Women on the Move: Representation and Gender Change in the Sitcom

by

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Introduction

Television’s representations of women are related to women’s lives in a number of complex ways. As Julie D’Acci has written, “The tight interweaving of institutional constrains and women’s ‘lived experience,’ of [television’s] construction of femininity and women’s understanding of themselves as women, are impossible to pick apart.”¹ Many have noted television’s ability to reinforce and reconfigure social norms, helping shape our ideas about who we are, how we should behave, and how we should conceive of each other and of ourselves, especially when it comes to gender. But television is not machine for reproducing dominant ideology; as a popular cultural medium its products are charged with contradictions and complications, and involves a multilevel process of continual negotiation. D’Acci has advocated for an “integrated approach” to analyzing television and gender, one that considers (or at least acknowledges) the medium’s four interrelated spheres: production (the making, marketing, and distribution of TV), reception (viewers’ practices and identities), content (the narrative and stylistic strategies of television programs), and social/historical context.² Television is constantly changing as it responds to changing social and cultural as well as industrial conditions; to examine only one sphere, without acknowledging any others, would provide a highly lopsided view of a complex phenomenon. TV’s ongoing negotiations are particularly visible when it comes to how women and femininity have been represented over the course of television history. The industry’s early days and the installation of television in

American homes over the late 1940s and early 1950s, coincided with a reversal of long-term socio-historical trends. In what became known as the postwar “domestic revival,” women (especially white, middle-class women) withdrew from or never joined the paid workforce and were confined to the home and to narrow gender roles; although for many postwar women the new family life was fraught with uncertainty and ambivalence, not until the next decade would these discontents be articulated in the second-wave feminist movement. As we will see, however, they also found covert expression in television representations that celebrated fulltime female domesticity.

Out of TV’s many genres, the situation comedy is uniquely positioned to engage with gender relations and woman’s roles in public and private life. At least since the nineteenth-century ideology of the True Woman, women and femininity have been culturally associated with (and constrained by) ideas of domesticity, family, and the home, of relationships and the private sphere; sitcoms have similar associations, as a genre initially designed for family viewing. Joanne Morreale has written that, by structuring their narratives around relationships in the home, workplace, and/or community, sitcoms “express the ideological tensions that mark particular social and historical moments.” Serafina Bathrick makes a similar point: “It is woman who provides situation comedy with its capacity to mediate historical change through its representation of both the family and the familial.” We can gain an understanding of the relationship between the sitcom and gender and social changes by examining the shifting portrayals of women in woman-driven sitcoms,

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3 Joanne Morreale, ed. Critiquing The Sitcom: A Reader (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), xi.
which I define here as a half-hour length program that centers on a woman or group of women, one that intends to elicit laughter (or similar emotional responses) from its viewers. Woman-driven sitcoms can be found in a number of the form’s subgenres and often blend multiple generic traditions or stylistic strategies. In thinking about changes in female representation, I will explore this category as it has been materialized in three subgenres that have been shaped by changes in women’s lives, as well as by changes in formal and industrial practices, and in industrial constructions of television audiences: the domestic or family-centered sitcom, the workplace comedy, and the “friendship” (or “gang”) comedy.

Though the idea that “television mirrors society” is a commonly held truism, D’Acci asserts that this platitude is inaccurate because “TV itself… is utterly selective about what it chooses to represent and how.”5 The body of woman-driven sitcoms throughout television history provides a clear illustration of TV’s selectivity in representation. Though there are naturally several significant exceptions, the vast majority of woman-driven sitcom narratives feature female protagonists who are young (generally in their thirties), white, educated, middle-class, and heterosexual. And, of course, most of these characters are conventionally attractive. Despite new industrial emphasis on “diversity” in recent years (mostly regarding race, sexuality, and body types), sitcom characters remain persistently homogenous. Consequently, my discussion of female representation will be mostly restricted to white, middle-class women, except where noted otherwise. The sitcom’s representation of feminism and feminist ideas has been similarly selective, as Bonnie Dow explains:

Liberal feminism, and its focus on women’s equality with men within existing social structures, has always been the easiest form of feminism for media to understand and incorporate… Television’s visions of feminism thus become equated with the practice of individualism by women… ignoring the complexities of race, class, and sexuality… and disregarding the structural problems that impede women’s progress.6

Feminism is certainly not monolithic, but because the sitcom depicts and defines it selectively, my references to its ideas, its movements, and its impact will be similarly selective, focusing mostly on the liberal feminism Dow outlines above.

To explore the sitcom and its relationship to gender and social change, I’ve selected a number of woman-driven sitcoms from the early 1950s to the present, grouping them in the three major subgenres outlined previously—domestic, workplace, and friend-group. I chose these programs based on a number of factors: their prevalence in preexisting literature, their ratings or critical acclaim, their impact on popular culture, audience response, and how they fit into shifts in social history and changes in sitcom formal and industrial practices. I’ve organized them chronologically within each chapter, moving from a subgenre’s beginnings to its more recent iterations.


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Hulu, 2015--). I analyze how each program grapples with domesticity and “domestic containment,” a concept developed by Elaine May; I also explore how social context alters the meaning or significance of domesticity, particularly in shows that began after the rise of second-wave feminist movements. My second chapter moves on to woman-driven workplace sitcoms: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977), *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006-2013) and *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, 2009-2015). I explore the rise of single women sitcoms, emphasizing *Mary Tyler Moore’s* impact on single woman narratives. I discuss the “work family” as a new iteration of the sitcom “family,” and I examine the shifts in how woman-driven sitcoms engage with feminism and feminist ideas, starting with Dow’s concept of “lifestyle feminism,” and then with the self-identified feminist protagonists of *30 Rock* and *Parks and Rec.*

My third chapter explores sitcoms that center on friendships among young, single women: *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), *Girls* (HBO, 2012--), and *Broad City* (2014--). Here, I relate the different generational representations of these three single women shows—*SATC’s* turn-of-the-millennium thirtysomethings versus millennial young adults on *Girls* and *Broad City*—and discuss the varying ways they depict relationships between women, as well as female sexuality and pleasure, in the lives of young adults. Through these three subgenres, we can trace in broadest strokes the progress of (mostly white, mostly middle-class) women in American society and cultural imagination from the postwar period onward, as these sitcom women migrated from the private sphere into the public, from a prescribed life path of

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8 Dow, “TV and Feminism since 1970,” 380.
marriage and motherhood to unruly independence. By examining the contradictions and complexities inherent in representations of women and in the situation comedy, we can track television’s relationship to social and gender change.
1. Containment and Contradiction in the Domestic Sitcom

Television’s early years, the late 1940s and early 1950s, coincided with the idealization of home, family, and domesticity in postwar America. Unsurprisingly, most female sitcom stars of this era were depicted as wives or mothers, tethered to the home; until the women’s movement gained more mainstream acceptance over the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, television women were largely contained to the domestic sphere. The very earliest domestic comedies, aimed at audiences in East Coast urban areas, mostly depicted working-class ethnic families, but over the course of the 1950s and into the mid-1960s, the domestic sitcom shifted focus, abandoning the urban, ethnic working-class for the white, middle-class suburbs. Over the 1950s, family sitcoms split into two formal categories: purely comic, vaudeville-influenced sitcoms, such as *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-57) and *The Honeymooners* (CBS, 1955-56), or more realist, sentimental domestic sitcoms with melodramatic aspects, set in middle-class suburban homes like *Father Knows Best* (CBS, NBC 1954-1960), *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS, ABC 1957-1963) and *The Donna Reed Show* (ABC, 1958-1966).

Purely comic family sitcoms drew on vaudevillian theatrical traditions, such as slapstick, while realist family sitcoms mostly sourced their comedy from smaller, more everyday domestic situations. Suburban realist domestic sitcoms featuring happy middle-class families have come to dominate popular recollections of the 1950s, especially when it comes to woman’s status in American society at the time.

One of the best-known vaudeville-inflected comedies of this era is *I Love Lucy*, which originally aired on CBS from 1951 to 1957. The show centers on the exploits of Lucy Ricardo, a housewife with showbiz aspirations but little talent, as she
tries (and always fails) to scheme her way to fame and success, against the wishes of her husband Ricky, a successful singer and bandleader; their friends and neighbors, Ethel and Fred Mertz, often join the Ricardos in their hijinks. *I Love Lucy* was originally conceived after CBS asked Lucille Ball, an actress well known for her work in film and on the radio, to bring her successful radio sitcom, *My Favorite Husband*, to television; production only went forward after Ball succeeded in convincing the network to cast her real-life husband, Cuban bandleader Desi Arnaz, as her spouse on the show. *I Love Lucy* was enormously popular during its original six-season run, achieving unprecedented levels of popularity for a medium still in its infancy. One episode from season one “was the first television program to be seen in ten million homes, at a time when there were a total of fifteen million television sets in operation in America.”\(^1\) The season two episode “Lucy Goes to the Hospital,” in which Lucy gives birth to her son, was seen by 72% of all TV-owning American homes, famously outperforming Eisenhower’s presidential inauguration.\(^2\) The show was groundbreaking in numerous ways: it was among the first sitcoms to be shot on film rather than broadcast live on kinescope; it set early conventions for the sitcom’s use of the multi-camera set-up, as well as its attendant lighting, staging, and editing techniques; its depiction of pregnancy was revolutionary for its time.\(^3\) It also helped to solidify conventional narrative structures of the situation comedy, like the basic

\(^3\) Landay, *I Love Lucy*, 27-31, 66-70. It should also be noted that the production deal Desilu made with the network contributed to recognition of the (incredibly lucrative) value of reruns and residuals.
three part structure consisting of “the setup, ending with an inciting incident; the second act that builds to a comic climax; and the denouement/resolution.”

Aside from its iconic physical comedy sequences, *I Love Lucy* is perhaps most remembered, at least by cultural critics, for its central character’s dissatisfaction with domesticity and her inability to escape it. Lucy can be understood as the sitcom genre’s “prototype” for the character archetype of the unruly woman, who is defined by her excesses and her transgression of conventional social boundaries. She is not satisfied with a life of domesticity, even though she is a (mostly) competent housewife. Though she is a conventionally attractive, relatively slender woman, Lucy’s unruliness also reveals itself through the physicality of the performer, Lucille Ball, in her exaggerated facial expressions and slapstick routines. Ball was a well-known performer who also became a powerful force in the industry, creating and co-owning (and eventually solely owning) her own production company, Desilu, which produced her sitcom as well as a number of other successful projects. The contrast between character and performer—Lucy, untalented housewife, versus Lucille, successful comic actress—provides the series with one of its central, defining tensions. Like many white middle-class American women of the postwar era, Lucy Ricardo, despite her career aspirations, is relegated to the domestic sphere. Numerous episodes depict Lucy attempting to scheme her way into her husband’s show, or onto TV, or into some other form of employment, only for everything to comically backfire; as the sitcom’s episodic structure dictated, the status quo is more or less

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restored by the end of each episode. Although, as Lori Landay notes, plots where Lucy tried to get into Ricky’s show are not in fact the most common, they have the subject of much critical scrutiny.\(^6\) Read solely in terms of its narrative structure, \textit{I Love Lucy} is a highly conservative sitcom that punishes deviation from normative gender roles: Lucy attempts to transcend her subordinate status, fails spectacularly, and is swiftly returned to domesticity. However, several factors complicate this understanding. Historical viewers’ extra-textual knowledge of Ball’s career would have informed their readings of Lucy’s recurring failures to some degree. A show that depicts an untalented woman trying again and again to break into show business and failing miserably at every turn could play more like a drama than a sitcom, but Ball’s comic gifts and professional and artistic successes, together with the show’s comedic style, allows viewers to laugh at her character’s failures while appreciating her performative virtuosity. In her analysis of the unruly women of vaudeo-sitcoms, Patricia Mellencamp summarizes this opposition: “[If] Lucy’s plots for ambition and fame \textit{narratively} failed, with the result that she was held, often gratefully, to domesticity, \textit{performatively} they succeeded.”\(^7\) Additionally, though the show appears to uphold the domestic status quo, the repetition of Lucy’s attempts to assert autonomy and escape the home required by the episodic format subtly gives voice to the frustration of middle-class housewives. As Landay puts it: “By replaying Lucy’s desire to escape domesticity over and over again, the desire gets the emphasis.”\(^8\)

\(^6\) Ibid, 42.
\(^7\) Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy,” in \textit{Critiquing the Sitcom}, 49.
\(^8\) Landay, \textit{I Love Lucy}, 58.
Lucy’s confinement to the home is one example of “domestic containment,” a concept developed by Elaine May, who ties American postwar foreign policy which aimed at limiting or containing geopolitical threats to the era’s cultural preoccupation with the home, conventional gender roles, and “family values.” May explains the strategy of containment as a reaction to the various anxieties aroused by rapid social change: “Within the home, potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be tamed, where they could contribute to the secure and fulfilling life to which postwar men and women aspired.”

Mellencamp, drawing on May, argues that “‘Containment’…was practiced on the domestic front as well, and it was aimed at excluding women from the work force and keeping them in the home.”

Though this period of idealized domesticity, which glorified marriage and family life based on strictly differentiated gender roles, turned out to be a somewhat short-lived reversal of long-term social trends, popular memory has recast the period as one dominated by “traditional values”; arguably, “classic” domestic comedies have contributed to this simplified misrepresentation of the postwar era. Domestic containment ideology is evident in a shift in the sitcom over the 1950s, as suburban realist domestic comedies displaced vaudeville-influenced sitcoms about combative spouses in urban settings. Iconic domestic comedies Father Knows Best (CBS/NBC, 1954-1960) and Leave it to Beaver (CBS/ABC, 1957-1963), both center on middle-class families with nice homes and sunny dispositions, families with strong breadwinner fathers and contented homemaker mothers. Mellencamp observes that such suburban realist

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10 Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy,” in Critiquing the Sitcom, 42.
sitcoms, with their emphasis on (so-called) “traditional” gender roles, contributed to the erosion of female power in television comedy between 1950 and 1960: “[The] genre’s terrain had altered: the housewife, although still ruling the familial roost, changed from a humorous rebel or well-dressed, wise-cracking, naïve dissenter… to being a contented, if not blissfully happy, understanding homebody.”¹¹ One partial exception to sitcom women’s pacification, however, is ABC’s The Donna Reed Show.

**The Donna Reed Show: More Than “Just a Housewife”**

*The Donna Reed Show*, which premiered in the fall of 1958, is often associated with the suburban domestic sitcoms that dominated the small screens of the 1950s. Lynn Spigel summarizes: “[1950s domestic comedies] dramatized, with varying degrees of humor, the lives of nuclear families in suburban towns… the women in these sitcoms were typically happy housewives who, despite the everyday strains of mothering, had put their faith in the suburban dream.”¹² The popularity of these shows, with their idealized families, reflected and reinforced the postwar domestic containment ideology that “worked to reconstitute the nuclear family…by depicting male centrality and authority while positioning women as contented housewives,” writes Joanne Morreale.¹³ While wives and mothers played important roles in these domestic narratives, they were most often portrayed as subordinate to

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¹¹ Ibid, 42-43.
their husbands, supportive but never assertive (Father Knows Best, after all). Unlike other domestic sitcoms of the day, however, Donna Reed places its housewife at the center of the narrative, one of many factors that complicate popular conceptions of the show. In her book on The Donna Reed Show, Morreale proposes a revisionist reading that separates the show from its suburban realist peers, arguing that its reputation for conformity and complacency masks its more subversive, contradictory undercurrents.

For eight seasons The Donna Reed Show chronicled the everyday trials and tribulations of the Stone family—housewife Donna, her pediatrician husband Alex, and their teenage children, Mary and Jeff. The show was created for film star Donna Reed, who had left movies hoping to find better roles and more consistent pay in the television industry. After she and her husband decided she should star in a sitcom, a network executive suggested that, since she was married with four children, she should play “herself”—a wife and mother—in her show. Like Lucille Ball, Reed was highly involved in the show’s production, and she similarly obscured her position of power by co-producing and co-owning the show with her husband. Todon Productions, the production company they founded, compounds the names of husband and wife in an unmistakable nod to Desilu. The contradiction between Donna as seen on TV—a consummate stay-at-home mom—and Reed’s actual life—a

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14 Mary Beth Haralovich, “Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker,” in Critiquing the Sitcom, 72-73. It’s possible to interpret the assertion of male authority in these sitcoms as a reaction to I Love Lucy; even though Ricky theoretically overpowers Lucy, her repetitive rebellions, her unruliness, her narrative centrality, and her status as the comic engine of the show all threaten her husband’s narrative control and mark him as an insecure patriarch.

career woman who, presumably, spent much of her time outside the home—functions similarly to *I Love Lucy*’s narrative tension between Lucy’s utter lack of talent and Ball’s performative virtuosity, though in *The Donna Reed Show*’s melodramatic, realist narrative, this tension is arguably much more acute.

Donna Stone, at first glance, appears to be a model sitcom housewife, and popular memory often paints her as a paragon of 1950s feminine virtue. Where vaudeo sitcom wives like Lucy Ricardo embodied female unruliness, Donna and her realist domestic-com peers exemplified idealized, “true” women, well-coiffed, well-mannered, and composed. However, Donna has considerable power within her household, in defiance of the “father knows best” attitude that dominated sitcoms of the day. Morreale argues that the character’s femininity is a kind of “mask” that disguises the threat her power poses to male authority, both as a female character at a show’s narrative center and as a woman who maintains power in the domestic sphere. Donna’s disguised position of power and control at home notwithstanding, we can also understand her as a woman who chafes at the limits of her domestic role, even as she excels at the various duties ascribed to a wife and mother. One illustrative example of Donna struggling with domestic containment can be found in the episode “Just a Housewife” (season 2, episode 19), in which Donna disputes the way a local radio program dismisses women as “just” housewives. Throughout the episode, she asserts that she has no problem with housework itself, but with the label of “just a housewife.” She doesn’t appear to challenge woman’s position in the domestic

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16 See, for example, the *Gilmore Girls* episode “That Damn Donna Reed,” (season 1, episode 14), where Donna is described as “the quintessential fifties mom with the perfect fifties family… Never without a smile and high heels.”

17 Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, 76-77.
sphere, but rather the notion that female domestic labor can be easily denigrated and dismissed. As she argues to Alex, “Men don’t say ‘I’m just a salesman’ or ‘I’m just a scientist’… [The radio host] makes [housewife] sound like a faceless glob.” She expresses her sentiments on the radio show, and though many women voice their agreement with her, the episode ends with no change to the sitcom’s stable status quo; the family is pictured laughing together around the breakfast table after Donna slams the door on a man who refers to her as a “screwy dame” and dismisses her crusade against the verbal denigration of domestic women. But despite the return to the overarching narrative equilibrium, the episode illustrates Donna’s frustration with the ideology of domesticity. She doesn’t challenge the gendered division of labor itself but asserts the value of the homemaker’s role in the face of denigration: “A nurse, a psychologist, a diplomat, and a philosopher” is how Donna describes the work of a housewife. Donna is demanding to be recognized as a person rather than one part of a faceless entity; she wants recognition for all she does, rather than mere expectation that she will do it. Though Donna, in all her model femininity, is not as unruly or out-of-control as other central characters of woman-driven domestic narratives, she still feels and chafes against the constraints of domestic containment. She may enjoy her life as a housewife, but she nevertheless struggles with the inferiority associated with her position.

