

# Introduction



Headlines of this type appear with a regularity that renders them as invisible by now as the cultural influence of the medium they describe: “Children Spend More Time Watching Television Than in School Classrooms,” “TV Saturation in American Homes Close to 100%,” and “Hours Spent Watching TV Continues to Rise Among Americans.” Critical essays and books that complement these empirical studies have been published since the 1960s, and it only took a few years for media studies courses and entire programs to creep into the academy at locales outside of Los Angeles, where they first appeared alongside the main business and production center of the entertainment industry.

Long past are the days when scholars had to justify writing about television. The pervasiveness and persuasiveness—implicit as well as explicit—of the medium make critical and historical analyses of television programming, its various meanings for audiences, and the industry that produces these cultural artifacts an enterprise of considerable relevance and importance. This volume features twenty-one original works on American television situation comedies, one of the oldest and most ubiquitous forms of television programming.

The chapters are arranged into seven topical sections, which were carefully considered as the anthology was conceptualized to address the following topics: conventions of the form, the family, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, work and social class, and ideology. Perspectives represented include critical media studies, cultural studies, feminist theory, queer theory, and a number of interdisciplinary approaches. The range of theoretical and critical tools employed by the authors of chapters was also an intentional choice on the part of the editors, meant to parallel the richness and range of the programming itself.

This project originated as a way of filling a void in the television literature. From our examination of the journal articles on sitcoms and books on broader topics related to television that included some material on sitcoms, we

found that these proposed topics are well established and represented by the scholarship in media studies. What has been missing, however, is a single volume that comprehensively examines the genre of situation comedy and applies sets of critical lenses to contextualize the programs and help readers think about the shows, and, perhaps, even about themselves, in new contexts.

The first part of this anthology begins, fittingly we believe, with an exploration of the conventions of the genre. The chapters in this part set forth the characteristics that establish situation comedies as a distinctive genre. These chapters explore the historical underpinnings of the genre as well as the evolution of the signifiers that establish and reinforce situation comedy. While sitcoms may be defined by their structure—thirty-minute episodes, photographed in a three-camera studio set up in front of a live audience, and built around the situations within the program—the term has been contested, especially in recent years. Can animated programs be classified as situation comedy? Some of our contributors certainly believe so. What about an hour-long, single-camera program shot on sets without a live audience? Another contributor writes about *Ally McBeal*, which pushes the perimeters of the form on all sides. While the terms defining the form may be contested, the appeal of the sitcom cannot. We believe it is no accident that situation comedy is the one television genre that has maintained a consistent level of popularity, and the explanation for its enduring popularity resides in the conventions of the genre.

David Marc has written extensively on comedic forms, and his work has been very influential among scholars writing about mass media. It is appropriate for this volume to start with his chapter on the conventions and history of the situation comedy during the critical time when sitcoms made the transition from radio to television. In “Origins of the Genre: In Search of the Radio Sitcom,” Marc identifies the origins of the term “sitcom” and traces its integration into the larger culture to describe a discrete and influential form of early television programming. This chapter includes an important discussion of the “dialect comedies” that made the transition from radio to television, the sitcom–variety show hybrids, and the influence of developing radio and television technologies on the mediums’ programming. Marc sets the larger context for the chapters across the topical sections and for Michael V. Tueth and David Pierson, who follow in the introductory part of the anthology with chapters that contextualize the situation comedy within two other historical traditions: the transgressive comedy and the comedy of manners.

In “Breaking and Entering: Transgressive Comedy on Television,” Tueth writes that most television comedy has “behaved itself” over the years, but he focuses on programs that have pushed the boundaries of network standards and practices and other commonly held ideas about what constitutes good taste. In addition to a survey of network programs that have challenged social conventions, the author looks more closely at *South Park* and the looser regulations that govern cable programming. The analysis of *South Park* is grounded

in historical examples and theories of transgressive humor and in the oppositional interpretation of popular texts. Despite the phenomenal success of this transgressive sitcom, *South Park* has its share of critics, which is to be expected of any text designed to shock audiences. A more pressing question is posed by Tueth regarding whether or not oppositional programming designed to violate cultural taboos can continue without spawning a slew of successful imitators and, in the process, losing its power to shock audiences.

