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The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom

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Introduction



TV's Three Queer Fantasies

While starring in popular family sitcoms, Kirk Cameron of *Growing Pains* (1985–92) and Angus T. Jones of *Two and a Half Men* (2003–15) fulminated against the lax morality depicted in their fictional households, biting the hands of producers who were very generously feeding them. Cameron skyrocketed to fame and teen idol status in his role as Mike Seaver yet complained to the producers and writers about transgressions against his sense of Christian morality—such as a fantasy sequence implying that Mike had consummated his relationship with his girlfriend—stating that such a scene “crosses the line in my conscience . . . and since I’m the guy who has to get up there and do this in front of millions of people, I don’t want to do it.”¹ Jones, while earning roughly \$8 million annually, lambasted *Two and a Half Men* as “filth” and urged viewers not to watch it, stating, “It’s the number one comedy, but it’s very inappropriate and its themes are very inappropriate. I have to be this person I am not.”² One would presume that these actors, notwithstanding their deeply held religious convictions, would understand that their occupation requires them to play roles that might not accord with their personal views. The inherent ridiculousness of Jones’s proclamation—“I have to be this person that I am not”—is true of every actor in every part, and his assumption of the role of teen regulator of American morality smacks of righteousness rather than rightness.

But while it is easy to dismiss Cameron’s and Jones’s diatribes for their sincere yet grandiose moralizing, might one concede that, on a historical and narratological level, they have a point to argue about the nature of the family sitcom in the United States and its trajectory from the 1950s to today, as well as

about the fluid protocols of the networks' programming in relationship to the chimerical concept of "family-friendly programming"? In his autobiography, Cameron argues that "a TV series has an unspoken agreement to be what it has been from the beginning. A sitcom shouldn't become a drama. Nobody wants to see a homicide investigation on *Mr. Belvedere*."³ In some ways, Cameron's discomfort with his program's escalating treatments of sexuality reflects his understanding of an inherent contradiction in the generic structure of the family sitcom, as it faces the challenge of creating fare appropriate for all family members, no matter their ages. His argument about the suitability of certain story lines for television programs—that narrative paradigms construct protocols for writers and producers, as well as expectations for viewers—is a reasonable assessment of the utility of aesthetic genres. These issues of genre and interpretation foist vexing pressures on family sitcoms because they, in many ways, are expected to capture for viewers a nostalgic, ostensibly timeless view of American domestic life rather than its shifting realities.

In their laments against television's lax morality, Cameron and Jones tacitly advocate the three fantasies that underpin this study—the genre of the family sitcom, the long-standing and historically recurrent marketing concept of family-friendly programming, and children themselves—while overlooking their inherently queer potential. To discern queer potential in these televisual texts is to argue against their historical and generic facade of smiling, feckless, American normativity. In brief, queerness as a critical concept fractures cultural constructions of gendered and erotic normativity, dismantling rigid binary codes of licit and illicit desires and identities. *Queer* refers to contested sexual and gender identities but extends further to include identities that challenge regimes of normativity. More so, queerness exposes how deeply heteronormative narrative frameworks, such as that of the family sitcom, are structurally incapable of suturing over their aporias and contradictions, such that their surface normativity cannot withstand the steady erosion of their symptomatic queerness. David Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz state that queerness and queer theory "challenge the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects: male or female, married or single, heterosexual or homosexual, natural or perverse."⁴ In this light, queer theory serves as a preferred tool for querying any genre or social practice that valorizes normality, as family sitcoms, virtually by their existence, attempt to accomplish—or, more potently, have been conscripted to accomplish in their reception. Such an approach does not simply cement a long-standing binary between the queer and the normative but instead depicts their radical intertwining, such that the normative cannot, in the final analysis, obscure the queer at its heart.

To describe the disparate entities of a televisual narrative structure, an advertising ploy, and young humans as queer fantasies does not deny their

effect or reduce them to gossamer ephemerality, of course, yet doing so highlights the ways in which they serve, and concomitantly subvert, ideological objectives outside themselves. Individually and collectively, domestic sitcoms, family-friendly programming, and children act as discursive concepts through which television narratives are staged, marketed, and consumed but also through which cultural battles are waged over the fate of America's moral condition—primarily to bemoan a coarsening of the entertainment industry but, through other eyes, to celebrate increasingly candid depictions of sexuality as an integral part of the human experience. So discussions of family sitcoms often touch on issues of morality and pseudotheological attempts to define what American families should both be and see—as Cameron, Jones, and cultural commentators of their ilk demonstrate.