Her discontent is often elided by the narrative, dismissed by her family or even disavowed through the laugh track. In “Just a Housewife,” she attempts to share her frustration with her husband, and he laughs it off, echoed by the laugh track. The scene ends with Alex invoking his suffragette grandmother (a woman who used to
“handcuff herself to lampposts,” he says) and bidding Donna to start dinner, and she
smiles somewhat knowingly, arms crossed, before the camera cuts away. Both
narrative and formal elements of the scene—Alex’s brush-off and the non-diegetic
laughter—cue the viewer to understand Donna’s discontent as trivial or silly. Despite
her centrality to the narrative, and the real discontents the show depicts, the series
overall does not openly challenge domestic ideology; nevertheless, Donna Reed is not
as conformist as popular memory would suggest. In depicting a woman who excels at
domesticity while simultaneously chafing at its restraints, The Donna Reed Show
continues and complicates the domestic containment narrative fundamental to the
woman-driven domestic sitcom. This narrative would only become more complex in
the decades to come as television contended with women’s changing place in
American society and their commercial value as an audience.

*Bewitched: Deviant and Domestic*

*Bewitched*, which aired on ABC from 1964 to 1972, continued the sitcom
housewife’s complicated relationship with her restriction to domesticity. The show is
one notable entry in a subgenre of the domestic sitcom that reflects the transitional
nature of its originating era: the “magicoms,” or fantastic family sitcoms, of the
1960s. As Lynn Spigel has argued, shows in this subgenre fused the conventions of
traditional domestic sitcoms with growing cultural discontent over idealization of the
family and suburbia, making familiar narratives “strange” with the addition of magic
or the supernatural. The magicoms’ popularity and ubiquity during the 1960s
illustrates the television industry’s bumpy ideological transition as producers
attempted to reconcile network desires for broadly appealing programming with
America’s changing cultural and political climate. In the years leading up to
Bewitched, Americans were witness to the birth control pill and Betty Friedan’s The
Feminine Mystique, John F. Kennedy’s assassination and the beginnings of the
“Space Race”; more changes occurred concurrent with the show’s eight seasons,
continuing to shake popular middle-class faith in the suburban domestic ideal that had
characterized the 1950s.¹⁸

_Bewitched_ follows the daily lives of Samantha Stephens, a powerful witch,
and her husband Darrin, an ordinary advertising executive, as they attempt to lead a
“normal” life in spite of Samantha’s magical heritage. The role of Samantha was
played by actress Elizabeth Montgomery. The show was very popular, enjoying high
ratings during its original run and spawning its own rival (NBC’s _I Dream of Jeannie_,
1965-70), as well as an unsuccessful spinoff (_Tabitha_, a blatant _Mary Tyler Moore_
rip-off that aired for one season in 1977). It was shot with a single-camera setup and
utilized a laugh track, both established conventions of the suburban domestic comedy;
it also transitioned from black and white to color presentation over its run.¹⁹

_Bewitched_ took the narrative conventions of the vaude sitcom—chaos generated and
recontained—and transposed them to the suburban middle class setting of domestic
comedy, with Samantha’s witchcraft providing an extra twist. The pilot depicts
Samantha swearing off her powers, vowing her commitment to the life of a normal
suburban housewife; naturally, she breaks her vow in this and all subsequent

¹⁸ Spigel, “The Fantastic Family Sitcom,” 107-116; Walter Metz, _Bewitched_ (Detroit:
Wayne State University Press, 2007), 13-14. Metz notes the “historical uncanny” of
the show, particularly in that pilot began filming the exact day of the JFK
assassination.
¹⁹ Metz, _Bewitched_, 13-17.
episodes. She often brings magic into the domestic sphere by using her powers to aid her in her housework, a decision that almost always results in some kind of comic mayhem. By each episode’s end, she recommits to the boundaries imposed by her husband, thus restoring narrative equilibrium and (arguably) reinforcing conventional notions of marriage and gender roles. Domestic containment is a central tenet of the narrative, as is the case for all the woman-driven domestic comedies; however, the status of *Bewitched* as a fantasy-comedy hybrid gave it room to be more explicitly subversive, even as broadcast networks hesitated to deviate from the status quo.

Walter Metz draws an explicit line between Lucy and Samantha in his analysis of *Bewitched*, noting that both narratives center on a woman “relegated to the private space” who “[threatens] to burst into public visibility” on a near-weekly basis. *Bewitched* also continued the household gender dynamics observed in *The Donna Reed Show*, in which the wife holds more power than the husband. Spigel contends that Samantha hides behind a “mask” of normative femininity in order to disguise the authority she assumes over her husband as a result of her magical powers; Joanne Morreale applies the same argument to Donna Stone’s quiet usurpation of Alex as the head of the Stone household. However, where Donna’s position of power is fixed firmly within the domestic sphere, Samantha’s dominance over Darrin springs from the supernatural and the threat she poses as a magical being. And in contrast to *I Love Lucy*, where Lucy’s utter lack of talent rationalizes Ricky’s attempts at containment, Samantha’s powers are very real, depriving Darrin of a similarly rational justification. Moreover, where Lucy’s transgressions inevitably

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21 Spigel, 128-130; Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, 76-77.
create chaos, Samantha often uses her “powers” to restore order. *Bewitched* weaves together the threads of *Donna Reed* and *Lucy*, allowing the show to subvert and play with the conventional sitcom dynamics of gender representation.

For example, in the episode “A is for Aardvark” (season one, episode seventeen), Darrin’s sprained ankle confines him to bed, and Samantha, exhausted from trekking up and down the stairs to care for him, grants him a few minor magical powers by enchanting the house to do his bidding. As her mother Endora predicts, Darrin doesn’t take to it well, and grows bolder and bolder in deploying magic. He decides to quit his job, and Samantha attempts to rein him in by going along with his plans to buy a larger house and take an extravagant trip. He soon realizes he no longer wants his powers, and Samantha undoes the charm. The narrative upholds the moral ideology common to fifties domestic comedies, which, as Morreale notes, repeatedly emphasized values like “hard work, honesty, responsibility, and the importance of the nuclear family;” here, after succumbing to temptation, Darrin reaffirms the value of honest hard work over the glamour and ease of “unearned” wealth. The episode also fits in the *Lucy* model, inasmuch as the wife’s transgressions make trouble, and it follows *Donna Reed* as it depicts a woman who is more powerful than her husband. However, “A is for Aardvark” complicates both of these domestic containment narratives—though Samantha is the one crying at the end of the episode, she is ultimately far more powerful her husband, since she is the arbiter of his temporary powers, and thus he is truly in the wrong. This episode also hints not only that Darrin is much weaker than his wife, but that he is entirely unable to handle such power; this is a far cry from fifties’ domestic comedies like *Father Knows Best*, in which men
were plainly positioned at the center of the idealized nuclear family, their power and authority never questioned. By implying the impotence of its patriarch, *Bewitched* undermines the nuclear-family structure conventionalized in fifties’ suburban domestic comedies, weakening its structure and blurring its boundaries. Further undermining Darrin’s authority are the repeated intrusions of Endora, his meddlesome mother-in-law, a type familiar from vaudeo-comedies. Though Darrin and Samantha both want to commit to simple, suburban family life, she can never definitively escape her former identity as an independent, single, city-dwelling witch (briefly depicted in the opening sequence of the pilot); her meddlesome magical relatives, Endora chief among them, appear repeatedly and without warning in the Stephens’ household, criticizing Samantha’s “boring” lifestyle choices and her disavowal of her magical powers. Darrin and Samantha cannot control the entrances or exits of these magical intruders, who undermine the primacy of nuclear family not only by entering the family home in defiance of the husband and wife, but also by rejecting the trappings of conventional, non-magical middle-class existence and urging Samantha to do the same. In this way, her old life constantly intrudes into her married existence, reasserting the powerful potential of this character even as she and her husband repeatedly attempt to deny or suppress it.

*Bewitched* continued to convolute the containment narratives of woman-driven domestic sitcoms by acknowledging the discontent with idealized domesticity that resurfaced during the turbulent 1960s. The show’s position as a fantastic family sitcom, as well as the rapidly changing decade in which it aired, allowed it to be more openly critical than its earlier melodramatic, realist domestic comedies, or even its
vaudeville-influenced sitcom predecessors. Woman-driven family-centered sitcoms that followed *Bewitched* would grapple with a new set of issues surrounding female domesticity and the home, driven by the (re-)reversal of containment-era social trends and the increasing influence of second-wave feminist movements.

**Roseanne: True Womanhood, Unruly Womanhood**

Beginning roughly in the early 1960s and continuing into the 1970s, second-wave feminist movements challenged the hyper-domestic ideologies that confined (white, middle-class) women to marriage and the home, arguing for female independence, for employment and equal pay, and, broadly, for the “filling out and equaling up” of women’s lives, as Rebecca Traister puts it.\(^{22}\) The second wave reflected and contributed to a larger societal shift away from the postwar domestic ideal—for example, early marriage rates declined along with the percentage of married Americans overall, and middle-class women were pushed and pulled back into the paid workforce. Though the sitcom was slow to acknowledge feminist ideas and their growing influence, the 1970 premiere of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* marked a new era in sitcom representations of women that recognized the growing influence of young, single women; this character type has come to dominate woman-driven sitcom narratives, mostly displacing fulltime housewives like Lucy and Donna. Additionally, as Bonnie Dow has argued, these (mostly) young, urban, middle-class female characters have become television’s “most visible indicator” of feminist

influence and representation. A key exception is Roseanne (ABC, 1988-1997), a woman-driven family-centered sitcom with an explicitly feminist backbone. Roseanne picked up the themes of domestic discontent hinted at in I Love Lucy and The Donna Reed Show, reviving them for a new era as the show’s central character grapples with the enduring constraints and contradictions of domestic ideology.

Roseanne’s narrative centers on the day-to-day exploits of the working-class Conner family, headed by the eponymous Roseanne, matriarch of the household, and her husband Dan, an underemployed contractor. The other central characters include the Conner children—overachieving teenage Becky, spiky tomboy Darlene, and youngest son DJ—as well as Roseanne’s unmarried younger sister Jackie and their friend Crystal. The show was shot with the multi-camera technique, and employs many of its associated stylistic conventions, such as high-key lighting, theatrical staging, and a running laugh track; it borrows the stylistic conventions of other cinematic genres or works, for parody, dream sequences, or other jokes and gags. Roseanne quickly became a hit, garnering top Nielsen ratings for most of its nine-season run. Critics and ordinary viewers alike have praised the show’s “realism” in depicting working-class experiences and the conflicts of non-idealized family life, which previous sitcoms tended to smooth over or outright ignore. Realism in Roseanne differs from that of the fifties’ domestic comedies in that the show blends the vaudeville-inflected and suburban realist strains of the sitcom, utilizing physical comedy and vaudevillian humor as well as melodramatic narratives (which became


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especially prevalent in the show’s later seasons). Working-class family sitcoms have existed since the early days of television, but as Julie Bettie has noted, they make up only a small minority of the subgenre.²⁴ Moreover, the most celebrated working-class comedies, *The Honeymooners* (1955-56) and *All in the Family* (1971-79), focused on unruly male figures, whereas *Roseanne* positions an unruly female at its center.

*Roseanne* can also be understood as a response to the Reagan-era dominance of neo-traditional sitcoms about middle- and upper-middle class families, such as *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), a program frequently recognized as a revival of 1950s domestic comedies.²⁵ Whereas programs like *The Cosby Show* upheld many of the domestic sitcom’s moral imperatives, *Roseanne* upturned or rejected them, offering a distinctly woman-centric, working-class view of domesticity and family. The show’s distinct feminist sensibility can broadly be attributed to its star, comedian Roseanne Barr.²⁶

Though she is not credited as the creator of the show, which was developed for Carsey-Werner Productions by *Cosby Show* writer Matt Williams, Barr’s centrality to the series is undeniable; she wielded a great deal of authorial control throughout the show’s production, many of its narrative elements were inspired by her life, and her worldview informs the entire show. Like Lucille Ball and Donna Reed before her, Barr was highly involved in production, though unlike her foremothers, her off-camera power was not obscured by her husband’s involvement, although the tabloids’ obsession with Barr’s troubled, relatively brief marriage to Tom Arnold, as well as her repeated Emmy snubs and other media-incited indignities,

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might be interpreted as attempts to diminish her power. She has always been vocal about her feminism and the feminist intentions of her work, beginning with her stand-up routines, which were mostly sharp, satirical critiques of various class and gender issues, and these critiques carried over into her work on her sitcom. In a 2011 article, Barr writes: “I created, wrote, and starred in television’s first feminist and working-class-family sitcom (also its last). […] I wanted to do a realistic show about a strong mother who was not a victim of Patriarchal Consumerist Bullshit…”

Representation of social class, particularly the working class, is an essential element of *Roseanne*, not only as narrative foundation, but also as an unexplored dimension of the domestic containment problem that weaves through all the woman-driven family-centered sitcoms. Unlike her sitcom foremothers, Roseanne is not truly “contained” within the home (by her husband or otherwise), nor is she defined solely by her domestic prowess. Roseanne works, as does her husband (though they both find themselves out of work on different occasions), but her blue- and pink-collar jobs contrast sharply with the careers pursued by more affluent sitcom wives or single women. Middle- or upper-middle-class female characters such as Mary Richards or Claire Huxtable are generally depicted as working because of their own personal or professional aspirations, out of choice rather than economic necessity, which is what

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27 Stand-up comedians and their comedy became increasingly important to television over the eighties and beyond, as performers and writers associated with the adult-oriented, vaudeville-derived form—Bill Cosby, Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David, Barr—gave network sitcoms an “edge.” This turn to stand-up was part of the (ongoing) fragmentation of the once-monolithic television audience, an attempt to appeal to “sophisticated” urban audiences, as a widening array of viewing options undermined broadcast network dominance.

drives most of Roseanne’s employment; her true aspiration—to be a writer—would not allow her to adequately support the economic needs of her family. Just as it twists the narrative conventions of the family-centered sitcom, *Roseanne* twists the domestic containment ideology, inasmuch as the female protagonist consistently asserts herself both within and outside of the home. Roseanne’s performance of domesticity is classed as well as gendered, and it is not policed by her husband, but by tastes and judgments of condescending class elites, which she repeatedly defies; the show also touches on another contemporary twist on domestic containment, the internal contradiction (and attendant struggles) of a self-professed “Domestic Goddess” who rejects conventional domesticity and asserts herself within the home.

Kathleen Rowe has identified Roseanne Conner (and Barr herself, by extension) as embodying the archetype of the “unruly woman,” who can be identified by her excesses, her looseness, and her transgressions. Her appearance, her body and bodily functions, her movement, her speech, her appetites and tastes—all are excessive in opposition to normative bourgeois femininity, reflected in media standards surrounding female beauty and comportment. According to Rowe, Roseanne’s “most potent” excess is in her body, which is fat; she revels in her excess, flaunting her fatness and appetite, rather than expressing any kind of shame about her appearance, as media conventions dictate. The only time we see her diet, in season two’s “I’m Hungry” (season two, episode eighteen), shows Roseanne simply giving up by the end of the episode—her appetites are too great, and her own happiness

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Rowe, “Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess,” in *Critiquing the Sitcom* (2003), 256. Though it should be mentioned that in later seasons, as the show became more melodramatic, Roseanne’s weight was linked to the childhood trauma she suffered while growing up in an abusive home.
ultimately matters more. Though her eventual abandonment of the diet can be partially attributed to the traditional narrative structures of the sitcom, in which narrative equilibrium is restored by each episode’s end, the episode links this sitcom convention to a rejection of the view of female appetite as a weakness to be monitored or controlled. Roseanne also embodies excess through her speech, which transgresses notions of propriety. Rowe writes: “Her speech—even apart from its content—is loose (in its sloppy enunciation and grammar) and excessive (in tone and volume). She laughs loudly, screams shrilly, and speaks in a nasal whine.”30 She talks too much and takes up too much space, transgressing societal expectations of how women are supposed to appear or behave. Her non-normative acceptance of (or pride in) her appearance and her behaviors carry class meanings, as Rowe explains:

[Her ease with her body] marks her rebellion against not only the codes of gender but those of class, for a cultures norms of beauty or the ‘legitimate’ body—fit and trim—are accepted across class boundaries while the ability to achieve them is not. Ease with one’s body is the prerogative of the upper classes. For the working classes, the body is more likely to be a source of embarrassment, timidity, and alienation. While her body bears the coding of the working-class woman’s ‘alienated’ body, [Roseanne] rejects what that coding signifies.31

To Rowe’s numerous examples, I would add that Roseanne also enacts what some might consider a loose or transgressive style of mothering. Her default setting—the default setting of the whole Conner family—is that of sarcasm or jokiness. Most of

30 Ibid, 256.
31 Rowe, The Unruly Woman (1995), 64.
the time, Roseanne will react to anything her children send her way with a zingy one-liner. In the pilot episode, for example, when exasperated by an argument between Becky and Darlene, she snarks, “That’s why some animals eat their young.” Another moment in the pilot episode illustrates a clear departure from previous sitcom mothers. The Donna Reed episode “Three Part Mother” (season one, episode seven), shows Donna’s son Jeff asking her to untie a knot in his shoes; she kisses him on the forehead and attempts to undo it, eventually telling him to give it to his father instead (“Here, Daddy’s good at this”). In direct contrast, Roseanne’s pilot opens with DJ asking the same favor of Roseanne, who swiftly brushes him off with her response: “Wear loafers.” Though she clearly loves her kids and her husband, she does not shy away from expressing her frustrations with motherhood, using jokes to lighten a sentiment that is often considered taboo, or at the very least, unmotherly. It’s hard to imagine even Donna Stone, a character with her fair share of subtly pointed remarks, expressing similarly explicit feelings about her family on such a regular, repetitive basis; Barr has said of her character: “I’m not Lucy trying to hide 20 bucks from Ricky, or June Cleaver gliding around in a dust proof house in pearls and heels. I’m a woman who works hard and loves her family, but they can drive her nuts!”32 The show brings to the surface the elided frustrations of the “contented” sitcom wives and mothers before it.

Roseanne Conner carries on the sitcom tradition of female unruliness, embodied both covertly, as in The Donna Reed Show, and overtly, as in I Love Lucy. Jane Feuer ties Rowe’s analysis of Roseanne’s unruly womanhood to Lucy Ricardo

32 Barr, qtd. in Rowe, The Unruly Woman, 82.
and her dissatisfaction with the home: though Lucy is “thin and attractive,” her repetitive rejection of her enforced domesticity, her career ambitions, her consumer desires, and her physical looseness and excessively expressive facial movements are all signifiers of female unruliness.\(^33\) *I Love Lucy*’s unruly woman enacts social critique through her physicality, an expression of frustration with the conventions associated with “wife”; the embodied critique *Roseanne* uses to push against conventions of class and gender draws on and reconfigures the generic tradition of gendered protest.