The theatrical comedy of manners genre is characterized by an emphasis on “a strong sense of style, deportment, and a witty repartee that is used to conceal the raw emotions that lie just beneath the surfaces of the dramatic lives of its characters,” according to Pierson in “American Situation Comedies and the Modern Comedy of Manners.” Just as Tueth examines *South Park* in the context of transgressive comedy, in this final chapter of the first part of the volume Pierson argues that characters in situation comedies are just as obsessed with and frustrated by the dominant social conventions as characters in the English Restoration comedies of Congreve and Sheridan are. In this chapter, the discursive elements of sitcoms from two distinct time periods, the 1960s and 1990s, are examined, and the author concludes through his analysis of *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Seinfeld* that the situation comedy is a “worthy descendant” and a “modern variation” of the theatrical comedy of manners.

The family has long been a staple of situation comedy. Part two, “Reframing the Family,” looks at some of the ways television families have evolved over the years and, curiously, the way it seems that sometimes the more things change, the more they stay the same among TV families. From the radio days that established the formula to the earliest days of sitcoms on television, family sitcoms have formed the foundation of this type of programming. Through the years, the picture-perfect family has evolved from the traditional working dad and stay-at-home mom nuclear family to include unlikely but seemingly exhaustive configurations of nontraditional families. The roles of mothers, fathers, and children have been rearticulated in many forms, including blended families, step-families, adoptive families, multigenerational households, multicultural households, school families, friendship families, and work families. Still, the basic paradigm remains intact, as Laura R. Linder demonstrates aptly by comparing *Ozzy* and Harriet Nelson to *Ozzie* and Sharon Osbourne. She finds remarkable similarities between the two superficially disparate TV families. The three chapters in this part will situate the family sitcom within a larger cultural context.

Judy Kutulas’s expansive overview of sitcom families, “Who Rules the Roost?: Sitcom Family Dynamics from the Cleavers to the Osbournes,” argues that the family lies at the heart of the American situation comedy. She begins with an examination of the 1950s sitcom families and explores how these idealized narratives complemented the desire in postwar culture for stability and clearly delineated gender roles in fiction, if not in fact. The mid-1960s marked

the opening of a generational gap that would widen in real life and on television by the 1970s. When *All in the Family* premiered in 1971, it was clear that the Bunker family provided a marked contrast to the idealized Cleavers. It gave some legitimacy to youth's rebellion against their elders, while at the same time paving the way for the social relevancy family comedies of the 1970s. By the 1980s, television parenting styles had changed, and boomer parents actually cultivated independence in their children and ran their families more democratically than ever before. By the final decade of the century, family sitcoms had increasingly become pitched to a Gen X audience and the emblematic head of household has moved from Ward Cleaver to Ozzy Osbourne, but, as Kutulas maintains, there are similarities linking the two dads: "[Ozzy] certainly is not Ward Cleaver and maybe not even Cliff Huxtable; still, he cares about his wife and children, and they care about him." The survey of family situation comedies over time provides a valuable context for the other two chapters in this part.

Laura R. Linder's unlikely linkage of two sitcom families that appear dramatically different on the surface suggests that the conventions of the genre transcend time and culture. In the second chapter of part two, "From Ozzie to Ozzy: The Reassuring Nonevolution of the Sitcom Family," the contrast between Ozzie Nelson—who epitomizes the bland sitcom dad of the 1950s—and shock rocker Ozzy Osbourne—who is better known for profane lyrics, scary makeup, and antics on stage that some would label satanic—is shown to be more superficial than substantive when considered within the generic conventions of the family sitcom. This chapter offers an insightful look at the parallels between the two personas and their respective series. The fascinating historical background of each series is combined with a compelling textual analysis of the shows. While the problems these musical celebrity families deal with are different and related to the time periods in which the shows were produced, the defining elements of the family sitcom are intact: there are parents with kids; there are problems arising in day-to-day life that must be handled; and a loving family is able to handle whatever comes its way because of the closeness of the family unit. Whether or not the TV dad wears eyeliner is secondary to the core values that define the genre.

