehicle for conservative key issues regarding race and gender. Furthermore, I argued that the network channel ABC commodified and capitalized on the invective dynamics of the revived show in order to reach audiences who were supposedly neglected before the 2016 presidential election.

In this chapter, I analyzed how invective dynamics can work to align the sitcom genre's conventional features with changing social and political constellations. In an age where "[the] economy of selling comedic shows has completely changed" (Fox), the viewers are able to experience a multitude of different experimental shows since "it takes fewer eyeballs to make a show a 'hit'" (Zoller-Seitz). Apart from comedy formats like *MMM*, *P&R*, and *The Comeback*, other recent shows bear witness to a diversification of the sitcom genre. Series like *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (Netflix 2015–20), *Kevin can F*** Himself* (AFC 2021–) and *Ted Lasso* (Apple TV 2020–) "[unleashed] a rainbow spectrum of comedic approaches and [focused] the spotlight on women, people of color, gay, bisexual, and transgendered characters," bringing the sitcom genre in line with current Quality TV discourses (ibid.). The turning away from stereotypical characters, narratives, and formal features enables the comedic format to generate new audiences and to replace its smirched reputation as escapist and obtuse with one that mirrors the actual complexity and contingencies of the genre.

6. Conclusion

In the 2020 Netflix docu-series *The History of Swear Words*, host Nicholas Cage suggests that disparagement, humiliation, and deprecation "can cut, soothe, delight, frighten, insult, and seduce. […] [They] are the most popular and alluring taboos we have" (1.01, Netflix, 2020). The existence and topic of such a documentary series acknowledges and reinforces the popular appeal of disparagement at the current moment.

As I demonstrated in this book, female-led contemporary US American situation comedies employ disparagement, humiliation, and mockery as major sources of humor and as narrative devices. In order to comprehend the complexities of popcultural disparagement, this study carved out exactly these deprecating phenomena and proposed that it is vital to introduce the concept of invectivity. Against the backdrop of existing research on situation comedy genre conventions, I employed invectivity as a novel research perspective to take precise stock of exemplary invective strategies in the respective series. I presented three approaches to examine disparagement in contemporary sitcom formats as well as the dynamization of the genre since the turn of the millenium. With the help of the analytical category of invectivity, I gained a novel perspective on exemplary female-led 21st US American sitcoms and began to grasp the developmental dynamics of the sitcom genre that, as I argued, are sustained by a back and forth of affirmation, reflection, and disruption of invective conventions. In addition, I demonstrated that the storytelling of these respective sitcoms frequently revolves around moments of debasement and ridicule in order to fuel laughter. Since sitcom laughter is frequently based on superiority theories of humor where an individual laughs *at* another one, power imbalances are established and judgment concerning someone's inferiority is passed. In this regard, my research focused exclusively on the textual, audiovisual, and narrative elements and structures of my material that invite audiences

to laugh. I argued that invective humor can be read as the grounding of the genre and can function as a catalyst for the exploration of the genre's self-understanding and its boundaries. The analytical category of invectivity enabled me to not only describe by way of example how popcultural practices of disparagement mirror awareness of social hierarchies, but also to analyze how the formal poetics of the material enable and structure its cultural work. While some series largely adopt symbolic abuse to affirm invective conventions, others make it a point to reflect on and question them. I detected invective strategies that claim inauthenticity in order to be protected from criticism (*Mike & Molly*), that intricately question socially sedimented systems of gendered inequality (*Parks and Recreation*, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*), that commodify and politically capitalize on disparagement (*Roseanne*), and strategies that radically revert invectives and counterpose them with Super Niceness (Michael Schur's œvre of situation comedies).

In the previous chapters, I made it a point to examine my corpus' sitcom texts along their poetics and politics, especially how these two represent interdependent dimensions. In the first analytical chapter, my analyses revealed how invectivity can hinge on discourses of alterity. Utilized to elicit humor, deprecation and humiliation are able to cement hierarchical differences between the self and others following superiority theories of humor that describe an imbalance of power between the laugher and the laughee. Manifold pleasures can be drawn from disparaging formal, narrative, and aesthetic patterns in the respective texts. The reading of *Mike & Molly* emphasized the symbolic abuse of its fat protagonists. I argued that Invective Fools, heavily flawed supporting characters with distinct invective licenses to speak, are employed as an authorizing strategy to enforce supposedly socially sanctioned norms and devalue undesirable behaviors and bodies. Moreover, the reading of *2 Broke Girls* examined the auto-invective strategies of one of the show's female protagonists and connected them to gendered traditions and legacies in the comedy circuit. What was exploited as a strategy to circumvent gate-keeping mechanisms in the male-dominated domain of comedy is now argued to challenge socially reinforced regimes of gender inequality. While delivering distinctly on this matter, the two texts both predicate their humor on disparaging imbalances of power and discourses of 'otherness.'