Though the characters of Donna Stone and Roseanne Conner would not seem to share virtually any traits, aside from their shared status as wives and mothers, both women struggle against “True Womanhood” ideologies that contain them. As I have previously argued, Donna can be understood as a character with a deep internal contradiction: she both excels at and is discontented with domesticity, ideologically represented as the means of feminine fulfillment. *Donna Reed* obliquely addressed the contradictions inherent in domestic ideology and its visions of the “True Woman,” in which women can only achieve happiness and self-fulfillment by subordinating their own needs and desires in favor of the needs and desires of others. *Roseanne* pushes this conflict further, making the True Womanhood paradox explicit. Roseanne embodies many contradictions herself, which Rowe enumerates: “A fat woman who is also sexual; a sloppy housewife who is a good mother; a ‘loose’ woman who is also tidy, who hates matrimony but loves her husband, who hates the

\(^{33}\) Feuer, “Situation Comedy,” 68.
ideology of True Womanhood yet considers herself a domestic goddess.”

She is also depicted as being very smart, highly capable, and, in her own way, principled. Roseanne takes pride in her ability to care and provide for her family, in her skills as a homemaker, and she loves her husband and her kids; at the same time, she clearly feels discomfort with the constraints of her domestic and familial obligations and she makes no attempts to suppress it. Roseanne, like Donna, tends to the needs of her husband and children; however, unlike Donna, Roseanne repeatedly and consistently asserts her own desires and her overall need for autonomy, her explicit desire for an identity independent of her roles as wife and mother. And though her family is generally more receptive to her needs than the Stone family is to Donna’s, Roseanne still struggles with the contradictions of domestic ideology.

These contradictions are well represented in the episode “Confessions” (season three, episode twelve), in which Jackie and Roseanne’s mother is visiting the Conner household. The episode’s central conflict begins when their mother reveals to her daughters that she and her husband always thought Jackie had “a spark,” but that they weren’t worried about Roseanne, because they always knew she’d be “safe and comfortable and a good mommy, just like [she is] now!” After this pronouncement, Roseanne is visibly angered, and her voice becomes shriller as she asks, in an echo of Donna Reed, “So, um, what are you saying, mother? Are you saying that all I could ever be is some ordinary housewife?” Where single, childless Jackie is praised for her autonomy and independence and pushed towards high achievement, Roseanne, a “good mommy,” is reduced to her maternal identity, with no acknowledgment of her

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34 Rowe, “Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess,” 261.
other achievements, aspirations, or desires. Later in “Confessions,” the Conner family sits down to dinner and heaps praise on Roseanne, who is still visibly bitter; when Jackie and Dan, in an attempt to cheer her up, commend her for how she “runs the house like a well-oiled machine” while still managing to “do all the stuff she does.” She immediately deflates all their efforts to make her feel less ordinary, and the issue is essentially dropped, though many other episodes in the series grapple with the inherent tensions between the autonomous self and self-sacrificing motherhood.

In writing about *Roseanne*, Rowe describes the show as having a “willingness to engage with the contradictions of women’s lives,” and this very specific, very feminine contradiction—discontent with or hatred of domestic ideology, right alongside a self-identified “domestic goddess” status—is common among contemporary woman-driven domestic narratives. Roseanne’s working-class status contributes to the weight of this contradiction, complicating the notion of domestic containment. Unlike Lucy’s aspirations, which are contained by her husband, Roseanne’s dream of being a writer receives encouragement from Dan, who even creates a small writing studio for her in “Happy Birthday” (season 2, episode 24). What holds Roseanne back is not her partner, but material and ideological conditions of working-class life, which hinder her ability to put personal goals before familial obligations. The domestic ideology that binds all the woman-driven family-centered sitcoms is, in the case of *Roseanne*, a classed containment, heightened by the paradox of rejecting hegemonic gender ideals while simultaneously living as a “Domestic Goddess.”
The Mindy Project: Re-containment as Romantic Comedy

*The Mindy Project* (Fox, 2012-2015; Hulu, 2015--) began its run as a romantic comedy/workplace sitcom hybrid, a single-woman narrative with more apparent similarities to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* than to woman-driven family-centered sitcoms like *I Love Lucy*, *The Donna Reed Show*, or *Roseanne*. However, the show has more recently transformed into a show about a working mother that alternates between workplace and familial settings. Its most recent episodes revive the contradictions of domestic containment ideology, reworking them in the context of contemporary social conditions, which have made balancing work and family life necessary for women of all classes; with the expansion of workplace opportunities for women and the steady growth of dual-income as well as single-parent households, the “patriarchal bargain”—female domesticity in exchange for a male breadwinner’s economic support—has lost its once normative status. The show was created by and stars actress Mindy Kaling, who also writes many of the episodes. Kaling got her start as a writer for NBC’s hit series *The Office* (2005-13), where she was initially the only woman on the writing staff; she also had a role on the show, as a ditzy, gossipy customer service representative. Kaling left *The Office* in 2012 to begin working on *The Mindy Project*, which premiered on Fox that same year. It aired for three seasons, and though its low ratings led to Fox’s cancellation of the show, it was picked up by Hulu, a streaming platform founded as a joint venture between the corporate entities that own ABC, Fox, and NBC. The show’s premise and central characters are somewhat difficult to describe succinctly, as the show has undergone many changes in casting and in the general direction of the plot. Broadly put, the show is a single-
camera romantic situation comedy about the life of Mindy Lahiri, an OB/GYN living in New York. It has frequently employed tropes of romantic comedy films (as well as rom-com sitcom narratives), and many episodes directly or indirectly reference particular romantic comedies or other pop-cultural works. The show’s three-and-a-half seasons (at the time of this writing) have chronicled her dating life as a single working woman, her slowly developing relationship with co-worker Danny Castellano, another doctor in her practice, and, most recently, after the long-deferred launch of their romance, her unplanned pregnancy, the birth of their son, and the challenges of combining family and work, parenthood and partnership.\(^{35}\)

_Mindy_ has gotten mostly positive reviews from critics and has a loyal fan following.\(^ {36}\) However, the show has also received a fair amount of backlash, most notably for the casting of Mindy’s various love interests (Kaling is Indian-American, and most of the men her character dates are white, which some people find problematic). Kaling has also gotten criticism for the various negative tendencies of her character, Dr. Mindy Lahiri, which some fans assert are not appropriate behaviors for a fictional “role model.” Criticism of this kind is common for contemporary shows that feature women whose narratives and/or bodies don’t fall within conventional (white, thin, pretty, et cetera) media standards of proper feminine looks

\(^{35}\) I should note that the latter half of _Mindy_’s fourth season is set to premiere on Hulu on April 12\(^{th}\), 2016, so it’s possible that the show will have changed course yet again by the time this thesis is published.

\(^{36}\) Although _Mindy_’s first three seasons were so commercially unsuccessful that Fox canceled the show, which is why it currently streams on Hulu.
and behaviors. In an article exploring these kinds of responses, Emily Nussbaum cites Kaling’s opinions on the criticism her character has received:

[Kaling’s] idea for Mindy Lahiri, she said, wasn’t a spunky role model like Mary Tyler Moore. She also wasn’t trying to create a flawed comic protagonist with a voice-of-reason quality, in the tradition of Liz Lemon and Leslie Knope. Instead, she was going for the Michael Scott, the Larry David, the Kenny Powers—truly screwed-up bigots and basket cases who were, nonetheless, the rowdy centers of their respective shows. ‘That felt more fun to me,’ she said.

Mindy Lahiri’s many flaws are not meant to be cute, or endearing. The character continues the mode of unruly womanhood previously embodied by Roseanne Conner, though *Mindy* infuses her unruly transgressions with hyper-femininity. For example, she’s a little heavier than the television norm, and she has an unhealthy appetite for junk foods; she has sexual appetites, too, and expresses them unselfconsciously; she is occasionally loud, frequently obnoxious, and unendingly vain. Many of her excesses and extremes are highly feminized: she is shallow and often ignorant; a shopaholic, she loves fashionable clothes, favoring girly skirts and dresses, many of which are brightly colored, or sparkly, or both; she prefers celebrity gossip to books. Nussbaum makes an intriguing point about the source of negative reactions to Mindy Lahiri. She notes that *The Mindy Project*, itself a romantic comedy, is a sitcom “about a woman poisoned by rom-coms,” and goes on to argue that perhaps female viewers,

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37 *Girls* (2012—, HBO) is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon, as demonstrated by the often vitriolic reactions to Lena Dunham’s character Hannah. 38 Emily Nussbaum, “The Female Bad Fan,” *The New Yorker* (October 17, 2014), http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/female-bad-fan
who have been primed to expect certain narrative elements or plot payoffs, are not used to a romantic comedy heroine who pushes past generic, relatable levels of flawed and moves straight to singularly, magnetically, humorously awful.

For the first part of its run, the show focused on Mindy’s single life, her career as an OB/GYN at her practice, Shulman & Associates, her relationships with her highly eccentric co-workers (of whom only a few are still part of the show’s central cast), and the ups and downs of her various romances. The will-they-won’t-they flirtation between Mindy and Danny was established very early in the series, and by the middle of the second season, the two finally began a romantic relationship. They continued to date into the third season, and Mindy eventually became pregnant. (Mindy is frequently portrayed as a highly competent OB/GYN, as is Danny; how these two managed an unplanned pregnancy is one of the show’s more befuddling inconsistencies.) Now in the middle of its fourth season, The Mindy Project has shifted its narrative focus to Mindy and Danny’s relationship after the birth of their son, Leo Castellano. Mindy has also opened a second practice, her own fertility clinic. Though the show’s original plotlines focused on the work and love lives of single protagonists, the first thirteen-episode half of the show’s fourth season has increasingly moved away from the workplace comedy settings that characterized the earlier seasons, and has come to settle (perhaps temporarily) in the realm of the woman-driven family-centered comedy. Like Roseanne, The Mindy Project blends two primary strains of the sitcom, the vaudeville-influenced and the melodramatic realist; the show utilizes physical comedy, rapid-fire jokes, and one-liners, but has
added more melodramatic storylines as it has gone on, especially prevalent in the most recent episodes.

This season has shown Danny growing more and more conservative in his views on gender relations and the home, forcing his beliefs on Mindy in an increasingly authoritarian manner. Previous plotlines showed Mindy asserting her independence in the face of controlling male partners, prioritizing her own desires and autonomy, but her relationship with Danny—a character established as Mindy’s main love interest long before the start of their official relationship—has broken this pattern. Mindy acquiesces to Danny’s demands even after resisting or rebuttering them, a process that has been uncomfortable to watch, particularly as he insists that she quit her career to pursue motherhood full-time, and as he tries to control her behaviors and activities both in the home and in the public sphere. Though shows like *I Love Lucy*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *Bewitched* also featured women struggling with enforced domesticity, *The Mindy Project* engages with domestic containment ideology at a time when it is no longer a mainstream moral imperative, as delay of or abstention from marriage has become a “mass behavior,” per Rebecca Traister, and as female autonomy and self-reliance are increasingly valued.\(^{39}\)

*The Mindy Project* is part of larger trend of romantic comedy as an element of sitcom narrative. Romance and romantic comedy have always been an important element of many comedy series, but the relationship that has most impacted romantic comedy in the sitcom is the original “will-they-or-won’t-they” deferred romance

between Sam Malone and Diane Chambers of *Cheers* (1982-93, NBC). Sam and Diane’s romantic and sexual tension thrilled audiences, and the narrative patterns of “will-they-won’t-they” that *Cheers* established for them—delays and deferrals that heighten a sort of romantic suspense for the viewer, stretching across episodes and seasons—established a narrative device utilized in many sitcoms, from Ross and Rachel on *Friends* to *The Office*’s Jim and Pam to Ted and Robin (and Barney and Robin) on *How I Met Your Mother*, as well as to Danny and Mindy. Romantic comedy narratives blended into TV sitcoms function differently than in cinematic romantic comedies. Rom-com films have brevity on their side, as their romances can charm an audience in just ninety minutes, leaving viewers satisfied by some kind of narrative resolution. In contrast, sitcoms, designed to extend over many episodes and increasingly reliant on a serialized storytelling form, face a different challenge in capturing love and romance because the open-ended nature of the format requires established relationships to continue after the rom-com resolution is reached.

Domestic and family-centered sitcoms, especially those that are woman-driven, have a strong connection to romantic comedy. Lori Landay and Kathleen Rowe, among others, have argued that these sitcoms can be understood as the “after” portion of a cinematic romantic comedy, what happens in the days, weeks, and years after an onscreen couple is (re)united and the film’s narrative ends. Rowe maps this argument onto her examination of the unruly woman figure, linking it more specifically to the classical Hollywood romantic comedy (for example, the film *It Happened One Night*, 1934). She argues that the women of these earlier romantic comedies were playful, rebellious figures, whose inevitable marriage at the end of the
film was her domestication, and suggests that the screwball comedies of the 1940s (like *His Girl Friday*, 1940) set the stage for the “battleground marriages” that were popular on television in the early 1950s, and for *I Love Lucy* in particular. She writes:

… The unruly woman became anchored in the family like television itself, no longer a bride but a wife, a mother, a *matriarch*; no longer in the realm of fantasy and the erotic, but part of the everyday. Taking up the woman’s story *after* the high drama of courtship and the wedding that resolves romantic comedy, the domestic sitcom explores what follows: children, the routine of family life, and marital discord with no promise of a magic, total reconciliation of difference.  

This model can accommodate all the woman-driven family-centered sitcoms I have discussed thus far. *Bewitched*’s pilot episode engages the romantic narrative head-on; a voiceover sets up the meet-cute of Samantha and Darrin, and cheekily narrates their courtship montage. The series’ premise begins to unfold immediately after the wedding, when Samantha and Darrin have just begun their honeymoon, and the newly wedded bride informs her husband that she is a witch. In this way, *Bewitched* contrasts with the other woman-driven family-centered sitcoms, since *I Love Lucy* begins after the Ricardos have been married for some time, and both *The Donna Reed Show* and *Roseanne* start when the couples’ oldest children are young teenagers. *The Mindy Project*, in contrast, encompasses both the “before” of courtship (not elided by montage, as it was in *Bewitched*) and the “after,” when a nuclear family unit is established (albeit without a marriage). The series’ status as a blended rom-sitcom

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40 Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, 77-80.
combines with its contemporary social context to alter the meaning of the domestic containment narrative theme, as it plays out in an era where female independence and choice is accepted and the patriarchal bargain has lost its pragmatic as well as its ideological justifications.

*The Mindy Project’s* domestic sitcom plotlines, seen in the first thirteen episodes of the fourth season, replay the containment issues that thread through woman-driven family-centered sitcoms, particularly *I Love Lucy* and *Bewitched*. The Ricardo, Stephens, and Lahiri-Castellano households are all connected by the male partner’s desire to contain the unruly woman within the private sphere, away from the public eye. Examining these shows in chronological order reveals the breakdown of the patriarchal bargain over recent decades, as male justifications for enforcing domesticity were increasingly stripped of their rationale in sitcom narratives, as well as in society at large. In the containment-era 1950s, which centralized male authority, Lucy’s utter lack of talent justifies Ricky’s efforts in containing her; and in the 1960s, as backlash to domesticity began to stir, Samantha’s real magical powers undermine Darrin’s attempts patriarchal prohibition. Both women are dependent on their husbands for economic support, as their containment denies them the means to become autonomous. At present, when female independence is increasingly the norm, *The Mindy Project* does not grant Danny any rational reasons for pushing his partner into fulltime domesticity.

Danny has always been portrayed as one of the more conservative characters on the show—several long-running jokes allude to how he comes across as much older than he is, or make reference to his Italian-American heritage and Catholic
youth. The birth of his son has made Danny more conservative, and his behavior towards Mindy channels the dynamics of the Ricardo and Stephens households, with the husband restricting the wife to the confines of home and hearth. For example, in the season four episode “Leo Castellano is My Son” (season 4, episode 3), Danny prepares to return to the office while Mindy stays on maternity leave. Much to Mindy’s dismay, he “baby-proofs” the house by removing the internet connection, the TV, and the junk food, and he also instructs his wife not to leave their apartment for little Leo’s sake, effectively confining her to a domestic prison, forcing Mindy into self-sacrificing motherhood for the time being. But like Lucy, she inevitably violates this edict, skipping out for a celebrity book signing with her son in tow, and the physical comedy that occurs when Mindy must sneak back in the house before Danny finds out that she had left recalls the slapstick elements of Lucy as well.

But unlike Lucy, Mindy has no need for the patriarchal bargain, and Danny’s attempts at enforced domesticity are entirely unjustified. Like many contemporary women, she is a highly competent (if somewhat irresponsible) professional with a well-paying job that she finds fulfilling, a character who clearly values her self-reliance and repeatedly asserts her own desires and needs. Furthermore, Danny and Mindy are equals in every respect: they are roughly the same age, they are both well-educated, they share the same professional status and are both skilled in their shared field. Practical realities within the narrative also undermine Danny’s controlling, containing behaviors. Unlike working-class Roseanne, Mindy is a professional who works as much for a sense of personal fulfillment as for economic rewards, though Danny argues that she should commit herself to her child and prioritize his wellbeing.
over her career, replaying the themes of maternal self-sacrifice and self-subordination promoted by True Womanhood ideology. However, the couple has the resources that would allow them both to maintain their careers—one episode shows Danny’s mother’s excellent childcare capabilities and her willingness to participate in her grandchild’s care, and they are certainly well-off enough to hire a nanny or to pay for daycare, if they so chose. And, most importantly of all, Mindy wants to continue to work. She loves and takes pride in her career achievements, which include her work at Shulman & Associates, as well as her burgeoning fertility clinic. Mindy’s enforced containment is in some ways opposite of the situation in Bewitched, which repeatedly emphasized Samantha’s choice to acquiesce to Darren and his desire for her domesticity. Over the course of its run, Mindy has repeatedly stressed its central character’s autonomy and self-reliance; though she has deferred to or become dependent on other men in the past, she eventually chooses independence; by breaking this pattern for most of this first half of season four, the show creates tension through the audience’s expectation that she will uphold her true self and stop being so deferential to Danny. Only in the final moments of the mid-season finale (season four, episode thirteen), after a dozen episodes of deferral, do we see Mindy reassert her independence once more. In this episode, Danny’s attempts to force domesticity on Mindy veer into shocking territory—he wants to have another child already, and tries to trick her into unprotected sex, which leads to a fight that ends with Mindy back in her old apartment, measuring a space for a crib. Throughout this season, The Mindy Project’s domestic containment narratives have proved highly divisive, not only for Mindy and Danny’s relationship, but also among fans of the show, many of
whom dislike the turn that Danny’s character has taken. But by reworking the
domestic ideology that drove previous woman-driven family-centered sitcoms—*I
Love Lucy, The Donna Reed Show, Bewitched*, and *Roseanne*—*The Mindy Project*
illustrates persistent, lingering obstacles that prevent truly egalitarian relationships or
marriages among men and women, even after great strides made by second- and
third-wave feminist movements. As Kathleen Gerson has observed, though the
majority of young men and women today “wish to build an egalitarian partnership
with room for considerable personal autonomy,” there is still a significant gender
divide when it comes to their respective “fall-back” strategies.\(^{41}\) Women cite the
importance of career and self-reliance, prizing their autonomy over a (now old-
fashioned) dependence on “traditional” marriages. Some men, however, envision
“neotraditional” marriages in which their partners can work, but they are the primary
breadwinners, a formation that frames women’s careers as “optional.” These
strategies, Gerson argues, are not only different, but in utter opposition, on a
“collision course” with each other.\(^{42}\) We can understand Mindy and Danny as sitcom
embodiments of these gendered trends: Mindy is the self-reliant young woman who
values her autonomy and a wealth of choices, while Danny is the neotraditional
young man who is nominally interested in equal partnerships but ultimately puts his
own status first. Though these characters may love each other, their plans for their
lives are in direct contradiction to each other. This contemporary contradiction forms
a new facet of the paradoxical domestic ideology that woman-driven family-centered
sitcoms have grappled with throughout television history.