John O'Leary and Rick Worland offer us a chapter that has the gentle, affirming tone of the series itself in "Against the Organization Man: *The Andy Griffith Show* and the Small-Town Family Ideal." Their thoughtful critique begins by providing a historical context for the series that places it in the sub-genre of rural situation comedies. Then they explore links between the popular series and the populist films of Frank Capra during the 1930s, especially *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. One thread that runs through the chapter is the theme of family and small-town values that marked Mayberry as a mythic ideal even during its enormously popular prime-time run in the 1960s. While sitcoms of the 1970s would explore issues explicitly and build narratives around "work families," and defining series of

the 1980s would begin to focus primarily on isolated suburban nuclear families, *The Andy Griffith Show* is distinguished by its emphasis on the extended family and the interdependence of that group with a small community.

The politics of gender have been implicitly represented but seldom explicitly addressed in television situation comedies. Part three, "Gender Represented," looks at the politics of representation and explores how this genre has constructed the male/masculine and the female/feminine. Women have undoubtedly come a long way from the earliest days of television, when most played mothers or spinsters on situation comedies, but the multilayered critique of gender in sitcoms remains an important political project. When compared to other forms of mass media, notably Hollywood cinema, television today offers a wide range of roles for women, particularly leading roles for women in their thirties and forties. At the same time, most women in sitcoms play characters that fit fairly conventionally into the programs. These chapters offer a discourse that looks at how situation comedies alternately challenge and reinforce the hegemony of gender in historical and contemporary culture.

Lucy is probably the single most dominant icon of the sitcom throughout history. Lori Landay offers an important critique of how gender informs this iconography in ways that have been publicly visible as part of Lucille Ball's phenomenally popular television characters and ways that have been less visible to the viewing public. In "*I Love Lucy*: Television and Gender in Post-war Domestic Ideology," Landay explores the history and influence of the series and how the program is a venue for Lucy's public and private selves. On the series, Lucy Ricardo is a dizzy housewife dissatisfied with staying home while her bandleader husband is in the public spotlight; she is eager to get into show business at any cost, and the antics she engages in to try to snare her own spotlight are predictably hilarious. Behind the scenes, Lucille Ball is a savvy businesswoman working as actively at producing as at performing. The contrast between Lucy Ricardo and Lucille Ball is distinct, while at the same time the lines are blurred in publicity that touts parallels between Lucille's real-life marriage to co-star Desi Arnaz and the birth of Lucille and Desi's son on the same day their characters welcome a baby into the household in the sitcom. This chapter explores how differently the power relations of the sexes work onscreen in the series *I Love Lucy* and offscreen in the real lives of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz.

If Lucille Ball's face is emblematic of the sitcom because of the indelible characters she has established over the years, her influence over the genre has been felt in other ways that are not so visible, such as through other shows brought to the small screen through her production company. The popular and long-running radio sitcom chronicling high school teacher Connie Brooks's skirmishes with her principal and her relentless pursuit of a colleague as a romantic partner was brought to television by Desilu Studios. The disconnect Landay identifies in the previous chapter between the personas of the

character Lucy Ricardo and the creator of that character, Lucille Ball, sets the stage for Mary M. Dalton to examine Eve Arden's portrayal of the main character in *Our Miss Brooks*. Dalton does so in the context of other teacher narratives on film and television and also contrasts the television sitcom with the film of the same title. Dalton reads this sitcom and the resulting motion picture against the grain to argue that Miss Brooks's pursuit of Mr. Boynton and wisecracking about her desire to get married may be more fantasy than fact. Because of the conventions of teacher narratives related to gender and because of the mores of her small town, perhaps the only way Connie Brooks can remain independent in her 1950s community is to appear interested in the ideals set forth for her, marriage and children, and she chooses a most unlikely conquest to effectively retain her professional identity and autonomy.