As is readily apparent by even a cursory overview of the featured programs of this volume—*Leave It to Beaver* (1957–63), *The Brady Bunch* (1969–74), *The Cosby Show* (1984–92), *Roseanne* (1988–97), *Hannah Montana* (2006–11), and *Modern Family* (2009–)—family sitcoms from the 1950s to the 2010s record America's changing sexual and social norms, but it is not my objective to chart the history of sexual depictions—the first married couple to share a bed, the first gay kiss, the first teen character to lose his or her virginity. Instead, this study examines how the families of domestic sitcoms simultaneously resist and display sexuality's cultural shifts transpiring throughout the United States at various historical moments, for the purported innocence of children necessitates complex and conflicting strategies for addressing the eroticism ostensibly shunted to these programs' margins. Neither narrating a downward spiral into vulgarity nor applauding increasingly graphic depictions of sexuality, *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom* instead analyzes the ways in which children, families, and sexualities interact in relation to a host of other cultural issues, for sexuality serves as a preferred, if obscured, site of ideological power. As Michel Foucault so powerfully observes of sexuality's meaning: "Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power."⁵ Of particular concern to children's genres, which include family sitcoms within their purview, Foucault notes the "pedagogization of children's sex" and the "psychiatrization of perverse pleasure" as key tactics in the ideological construction of sex. Early family sitcoms (mostly) refrain from addressing sexuality and "perverse" pleasures, yet what they attempt to hide inevitably bleeds through into story lines otherwise cleansed

of such fare. And so they must: a foundational irony of family sitcoms emerges from their tendency to camouflage or otherwise cloak sex, thus overlooking the foundational role of sex in building the families depicted onscreen.

Such narrative tensions result in queerness, in the disruptions of gendered and (hetero)sexual normativity ostensibly encoded in these TV narratives that invariably cannot prevent fissures from subverting their surface presentation of the American family in the throes of domestic bliss. Queerness, as Alexander Doty argues in his landmark study of gay representations in popular media, serves “to mark a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception. As such, this cultural ‘queer space’ recognizes the possibility that various and fluctuating queer positions might be occupied whenever *anyone* produces or responds to culture.”⁶ Various studies have traced the history of gay portrayals on television from virtual absence to a vibrant presence, as they have also noticed the ambivalence of many such depictions.⁷ As Lynne Joyrich cautions, “It’s the ambivalence, though, of how queerness can be both the electrical spark and the grounding against any possible shock that remains the paradox and the problem—indeed, I’d argue, *the* problematic—for queer television studies.”⁸ This book contributes to this ongoing discussion by exploring how the fantasies of genre, of marketing, and of children can never fully cloak the queerness lurking within the plucky families designed for American viewers’ comic delight. Queer readings of family sitcoms demolish myths of yesteryear, demonstrating the illusion of American sexual innocence in television’s early programs and its lasting consequences in the nation’s self-construction, as they also allow fresh insights into the ways in which more recent programs negotiate new visions of sexuality while remaining indebted to previous narrative traditions and long-standing generic conventions. Simply put, queer readings of America’s domestic sitcoms radically unsettle the nation’s simplistic vision of itself, revealing both a deeper vision of its families and of a television genre overwhelmingly dismissed as frivolous fare.

The Queer Fantasy of the Family Sitcom

Within the world of narrative analysis, genres stand as trivial yet essential constructions: trivial, because they divulge so little; essential, because they establish a framework for understanding and digesting a cultural work. As Jason Mittell explains of television genres, “Genre definitions are no more natural than the texts that they seem to categorize. Genres are cultural products, constituted by media practices and subject to ongoing change and redefinition.”⁹ For example, to label a television show a mystery is to give only the barest hints of its contents or its aesthetic quality, for the form ranges from modern classics, such as Helen Mirren’s gutsy performances in the *Prime Suspect*

series (recurring from 1991 to 2006) to kitschy flops, such as Loni Anderson's and Lynda Carter's stars fading in the short-lived *Partners in Crime* (1984); it includes as well the subgenre of procedurals (e.g., *Law & Order* [1990–2010], *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* [2000–2015]), in which plot takes precedence over character development and emotional depth. In this light, genres represent little more than collective fantasies, a helpful yet inconsequential attempt to organize art into conceptual categories—categories that the creators of these works, according to their unique visions, then dismantle or, more optimistically, reconstruct. Within the television economy, genres emerge through the complex interactions of creative talent, producers, and audiences, with each exerting their influence on which programs are created, aired, and renewed, both in regard to individual shows and the genres of which they serve as constituent elements.