The chapter on reflexive invectivity allowed me to examine situation comedies that not only make invective humor a subject of discussion, but

that also utilize this reflection on invective strategies as a major source of humor. The chapter concentrated on one particular cluster of sitcoms connected to the auteur figure of Michael Schur, namely sitcoms described by the Comedy of Super Niceness, which reflexively champion humor based on sincerity over humor based on cynicism. By exploring the genre's self-understanding through one central exemplary text, *Parks and Recreation*, the first section reads the notion of Super Niceness and its radical reversal of invectives as a divergent and distinct outbidding strategy from a perspective of media economics. The second section argued for Super Niceness as a tool to replace the humorous pleasures of invective transgression that are often associated with postmodern shows, with the humorous pleasures of sincerity and genuine human interconnection in contemporary sitcoms. Finally, the third section highlighted the disparagement in Super Nice sitcoms that is directed at white, male, middle-aged characters in order to reflexively negotiate their solidified privilege and to deliberate legacies from the sitcom past. All three subchapters shed light on one exemplary cluster of sitcoms that reflexively deconstructs invective strategies and radically reverses them.

Finally, the last analytical chapter zoomed in on the distinct dynamism of the sitcom genre and the breaking down of formerly stable and rigid structures, arguing that invective strategies play a significant role in the genre's boundary work. The analysis of the mockumentary sitcoms *The Comeback* and *Parks and Recreation* examined embarrassment as an authorially-staged invective strategy to elicit humor. Furthermore, embarrassment is utilized as a social control mechanism. The reading of the dramedy *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* demonstrates the significant role of invectives in the fusion of dramatic and comedic elements. While the protagonist's invectives in her stand-up comedy are portrayed as an escape from and a breaking free of the pressures of traditional gender roles, invectives are also used to bypass moments of narrative conflict, and they reflexively ridicule and expose prevailing gender inequality. Lastly, the analysis of the 2018 revival of the hit-sitcom *Roseanne* connected a focus on media practices and institutions to invectivity, demonstrating that nostalgia for familiar invectives can be part of a political strategy by network channels to tap into larger audiences. The three texts can, thus, be read in the context of how they align the genre's traditional features and conventions to changing political and social constellations. The recent formal and narrative developments of the sitcom genre that I exemplified in the case studies of this chapter indicate a *Quality Turn* in comedy. The diversification of the

ensemble cast, the mixing and hybridizing of genres, and the weaning of the "comedic impetus" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 5) enable, as Zoller-Seitz argues, an "infinitely more tonal and aesthetic variety […] than in any comparable list of dramas you could put together" (Zoller-Seitz).

The three previous chapters taken together established the analytical and conceptual productivity of invectivity as an analytical category to inquire into contemporary US situation comedies and American popular culture in general. The chapters fleshed out three individual starting points for analyses – discourses of 'otherness,' reflexive invectivity, and dynamizing invectivity. Yet, they are also complexly linked to each other, establishing, for example, that the same text (in this study, *Parks and Recreation*) can be utilized for the discussion of distinct invective conventions: reflexive and dynamizing invectivity. The structuring principle of this book, then, enabled me to analyze distinct aspects of invective conventions in rather loose clusters while making room for the possibility of overlaps. Invectivity, as an overall analytical category, proposes to fill gaps in scholarly research, highlighting the rather unattended popular appeal, the formal poetics, and the cultural work of disparagement, devaluation, and deprecation in American popular culture. By exemplarily demonstrating how the discussions and examinations of invectivity intertwine with core question of American studies, this project hopes to contribute impulses to American popular culture studies, humor studies, and cultural narratology.

Even with a large-scale study of exemplary ways of dealing with invectivity in contemporary US sitcoms, there were various elements and aspects that this book could not take into consideration. Further research could, for instance and besides the obvious departure from female-led comedies, concentrate on other focal points and perspectives, including a comparative analysis of invectivity in sitcoms with and without laugh tracks, a closer look at sitcoms that focus on the excessive use of invectives (e.g. *Veep*, *Don't Trust the B— in Apartment 23*), or an examination of invective strategies in sitcoms that include video-game-like interactive viewer participation.[1] Facilitated and assisted by the analytical and conceptual work of this project, further exploration promises to accentuate and broaden this line of research.

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1 In 2020, Netflix's sitcom *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* released an interactive special, "Kimmy vs. the Reverend," in which viewers can direct the protagonist by remote control through the storyworld.

As this book demonstrated in the preceding chapters, sitcoms are contingent on invective structures. For this and many other reasons, the genre is in a state of flux, suggesting a *Quality Turn* in comedy that could reevaluate the genre's battered reputation. As Matt Zoller-Seitz suggests

> We may be headed toward a future where the labels 'comedy' and 'drama' and 'hour' and 'half-hour' no longer tell us anything useful about a show, and we'll have to think about them, live with them, in order to figure out what they are. No joke. (Zoller-Seitz)

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