While Connie Brooks alludes to her supposed desire for "frog boy," the biology teacher down the hall, the women friends on contemporary cable programs are much more decided and direct about desires of all types. In the final chapter of part three, "Talking Sex: Comparison Shopping through Female Conversation in HBO's *Sex and the City*," Sharon Marie Ross argues that representing female sexual desire as limitless is a construction that is compatible with many of the goals of feminism as a political movement. Her piece uses the HBO series as a frame for examining female sexual desire and its connection to other desires. Specifically, episodes are discussed that show women discussing their sexuality and sexual actions, that show women discussing gender roles in modern-day society, and that show women discussing their consumption of material goods. Ross believes that such representations are important in that they expand our notion of female sexuality and female friendship and, further, that popular culture should explore lesbian, bisexual, and racially and ethnically diverse narratives of female agency and desire.

What is the role of race and ethnicity in the situation comedy? As the chapters in part four demonstrate, there are multiple perspectives on the question, only a few of which can be considered in an anthology of this scope, and one of those perspectives is historical. There were a few examples of ethnic sitcoms in the early days of television, followed by almost two decades of "Whiteout." In the early days, roles for African Americans were confined mostly to maids or gross stereotypes—such as those seen on *Amos 'n' Andy*—followed by years of invisibility until breakthrough programs like *Julia* and *The Cosby Show*. Early shows, as noted by David Marc in the first chapter of this volume, also featured a number of immigrant families, but the trend was not sustained through the 1950s and 1960s, when White sitcoms became the norm. More recently, programs featuring mostly Black characters have been relegated to start-up networks to fill what is perceived as a niche programming need. The current marginalization of Black sitcoms begs the question whether it is better to be seen a little or not at all. Still fewer are the shows that feature Hispanic and Asian characters. This part will address issues of

identity and representation in the context of racial determinacy and indeterminacy, taking into account trends toward a racial segmenting of both programming and the audience. The continuing invisibility of most racial and ethnic groups on commercial television is a topic raised in part four and explains why each of the chapters in this part focuses mainly on Black sitcoms. It seems logical that as people of color play an increasingly larger role in American society, the diversity of characters represented in sitcoms will expand accordingly. We anticipate that future critical studies of the genre will include this area of analysis.

Robin R. Means Coleman and Charlton D. McIlwain launch part four with an important survey of the historical and cultural significance of Black sitcoms. "The Hidden Truths in Black Sitcoms" draws on Means Coleman's earlier work, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*, and establishes the Black sitcom as a definable subgenre by tracing the history of the form and integrating an analysis of industry practices related to the production and promotion of Black sitcoms. The earliest days of television (1950–1953) are identified as the TV Minstrelsy Era, followed by the Nonrecognition Era (1954–1967), the Assimilationist Era (1968–1971), the Social Relevancy and Ridiculed Black Subjectivity Era (1972–1983), Black Family and Diversity Era (1984–1989), and the Neo-Minstrelsy Era (1990–1998). It remains to be seen what patterns will emerge in coming years, but Means Coleman and McIlwain argue that audiences need to become more active, to understand how the "comedic mediation of Black identity impacts and informs African Americans' lives," and to demand programming that includes more diverse images of Blackness.

Amanda Dyanne Lotz pays even closer attention to audiences and reception of the Black sitcom in the second chapter of this part. She notes that comedy has historically been the first narrative form on television to break barriers but adds that people of color, particularly Asian Americans and Latino/as, have yet to find a presence outside of comedies in her chapter, "Segregated Sitcoms: Institutional Causes of Disparity among Black and White Comedy Images and Audiences." She looks at changes in television distribution—the movement away from programs being solely broadcast to programs being delivered by cable and satellite, with a resulting expansion in the number of networks—and how that transition has shaped programming and audience demographics. At the same time, the imperative for Black sitcoms to appeal to both African American and White audiences has been reduced or eliminated, and the audiences for comedies and other programs have become more and more segregated. Specifically, Lotz looks at the institutional and formal causes of audience segregation in the 1990s and offers a case study of the series *For Your Love* to support her argument.