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\(^{41}\) Gerson, 742-46.
\(^{42}\) Ibid, 743.
2. Liberation & Lifestyle Feminism in the Workplace Sitcom

Second-wave feminism was in full swing by the start of the 1970s, and though notions of gender equality were becoming more mainstream, television had not fully caught up to women’s changing position in society. Woman-driven sitcoms featured protagonists who were predominantly housewives, as we have seen in the previous chapter; though there were representations of single women as well, in shows like *Our Miss Brooks* (CBS, 1952-56) or *That Girl* (ABC, 1966-1971), they were mostly few and far between. This changed in the fall of 1970 with the premiere of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-77), a woman-driven workplace sitcom still widely regarded as “… television’s first serious concession to a changed world where middle-class daughters leave home, earn their living, and remain single.”¹ *Mary Tyler Moore* was very successful during its time on the air, receiving respectable ratings and garnering accolades ranging from its 1977 Peabody Award to its record-setting 29 Emmy Awards (a record only beaten by NBC’s *Frasier*). The show’s seven seasons chronicle the professional and personal exploits of single, thirtysomething Mary Richards, an associate producer at a low-ranking local news network in Minneapolis. The main cast of the series includes Mary’s co-workers and neighbors: Lou Grant, gruff news director; Murray Slaughter, head writer and Mary’s closest work friend; Ted Baxter, the show’s vain, empty-headed anchorman; Rhoda Morgenstern, Mary’s mouthy, perennially single best friend; and Phyllis Lindstrom, Mary’s snobbish married neighbor. (Both Rhoda and Phyllis would eventually depart

Mary Tyler Moore for their own spin-off sitcoms, and two new characters filled in the gaps: Ted’s girlfriend, the ditsy Georgette, and the happy homemaker/home-wrecker Sue Ann Nivens). Mary is frequently positioned as a foil to her wacky friends and co-workers, though she is not immune to the awkwardness and embarrassments of dating and romance, or the frustrations of being a woman in a workplace designed for and dominated by men.

The show was originally conceived as a star vehicle for actress Mary Tyler Moore, previously known to television audiences as “zingy” housewife Laura Petrie on showbiz-workplace/family sitcom bybrid, The Dick Van Dyke Show.\(^2\) Like Lucille Ball and Donna Reed before her, Moore and her husband formed a production company, MTM Enterprises, so that they could “maintain some control of the show,” as Jennifer Keishin Armstrong puts it.\(^3\) Under Tinker’s direction, MTM went on to produce many successful sitcoms in the 1970s, subsequently diversifying into dramas over the 1980s, and consolidating a reputation for “quality television” programming that began with Mary Tyler Moore.\(^4\) Part of Mary Tyler Moore’s “quality” effect came from the way that it emphasized the characters, their relationships to each other, and their growth and maturation over seven seasons as a source of both comedy and poignancy, blending traditional, situation-based jokes with more thoughtful character-based humor. This emphasis on character and witty, sophisticated dialogue would become hallmarks of MTM Enterprises’ signature style.

\(^2\) Bathrick, “Women at Home and at Work,” 158.
\(^4\) Among their many other productions, MTM Enterprises produced the aforementioned spin-offs for the characters of Rhoda and Phyllis (and a later spin-off for Lou Grant).
Aside from its contributions to sitcom form, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*’s most enduring legacy is its impact on the woman-driven sitcom. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* introduced audiences to what would become the gold standard of sitcom single womanhood in the form of relatable Mary Richards, a single working woman from a small Midwestern town, new to life in the city. Mary was sweet, smart, and full of “pluck,” but more importantly, her commitments to her job and her friendships were emphasized throughout the show, rather than commitment to a man. Bonnie Dow has explored *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*’s long-lasting impact on television depictions of single women, most visibly through the character traits that the show established: mostly young, white, middle- or upper-middle class, heterosexual women who live in urban settings, and often work in traditionally male-dominated professions. With the show’s 1970 premiere, the sitcom woman left her suburban confines for a more independent life in the big city, a shift depicted in the show’s opening credit sequence: Mary leaving her small town, driving down the highway and arriving in Minneapolis, where she throws her hat in the air in celebration. Dow writes that Mary Richards, as the ur-example of this kind of working woman, laid the groundwork for “[what] has come to be the most visible indicator of the influence and representation of feminism on television,” what Dow terms “lifestyle feminism,” in which a character’s associations with feminism is expressed through how she lives, rather than through any explicit involvement feminist movements or ideologies.5

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Both Dow and Serafina Bathrick have also noted the contradictions that *Mary Tyler Moore*’s central character embodies as she fuses elements of a modern, liberated New Womanhood with the traditional True Womanhood of the domestic woman. Within the workplace family, Dow writes, “Mary functions in the recognizable roles of idealized mother, wife, and daughter… [she] alternately nurtures, mediates, facilitates and submits, bringing the accessible, other-centered, emotionally skilled ‘True Woman’ to the workplace.” She argues that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* retained the patriarchal structure of the domestic sitcom and its domestic containment theme, merely updating the setting and players for a smoother ideological transition. Mary may have a second-wave feminist edge, but her “lifestyle feminism” and her agreeably feminine personality made her less threatening to viewers uncertain about social change. At the same time, however, the character challenged previous representations of women in the sitcom, as the show consistently “[asserts] that work was not just a prelude to marriage…but could form the center of a satisfying life for a woman in the way that it presumably did for men,” according to Dow.

The show’s ideological contradictions worked to its advantage in maximizing its audience appeal. In the years leading up to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*’s premiere, networks were grappling with the “television gap” between older generations and baby boomers, who were increasingly uninterested in traditional domestic sitcoms. Writes Judy Kutulas, “Because [the younger generation] rejected...

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7 Ibid, 24.
their parents’ paths—choosing instead to get more education, marry later, and have fewer children—they were attractive targets for advertisers; yet their rejection of traditional domesticity also meant that they did not find family sitcoms compelling.

The workplace sitcom provided a handy solution for the networks, as it transposed the roles of the traditional family unit into the working world. Mary’s “lifestyle feminism” and her position in the work family allowed the show to appeal to progressive baby boomers and their more conservative parents simultaneously, walking a fine ideological line that slowly presented viewers with women’s changing roles while also maintaining the status quo. At the same time, the show ushered in a new phase of woman-driven sitcom, “[expanding] the limited parameters,” as Dow puts it, of female representation in this genre category.

Decades later, we can judge Mary Tyler Moore’s lasting impact as both a formally innovative “sitcom of distinction” and as a transformative representation of sitcom womanhood. This impact can be traced to two more recent “working woman” sitcoms: 30 Rock (NBC, 2007-2012) and Parks and Recreation (NBC, 2009-2015). These shows draw on and rework imaginative resources introduced by Mary Tyler Moore as they explore the various complexities of being a career-oriented woman in contemporary society, though each show finds ways to twist MTM’s DNA to newer, wilder ends.

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9 Dow, “1970s Lifestyle Feminism,” 34.
Changing Industrial Conditions

By 2007, the year *30 Rock* would premiere, the network television landscape had already changed significantly from those of the network era in which *Mary Tyler Moore* aired. The growing competition of premium cable programming and an ever-increasing number of networks, threats to advertising revenue posed by VCRs and TiVo, and the early days of streaming content sites on the internet were shaking the foundations of the network system. The television audience once imagined as a monolithic “mass” had fragmented into multiple niche audiences, who represented specific demographics that could be targeted with shows that addressed particular interests. Television networks began to take more risks in their programming, as it was now possible to profit by tailoring content to more narrowly defined, homogenous audiences; both the newcomers and the broadcast networks recognized the lucrative potential of programs catering to “upscale” or “quality” audiences (generally imagined as composed of white, affluent, urban-oriented young adults), whose discretionary income and consumer tastes made them desirable targets for many advertisers, especially sellers of prestige goods. At the same time, however, broadcast networks that target “quality” audiences are still reluctant to alienate the wider base of primetime viewers—they do not target niche interests with the same intensity as premium cable or streaming platforms.¹⁰ As a result, the sitcom has seen a number of innovations and deviations from traditional form, as new shows continue to stretch the narrative and formal possibilities of the genre.

One important development has been the critical success of the single-camera format, where each shot of a scene is captured one at a time by a single camera (as the name implies). Single-cam is regarded as much more “cinematic” than the multi-cam setup of the traditional sitcom for several reasons, first and foremost because it is the dominant technique in conventional narrative filmmaking. While TV dramas and some sitcoms have long been shot using the single camera technique, the sitcom became associated with the more “theatrical” multi-camera system developed for *I Love Lucy*. The single camera (or “film style”) production system is also distinguished from the majority of multi-cam shows by its absence of a laugh track, a televisual device many have come to regard with disdain, as a kind of “cattle prod” for the audience, providing a cue for laughter rather than simply expecting a viewer to be intelligent enough to recognize a joke.\(^\text{11}\) As an aesthetic choice, the use of single-cam can expand the narrative and filmic potential of a sitcom, creating a wider array of options when it comes to filmmaking tools such as editing and camera movement, staging, visual effects, mise-en-scène, soundtrack, and narrative structure.\(^\text{12}\) This expanded toolkit also creates new opportunities for joke-telling and humor. For example, a joke could be an incongruity between image and voiceover, like some of Carrie’s voiceovers on *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998–2004), or the narrator’s commentary on *Arrested Development* (Fox, 2003–06; Netflix, 2013--); it could arise from a flashback or cutaway, like *30 Rock*’s numerous visual gags; or it could come from a series of non-diegetic jump cuts, like many of the talking-head gags of *Parks and Recreation*.

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\(^\text{11}\) Ibid, 72, 75-76. 
\(^\text{12}\) Ibid, 63-69. Levine and Newman’s full chapter “Upgrading the Situation Comedy,” offers a much more in-depth analysis of its use in the TV comedies of the 2000s and early 2010s.
and Rec. Conveying humor through such cinematic devices, rather than relying on traditional setup-punch line rhythms of TV comedy, has come to be viewed as a mark of distinction that sets “quality” sitcoms from what is regarded as more lowbrow fare. Through their associations with cinema and film, a medium conventionally understood as more “sophisticated” or “worthy” than TV, contemporary single-camera comedies are seen as aesthetically superior to multi-cam peers by popular and scholarly critics alike.

The proliferation of single-cam sitcoms accompanies the genre’s shift away from its traditionally episodic roots to a more serialized narrative structure, a move popularly credited to the classic (multi-cam) workplace sitcom Cheers (NBC, 1982-1993). Cheers’ emphasis on “literate writing and complex, evolving characters and storylines” continued the character comedy developed in Mary Tyler Moore and the increasing emphasis on serialization in dramas produced by MTM Enterprises (where the creators of Cheers got their start) over the 1980s. The popularity of the serially-structured sitcom can also be attributed to consumer technologies such as VCRs, DVDs, TiVo, and internet streaming services. No longer was a sitcom’s legacy tied to its ability to play well in reruns and syndication; now viewers could watch a series in order, from start to finish, freed from network-mandated time slots and, increasingly, commercial breaks. A serially-structured sitcom could incorporate complex, developing plots while still maintaining a strong sense of episodic closure; it could have recurring callbacks, references, and jokes meant for only dedicated viewers to “get”; it could feature subtle sight gags or intricate foreshadowing that could only be

13 Newman and Levine, Legitimating Television, 68.
caught by a repeat viewing.\textsuperscript{14} \textit{30 Rock} and \textit{Parks and Recreation} are both identifiable as products of the late 2000s—they are single-camera serial narratives with no laugh track, used by their shared network to appeal to a young, affluent, educated, white audience while simultaneously designed to avoid alienating a broader network TV viewership (though, judging by the numbers, neither one achieved broad appeal). They both make use of the cinematic possibility of the single-camera format—\textit{30 Rock} through its cartoonish, vaudeo-esque smash cut gags, among other devices, and \textit{Parks and Rec} through its use of mockumentary style camerawork and editing. Each also reflects the heritage of \textit{Mary Tyler Moore}: broadcast television workplace comedies that ran for seven seasons; star vehicles for women already known for their work in television comedy; funny, textured portraits of women who identify themselves through their careers rather than their personal lives. Liz and Leslie represent a new breed of Mary Richards—they are more flawed, more outspoken, and more deeply, truly weird—and the changing industrial conditions and narrative conventions of the sitcom contributed to these fascinating depictions of women in positions of power.

\textbf{30 Rock: Good God, Lemon}

\textit{30 Rock} premiered on NBC in the fall of 2007 and ran for seven seasons, until early 2013. The largely serialized single-camera comedy centers on the personal and professional antics of Liz Lemon, the head writer of mediocre sketch comedy “TGS with Tracy Jordan,” and her enduring quest to “have it all” (meaning simultaneous

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Arrested Development} is an excellent example, embodying all of these qualities; though it has achieved cult status today, with a passionate fan base and a revival on Netflix, it was a total flop on network TV.
career success, romantic fulfillment, and a family). Its cinematic qualities notwithstanding, *30 Rock* also has multiple ties to the vaudeville performance tradition as a slapstick, humor-driven sitcom about a live comedy-variety show. Most of the action takes place at a fictionalized version of 30 Rockefeller Plaza in New York City, NBC’s real-life headquarters. The show’s central characters include Jack Donaghy, conservative NBC executive and Liz’s mentor/boss; Tracy Jordan, eccentric & unpredictable star of TGS; Jenna Maroney, an over-the-top, self-centered “TGS” actress and Liz’s closest female friend; Pete Hornberger, “TGS”’s sad-sack producer; and Kenneth Parcell, an over-eager, always enthusiastic (and possibly immortal) NBC page from Stone Mountain, Georgia. Additional recurring characters include the staff of the “TGS” writer’s room: Frank, a schlubby man-child; “Toofer,” whose nickname comes from being both black and a nerd; Lutz, the constant butt of the staff’s jokes; and Cerie, Liz’s attractive, laid-back assistant. Also worth noting are Grizz and Dot Com, key members of Tracy Jordan’s “entourage” that were developed over seven seasons from silent thug-types to men of substance and depth.

It was loosely inspired by the experiences of its creator/writer/star Tina Fey, who had been head writer at sketch comedy institution *Saturday Night Live* from 1999 until she departed for *30 Rock* in 2006; she also co-anchored the show’s “Weekend Update” segment, first with Jimmy Fallon and later with Amy Poehler (the star of *Parks and Recreation*). Fey specifically turned to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* for inspiration when writing *30 Rock*, and several sources are quick to cite the connections between characters on the two shows—single career gals Liz and Mary, gruff bosses Jack and Lou, work buddies Pete and Murray, unpredictable, infantile
stars Tracy and Ted.\textsuperscript{15} Fey herself has said: “We talked about [\textit{Mary Tyler Moore}] a lot… as a template, obviously, of a great show, but also a show that is all about the relationships in the workplace, but not the making of television so much.”\textsuperscript{16}

Much like many “quality” sitcoms of the past two decades, \textit{30 Rock} is a workplace comedy that fits Joanne Morreale’s idea of the postmodern sitcom, one that “[thrives] on intertextuality,” “[incorporating]…parody [and] play with the sitcom form, indicating an even greater emphasis upon the discursive relationship set up between text and viewer.”\textsuperscript{17} Overall, the show has an excessive, broadly comic tone, but there are moments of genuine emotion between characters, whose relationships developed and evolved over the years even as characters and plots became increasingly absurd. Any given episode could contain multiple pop-cultural references (from \textit{Star Wars} to \textit{Amadeus} to \textit{Night Court}, to name a very select few), callbacks to in-show running jokes (“Shut it down!”, “I want to go to there,” the “TGS” writers’ collective lack of chins), or parody of current events, politics, and prominent figures from real life (who would often cameo on the show, either as heightened versions of themselves, such as Condoleezza Rice’s appearance as one of Jack’s exes, or in fictional roles, like Matt Damon as Carroll Burnett, one of Liz’s boyfriends; this strategy was also employed by \textit{I Love Lucy}). \textit{30 Rock}’s satirical subjects ranged from the Iraq War to white liberal hypocrisy to self-righteous mommy bloggers, but its most frequent target was the institution of television itself. Many of the show’s jokes stem from its “meta” commentary on NBC and its parent

\textsuperscript{15} Armstrong, \textit{Mary and Lou and Rhoda and Ted}, 290-91.
\textsuperscript{17} Morreale, \textit{Critiquing the Sitcom}, 249, 276.
companies as well as the various challenges and indignities of working in television. Fey and her writers never hesitated to joke about their corporate overlords, incorporating NBC’s constant struggles for ratings and relevancy, its merger with Comcast (“Kabletown” in the 30 Rock universe), and even the 2010 Tonight Show controversy into major and minor plotlines. One excellent example of 30 Rock’s self-reflexivity occurs in “Mrs. Donaghy” (season 5, episode 11). When Liz asks Jack to restore “TGS”’s budget, which has recently been cut; he holds up a pie chart that reads “NBC Programming Priorities Breakdown.” Explains Jack: “The big red part you can see is The Biggest Loser. The yellow slice, our number two priority—‘Make it 1997 again through science or magic’—and the little green part is everything else. Request denied.”

The show is also known for the way it handles product placement; although it has incorporated more traditional product placement, such as light mentions of snack foods, or visible Apple logos, it has also made product integration part of the joke, as in season two episode “Somebody to Love,” where, after saying something complimentary about Verizon, Liz turns directly to the camera and asks, “Can we have our money now?”

Despite the sharp barbs it levels at television, 30 Rock can often be read as a loving, albeit twisted, tribute to the medium. Multiple plots incorporate longstanding sitcom tropes only to eventually subvert them; one notable example is the series’ long-running gag involving the non-existent sexual tension between Jack and Liz, a sort of reverse will-they-or-won’t-they. This plot point is most notably evoked in

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“Mrs. Donaghy,” where a human resources representative asks a series of questions that are seemingly about to escalate into a romantic moment between Liz and Jack (“Is this the longest and perhaps most meaningful relationship in your life? Do you often find yourselves thinking the same thing and then saying it at the exact same time?”) only to be subverted at the last second; also, in the series finale, where Liz and Jack admit their (platonic) love for each other. Their romantic incompatibility is both a reference to the Mary/Lou relationship in *Mary Tyler Moore*, the show’s penultimate episode in which the characters went on a date just to prove how incompatible they are, as well as a clever subversion of the Sam-and-Diane relationships popularized by *Cheers.* (*Cheers* is also referenced in season four, episode twenty-two, as Grizz turns to Liz and states, “We really were the Sam and Diane of this place.”). *30 Rock* has whole episodes that serve as love letters to TV—two live shows, which offered two different salutes to traditional multi-cams, comedy-variety shows, and the wonders of live television (“Live Show,” season five, episode four, and “Live from Studio 6H,” season six, episode nineteen); “Queen of Jordan” (season five, episode seventeen) and “Queen of Jordan 2” (season six, episode twenty), painstakingly crafted homages to Bravo reality programming; and the final episodes of the seventh season, which Todd VanDerWerff has cited as a kind of tribute to the last season of *Mary Tyler Moore.*19 An exchange between Jack and Kenneth in the penultimate episode succinctly sums up *30 Rock’s* love-hate

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relationship with its medium: Jack says, “This is broadcast television, it’s a ruthless business.” Kenneth responds: “No sir, it’s a magical, ruth-filled business!”