Of the various television genres, the situation comedy towers as a resiliently popular form, reborn in successive generations and capturing various aspects of its zeitgeist. Richard Butsch observes that the “situation comedy is built around a humorous ‘situation’ in which tension develops and is resolved during the half hour. In episode after episode the situation is re-created.”¹⁰ Many sitcoms succinctly establish their foundational comic premise in their titles: lost on a tropical paradise in *Gilligan's Island* (1964–67), or the continual delay of answering the apparently simple question of *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–14). Even sitcoms named for their eponymous protagonist disclose their situational plotlines once audiences understand his or her identity: a white couple adopting a young African American child in *Webster* (1983–89) or the neurotic nothingness of *Seinfeld* (1989–98). Moreover, sitcoms typically adhere to formulaic plots that do not advance their foundational premises. As Paul Attallah explains: “It is a narrative necessity of situation comedy that the ‘situation’ must remain unchanged. If the program is to be repeated week after week, the characters and their mode of interaction must not be allowed to evolve. Were they to acquire experience, then evolution would occur and the show would not continue.”¹¹ Attallah's point is clearly evident in the vast majority of sitcoms, for most episodes of a series can stand alone without the scaffolding of past narratives. The genre's popularity is matched by its lucrative payoffs, for, as Lawrence Mintz notes, financial incentives abound owing to the fact that the sitcom “reigns supreme in the syndication market and as an exportable commodity”—which further explains its resiliency despite the various programming fads over the decades since television's rise.¹² If a sitcom can remain in production long enough to be distributed in syndication—typically, for five seasons, or approximately one hundred episodes—a financial bonanza awaits.

Under the wider rubric of situation comedies, the subheading of family, or domestic, sitcoms stands as one of its most durable, even beloved, forms. Lynn

Spigel states that the genre's traditional parameters include "a suburban home, character relationships based on family ties, a setting filled with middle-class luxuries, a story that emphasizes everyday complications, and a narrative structure based on conflicts that resolve in thirty minutes."¹³ Horace Newcomb distinguishes between situation comedies and domestic comedies, with the latter taking as their domain the daily activities of a given family, which, as he argues, results in programs with "more warmth and a deeper sense of humanity" than standard sitcoms.¹⁴ The names of many of TV's families resonate with an appeal both nostalgic and iconic: the Nelsons of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–66), the Ricardos of *I Love Lucy* (1951–57), the Cunninghams of *Happy Days* (1974–84), as well as the six primary clans examined in this monograph: the Cleavers of *Leave It to Beaver*, the Bradys of *The Brady Bunch*, the Huxtables of *The Cosby Show*, the Conners of *Roseanne*, the Stewarts of *Hannah Montana*, and the Pritchetts, Tucker-Pritchetts, and Dunphys of *Modern Family*. These fictional families have influenced countless viewers' perception of American domesticity, even when filtered through such lenses as irony, nostalgia, or incredulity.

The narrative structure of family sitcoms favors pat conclusions for their plots, and most of these programs end with a touch of moralizing, summarizing the lessons learned from the transgression against the family's rules. Many story lines involve only a minimal disruption of the family's unity, which George Burns suggests sardonically in a moment of metadiscourse in his *George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (1950–58): "We try to strike a happy medium. We have more plot than a variety show, and not as much as a wrestling match" ("Chapter 3").¹⁵ Whatever the extent of the transgression, all is forgiven by story's end, as is evident in—to take one example out of the thousands of narratives constituting sitcom history—the "Body Damage" episode of *Family Matters* (1989–98). Rachel (Telma Hopkins) damages her brother-in-law's car, and the family conspires to keep it a secret from him. When Carl (Reginald VelJohnson) learns the truth, he is more upset about the secret than the car: "But guys, remember, we're a family. Your problems are my problems. But I can't do anything about them unless you let me know what they are, okay?" His wife, Harriette (JoMarie Payton), agrees, speaking for herself and the rest of the family: "Right, baby. From now on, this family sticks together." David Marc describes the plotlines of family sitcoms as "illustrat[ing], in practical everyday subphilosophic terms, the tangible rewards of faith and trust in the family,"¹⁶ so even in family sitcoms that flagrantly rewrite the codes of domestic life into gleeful odes to dysfunctionality, the family unit remains sacrosanct: Al and Peg Bundy of *Married with Children* (1987–97), despite apparently loathing each other, could never divorce, for doing so would sever the program's foundational premise of familyhood.