In a sense, Demetria Rougeaux Shabazz brings another case study to this volume in the final chapter of part four, "Negotiated Boundaries: Production

Practices and the Making of Representation in *Julia*.” This chapter demonstrates quite strikingly just how form and content are inextricably linked in television texts. Shabazz places *Julia* in its cultural and historical context, but she quickly moves on to show how television’s standardized language already “had its own grammar of race and way of encoding racial bias” in 1968, when Diahann Carroll assumed the central role in this sitcom. The author’s detailed reading of the sitcom explores how *Julia* “disrupted the color-coded language” at the same time the series’ “staging techniques and genre repetition reinforced racist stereotypes.” This chapter examines how elements such as the set design and the “posh” décor of Julia’s apartment, the camera angles and lighting used to frame the character Julia Baker, the casting conventions of the time period, and the themes that complement the family sitcoms of the 1950s, come as close as possible to stripping the title character of *Julia* of her racial identity and, at the same time, make a mainstream audience more comfortable with the groundbreaking show.

Until the mid-1990s, sexual orientation had seldom been represented overtly in American situation comedies; the apparent assumption was that everyone in America was straight. Two chapters in part five, “Situating Sexual Orientation,” focus on close textual readings of the two popular sitcoms most closely identified with the increasing acceptance of gay characters in half-hour comedies. With the coming out of Ellen Morgan on *Ellen*, portrayals of gay characters on television have become both more prevalent and more direct than ever before in sitcoms. In fact, one could argue that current programs, such as *Will & Grace*, advance the cause of “normalizing” homosexuality to the general public, even if the approach on these programs is exceedingly cautious. Perhaps these programs represent a distant echo of the relevancy television programs of the 1970s, with their overt political agenda supporting social change and progressive movements; on the other hand, these sitcoms may signify that issues of sexuality represent little more to network executives and program producers than an interesting “twist” on stock characters situated in staple scenarios.

This part begins with a thick reading of an important television text. In “*Ellen*: Coming Out and Disappearing,” Valerie V. Peterson analyzes the “puppy episode” of Ellen DeGeneres’s series that aired on April 30, 1997 and became more media event than prime-time sitcom. Peterson argues that this episode did little to challenge mainstream biases against gays because it presents an overly simplified process of coming out and an essentialist version of lesbianism, a version that allows only an intractable and singular set of properties for those who claim this identity. In this episode, Ellen’s character comes out in four discrete and compressed stages: shared meaning, self-labeling, confiding, and announcing. The show’s focus on a simplistic process rather than the complex construction of an identity within a larger cultural context is certainly reductive, as sitcoms often are, but the stakes for this media event were

somewhat larger for viewers who hoped the episode might challenge the social order and demonstrate the potential for larger forms of liberation.

Denis M. Provencher explicates a set of texts rather than a single episode in “Sealed with a Kiss: Heteronormative Narrative Strategies in NBC’s *Will & Grace*,” but he confronts some of the same problems identified by Peterson in the preceding chapter: the series conflates character types and avoids presenting particularly complex or controversial social issues that might prove too challenging for a mainstream audience. Provencher looks beneath the surface constructions and makes the implicit strategies employed on the show to link Will with Grace and Jack with Karen (and even Jack with Rosario) as “couples” explicit for readers of this chapter. He notes how same-sex affection is avoided on the series at the same time these couples regularly lock lips. The author offers close readings of two episodes of the series and concludes that the absence of the “gay kiss” and recurrence of the “straight kiss” on a gay sitcom exemplify how *Will & Grace* “foregrounds heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and family values” while the gay male characters are essentially closeted in terms of same-sex affection and intimacy.