*Parks and Recreation: Waffles, Friends, Work*

*Parks and Recreation* premiered in the spring of 2009 on NBC, where it aired until early 2015. The show was originally conceived as a spin-off of *The Office*, which at that time was NBC’s highest-rated scripted show; however, the spin-off premise was abandoned when Amy Poehler joined the project, and the show was reformulated to better suit its new star. Poehler was already regarded as a gifted comedian; she was one of the founding members of the sketch/improv group the Upright Citizens Brigade, she had a storied tenure on *Saturday Night Live* (co-anchoring the “Weekend Update” segment both with Fey and Seth Meyers), and in two cult classic films (Fey-penned *Mean Girls* in 2004, and *Wet Hot American Summer* in 2001). *Parks and Rec* retained the mockumentary shooting and editing style of its would-be predecessor, though it uses the style more loosely, as a narrative device for conveying the character’s thoughts and opinions; additionally, the mockumentary style grounds the wacky, almost Springfieldian town of Pawnee in cinematic verisimilitude. This is in contrast to *The Office*, which makes the camera crew and resulting “documentary” part of the narrative in its final season. The show’s first season was a critical failure, and the six episodes that compose it are best forgotten, as the tone of the show and the characterizations of the main cast changed drastically in the second season. After its disastrous start, *Parks and Recreation* soon became a critical darling (and, predictably, a ratings flop), distinguished from many other sitcoms on television by its pervasive, persistent optimism.
*Parks and Rec* is set in fictional Pawnee, Indiana (“First in Friendship, Fourth in Obesity”), a small town populated with stubborn, idiosyncratic residents. The show centers on the employees in the Parks and Recreation department of the local government, focusing largely on Leslie Knope, the Deputy Director. Leslie is a highly enthusiastic, energetic public servant with big political aspirations and vocal feminist intentions; a woman who eats waffles, prepares hundred-page action plan binders, and compliments her best friend with the same relentless voracity. Her co-workers include Ron Swanson, a thoughtful, uber-rugged individualist; nurse Ann Perkins, Leslie’s best friend and the show’s frequent straight woman; Tom Haverford, an immature, trend-obsessed slacker who dreams of being a successful business mogul; April Ludgate, Ron’s deadpan, cynical assistant; Andy Dwyer, a dim-yet-loveable rocker and April’s eventual boyfriend and husband; Chris Traeger, Pawnee’s exceedingly positive, incredibly health-conscious city manager, who later fathers a child with Ann Perkins; office manager Donna Meagle, a deadpan hedonist and serial dater; Ben Wyatt, an uptight, passionate nerd (and former disgraced teen mayor) who eventually marries Leslie; and the variously named Jerry Gergich, the butt of every joke and office pariah, who also has a happy, fulfilling personal life and a wonderful marriage (and, as the show later reveals, an enormous penis). Chris and Ben entered the show near the end of the second season as state auditors making budget cuts, but were quickly absorbed into Pawnee life and the Parks & Rec team; Chris and Ann relocated to Michigan in season six, but both would return for the series finale. The

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main players are rounded out by a large cast of recurring characters, the specifically rendered residents of Pawnee.

*Parks and Rec* depicts a neat, nearly-self contained world whose cultural references rarely exceed city limits, and contemporary American politics and current events play out on a micro scale. The show has had many storylines that allude to news stories or divisive contemporary political issues. For example, Pawnee faces a local government shutdown; Leslie is accused of lying about her place of birth; she attempts to bail out a local business with government funds; she proposes a soda tax; she takes part in an impressively long filibuster (while also wearing roller skates). The town has its own distinctive culture, most emblematic in the citizens’ unending, incomprehensible devotion to miniature horse, as well as their unique method of drinking water from public fountains, and their collective devotion to fatty, sugary foods.

Though the show’s premise is not as similar to *Mary Tyler Moore’s* as the premise of *30 Rock, Parks* is in many ways more of a spiritual successor to Mary Richards and company; its ideological emphasis on unity, positivity, and the strength of the group are more reminiscent of *MTM*’s ideology than is *30 Rock;* Fey’s program almost never failed to undermine even its most poignant moments with some kind of joke. Showrunner Michael Schur crafted the sitcom with several texts in mind, most notably David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (as well as that paragon of quality TV, *The Wire*). This arguably peculiar source of inspiration for an upbeat, female-centric network sitcom adds to the show’s position as a sitcom of “quality” while also gesturing at the ideological rigor and consistencies of the show and its central
character. From an interview with Schur: “One of the themes [is that] optimism beats pessimism… The other big theme is that no one achieves anything alone. Almost every story, no matter how small, has some element of that theme in it… You can’t achieve anything entirely by yourself.”

Like Leslie herself, Parks and Rec is ideologically consistent, championing teamwork and positivity over cynicism or personal ambition.

**Femininity and Unruly Womanhood**

Mary Richards may have been slightly awkward, but she was largely a conventionally feminine character. She was “liberated,” with a cute apartment and plenty of adorable outfits, and her co-workers and friends frequently commented on her good looks and charming nature. She wasn’t utterly sweet, but she was a working woman with the attributes of a traditional True Woman. In contrast to Mary, Liz Lemon and Leslie Knope both fit within the archetype that Kathleen Rowe has designated the “unruly woman.” They are both women of excessive appetites—Leslie for her waffles or most sugary things, and Liz for junk foods like off-brand cheese curls “Sabor de Soledad” (“flavor of loneliness” in Spanish) or Cheesy Blasters (hot dogs stuffed with cheese and rolled in a pizza). They’re intense when they’re hungry—Liz once flips over a table in the writer’s room, roaring “Where’s my mac and cheese?” Their movements are excessive, as both Fey and Poehler play with physical comedy. Liz is notably sex-averse—one episode’s major plotline was

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devoted to helping her figure out why she was such a prude. Liz and Leslie are
workaholics who are in positions of power at work, though, notably, they both have a
male superior. Liz is theoretically good at her job, but the quick glimpses the viewer
gets into the sketches of “TGS” show how low-quality it is, and its horrible ratings
and demographic targets are the subject of several jokes (they purportedly have a
target demographic of “drunken eleven-year-olds,” for example). Leslie, however, is
portrayed as hyper-competent—she lives for work. An episode where she is
suspended from work shows her miserable at home until she decides to form a group
for citizens, which launches her straight back into action. Both women have many
flaws, although Leslie’s are much more consistent. Liz is nitpicky and judgmental;
she is kind of gross, holding up her bras with tape and using a Duane Reade bag as
underwear. Her disregard for her personal appearance, cleanliness and propriety,
dispositions conventionally associated with men, mark her as distinctly transgressive.
Leslie, for all her hard work and good intentions, is incredibly stubborn and
opinionated, and finds it very difficult to accept when she is wrong. She is somewhat
of a “steamroller,” as Ben informs her, though she makes conscious efforts to listen to
people more. Where the True Woman of the domestic comedy (and Mary Tyler
Moore, to some extent) is open and receptive to others, often putting their needs
above her own, both Liz and Leslie embody the opposite, though in different ways.
Liz, the “mother” of her “TGS” family, displays an unfeminine lack of concern for
others, as she pushes away her coworkers and others in her life. Leslie, though
extremely caring, transgresses conventional femininity through her hyper-self-
confidence and lack of deference. Both women have many personality traits that
don’t fall within the conventions of traditionally acceptable behaviors for women, even when compared to other single, working female protagonists of the past, like Mary.

One easily identifiable difference between Liz, Leslie, and their sitcom predecessors is in their costuming. Liz is almost always in casual, gender-neutral outfits. The show makes a running joke of her footwear, which Jack frequently links to lesbianism and/or manliness. She’s often in a hoodie or jeans, and, in one memorable episode, she is actually wearing a dickey (season 6, “Dance Like Nobody’s Watching”). Most of the time, when Liz is dressed formally or in a more conventionally feminine way, it is only so the show can set up a joke about her attire. For example, the first season episode “Jack the Writer” shows Liz after she has been made over by Cerie, strutting down the hallway in slow-mo to the tune of “Who’s That Lady” in a flowy shirtdress that says “Dirty Diva” in rhinestones. As soon as she enters the writer’s room, the slow motion and music come to an abrupt halt, and all of her staff laughs at her. When she gets married to her boyfriend Criss in the final season, Liz decides that since it’s her “special day,” she will wear something special: a full-on Princess Leia costume, a total nerd signifier. Leslie is often in pantsuits and blazers—less neutral than Liz, but still more feminine, and more professional (which can also be attributed to the differences in the work cultures of the entertainment industry and public service). Her choice of wedding attire, like Liz’s, conveys a specific part of her identity. After she and Ben decide to have the wedding earlier than planned, Ann, the dress’s designer, has to come up with another way to finish the dress. The result is pitch-perfect: a short skirt patchworked out of documents of all of
Leslie’s achievements in Pawnee, as well as pictures of her heroes. It’s a fitting dress for the sitcom feminist, because it celebrates her work achievements, even at this personal occasion, and it is unconventional, like Leslie herself. After their original attempt at a wedding is ruined, Leslie and Ben get married at a beautiful, intimate ceremony in a better location: the Parks office itself.

“Lifestyle Feminism,” Liz, and Leslie

Mary Richards was one of TV’s first acknowledgements of a changing world in which women were no longer confined to traditional paths of hearth, home, and husband, moving the woman-driven sitcom from domesticity to professionalism. However, as Dow has written, her association with feminist movements and ideas is signified through her lifestyle as a self-sufficient, career-driven woman.23 This “lifestyle feminism” seems to have come straight from the show’s creators, who have repeatedly denied any political intent, emphasizing their commitment to characters rather than social issues. Writes Bathrick:

When asked whether he felt that [the show] addressed the question of women’s rights, [producer James Brooks] attributes to ‘good timing’ the relationship that is established. Mary Richards’s character and the women’s movement ‘evolved’ simultaneously, he claims, ‘but we did not espouse women’s rights, we sought to show someone from Mary Richards’s background being in a world where women’s rights were being talked about and it was having an impact.’24

Though Mary herself is an “ambivalent” feminist at best, her position as both a single career woman and a winning, barely-flawed sitcom protagonist reflects second-wave feminist discourses and their reverberating effects, illustrating how the sitcom processes social change.

*30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation* deal with feminism much more explicitly, though with largely different intents. These sitcoms take place after *Mary Tyler Moore*, after the rise of second- and third wave feminism, as well as post-feminism; they emerge from a world that has undergone major shifts in how women live their lives. *30 Rock* grapples with the contradictions and complexities of contemporary feminism and of television’s “lifestyle feminism,” while *Parks and Rec* reinforces central themes of optimism and the strength of community articulated through its explicitly feminist central character.

The character of Liz Lemon can be understood as a satirical take on the twentieth-century version of Mary and her “lifestyle feminism,” a critique of the complacency and hypocrisy of affluent, liberal-leaning white women. *30 Rock* often undercuts Liz Lemon’s conceptions of herself—for subversion of sitcom convention (like season three’s “Reunion,” where she learns she was not her high school’s nerdy underdog but rather its sharp-tongued bully), but more importantly for social satire. Her purported liberal feminist values, and the feelings of moral superiority she derives from them, are shattered episode after episode as her actions fail to line up with her stated goals. Liz repeatedly asserts that she supports women—“I’m like a human bra,” she claims—but in reality, she has a storied history of undermining, criticizing, and enforcing the behaviors of the women around her. For example, in
season one’s “Rural Juror,” contrasting flashback montages show Liz’s selective memory and the truth of her behavior. In the first montage, Liz recalls the support she has provided for Jenna and her many failed projects in three quick, successive cutaways—“You looked so beautiful!” “The lighting was really neat!” “The programs were really easy to read!” But when we are shown the same flashbacks again, from Jenna’s perspective, we see Liz’s full condescension, as Fey performs these lines with much less enthusiasm. Though this character may champion a vague idea of feminism, she is much more individualistic and self-interested than she purports to be.

One explicit example of Liz’s self-exceptionalism occurs in the season five episode “TGS Hates Women,” which engages with a kind of meta-textual commentary about criticisms of Liz, *30 Rock*, and Fey herself. “TGS” is accused of hating women by a feminist blog that Liz describes thusly: “It’s this really cool feminist website where women talk about how far we’ve come and which celebrities have the worst beach bodies!” Liz hires Abby Flynn, a female comedian, to guest write for the show as a way of improving its reputation, but is soon disturbed by her new writer’s “sexy-baby-hooker” shtick. When Liz reveals Abby’s past as a brainier, more Liz-like comic, Abby castigates her, explaining that she adopted her new persona to escape a homicidal ex. As she leaves the writers’ room, she proclaims: “Liz Lemon is a Judas to all womankind!” This episode is not a redemption tale for Liz or for *30 Rock* itself; it doesn’t settle any debate about her real-life counterpart, or answer any questions about feminism in comedy. Liz tries to force Abby to comply with her personal standards of what a professional woman (or, at least, a schlubby
comedy writer) should be, which is basically everything Liz is: brunette, non-sexual, snarky, brainy. She views Abby as a woman enslaved by male desire and societal pressure, a woman that she must save through a “femolution.” Abby points out how hypocritical Liz is: “Really? [Trying to help me] by judging me on my appearance and the way I talk? And what’s the difference between me using my sexuality and you using those glasses to look smart?” Liz may view herself as above conventionally feminized pettiness and superficiality—she proudly tells Jack that she’s not threatened by men finding Abby attractive—but once again, this notion of self is punctured. Additionally, the episode foreshadows the disastrous consequences of Liz’s schemes throughout: she criticizes Jack for wanting to “destroy” a teenager, and her desire to “fix” is repeatedly equated with Jenna’s desire to dispose of her new rival. This only heightens the tension between Liz’s espoused values and her deeds, and makes her smug superiority over her co-workers even sillier. In this way, Liz embodies the tension between feminism as a social movement—with its emphasis on collective action and female solidarity—and the individualistic values of effort and achievement, which, as Dow has argued, is how television typically represents feminism.25

30 Rock received a lot of backlash throughout its seasons on the air, particularly in its last few years, as online critics decried Liz as childish, pathetic, and anti-feminist. Emily Nussbaum rebutted the backlash, arguing, “[The show] rarely made Liz an empowering role model, although many women certainly identified with

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her. The show let her be the George Costanza, not the Mary Richards.” Indeed, the show even brings this up directly in the opening scene of the pilot (season one, episode one), when Liz gets into a very Larry David-esque argument over the line at a hot dog stand, and then has her walking the halls of 30 Rockefeller plaza with a large box of hot dogs to the strains of a song strongly reminiscent of Mary Tyler Moore’s opening theme (“Who’s that, kicking it down the street, causing a stir? That’s her! That’s her!”) only for the camera to reveal that the song is for a sketch about an “Overly Confident Morbidly Obese Woman,” not our protagonist. Liz may be the star of the show and its de facto plucky heroine, but she’s no feminist icon. Her inconsistent feminist practices and her privileged status as an affluent, city-dwelling, heterosexual, white woman combine to form a critique of a certain brand of privileged postfeminism, which selectively engages with more mainstream, commercialized ideas about body image, sexuality, and empowerment, but largely ignores most everything else. Liz is not intended to be understood as a feminist role model; rather, she is a critique of some of the very women who might find her character appealing or relatable. The high standards that many online critics have applied to this character and her feminist associations fail to acknowledge the complicated, almost radical nature of a network TV centering a sitcom on a woman who has both comically cartoonish and very real flaws, especially where her politics are concerned.

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27 Emily Nussbaum, “The Female Bad Fan,” The New Yorker, October 17, 2014. This article brings up an interesting point about mistaking female characters for “role models,” though I don’t really agree with her grouping of Liz and Leslie Knope.
If Liz Lemon represents a satirical “lifestyle feminist,” Leslie Knope is a feminist of unbending, iron will and optimism. Unlike Liz, her commitment to gender equality and her sense of community inform almost every aspect of her character. Though she is by no means a radical—neither a politician nor the lead character on a broadcast network sitcom could quite fit that bill—she makes a version of feminism an explicit part of both her work and her personal life, and constantly strives to improve life for the citizens of her town, which is portrayed as comically, stubbornly, childishly backwards. Leslie’s feminist views are not questioned by anyone in her immediate circle, and indeed, none of her close friends and co-workers are depicted as anti-feminist, either openly or in more subtle ways. Leslie has several strong female friendships, like her bond with Ann, and she constantly wants to help her friends advance through their careers (and in their love lives, an area in which Leslie is significantly less skilled). She has been a mentor to April, who, under Leslie’s influence, went from a sour, slacker intern to a responsible leader, though she maintained her original commitment to sarcasm and gloom. Additionally, the show intentionally references women of historical or political significance, sometimes featuring cameos by male and female politicians such as Madeline Albright, Barbara Boxer and Olympia Snowe, and John McCain. Leslie has pictures of significant female politicians and her personal heroines throughout her office, and treats politicians as a more conventionally feminine woman might treat a favorite celebrity, a trait that seems to have been with her since childhood (in one episode she references her childhood action figure, Geraldine Ferraro, made out of a popsicle stick). The show’s frequent references to Leslie’s real-life role models provide a nice contrast to
the largely misogynist local government and also round out a world that Leslie (and the show) see as full of possibility.

The men in Leslie’s life are all respectful and kind, particularly her husband, who shares her feminist beliefs. Leslie and Ben are portrayed as strong equals, both incredibly capable and hardworking; a marriage like theirs has rarely been depicted on television. Ben does not try to contain or dominate his wife, like the husbands of the family-centered comedies I have discussed previously (Ricky, Darrin, Danny). Instead, *Parks and Rec* repeatedly emphasizes their marital equality throughout the series, and often shows Ben in the more conventionally feminine position of repressing his own desires for the sake of his spouse. For example, in the series’ time-jumping finale (season seven, episode twelve), both Ben and Leslie are approached to potentially run for governor of Indiana, an exciting proposition for each of them. They both care for each other and want the other to be happy, to pursue their goals, so they decide to flip a coin. However, before they can toss the coin, Ben announces to their assembled Parks Department friends that Leslie will be running for the position. He puts her needs and ambitions ahead of his own, a radical subversion of the True Womanhood ideology that promotes female self-sacrifice. In this way, *Parks and Recreation* moves past Mary Tyler Moore’s “lifestyle feminism” by openly acknowledging feminism as a social movement, and by emphasizing collective action and the power of solidarity among both men and women, a theme of the show itself.

One example (among many) of the show’s emphasis on solidarity and gender equality can be found in season five, episode eleven. In the utterly backwards manner of Pawnee, only men show up to the commission (“Oh my god, I’m part of the
problem,” realizes Chris Traeger—one example of the feminist attitudes found in all the central characters). One of the men, Councilman Milton, congratulates her on getting the snacks, and begins to applaud her, telling the room, “She has to leave now to go get more snacks.” Leslie resists, and he asks why she’s so “ornery,” alluding to the fact that he keeps a calendar of her menstrual cycle (a practice that the first woman on city council had also dealt with). Leslie sets her sights on the sanitation department, who have the lowest rates of female employment because the garbage men don’t think women are strong enough. Leslie and April accept the challenge, and it becomes clear that they are even more efficient than the men. The chauvinistic sanitation department attempts to sabotage their work by asking that they move a large refrigerator, and they realize that they have been set up to fail. In the end, a group of women come from the local soup kitchen, and together, they move what Leslie referred to earlier as the “symbolic feminist obstacle” onto the truck of “women’s advancement,” a simple and bold narrative strategy that demonstrates Parks and Rec’s commitment to solidarity, teamwork, and gender equality.