But defining the apparently simple genre of the family sitcom conjures a foundational hermeneutic conundrum, for what configuration of individuals and consanguinity constitutes a family? The American family persists as a vibrantly amorphous entity, one that shifts in accordance with the prevailing zeitgeist, and further along these lines, prominent subgenres of family sitcoms rewrite the significance of children to the family unit or construct childhood according to varying parameters. For instance, *All in the Family* (1971–79) features bigoted antihero Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor) and his wife, Edith (Jean Stapleton), in its lead roles, along with their daughter, Gloria (Sally Struthers), and son-in-law, Mike “Meathead” Stivic (Rob Reiner). While Gloria is indeed Archie and Edith’s child, she is hardly one in the sense of an innocent naïf; on the contrary, she resists her father’s prejudices on numerous occasions and denounces him accordingly: “You are so sick,” she asserts after one of his antiethnic rants (“The Joys of Sex”). In complementary contrast, *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996–2005) reverses the standard intergenerational dynamic of most family sitcoms, with its plotlines addressing the rocky relationship of Ray (Ray Romano) and Debra Barone (Patricia Heaton) with Ray’s overbearing parents, Frank (Peter Boyle) and Marie (Doris Roberts). Thus, the variability of children and their ages affects—sometimes multiplying, sometimes restricting—the register, themes, and audiences available to a particular sitcom.

As this brief overview of family sitcoms and their shifting parameters attests, this genre is amorphous, as are all genres, and it is in the end, I think, unhelpful to construct a definition of the term that unnecessarily delimits it in light of its protean variations—one, for example, that would embrace *The Brady Bunch* for its focus on six young children but omit *All in the Family* because of Gloria’s early adulthood. Rather, the variability of familial relationships for each of these programs requires viewers to examine how a particular construction of kinship complements its narrative investments in other issues and the ways in which queer themes seep into a genre overarchingly conveying the fundamental sexual normativity of its members. For in so many instances, any promise of seamless heteronormativity is inevitably complicated, if not undone, as a program broaches topics it otherwise promises to eschew through its generic affiliation, thus rendering queer the very concept of the family-sitcom genre. At the same time, for the purposes of interpretive clarity, this volume focuses on programs that include young teen and preteen children as primary cast members, for these programs stake their appeal to viewers of all ages—even if their narratives are sometimes deemed too provocative for the fantasy of family-friendly programming. Television’s funny families with young children must tacitly address the issue of how to depict sexuality in a manner that will not alienate real-life parents tuning in to watch a program

with their kids, so the marketing concept of family-friendly programming attempts to assuage parents' concerns about television content through this ultimately meaningless designation.