One might expect the otherwise explicit and over-the-top *South Park* to make more obvious connections and offer overt commentary on homosexuality and politics, as it does with other progressive social issues addressed by narrative elements of the program. Karen Anijar, Hsueh-hua Vivian Chen, and Thomas E. Walker argue, however, that the opposite is the case in “Poofs—Cheesy and Other: Identity Politics as Commodity in *South Park*,” the final chapter in part five. The authors argue that the Big Gay Al character on *South Park* falls into the category of “benevolent, White gay depictions that are marketed for easy consumption” by audiences, a category that includes Will and Jack on *Will & Grace*. If the identity politics of television sitcoms is simplistic, the interplay between these characters, lived experience, history, and consumer culture are much more complex, and this piece explores those connections.

Whether the collar in question is white, blue, or pink, work in the television situation comedy is invariably linked to social class and, often, to gender. Part six, “Work and Social Class,” discusses how the complexity of class in America is explored and ignored as sitcom characters pursue, but never quite achieve, the American Dream. In their quest, however, the characters tacitly accept the validity and possibility of achieving this dream, with little political or economic critique to the contrary. Chapters in this section examine specific programs in the context of actual, cultural change played out in the fictive workplaces of television sitcoms and also look beyond the programs, in some cases, to explore the interplay between the real work of producing them and work as it is depicted within the sitcom narrative.

In the first chapter of this part, “Women, Love, and Work: *The Doris Day Show* as Cultural Dialogue,” Phyllis Scrocco Zrzavy makes a compelling case that the *Doris Day Show* has been overlooked by critics and television

historians. The author documents a character's transformation that essentially parallels the sort of changes women were experiencing in the culture at the time. Season by season, as the sitcom evolves and Doris Martin becomes more autonomous, Doris Day was making some of those same transitions offscreen. When her husband and agent died suddenly in April of 1968, Day discovered that he had left her in a precarious financial situation and contractually obligated to perform in a situation comedy, a format she "loathed." Over the next five years, the character Doris Martin, also a widow, makes the move from the family farm and bucolic bliss across the Golden Gate Bridge to an urban apartment of her own and a career in publishing. At the same time, Day eventually took responsibility for her sitcom in front of the camera and behind the scenes. In a sense, both the character and the performer came of age with a television series that mirrored the changes related to gender and the workplace that were taking place simultaneously in the culture at large.

In the decade following Doris Martin's big career move, workplace comedies became a staple of the sitcom genre and proved a rich venue for exploring gender and social change. Judy Kutulas links work and gender studies in the second chapter of this part, "Liberated Women and New Sensitive Men: Reconstructing Gender in the 1970s Workplace Comedies." By the late 1960s, baby boomers were diverging from patterns established by their parents by becoming more educated, marrying later, and having fewer children, which made them attractive to advertisers. The family sitcoms that had appealed to their parents were not compelling for the boomer, however, and television networks responded with social relevancy programs and workplace sitcoms. Males were still in charge of television workplaces, as they were in charge of real workplaces, but women made gains on television programs without doing so at the expense of men. Women were liberated, gained some degree of sexual freedom, and found themselves drawn to a new type of romantic partner: the sensitive man. Not incidentally, the "liberated woman and the new sensitive man carefully separated the most palatable aspects of feminism and packaged them into a neat consumer-friendly idea." By the 1980s, the workplace sitcom began to lose its momentum while the family sitcom began a revival. Although the liberated woman and new sensitive man have lost a lot of the traits that once defined them in workplace sitcoms, Kutulas notes that these characters continue to influence "our television-normalized sense of reality."