The Work Family

Both 30 Rock and Parks and Recreation continue a concept largely pioneered by Mary Tyler Moore (and elaborated in other MTM-produced comedies), that of the workplace as a family unit. The domestic-com family dynamic had worked well for decades, and creating a family of co-workers infused the concept with new narrative and comic possibilities. Mary brought together a group of loveable misfits; in the series finale, “Mary asserted that what defined a family was ‘people who make you
feel less alone and really loved.””28 Conveniently, this family dynamic also transposed the traditional, gender-divided conception of the family onto the workplace, with men in charge and women in secondary positions. 30 Rock and Parks and Rec utilized this concept in different ways, indicating the storytelling possibilities the family dynamic brings to the genre.

30 Rock’s co-workers can be understood as a nuclear familial unit, with Jack as the patrician father, Liz as exhausted, overworked mother, and the writers and stars of “TGS” as her children. The writers could be compared to teenagers—they are messy, they are rebellious, they constantly undermine her. Tracy and Jenna, with their fragile egos, poor impulse control, and frequent tantrums, are the toddlers of this “family.” This show is much more individualistic than Parks, however, so the workplace family is not about family unity at all; rather, it is Liz’s substitute for a balanced life, at once her baby and her spouse. The show makes it clear that Liz’s job and her personal life are practically one and the same, from Rosemary’s warnings to frequent equations of Jenna and Tracy as her children. The last two episodes of the show deal with Liz as a mother with a real family, beginning with the arrival of her newly adopted eight-year-old twins at the end of the penultimate episode, “A Goon’s Deed in a Weary World” (season seven, episode eleven). The most stable aspect of 30 Rock—Liz’s job—had just been upended, as “TGS” had finally been cancelled, with her two stars and the writers all quitting so that Liz could greet her new children at the airport. When they finally show up, they’re clearly meant to be child-size copies of Tracy and Jenna: their names are Tracy and Janet, and their first dialogue is similar

to that of their grown-up counterparts. It’s the show’s way of reinforcing that, even though she may be a mother, and married, Liz’s family has been her work all along.

*Parks and Recreation* is very much about the work family that the Parks employees created together. Since the show and its central characters are portrayed as a group that values gender equality, it isn’t as traditionally gendered a workspace as the offices of WJM, though Leslie sits at its helm as a nurturing, hardworking, sometimes manic mother. The Parks family is less about the workplace itself and more about the experiences they have outside of it as they all work together for the Harvest Festival, or the city council election, or the Unity Concert—these are the major events where the series’ central cast is all in (roughly) the same space all at once, working for a single goal. With her Parks coworkers, Leslie often takes on the role of mother, trying to improve her friends’ lives or careers, as exemplified by her relationship with April, who she stubbornly (though lovingly) badgers into a career-oriented mindset throughout the entire show. One could also view the “family” of this workplace as a relationship between Leslie and her constituents, who she also strives to improve. Right-leaning politicians often invoke the term “nanny state” in critiquing liberal policies they view as government overreach, which comes up several times between Leslie and the citizens of the town she loves. She is the mother who begs them to eat their vegetables, and they resist her at every step of the way. The relationship between Leslie and her various “families” illustrates an interesting contradiction of the character; though committed to fairness and equality in every respect, she behaves as a mother figure to her coworkers and the town, transposing the vision of woman as moral caretaker from the private to the public sphere.
Through *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation*, we can see how the threads of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* run through the woman-driven workplace sitcom, shifting and growing more complicated along with social change. Where Mary is a transposed True Woman, Liz and Leslie are quite different. Liz, though espousing liberal feminist values, is ultimately individualistic and self-serving, a satire of the “lifestyle feminism” evinced by many of the single woman characters inspired by *Mary Tyler Moore*, and by a certain strain of contemporary feminists in real life as well. Leslie moves beyond Dow’s concept of “lifestyle feminism,” in her explicitly feminist deeds and actions, as well as in her values of collective action and unity. However, all three characters enact conventionally feminine, maternal or sororal roles within their respective workplace environments. In this way, we see the influence of social change and feminist movements on this subgenre of the sitcom, as it grows more complex and contradictory over time.
3. Single Women & Sisterhood in the Friendship Sitcom

The success of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in the 1970s showed the broadcast networks the lucrative potential of narrowcasting, a strategy defined by Joanne Morreale as “producing television shows for small but specific demographic segments of the viewing population,” as opposed to their original strategy, which was generally to aim for the broadest possible audience. And as we have moved away from the containment-era patterns of early marriage and motherhood towards the contemporary era, where single women currently outnumber married women, the segment of audiences originally courted by *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*—upscale working women—have become increasingly valuable to the television industry.¹ As I have documented, early woman-driven sitcoms, like *I Love Lucy* or *The Donna Reed Show*, were rooted in domestic containment ideology and either predated or ignored second-wave feminist movements. These family-centered sitcoms represented women only after marriage and motherhood, the unrepresented “happily ever afters” projected by conventional cinematic romantic comedies. But as the feminist movement gained mainstream momentum in the early seventies, depictions of leading women in sitcoms moved from the private sphere out into the public. The working woman comedies that formed the next “phase” of the woman-driven sitcom, such as *Mary Tyler Moore*, responded to the changing paths of women’s lives, and they could also appeal simultaneously to the modern “liberated” women without alienating domestic women or more conservative audiences. However, narrowcasting would become increasingly important—and increasingly narrower—over the 1970s, 1980s

and into the 1990s, as competition from cable television intensified, and as new technologies like VCRs and DVD players handed audiences more control over their viewing choices and habits than ever before. And though broadcast networks would essentially maintain their pursuit of large (though segmented) audiences, cable networks have sought out “niche” viewers, offering slates of content designed to appeal directly to their desired demographics.

Despite the industry’s ever-growing interest in a variety of women viewers in the new TV marketplace, premium cable channels have continued to privilege male viewers. Among the numerous cable networks that exist today, perhaps the most prestigious is Home Box Office, commonly known as HBO, which has long relied on male-oriented programming in developing its particular brand of “quality” television. Founded in 1972, it is the oldest continuously operating cable network; its name evokes cinema, which is often regarded as a higher art form in comparison to television; and it is a premium cable network, meaning viewers pay a monthly subscription fee in order to access its content. Because of this subscription-based model, HBO is not dependent on advertising and thus not beholden to the same kind of censorship as a broadcast or even basic cable network. Their most famous slogan, “It’s not TV. It’s HBO.”, was designed to brand them as prestigious, placing their content above that of the lowly networks and basic cable companies. HBO’s initial strategy was focused showing movies and special events such as sports and live concerts, but since the early nineties, they have become well known for their original programming: compelling dramas such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire*

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(2002-08), and acerbic comedies like *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-98) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-2011). Shows like these have garnered major acclaim from viewers, critics, and academics, many of whom have praised the shows for their cinematic styles and complex narratives. *The Sopranos* in particular is frequently credited with kicking off television’s latest “golden age” of morally complex anti-heroes and cinematic style.

However, as Emily Nussbaum has pointed out, many commentators forget (or outright ignore) one of HBO’s earliest successes, the romantic dramedy-slash-female friendship comedy *Sex and the City* (1998-2004).³ *Sex and the City*’s six seasons chronicle the lives of four female friends as they navigate sex, dating, and single womanhood in New York City. The series was extremely successful during its original run, winning praise and industry awards as well as an unprecedented number of viewers, especially for premium cable, for its series finale; it continues to circulate as a bona-fide pop cultural phenomenon, with two (horrendous) feature-film sequels, intensive merchandising, and years of syndicated reruns.⁴ *Sex and the City* has also been the object of much criticism or outright derision, which runs the gamut from questioning its feminist bona fides to denouncing the show as demeaning all women to merely scolding the characters for being shallow or consumerist. Nonetheless, *Sex and the City* was undeniably innovative in its depictions of flawed women protagonists, female sexuality and pleasure, and its focus on female friendship. The series was loosely based off of a *New York Observer* column about modern dating

and sex, written by self-styled “sexual anthropologist” Candace Bushnell; television writer and producer Darren Star adapted her work to the small screen and became the series’ primary showrunner.\(^5\) Star knew that the series’ edgy sexual subject matter would not play well on censored network television, so he specifically solicited HBO to commission the project.\(^6\) Working with HBO also allowed Star to stick with his initial vision for the show, which he has repeatedly described as something more “cinematic” than television—a vision consistent with HBO’s “not TV” brand at the time. In an interview from 2016, he explains, “Sex and the City was, for me, an independent film for television… I want to make the equivalent of little movies for television.”\(^7\) With its high production values, the series has many markers of film style and generally operates outside of stylistic conventions for half-hour television comedies. Shot in the single camera style (now de rigueur for comedies both cable and broadcast), they used film rather than video, and shooting took place in New York City, a much of it actually on location, rather than on a set in a studio; additionally, there is no laugh track to cue the home audience to respond to jokes or humor. Deborah Jermyn has argued that SATC’s rejection of conventional sitcom production techniques, most notably the lack of a laugh track, complicates the show’s generic position as it owes as much to cinematic romantic comedy as to the television sitcom, and its stories can swing wildly between comedy and melodrama.\(^8\) The show’s episodic structure is shaped by voiceover narration from the show’s central

\(^5\) Nussbaum, “Difficult Women.”
\(^6\) Jermyn, 19.
\(^7\) Darren Star, interview by David Blum, Darren Star: The Kindle Singles Interview (Amazon Digital Services, 2016), Kindle edition.
\(^8\) Jermyn, 23.
protagonist, sex columnist Carrie Bradshaw (originally Bushnell’s alter ego). Her narration frames each episode’s subplots if reading from her column, foregrounding their thematic connections, which usually address some facet of single womanhood, dating, or gender relations.9 *Sex and the City* swings between worlds of realism and melodrama, with a consistent emphasis on consumerist excess: it would shoot in the bars or nightclubs that wealthy Manhattanites actually flocked to at the time, but it also depicted a freelance writer with a closet so full of high-fashion ensembles that she rarely (if ever) wore the same thing twice. Mise-en-scène helps negotiate between the realism and the excess of the New York in *SATC*, and designer Patricia Field’s costuming is among its most important and visually excessive elements, eye-catching and over-the-top. Jermyn analyzes the fantastical nature of Field’s costuming as part of a larger “gendered, consumerist, and romantic fantasy” of a single woman, with no family or marital responsibilities, spending her income on her own pleasure.10

*Sex and the City’s* central quartet consists of Carrie, the show’s narrator and de facto protagonist, and her three best friends: lawyer Miranda Hobbes, a career-minded pragmatist; PR executive Samantha Jones, a libidinous commitment-phobe; and art dealer Charlotte York, a hopelessly romantic WASP. These four characters each embody a different basic archetype—the “everywoman,” the “career woman,” the “slut,” and the “traditionalist,” respectively—providing female fans, as well as numerous websites and magazines, a quick shorthand with which to identify

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9 The themes usually come in the form of a question, like “Can you change a man?” “Are we sluts?” “Can we have it all?”. For an amusing selection of everything Carrie wondered over the course of the show, see this article from *New York Magazine’s* Vulture blog: http://www.vulture.com/2013/03/carrie-sex-city-couldnt-help-but-wonder.html
10 Ibid, 30.
themselves and their own friends, a shorthand that hasn’t fallen out of use even more
than a decade after the show’s finale. While personally differentiated, the group is
socially homogenous, as all four women are professionally successful, affluent, white
thirtysomethings with attractive wardrobes and enviable apartments in nice
neighborhoods. However, they each have their own individual orientations, which
undercut their surface similarities and spark the show’s primary narrative rhythms.
Nussbaum argues that the characters are allegorical figures,
...pegged to contemporary debates about women’s lives, mapped along three
overlapping continuums. The first was emotional: Carrie and Charlotte were
romantics; Miranda and Samantha were cynics. The second was ideological:
Miranda and Carrie were second-wave feminists, who believed in
egalitarianism; Charlotte and Samantha were third-wave feminists, focused on
exploiting the power of femininity, from opposing angles. The third concerned
sex itself...Miranda and Charlotte were prudes, while Samantha and Carrie
were libertines.12

Their contrasting positions on almost every issue, and the various stances they could
fight for or against in endless combinations, present the viewer with a wide variety of
perspectives on the problems or questions that single women might agonize over as
they navigated sex, dating, and many other issues, ranging from the inane to the
existential (Can you ever really be friends with an ex? Would anal sex make a new

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11 As of this writing, a quick Google search for “Which SATC girl are you?” returns
more than half a million results in personality quizzes from various web outlets
(including one from the satirical website Clickhole.com, which itself lampoons the
whole notion of taking a *Sex and the City* personality quiz).
12 Nussbaum, “Difficult Women.”
boyfriend respect you less? Can you be part of a couple and retain your own identity?). *Sex and the City*’s core fascination with the various possibilities of single women’s lives can be understood as key to the series’ tremendous appeal and unrelenting popularity. As Jermyn writes, the show “was perfectly timed to tap into a zeitgeist consumed by the question of what women want,” especially as postfeminist attitudes proliferated in the eighties and nineties, emphasizing individualism and individual choice among women.¹³

With its postfeminist, sexually active single women, *Sex and the City* is undeniably one of *Mary Tyler Moore*’s many descendants. The show’s opening credits are a clear allusion to *MTM*, a nod to their foremother: Carrie on the street, amidst shots of New York City skyscrapers, enjoying a moment of Mary-esque triumph (sans hat) until she gets splashed by a passing bus.¹⁴ However, as Nussbaum has argued, Mary Richards was a true role model, a plucky, exemplary heroine anyone could root for, while Carrie and her friends were “jagged, aggressive, and sometimes frightening figures,” female characters with flaws that often angered the same adoring fans who so eagerly identified themselves as Carries, Charlottes, Mirandas, or Samanthas.¹⁵ And though Mary had several women in her circle of friends (most notably her neighbor, Rhoda), these friendships were undercut by her “work family” at WJM, a male-dominated group. *Sex and the City*’s intricately rendered portrait of female friendship can be traced back through another important woman-driven sitcom, *The Golden Girls* (NBC, 1985-1992). *Golden Girls* centered

¹³ Jermyn, 2.  
¹⁴ Jermyn, 80-82.  
¹⁵ Nussbaum, “Difficult Women.”
on Dorothy, Rose, Blanche, and Sophia, a foursome of older women sharing a home together in Miami. All of the women were either widowed or divorced. And, as they frequently say, now took one another as a new family. Many have perceived direct lines from these characters to their younger New York counterparts: “everywoman” Dorothy to Carrie, sweet Rose to Charlotte, promiscuous Blanche to Samantha, practical Sophia to Miranda (although the link from Sophia to Miranda is much more tenuous). But the series’ greatest impact on Sex and the City, and on woman-driven sitcoms more broadly, was its loving depiction of friendship among women. Jermyn writes, “[Golden Girls] imagined a bold milieu for television where the relationships between a set of women are the primary focus, forming a surrogate family unit where men play a generally peripheral role.”16 The family unit has been the sitcom’s most fundamental building block since the medium’s inception, though its social realizations have shifted in the woman-driven sitcom with the influence of feminism in American culture and society. As certain second-wave feminist ideologies entered the mainstream, the “families” of woman-driven sitcoms shifted from the nuclear family of domestic containment into the workplace family of liberated, professional womanhood; more recently, as the median age of first marriage has risen and postfeminist attitudes have become more commonplace, the woman-driven sitcom family unit has morphed once again, now into a vision of the friend group as family.17

The differences between Golden Girls and SATC offer a particularly clear illustration of this phenomenon. Close relationships among women, particularly single women,

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16 Jermyn, 44.
17 Traister, All the Single Ladies, 5. From 1890 to 1980, the median age of first marriage hovered between twenty and twenty-two years old; today, that age is around twenty-seven or higher.
have long unsettled hegemonic patriarchal structures, for they have often been perceived as “[undermining] traditional family and the primacy of the heterosexual couple,” in Jermyn’s words.\(^\text{18}\) *Golden Girls*, a broadcast network sitcom that began in the mid-eighties, depicts the friendship of women who have already been married and are of an age group that popular culture often ignores or makes invisible. But by the late nineties, on a cable network known for its permissive attitudes towards the content of its programs, the friends on *Sex and the City* are still single in their thirties, an age at which all of the women of *Golden Girls* were already married. By depicting the closeness of never married women in a younger age group, fully formed women who were unwilling (or just unready) to settle down or start families, *Sex and the City* affirms female friendship as central to women’s lives, rather than mere placeholders until “real” life—married life—begins, or a safety net after it ends. This is best exemplified by a scene in the episode “The Agony and the Ex-tacy,” (season 4, episode 1). After Carrie’s friends accidentally stand her up at her thirty-fifth birthday dinner, the ladies go out for dessert, where Carrie confesses to the group that in that moment, she felt sad not to have a man in her life who cared about her, a “soul mate.” Charlotte responds: “Don’t laugh at me, but maybe we could be each other’s soul mates. And then we could let men just be these… guys to have fun with.” The four women all agree. This notion of being “each other’s soul mates,” being the family they got to choose for themselves, was the central tenet of the show; though the

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 96-114; Jermyn, 45. For example, Traister includes a brief section about Charlotte Brontë’s husband, who was so afraid of his wife’s close friendship with Ellen Nussey that he insisted Nussey burn all the letters she received from Brontë. (Luckily, she never did).
women may have all desired male companionship or partnership in one way or another, their greatest love was for each other.

Both *Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* were part of a larger phenomenon of an emerging sitcom genre, that of the friendship-centered sitcom, perhaps most famously exemplified by the success of NBC’s smash hit, *Friends* (1994-2004), about a group of young people living in New York. *Friends* has been widely credited as the catalyst for the growth of this subgenre, as a show that simply showed the slice-of-life exploits of a group of people who were not related to each other, married, or co-workers, in contrast to most of the sitcoms that predated it.\(^\text{19}\) The bridge from workplace sitcoms to friendship-centered sitcoms is NBC’s *Cheers* (1982-1993), which, with its (romantically incestuous) family of bartenders and patrons, blurred the lines between workplace and private life.