The Queer Fantasy of Family-Friendly Programming

"You know, FOX turned into a hardcore sex channel so gradually I didn't even notice," sighs Marge Simpson in *The Simpsons* ("Lisa's Wedding"), in a satiric jab at network television's increasingly graphic depictions of sexuality over the years. Marge's words exaggerate yet echo recurring criticisms of television's shifting mores, particularly in relation to the chimerical concept of family-friendly programming. From television's early days, when the majority of families who owned a set owned only one and gathered together to watch it, domestic sitcoms were built on the foundational premise of appealing to the various members of their audiences, with the assumption that each member of a viewing family would identify with his or her corresponding role in these narrative families. As Lawrence Laurent notes in his classic 1956 study, family sitcoms enhance their commercial value through their multiple points of audience identification: "In some ways, commercial sponsorship is directly responsible for the kinds of programs which are seen on television. If the sponsor is trying to win 100 percent acceptance of his product, he is likely to prefer a program which will appeal to 100 percent of the audience. This fact accounts, in large part, for the plethora of 'family situation comedies' which fill the TV schedules."¹⁷ Early television advertisers also saw the benefit of appealing directly to child viewers, as Vance Packard charges in his 1957 anti-propaganda classic *The Hidden Persuaders*, in which he quotes a contemporary advertiser to reveal the industry's unscrupulous methods and pecuniary aims: "Think of what it can mean to your firm in profits if you can condition a million or ten million children who will grow up into adults trained to buy your product as soldiers are trained to advance when they hear the trigger words 'forward march.'"¹⁸ In sum, advertisers have long relied on family-friendly programming, little more than a marketing ploy based on an ecumenical appeal to various demographics, as they urge audiences to purchase their wares. This strategy bears the side-effect that viewers will inevitably compare themselves and their ideal vision of the American family to the images seen onscreen, with these sitcom families validating certain forms of kinship and overlooking others. Such a simplistic assessment cannot account for the multiple and contradictory viewing positions any given individual may stake in relation to a program, nor did most early television families recognize the diversity of the American family in relation to race, gender, and other identities excluded by the normative assumption of suburban whiteness. Nonetheless, this marketing foundation of universality imbues domestic sitcoms with accompanying

values and appeals, thus virtually assuring their queer collapse under these inherent contradictions.

Recurring controversies over the chimerical concept of the “family hour” showcase the queer and hazy parameters of any real commitment to family-friendly programming on the part of the legacy networks and cable channels. A staunch defender of this fantasy, television critic Thomas Johnson proposes that “shows airing in that hour should not merely entertain children, but be good for them; they should reinforce traditional values, not subvert them,” citing *Little House on the Prairie* (1974–83), *Happy Days*, *The Cosby Show*, and *Full House* (1987–95) as examples of appropriate family-friendly fare.¹⁹ A family hour was unnecessary during television’s early years when the networks censored themselves to the extent that on *I Love Lucy*, Lucy (Lucille Ball) and Ricky Ricardo (Desi Arnaz) avoid the word “pregnant”—preferring instead the euphemism “expecting.” By the 1970s, however, concern had mounted increasingly over programs’ candid depictions of controversial topics, including racism, violence, women’s reproductive rights, and homosexuality. The 1971 report “Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Televised Violence,” submitted to Surgeon General Jesse Steinfeld, concludes that “The Department of Health, Education and Welfare would do well to consider increased involvement in this field, not just in relation to the possibly harmful effects of television, but also to develop the experience and professional relationships needed to consider and stimulate television’s health-promoting possibilities.”²⁰ The federal government, identifying a moral scourge on the television screens of the nation’s families, charged itself with the improvement of the American mind.

Seeing the handwriting on the wall, and responding to additional pressure from Congress and the Federal Communications Commission, the networks embraced and codified family-friendly protocols in 1975, agreeing that the first hour of prime-time scheduling would consist of shows appropriate for all ages. Arthur R. Taylor of CBS Entertainment endorsed the “Family Hour” plan, which, as Richard Blake attests, “was adopted into the Code of the National Association of Broadcasters in April, 1975, and became policy at the start of the 1975–76 season.”²¹ Unsurprisingly, the family-hour policy proved exceedingly unpopular among the creative forces behind network television. Norman Lear, producer of *All in the Family*, *Maude* (1972–78), *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* (1976–77), and other popular programs, asked Robert D. Wood, president of CBS Television (1969–76), to clarify its parameters but received only equivocations and so replied with cheeky exasperation, “Well, how can you think of moving [*All in the Family*] out of the Family Hour unless you know what it is? . . . Is there something you can read to me so I’ll know what it is you want me to conform to?”²² Additional creative voices expressing outrage over the tyranny of the family hour included George Schlatter, executive

producer of *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* (1967–73) and *Cher* (1975–76), who tersely jibed, “The family hour sucks,” and Paul Junger Witt, executive producer of *The Partridge Family* (1970–74) and *Soap* (1977–81), who agreed that it was “an outrageous pain in the ass.”²³ Rebellious against the restrictions it imposed, television programs of the era employed the family hour as fodder for sarcastic humor, such as in *One Day at a Time* (1975–84), when petulant daughter Julie (Mackenzie Phillips) snipes at her mother, Ann (Bonnie Franklin), for treating her like a child: “I didn’t think the family hour ended ‘til nine!” (“Chicago Rendezvous”).