The third chapter in part six shifts lenses to look at sitcom texts in a context that is not limited to social conditions but also examines the industry that produces the programming. Paul R. Kohl suggests that collaboration is generally a misnomer when describing the process of producing television shows because of the imbalance of power between production executives, network programmers and advertising representatives, and the writers and creative personnel charged with "creating" a particular program. In "Who's in Charge Here?": Views of Media Ownership in Situation Comedies," Kohl offers resis-

tant readings of three classic situation comedy series. He uses an episode of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* as a vehicle for illustrating Marx's theory of the alienated worker. The final episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* provides an exemplar for exploring "the resistance potential of carnival to ridicule the corporate end of the media." And a series of *Seinfeld* episodes in which the program's origins are "self-reflexively parodied" provide a forum for employing the carnivalesque technique of the grotesque for contextualizing the owner-worker relationship. The author argues that even though they are handsomely compensated for their work, television writers are subject to alienation because the product of their labor is removed from their control. There is the opportunity, however, for these writers to include competing messages in the texts they create that reveal some of the tensions they feel under the guise of humor.

The final set of chapters, part seven, begins to explore the implications of ideology. Critical theorists write extensively and compellingly of the competing messages embedded in popular texts, and situation comedies certainly reinforce the argument that popular texts are made up of layers of meaning under the guise of entertainment. Explicating these messages is critical to a fuller understanding of the genre and its influence on culture. Clearly, the pervasiveness of sitcoms coupled with the frequent and tacit acceptance of the values found in them is justification for the study and critical analysis of these texts. There can be no fear that sitcoms will inculcate untold generations with a dominant ideology that may not represent their interests without dissent, negotiation, and competing ideas so long as relevant and persuasive theoretical tools are used for reading and critiquing the texts. This final part will pull together the ideologies explored in previous parts and form new links to theoretical constructs.

Christine Scodari identifies an emergent subgenre of the situation comedy referred to as the "sexcom" in the first chapter of part seven, "Sex and the Sitcom: Gender and Genre in Millennial Television." She examines two sitcoms, *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* as exemplars of sexcom, a subgenre defined by its curious privileging and trivializing of concerns of the private (feminine) sphere. This leads to increasing audience segmentation by gender while the programs purport to celebrate an emancipated, multifaceted, millennial woman. Scodari argues that the net result of this trend, in terms of audience and program content, is to further dissociate the masculine sphere from the feminine sphere.

Robert S. Brown takes a different tack by framing a series within a single theoretical construct. In the second chapter of part seven, "*Cheers*: Searching for the Ideal Public Sphere in the Ideal Public House," Brown argues that the bar where the vast majority of scenes in the long-running and highly popular series were staged is a model for the modern ideal public sphere as envisioned by Jürgen Habermas. This space was a place where a "community of independent, educated people existed as equals between the state and the masses,

[where] opinions on matters of general interest were openly debated in the salons, reading rooms, and coffee houses of Europe.” But this realm of ideas was shortlived in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and was criticized by Keith Michael Baker as a construction that was more private and exclusive than public. It was further criticized by David Zaret for privileging the role of economics in creating a public sphere over the influences of religion, science, and printing. Brown finds that the bar Cheers comes much closer to meeting Habermas’s goals for the ideal public sphere and, at the same time, meets other concerns that a wider spectrum of the public be represented and have an equal voice in all discussions. For the eleven years the series ran in network prime time, bar patrons discussed popular culture and social issues in addition to the personal and anecdotal; in every case, even the most heavily contested ideas are discussed and debated until participants have arrived at a peaceful conclusion.

This volume concludes with an elegant chapter by H. Peter Steeves that is funny, expansive, and located in that powerful and evocative space somewhere between theory and fandom. “‘It’s Just a Bunch of Stuff that Happened’: *The Simpsons* and the Possibility of Postmodern Comedy” makes a number of interesting and compelling connections. Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes, Henri Bergson, and Umberto Eco join a host of pop culture icons in a chapter that reads rather like an episode of the sitcom it contextualizes. What is the context? Postmodernism, consumer culture, theories of the comedic, and linguistics are tools for contextualizing an animated family living in Springfield, a family that is inexplicably and unapologetically yellow. What does it all mean? Many things. After all, television sitcoms, as we have come to know over the years, may be entertaining, but they are never *just* entertainment.