In *Friends*, the workplace is no longer an important site of personal relationships. The show reflected changes in middle-class formation, as marriage was deferred and lost its status as the marker of adulthood, while the expansion of urban singles cultures contributed to a consumption-oriented version of adulthood defined by play as much as by work. These shifts reinforced the commercial value of urban single professionals to the television industry, an audience seen as receptive to the friendship-centered sitcom. The popularity of the “friend-com” form endures today, as the perceived transition from youth to full adulthood has become even more

\(^{19}\) It should be noted that *Friends* was actually preceded by Fox’s *Living Single* (1993-1998), a fact that many have forgotten or glossed over. It’s often been called “the black *Friends*,” indicative of how representations of people of color are marginalized on TV and by “mainstream” audiences.
extended in recent years, and middle-class young adults face far more precarious, unstable, and uncertain futures than the boomer generation that preceded them.\textsuperscript{20}

The simplest way to define the friendship-centered sitcom genre is as a show that centers on the exploits of a pair or group of friends. Others have called shows in this category “roommate comedy” or “hangout comedy,” but I believe that “friendship-centered sitcom” is a more inclusive and flexible term (although, admittedly, much less succinct). More recent friend-coms include shows such as \textit{Will & Grace} (NBC, 1998-2006), \textit{How I Met Your Mother} (CBS, 2005-2014), \textit{Happy Endings} (ABC, 2011-2013), and \textit{New Girl} (Fox, 2011—), among others. The genre is a rather nebulous one, and many of the shows that fit the definition could also be categorized under a number of other genres, but identifiable patterns do appear. These friends might live together or next door to each other, like the women of \textit{Golden Girls} or the titular \textit{Friends}, but they also might have their own apartments, like the women of \textit{Sex and the City}. Friend-coms often include a focus on the characters’ romantic lives, with multiple plots about sex, dating, or relationships, and if the group is gender-mixed, there will usually be at least one plot thread about a romantic or sexual relationship between two members of the group—the infamous Ross-and-Rachel (and Monica-Chandler pairing) on \textit{Friends}. Though these shows may include plotlines about the workplaces or professional lives of their characters, or plots about marriage

\textsuperscript{20} Frank F. Furstenberg Jr. et al, “Growing Up is Harder to Do,” in \textit{Public and Private Families: A Reader}, by Andrew J. Cherlin, 7\textsuperscript{th} ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013), 38-42. \textit{Friends} remains incredibly popular among millennials (many of whom are much younger than the show itself) and Gen-Xers alike, with many citing the relative stability of the nineties as the reason they enjoy it. See this fascinating article from \textit{New York Magazine}’s Vulture blog for more: http://www.vulture.com/2016/03/20-somethings-streaming-friends-c-v-r.html.
and new parenthood (not necessarily in that order and especially in later seasons), they do not fit the genre molds of either family-centered comedy or workplace comedy. This makes the friend-com uniquely flexible, since it can incorporate aspects or plot arcs of these other genres, which theoretically broadens their appeal. Friend-com characters usually exhibit similar generic traits: they are almost always young, in their twenties or thirties; the groups are white or predominantly so; they generally come from middle- or upper-middle class backgrounds and have relative financial stability; they are educated; they are single or predominantly so; they live in urban environments, usually New York City. These characteristic similarities across the friendship-centric sitcom genre are not an accident, as they mirror the young, urban, “sophisticated” audiences that networks have been pursuing since the days of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

*Sex and the City’s* specifically female iteration of the friendship-centered comedy is arguably its most compelling, enduring legacy. Though many woman-driven sitcoms have depicted female friendship—Lucy and Ethel, Mary and Rhoda—these relationships were not central to the narrative of their respective series, since they almost always took a back seat to the dominant narratives of domesticity or workplace life. In contrast, as Dow has argued, woman-driven friendship-centered comedies like *Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City* “[emphasize] the benefits of female support, giving implicit (and sometimes explicit) credence to feminist arguments about the need for women’s solidarity.”

The friend groups on these shows are each other’s “soul mates,” each other’s chosen family, superseding any other relationships

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that either show may depict. However, though *Golden Girls* is the indisputable
grandmother of the genre (literally), *Sex and the City* has ultimately proven to be
more influential, since it depicted the younger, “cosmopolitan” audiences that the
television industry has found more commercially valuable. Deborah Jermyn offers a
succinct summary of the show’s impact: “*SATC* became a kind of shorthand through
which to articulate a particular cultural moment among a generation of ‘postfeminist’
television audiences…”

And today, in the current “cultural moment,” we can understand *Sex and the City*’s legacy through its two most obvious descendants,
woman-driven friendship-centered comedies *Girls* (HBO, 2012—) and *Broad City*
(Comedy Central, 2014—).

*Girls* and *Broad City* share many, many parallels to *Sex and the City*, as well
as to each other. Chief among these is premise: all three shows chronicle friendships
between young, single women living in New York City, though the women of *Girls*
and *Broad City* are in their early twenties (significantly younger than Carrie and
company) and far less established both financially and professionally. Additionally,
*Girls* and *Broad City* each depict female pleasure and female sexuality in an explicit,
boundary-pushing manner, both continuing and challenging *Sex and the City*’s
innovative exploration of these subjects. The three shows share industrial similarities
as well—all three shoot in New York, frequently on location, and they all air on
male-dominated cable networks.

But *Girls* and *Broad City* capture a different

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22 Jermyn, 10.
23 Though *Broad City* is on Comedy Central, a male-oriented network that does not
quite have HBO’s same prestige. For more on Comedy Central’s male-oriented
programming, see Nick Marx, “Expanding the Brand: Race, Gender, and the Post-
generational version single womanhood than *Sex and the City* did, set in a different cultural milieu. Where *Sex and the City* conveyed the postfeminist anxieties of affluent, thirtysomething single women at the turn of the millennium, *Girls* and *Broad City* articulate varying versions of millennial aimlessness and uncertainty. The women of *SATC* were incontestably adult, with such markers of maturity as successful careers and their own apartments; these contemporary characters, in contrast, mostly work in unpaid internships or dead-end jobs, and share haphazardly furnished apartments with at least one roommate. These differences reflect not only the younger age of the characters, but also a sense that the road to adulthood—generally defined today as leaving one’s childhood home, finishing school, and being financially independent—has become longer and increasingly precarious, for some; some refer to today’s twentysomethings as “emerging adults” or other similar phrases. 

*Broad City* and *Girls* each rework the legacy of *SATC* in their distinct depictions of female friendship among young, urban, privileged single women. *Sex and the City*’s commitment to the power of female friendship, in all its intimacy and intricacies, continues to resonate in the woman-driven friendship-centered sitcoms airing today; *Girls* and *Broad City* benefit from the show’s boundary-pushing portrayals of female pleasure, female sexuality and female friendship, and they continue to complicate sitcom representation of women and women’s lives.

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24 Furstenburg et al, 41; Traister, 135. The (much contested) “emerging adult” concept comes from sociologist Jeffery Arnett, who gave it a largely positive sense as a period of extensive “self-exploration.”
Girls Growing Up & Apart

*Girls*, which premiered on HBO in 2012 and is currently airing its sixth (and penultimate) season, follows a group of young women in their early twenties as they stumble through life. It centers on four single women, each a new iteration of the *Golden Girls/Sex and the City* archetypes: Hannah, an aspiring writer and the show’s greatly flawed “everywoman”; Marnie, a type-A gallery girl (later an aspiring musician); Shoshanna, a bubbly and naïve NYU student; and Jessa, a cynical hedonist. Though its tone can veer from darkly comic to truly upsetting, *Girls* is generally regarded as a comedy or (more accurately) a dramedy. The show is shot in the single-camera format, and like most “quality” or “prestige” comedies of recent years, does not utilize a laugh track or other traditional markers of the sitcom aesthetic. The show is is highly serialized, although individual episodes—and the longer story arcs as well—are much more slice-of-life, part of the show’s larger dedication to realism in depicting the meandering, directionless feel of contemporary young adulthood among this narrow segment of privileged twentysomethings, as well as its creator’s stylistic sensibilities. The show was created by indie filmmaker Lena Dunham, who earned a deal with HBO following the success of *Tiny Furniture*, her feature-length debut, in 2010. As with *Tiny Furniture*, *Girls* is loosely based on Dunham’s experiences in navigating post-college life; in addition to writing the show, she also produces, directs some episodes, and stars as Hannah, the main protagonist.
Though *Girls* received a good amount of praise and favorable press, waves of backlash and criticism have surrounded it since its premiere episode.\(^{25}\)

Detractors have criticized the show for not being “funny enough” or not “realistic” enough in its representation of millennials or of New York City; Dunham and her cast for alleged nepotism (all four of the show’s stars are children of wealthy public figures); the characters, for being too privileged, too whiny, too narcissistic or childish, or not being good enough “role models”; and of the show’s representation of sex and sexuality, for being either too explicit, too degrading, or too negative. And though many of these criticisms may have some validity, other critics have pointed out that a lot of the vitriol directed towards the show links to a larger gender bias. Todd VanDerWerff argues that, legitimate quarrels aside, the backlash against *Girls* is connected to current ideas about what makes “quality” television, a notion that is often masculinized.\(^{26}\) *Girls*, he argues, does not fit this masculinized mold, as it depicts distinctly feminine characters with flaws; they are comedic anti-heroines who are often off-putting, a quality that often gets praised in male comic anti-heroes, like the misanthrope protagonists of *Louie* or *Curb Your Enthusiasm* or *Seinfeld*, but is regarded with suspicion or disgust in female characters, particularly young ones.

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\(^{25}\) Amanda Dobbins, “Anatomy of a Backlash: Tracking the Arguments About *Girls,*” Vulture (blog), *New York Magazine*, April 26, 2012, http://www.vulture.com/2012/04/anatomy-of-a-backlash-tracking-the-arguments-about-girls.html. This timeline of backlash only includes immediately before and after the show’s premiere, though criticisms of the show have not died down, even now in its sixth season.

These reactions to Girls’ undeniably self-absorbed characters and their perceived “unlikability” parallel similar criticisms surrounding the women on Sex and the City. Girls carries on the legacy of its many woman-driven sitcom antecedents in a number of ways. For instance, I Love Lucy, The Donna Reed Show, Roseanne, and the more recent 30 Rock all star their female authors who play humbler versions of themselves, as Dunham does in her show. Additionally, the pilot episode contains an explicit allusion to The Mary Tyler Moore Show; an early scene begins with Hannah and her roommate Marnie waking up in bed together after having fallen asleep watching reruns of MTM. Another important part of Girls’ sitcom heritage is how it portrays unruly womanhood, particularly as it relates to excessive female bodies. Like Roseanne Conner before her, Hannah is a short and chubby sitcom protagonist, whose body does not conform to conventional media depictions of women (particularly women in leading roles); her bodily excess is a physical manifestation of the character’s many unruly qualities. Hannah is outspoken, obnoxious, selfish and even somewhat shrill; she is sexually loose; she has excessive appetites for food, often eating as a way to cope with stress. (In season one, episode three, she confesses to Shoshanna: “I just bought four cupcakes and ate one in your bathroom just now.”). Her frequent nudity, and Dunham’s willingness to display her body in realistically unflattering ways, add a new dimension to unruly womanhood in television comedy, one that could not circulate on the more strictly regulated broadcast networks. Girls’ most obvious link, however, is to its HBO predecessor Sex and the City.

Most reviews or other early press for the show cited Sex and the City, either for purposes of direct comparison or simply to bring up the “inevitability” of such
comparisons, as Alan Sepinwall did in his review of the first episode.\textsuperscript{27} The pilot episode contains an explicit nod to the show’s forerunner, in a scene in which girly Shoshanna welcomes Jessa, her much more worldly cousin, into her apartment, where a \textit{SATC} poster hangs on the wall. Impressed by how “classy” Jessa is, Shoshanna begins to ramble: “You know, you’re funny, because you’re definitely, like, a Carrie, but with like, some Samantha aspects, and Charlotte hair. That’s like, a really good combination.” Jessa thanks her awkwardly, and after a beat, Shoshanna continues. “I think I’m definitely a Carrie at heart, but sometimes”—a smile—“Sometimes Samantha kind of comes out.” She pauses briefly and then immediately adds, “And then, I mean, when I’m at school, I definitely try to put on my Miranda hat.” Jessa stares at her blankly, if not a little scornfully. This exchange acknowledges \textit{Girls’} predecessor while also poking fun at its legacy, a subtle joke made even funnier when it is revealed a few episodes later that Shoshanna (despite her Samantha aspirations) is actually a virgin. Dunham has addressed the comparisons between her show and \textit{SATC}; in one interview, she explained that she felt the two shows were “tackling different subject matter,” since \textit{Sex and the City} was about women in their thirties who had already “figured out work and friends and now wan to nail family life,” whereas \textit{Girls} centers on much younger women who don’t have anything figured out at all. (“Their shitty boyfriend whose bed is on the floor is their Mr. Big,” said

Dunham of her central characters).\textsuperscript{28} Though both \textit{SATC} and \textit{Girls} feature single women dating, entering relationships, and engaging in casual or monogamous sex, each show depicts sex in a particular light. To a certain degree, this is a factor of the characters’ difference in age, as well as the recent rise of a much maligned “hookup culture,” a term most often used to describe the behavior of young adults, particularly on college campuses, who engage in physical or sexual encounters without expectations of long- or short-term commitment.\textsuperscript{29} But mostly, it has to do with the distinctive tones of the two series.

\textit{SATC} frequently deploys sex—both discussions about it and depictions of it—as comedy, whether slapstick or sophisticated; this strategy is particularly useful as comic relief in episodes otherwise dominated by pathos or melodrama. For example, in “My Motherboard, My Self” (season four, episode eight), a short montage of Samantha and her latest conquest trying out a variety of increasingly complex sexual positions provides a dose of comedy amidst the episode’s more melodramatic A-plot, which concerns the sudden death of Miranda’s mother. In contrast, many of the sex scenes on \textit{Girls} are much more uncomfortable, messy, and awkward, depicting sex that is rarely ever satisfying for both parties. Though these scenes may have comic elements or undertones, they are mostly cringe-inducing in their depictions of the sexual indignities or absurdities that the central characters face as they attempt to live out their own versions of empowered female sexuality, no matter how misguided.


\textsuperscript{29} Traister, 226.
Most of Hannah’s trysts with Adam, her hookup (later boyfriend, then ex), in season one, are funny and embarrassing all at once, as Hannah tries to come across as cool, kinky, and spontaneous, attempts that always fail. For instance, in season one, episode two, Adam suddenly begins narrating a somewhat disturbing sexual fantasy involving Hannah as a preteen girl, which she tries to keep up with, adding her own attempts at dirty talk; when he finishes, she remarks, “I almost came.” Girls’ bleakly humorous sex scenes are a far cry from most of SATC’s comic or even cartoonishly slapstick sexual sequences; as Emily Nussbaum wrote of the show’s first season, “…‘Girls’ captured how sex can be theatre—not just faking orgasm but faking coolness, kinkiness, independence.”

Another difference between the two shows comes from the way they treat their central friendships. Where Sex and the City celebrated the power and strength of female friendships and consistently cued audiences to understand the characters as each other’s “soul mates,” Girls is far less certain about its characters’ friendships; it is more a coming-of-age story depicting young women growing up and apart. We can understand this difference partially through the contrasting stylistic strategies of each show. For instance, no matter how disparate their lives may have been within different episodes, the women of SATC are constantly linked by Carrie’s omniscient narration, which weaves each woman’s individual plot into a larger thematic pattern for the episode, thus emphasizing their unity as a group. In contrast, Girls has no voiceover, no narrator to mediate the episode’s events or tie the characters together across disparate plot arcs. The lack of voiceover forms another facet of the show’s

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realism, as it divides, rather than unites, the central friend group, especially as they have drifted apart over the past several seasons. Though some have criticized this drift on the grounds that it “doesn’t make sense” for the characters to continue to call themselves friends, Matt Zoller Seitz argues that it is part of Girls’ verisimilitude. “In recent seasons,” he observes, “the writers have had to contrive reasons to have them cross paths with each other, often by way of a scheduling coincidence or a meal or a party… because that’s what happens when you get older.” Additionally, Sex and the City’s use of voiceover narration prompts the viewer to align with its flawed protagonist(s) even as they behave badly, like the season three storyline in which Carrie repeatedly cheats on Aidan, her loving, attentive boyfriend, with bad-boy Mr. Big. Though her actions are objectionable, her narration provides subjective access to her inner thoughts, allowing the audience to understand and even sympathize with the self-destructive, selfish impulses that drive her. In contrast, Girls presents its abrasive, self-involved characters with glaring objectivity, neither endorsing nor fully condemning their flaws or their actions. They are, after all, still “busy trying to become who [they are],” to paraphrase Hannah’s angry, self-defensive retort to her parents’ attempts to cut her off financially in the pilot episode. And their many character weaknesses have exacerbated the growing gaps in their friendship, even as they’ve matured slightly over the show’s almost six seasons.

In this way, Girls both draws on and complicates the portrayals of female friendship and flawed protagonists that powered Sex and the City, showing a group of

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difficult, flawed young women in the process of growing up as well as growing apart. Where *SATC* offers a somewhat utopian portrayal of female friendship, *Girls* reinscribes the conventional wisdom that such bonds are impermanent. Like *SATC’s* equally narrow depiction of wealthy New York thirtysomethings in the late ninties/early aughts, *Girls* is a similarly hyper-specific portrait of privileged twentysomething waywardness as experienced by this group of affluent, white, college-educated Brooklyn transplants, or what Dunham has referred to as “the rarefied white hipster thing.” *Girls* is its sitcom foremother stripped of its stylistic excess and elements of fantasy, a full-on dramedy rather than a romantic comedy hybrid. And though friendship was *Sex and the City’s* most perfect, enduring love story, *Girls*’ relationship to female friendship is much more like a doomed romance with someone who no longer feels like a “soul mate.”

**“Bra-mance” and *Broad City***

*Broad City* is the latest in the woman-driven friendship comedy subgenre, an idiosyncratic take on the same basic premise explored in both *Sex and the City* and *Girls*. The show chronicles the exploits of a pair (not a foursome!) of best friends, goofy twentysomething slackers Abbi Abrams and Ilana Wexler, as they stumble through early adulthood in New York City. The show was co-created by Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer, best friends in reality as well as in fiction; the two met taking classes at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theater, a well-known comedy venue and improv training center co-founded by *Parks and Recreation*’s Amy Poehler. *Broad City*’s original iteration was as a low-budget web series, first uploaded to YouTube in 2009. Though the web version never gained a large following, it did earn
praise for Jacobson and Glazer’s chemistry. A former UCB teacher helped the pair get in touch with Poehler, who agreed to cameo on the final episode of the web series, and she eventually signed on as executive producer for a television version of the show. Though FX, a male-oriented basic cable network, passed on their initial pitch, Comedy Central, aimed at a similar demographic audience, snapped it up soon after; *Broad City* premiered on the network in 2014, where it is currently airing its third season and was recently picked up for at least two more. *Broad City*’s first two seasons received rave reviews, though critical reaction to the latest season has been positive to mixed thus far (as of this writing, only eight of the season’s ten episodes have aired). The show has developed a passionate fan base since its Comedy Central premiere; Emily Nussbaum once described the crowd at a 2014 performance of Jacobson and Glazer’s as “screaming as if we were at a Beatles concert.” Another article deemed the show a “bona fide indie phenomenon,” citing the first season finale’s 1.3 million viewers (“solid for a debut cable show”), the sold-out “Broad City Live” tour in 2014, as well as the show’s generally boisterous online presence.

Like many other woman-driven sitcom authors-slash-stars (Lucille Ball, Roseanne Barr, Tina Fey), Jacobson and Glazer maintain a high degree of creative control over their show as writers, producers, and performers, and they edit “every frame” of the show as well; they also carry on the convention of playing humbler versions of themselves. Abbi and Ilana are Jacobson and Glazer but slightly younger,

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with limited means, few real responsibilities, and no discernible ambitions. They play
on a sort of stereotypical “Odd Couple” dynamic—Abbi is generally more straight-
laced, Ilana more free-spirited—but often end up subverting or undermining those
color character conventions.