Victory for family-hour advocates was short-lived, and in the ensuing court case, the Writers’ Guild of America, the Directors’ Guild, and several production companies (including Norman Lear’s Tandem Productions) sued ABC, CBS, NBC, the Federal Communications Commission, and the National Association of Broadcasters. On 4 November 1976, Judge Warren J. Ferguson of the Federal District Court in Los Angeles ruled the “Family Hour” policy unconstitutional for violating the First Amendment, so after one fleeting season, its family-friendly standards were jettisoned.²⁴ Even if the family hour had survived this legal challenge, it is difficult to imagine its guidelines being strictly enforced year after year. Much as film ratings have shifted over the decades, necessitating the addition of the PG-13 and NC-17 designations, so, too, would any protocols for family-hour programming have likely stretched with the passing of time. Counterfactuals are, of course, impossible to prove, yet it appears likely that any attempt to codify programming protocols for the networks would have faced increasing subversions over the years.

Beyond the immediate realm of the television networks, their programming schedules, and this skirmish over the “family hour,” the fantasy of family-friendly narratives invites political grandstanding in the so-called culture wars, for, as one unidentified source from the National Association of Broadcasters lamented in a 1997 interview, politicians “can never lose a vote bashing broadcasters and Hollywood.”²⁵ The cultural legacy of the 1970s family hour and accompanying calls for family-friendly programming have regularly erupted as flashpoints in debates addressing the United States’ moral character over the decades. Despite the fact that the “family hour” no longer existed in the 1990s as part of network protocols, L. Brent Bozell, chairman of the conservative Media Research Center, derided the loss of this phantom construction while bemoaning television as a “moral wasteland,” decrying *Spin City* (1996–2002) as “hyperlibidinous” and *Ellen* (1994–98) as “homosexually obsessed.”²⁶ Across the partisan divide, Senator Joe Lieberman (Democrat, Connecticut) agreed: “The safe haven that we once counted on has turned into a broadcasting bordello. Much of this material seems about as healthful and suitable to kids, frankly, as a plate full of lead paint.”²⁷ Similar to the controversies of the 1970s that resulted in the short-lived family hour, on 1 January 1997 a system

of parental guidelines, proposed by the United States Congress, the major television networks, and the Federal Communications Commission, began notifying audiences of the appropriateness and content of various fare with the markings TV-Y (appropriate for all children), TV-Y7 (appropriate for children seven and older), TV-G (suitable for all ages), TV-PG (unsuitable for younger children), TV-14 (unsuitable for children under fourteen years), and TV-MA (mature audiences only). The guidelines also include content labels: D for suggestive dialogue, L for vulgar language, S for sexual situations, V for violence, and FV for fantasy violence.²⁸ These guidelines purportedly assist parents in determining whether their children should watch a given program, yet it is quite likely that the many combinations possible from this array of labels—e.g., TV Y7 FV, TV-14 DLS—confuse rather than clarify its subject matter. The guidelines did little to mollify lawmakers: two years later, U.S. Senators Sam Brownback (Republican, Kansas) and Byron Dorgan (Democrat, South Dakota), with several colleagues from the House of Representatives, sent a letter to the network presidents, urging them “to reverse course and reinstate the family hour, once again making that time slot suitable for children.”²⁹

Unsurprisingly, neither the family-hour debates of the 1970s nor the institution of parental guidelines in the 1990s have squelched the fantasy of the family hour, with tempests regularly swirling over allegedly inappropriate content in the ensuing decades. A minor brouhaha arose following “The Baby Monitor” episode of *According to Jim* (2001–9), which depicts a neighbor consoling her husband over his small penis (notably, the stature of Jim’s penis—and thus of star Jim Belushi’s penis—does not trigger these anxieties). Stephanie Leifer, ABC’s vice president of comedy series, batted away the controversy: “We felt it wasn’t too graphic—it was done with a lot of double entendre. We’re trying to walk a fine line. We want adults to stay interested *and* feel comfortable enough to watch a show with their kids.”³⁰ The “MILF Island” episode of *30 Rock* (2006–13) likewise generated a minor stir over its plot, as Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin) produces a *Survivor*-like reality program based on horny adolescents determining which sexy mother will win the contest—“Twenty-five super-hot moms, fifty eighth-grade boys, no rules”—both hiding and trumpeting its sexual humor with the acronym MILF (“Mother I’d Like to Fuck”). NBC’s responses to the hullabaloo constituted a masterful medley of obfuscation and doublespeak. Executive Ben Silverman endorsed the family hour as “the 8 to 9 p.m. block of programming that . . . would consist of shows a family could watch together,” while Mitch Metcalf, NBC’s executive vice president for program scheduling, countered that the family hour suggests a proper “direction for program development” but should not be construed as establishing “black-and-white expectations” for viewers: “There are not going to be hard and fast rules,” he added.³¹ The family-hour culture wars flared anew with CBS’s short-lived *##*! My Dad Says* (2010). Fuming at the vulgarity encoded