Abbi, the dreamy, awkward half of the duo, has a dead-end day job as a
cleaner at Soulstice (a composite parody of various high-end gyms), where the bulk
of her time is spent sweeping up pubic hair. Though Abbi has a vague aspiration to
become a successful artist, her more immediate goal is to become a trainer at
Soulstice (a goal she achieves in season three). Abbi has a shallowly buried
aggressive streak, and can often be very bold: she’s competitive to the point of
violence, she goes way too far even in the tiniest lies, she takes on an alter ego when
she’s blackout drunk. (The alter ego’s name is Val, and she performs “Get Happy” at
an underground bar in full Judy Garland drag). She loves the store Bed Bath &
Beyond and idolizes Oprah so much that she has her face tattooed on her lower back.

Ilana is the “wild” one, with a more hedonistic outlook on life and no
discernable goals or life plans, aside from being Abbi’s life partner. Ilana is
somewhat sexually fluid, although she generally hooks up with men, including her
steady-casual hookup, a responsible, loveable dentist named Lincoln.34 She is
nominally employed at a sales-oriented startup, but she rarely does any work, instead
napping at her desk, taking a temp job in the middle of the workday, or even hiring an
“ethnic smorgasbord” of unpaid interns to do her work for her. (She has since been

34 Lincoln is portrayed by comedian (and former 30 Rock writer) Hannibal Burress. A
video of one of his comedy routines, in which he called out Bill Cosby for being a
rapist, went viral in 2014, and Burress has been credited for bringing Cosby’s
offenses back into public consciousness.
fired in season three, but not for any of those offenses). Though she is incredibly savvy when it comes to certain kinds of hustles—moneymaking schemes, picking up a new sexual partner at a bar—she is more often than not, utterly sincere and totally oblivious, taking many of the things sarcastic things Abbi says. The two characters also share many similarities. They’re both in their twenties; they’re both secular Jews who grew up outside of New York City (Abbi in a Philadelphia suburb, Ilana in Long Island). Ilana is definitely the more committed stoner of the two, but both women smoke a lot of weed, and numerous episodes have plots that center on smoking or being high. Abbi and Ilana are both vocal feminists (as are their creators), though their politics—“well-intentioned but barely informed fourth-wave, queerish, anti-rape/pro-porn intersectional feminism,” as Nussbaum puts it—are part of the show’s lovingly satirical take on millennial naivety and obliviousness.³⁵ This is especially true of Ilana, so caught up in her well-intentioned, nebulous progressivism that she occasionally veers into the offensive; as Abbi puts it, “Sometimes, you’re so anti-racist that you’re actually really racist” (season one, episode six).

Both Abbi and Ilana are sexually active and firmly sex-positive; they talk about sex constantly, and no topic is taboo. This is best exemplified by the show’s groundbreaking “pegging” episode, “Knockoffs” (season two, episode four). Abbi has finally landed a date with her longtime crush, her across the hall neighbor, Jeremy. Ilana is thrilled for Abbi, but soon becomes overcome with joy when Abbi calls to ask for her advice—Jeremy wants Abbi to “peg” him with his artisan-crafted dildo. Ilana encourages Abbi to go for it, and the next day, at her grandmother’s shiva, she learns

³⁵ Nussbaum, “Laverne & Curly.”
that Abbi went through with the pegging. In the middle of the service, she screams, “This is the happiest day of my life!” Such is the intensity of their friendship. The defining narrative of *Broad City* is its platonic romantic comedy: the “soul mate” friendship that Abbi and Ilana share. They are basically inseparable; even though they live in different boroughs of the city (Abbi in Queens, Ilana in Brooklyn), they often video chat from their respective apartments.

Both characters embody many different aspects of unruly womanhood. They are corporeally loose; both Abbi and Ilana are highly physical characters, and physical comedy is key to the show; their bodies flop, slouch, roll, and so forth, and their faces contort and twist. They are unashamed of bodily functions and of the various flaws and functions of the female body that subvert ideals of femininity—they have back pimples, light mustaches, periods; they sweat, particularly Abbi, and they defecate as well. They are generally unafraid and unashamed of their bodies, a rarity when it comes to portrayals of women in the media. Abbi dances around her apartment in the nude when her roommate is absent (season two, episode two); Ilana stores her weed in her vagina while she travels, and encourages Abbi to do the same (season one, episode two). Their speech, both in pitch and content, is also unruly, as the characters often yell, or discuss bodily functions or sexual tidbits, or swear wildly. They are sexually loose as well, particularly bisexual Ilana, and they both have multiple sex partners over the course of the show. The characters also take on conventionally masculine traits, expressions, or comedy styles, imbuing them with a new, female sensibility. For example, they frequently refer to each other as “dude,” “sir,” or “brother,” and Ilana frequently exclaims that something makes her “wet,” the
female equivalent of a male erection (a frequent source of comedy on Comedy Central, a male-heavy network); she also asks if Abbi is going to “vagina-swallow” Jeremy on their date (season two, episode four), an inversion of how heterosexual intercourse is usually described, and a feminized version of more conventionally male-oriented gross-out comedy about bodily functions and/or sex.

*Broad City*’s narrative is highly episodic, though as with most episodic sitcoms, there are a few longer plot threads, like Abbi’s crush on Jeremy. Despite its episodic nature, the show also rewards loyal, regular viewing with repetitions and callbacks: there are a few subtle jokes or running gags in the series that a more casual viewer might miss, like the presence of Garol, an unfriendly postal worker, at the bar that Abbi performs in as Val. The show is shot in the single-camera format, with a dynamic visual style that aids in both its more frantic and mellower moments. Much of the show’s comedy stems from its blend of sharp realism and surrealist lunacy. Even in its most over-the-top, fantastical scenes, situations, or sequences, *Broad City* is grounded in its portrayal of life for sort-of broke twentysomethings meandering through the city—the horrors of New York apartment hunting, the violence of a popular sample sale, the desperate hunt to track down a missing phone. The show is full of comic escalation, constantly upping the stakes, even for something as trivial as trying to be on time for a dog’s wedding in the park. *Broad City*’s ever-heightening fantastical undertones also undergird the stoner comedy aspects of the show, creating a kind of high for straight as well as sober viewers, as the escalation of situations or details grounded in realism may evoke the experience of being stoned in public. Additionally, Glazer and Jacobson’s backgrounds in improv comedy illustrate the
roots of this kind of escalation; one of their characters will have an idea, a scheme, or a need that must be met, and even if they hesitate, the other goes along with a “Yes, and—“

_Broad City_ has many points of comparison to both _Sex and the City_ and _Girls_, though it is more often compared to the latter. However, _Broad City_’s season three premiere contained a scene that alluded explicitly to _Sex and the City_, when the girls attend Lincoln’s graduation from trapeze school, an idea he picked up watching the episode of _SATC_ in which Carrie attended the same trapeze school. The three of them chat about which character they are: Abbi and Lincoln are both Miranda-Carrie hybrids, and Ilana, of course, is Samantha. (She says of her character, “Sometimes I’m happy about it and then other times I’m like, it’s gross.”). Though lines from _Sex and the City_ to _Broad City_ are much fainter than either show’s connections to _Girls_, _SATC_ and _Broad City_ do share some interesting characteristics. _Sex and the City_’s loving, glamorizing portrait of life in Manhattan, all shot on location, spurred the observation that the city itself was “the fifth woman” of the close quartet of friends. Similarly, _Broad City_ also features New York as a third wheel to the show, albeit a loonier, spikier version, in which the outer boroughs figure as much as Manhattan, the more common site of friendship-centered comedies. Writes critic Rachel Syme, “Their New York is the New York that can only be experienced as a duo: a kaleidoscopic playground made for two, the kind of cinematic, heightened fun-house version of the city that accompanies the most epic, swooning romances.”

_Broad City_’s New York infuses the show with frenetic, sweaty energy of the show as its

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36 Syme, “Broad Strokes.”
aimless characters ramble through it, like slightly demented flâneuses, as in the season two finale (episode ten), which captures St. Mark’s Place in all its crusty, off-putting glory. But the show’s depiction of the city contains menace as well as cartoonish fun: the spooky package center on North Brother Island (season one, episode three); the leering, predatory locksmith who remembers Ilana’s (fake) address (season one, episode three); horrifying, inevitable hordes of rats (season three, episode four). Whereas Sex and the City and Broad City imagine New York in different ways, both shows offer joyful depictions of female pleasure and female sexuality. Consumerist overtones aside, SATC showed women who had obligations to no one but themselves (and one another); they did not have to spend their incomes on spouse or family, and so they spent it (a little too freely, especially in Carrie’s case) on things they took pleasure in, like shoes or couture clothes. Though the twentysomething women of Broad City don’t have the same consumerist impulses or disposable incomes, they pursue pleasure with similar dedication: they smoke weed, they go out drinking and partying, they sneak into movie theaters and cheat their way into a double-feature. And they are equally as straightforward in their pursuit of sexual pleasure, another trait they share with the women of SATC. They also objectify men with their gaze, as Samantha often did; in one episode, Abbi and Ilana ogle a group of men playing basketball with such intensity that one of the players asks them to leave so the players won’t feel uncomfortable. It’s easy to see Broad City as the next step in female sexual frankness in television comedy, as they are even more

37 Broad City’s female characters appropriate this conventionally masculine role of the flaneur, a character type (originating in nineteenth century French literature) that generally means an idler or urban wanderer, a stroller of the streets.
accepting than the brunch tables of SATC; where Charlotte anguished over whether or not she could be the “up-the-butt girl” her latest suitor wanted (season one, episode four), Ilana instead asserts to Abbi, “It’s 2014. Anal’s on the menu” (season one, episode ten).

Because they are of the same era and depict similar characters, comparisons between Girls and Broad City have followed the latter show since its debut. The two have been compared so frequently that in one interview, Glazer expressed her frustration with how limiting the comparison is: “Lena [Dunham] is a fucking genius, but why group us all together?... This comparison happens to anyone who isn’t male or white… we are business owners. I wish we’d be seen as that more often.”

Girls and Broad City do depict characters from the same or similar milieus: like Hannah and company, Abbi and Ilana are college-educated white girls in their twenties, from middle-class homes in the Northeast; even though they’re broke, they’re relatively financially stable. And like Girls, Broad City’s central characters are flawed heroines; they are also self-absorbed and somewhat navel-gazing; they occasionally exhibit morally questionable behavior. But audiences and critics alike have responded more positively to Broad City’s self-involved millennials, which I would argue is a factor of Broad City’s warmth and compassion towards its flawed heroines, where Girls merely offers its characters up to be judged. Because Broad City is unquestionably a comedy—it literally runs on Comedy Central—audiences have no confusion about whether we are supposed to be laughing, in contrast to Girls, which is far more ambiguous and lacks an obvious genre coding, aside from its indie or avant-garde

38 Ilana Glazer, qtd. in Syme, “Broad Strokes.”
sensibility. *Girls*’ independent film associations and stylistic strategies can be considered “pretentious,” arguably adding to the animus against it, while *Broad City*, drawing from a “low,” often male-oriented tradition of sketch and improv comedy, does not get the same kind of criticism. However, these two shows code a broadly shared class-generational (middle-class, millennial) experience in different ways.

As Sherry Ortner has argued with regard to the class-generation known in the media as Generation X, many young adults whose parents belong to the upper-middle or professional-managerial class often grapple with anxiety over whether or not they will be able to follow their parents’ trajectories and reproduce their class status; other young adults in this class might actively choose not to follow in the footsteps of their parents, following a more bohemian path instead.\(^{39}\) *Girls* seems to express upper-middle class millennial anxieties over their ability to reproduce the class status of their parents, especially because they are so unsure of themselves and their own goals. But for *Broad City*, a much more joyful, hedonistic show, neither Abbi nor Ilana appears to be at all concerned about their future; and though they occasionally bemoan “the man” or “the system” or other, similar ideas, they don’t seem to be outright rejecting their upper-middle class roots either. Rather, the Broads seem to be reveling in a kind of twentiesomething stasis, keeping notions of “the future” open-ended and hazy. This choice was likely informed by the industrial realities of making an episodic sitcom—there’s no real point in having an endpoint, especially in a sitcom—but it also speaks to a certain aimlessness embraced by members of this classed generation; a directionless narrative perfectly suited to the show’s episodic

structure that captures the lived uncertainty and precarity of the future. Tellingly, though there are several episodes in which the characters discuss their goals for the years ahead, their ambitions are modest, to say the least: after Ilana’s twenty-third birthday, the two outline their plans to “make a plant last more than two weeks,” or “see a mangina from behind,” or “gradually lower my dosage of anti-depressants” (season two, episode ten). Another example of their tendency to view the future as essentially a version of the present is evidenced in season two, episode, two, when Abbi and Ilana briefly discuss how pregnant women usually defecate during childbirth. Ilana turns to Abbi and tells her, “If it happens to me, you have my permission to look away.” Abbi replies, “Thank you…I’m gonna see you give birth?” Ilana doesn’t miss a beat: “Bitch, duh. Who else would be my focal point?” She goes on to say that she plans on giving birth in Abbi’s apartment, since it’s so much cleaner than hers. Notably, Abbi and Ilana are not discussing when or if they’re going to start families, or talking about any potential husbands or partners, or even revealing fears or apprehensions about how hard it could be to raise a child; instead, their discussion is mostly speculative, until Ilana reveals that she envisions the two of them living in the same apartments in the future.

This scene also illustrates the very real, palpable chemistry between Abbi and Ilana, a real-life friendship transposed to onscreen fiction. In the words of Carrie Brownstein, co-creator and co-star of the acclaimed sketch comedy Portlandia, their lovingly rendered friendship makes you want to “live inside that secret handshake
vernacular.” It is notable that the show centers on a duo rather than a foursome, a departure from *Golden Girls*, *Sex and the City*, and *Girls*. And unlike many other woman-driven sitcom friendship duos, like Lucy and Ethel or Mary and Rhoda (and in contrast to quartets, as well), both Abbi and Ilana are the show’s main protagonists; neither one is prized over the other, or more central to the narrative, and, significantly, neither one is the “good girl,” the normative Mary to a wackier, unrulier Rhoda. They are utter equals, including in their transgressiveness. Though as I have mentioned, Abbi is usually labeled as the straight woman and Ilana the free spirit, the show frequently undermines these expectations, offering something fresh. They both get into trouble and do stupid things, and each one has had to take care of the other in some way, like in “Wisdom Teeth” (season two, episode three), in which Ilana is tasked with taking care of Abbi after her wisdom teeth surgery; through a typical Ilana mishap, Abbi gets violently high on pain medication and wanders through Gowanus, accompanied by her hallucination of a large stuffed toy. Ilana comes to her rescue, eventually finding her with thousands of dollars in organic groceries at Whole Foods. Ilana comes to Abbi’s rescue in many other episodes as well—she helps her dispose of some fecal evidence in “Hurricane Wanda” (season one, episode seven), and rescues her from a ditch in Central Park in “The Matrix” (season two, episode six). Though Abbi may initially appear to be more “together” than Ilana, the series undermines our expectations of how their relationship might stereotypically function, instead reinforcing their importance to each other. It also fits with the one unequal aspect of their friendship, that of Ilana’s more intense fascination with Abbi,

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platonically, romantically, and even sexually. Abbi clearly loves Ilana, but Ilana’s obsession with Abbi is set at a different intensity. As Syme writes, “[Mimicking] the passion that many young women feel for their best friends, that urge to consume them whole, to know every aspect of them, Ilana asserts that Abbi will always be her primary love interest…” And indeed, *Broad City* frequently sets up the duo as romantic-comedy soul mates, from Ilana’s one-sided vision of will-they-won’t-they with her BFF to the final minutes of the season one finale (season one, episode ten), which is just a long take, the camera rolling on the girls as they chat and dance goofily down the sidewalk and into the sunrise, like the end of a great romantic comedy. *Broad City*’s friendship is at the center of its narrative world, and the magnetic chemistry between the two, as well as their evocative portrait of messy, aimless, funny, and flawed millennial women. It is part of the show’s sneaky realism, which has helped the show attract such a large and dedicated following, particularly among young women in the demographics that Jacobson and Glazer represent—young, educated, white, and middle-class. On *Broad City*’s flawed heroines, Amy Poehler has remarked, “Women always have to be the eye rollers, as the men make a mess. We didn’t want that. Young women can be lost, too.” *Broad City* allows young women to revel in their youth and aimlessness, in their unruly, unrestricted, uncontained lives.

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41 Syme, “Broad Strokes.”
Conclusion

In tracing the shifting representations of women in the sitcom, I have explored how this television genre registers and processes changes in women’s lives, including the rise of feminist movements. Rebecca Traister has observed how generations of real-life women affect each other:

Every generation has struggled to overcome the gendered obstacles set before the previous one and, often, eliminate those obstacles for the next. It’s striking, when talking to women about their personal and professional choices, how deeply the experiences of mothers and grandmothers influence the decisions and strategies of daughters and granddaughters.¹

I have found that this is true of woman-driven sitcoms, where the “mothers” of this category have similarly influenced their contemporary “daughters” in their narratives, formal strategies, and/or industrial practices, concurrent with shifts in women’s lives in America. We can observe social changes not only in successive forms of woman-driven sitcom—from domestic to workplace to friendship—but also within these subgenres, as their characteristic narratives take on new meaning in new social and industrial contexts.

In the postwar “domestic revival” era, as middle-class women were pushed into early marriage and domestic confinement, female sitcom protagonists were similarly contained, and their shows related their discontent with domestic and “True Woman” ideology. As second-wave feminism emerged in the early 1970s and women began to (re)join the workforce and pursue independent lives, woman-driven sitcoms

migrated from the private to the public sphere—suburbs to cities, marriage to single life, and feminized domestic labor to culturally masculine working environments. This shift was part of television’s move towards audience segmentation, as these “lifestyle feminist” narratives allowed the industry to attract the “upscale” working woman audiences that they viewed as more valuable, without alienating a wider base of domestic women or conservative viewers. More recently, as the television landscape continues to splinter and grow increasingly crowded, upscale female audiences have remained valuable to the television industry; friendship comedies centered on similarly classed protagonists continue to shift portrayals of women in the sitcom, challenging the notion of female self-sacrifice as they emphasize pleasure and friendship.

As we have seen, both workplace and friendship comedies feature protagonists outside of the private domestic sphere, a powerful contrast to programs like I Love Lucy or The Donna Reed Show and their characters’ domestic discontent. However, though each subgenre evinces the changes in social formation and gender relations wrought by feminist movements, the woman-driven friendship comedy takes a step away from the limited “lifestyle feminism” that television has historically favored. Bonnie Dow has argued that television’s version of liberal feminism, with its “focus on women’s equality…within existing social structures,” usually emphasizes individualism or even exceptionalism among women, especially women who take part in culturally masculine activities or careers, “promoting as progressive those
representations that feature individual women succeeding in a ‘man’s world.’” In contrast, woman-driven friendship sitcoms more frequently reinforce the primacy of female friendship over heterosexual romantic ties, and not as a mere substitute or safety net, but as a bond with its own inherent value. These friendship comedies, though they may have many contradictory elements, come closer to a more nuanced, explicit depiction of feminism, one in which female solidarity and support are an important part of the narrative. As women’s options have expanded over the course of television’s history, we have seen how already-complex narratives taken on new meaning with different social contexts, and how representations of female protagonists have grown less restricted, less contained, over time. The ever-fragmenting television landscape, and its increasingly “niche” forms of audience address, gesture at the possibility of even more multi-faceted representations of womanhood and women’s lives in the sitcom genre.

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