in its title, media critic Jeff McCall lambasted it as “a poke in the eye for that large part of society that is, indeed, concerned about the role television plays in our national culture. Our culture has coarsened, of course, but that is in no small part because of television redefining acceptable standards.”³² Responding to such cultural pressures, the cable network ABC Family was renamed Freeform in 2015, in large part to escape the moral standards implied by its name. This domestic appellation was undercut through numerous controversial and sexually daring programs such as *Pretty Little Liars* (2010–17), which features teen girls as its protagonists in a variety of sexually suggestive and murderously vengeful scenarios.³³ As Emily Yahr notes in a *Washington Post* article whose title captures her exasperation—“*Pretty Little Liars*: When Will the Show Stop with Its Creepy Underage Relationships?”—this program “has always been a disturbing teen drama, the kind that makes people say ‘It’s on ABC Family?’”³⁴

As these recurring controversies over the family hour from the 1970s to the 2010s indicate, the queer fantasy of family-friendly programming has proved resilient, for it continues to haunt discussions of television programming and its protocols. Many viewers believed then—and continue to believe now—that the legacy networks and certain cable channels should air programs consistent with the nebulous parameters of “family values” during this time slot, and they often expect that the contents of this hour should reflect their personal sense of morality. With the rise of children’s networks in the 1980s and 1990s, primarily Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, many parents expected the original programming on these channels to adhere to family-friendly protocols as well, only to be surprised by their occasionally candid depictions of teen sexuality. Further confusing the fantasy of family-friendly programming, the legacy and cable networks, when it appears financially advantageous to do so, often highlight their kid-friendly fare, thereby reminding viewers of yesteryear’s code and its spectral descendants to which they do not formally adhere.

Beyond the financial motivations of the networks, ever-changing viewing habits have contributed to the erosion of family-friendly programming. As I have mentioned, during television’s early days, most families gathered together to watch their single console, but as prices fell over the decades, households began owning multiple sets, with viewing fragmenting along age lines: “Kids are watching something in their room, and parents are watching something else in *their* room,” noted media analyst Betsy Frank, which resulted in the further fragmentation of advertising demographics.³⁵ Moreover, with the explosion of cable networks in the 1990s and 2000s, and with the rise of Internet entertainment and viewing devices such as electronic pads, audiences have increasingly segregated themselves not merely by the programs they watch but by the channels or websites to which they turn. A cherished illusion throughout TV’s history, the fantasy of family-friendly programming continues to

pervade discussions of network programming and its suitability for audiences of all ages—even when a given sitcom evinces little interest in appealing to “innocent” young viewers, who some believe must be protected from the culture around them. Family-friendly programming, a fantasy rendered queer through the impossibility of its call for children’s eternal innocence, cannot fully inoculate programs from the surrounding culture, nor can it quarantine children from that which they cannot be quarantined: themselves.

The Queer Fantasy of Innocent Children

“And if you are going to take a stand, perhaps the best one possible is the one good for the child.” I picked this quotation virtually at random, knowing that I would need someone to make this point as I wrote this book, knowing that someone would oblige, for various politicians, pundits, and cultural commentators are always defending their viewpoints through an appeal to pathos predicated on the image of the child.³⁶ In the realm of family sitcoms, such pleas are parodied in the repeated cries of Helen Lovejoy on *The Simpsons*—“Oh-h-h, won’t somebody please think of the children?” (“Much Apu about Nothing”)—always with the objective of winning whatever argument is at hand. For who can argue against children, against children’s needs, against children’s innocence? When we think of children, we think of the cultural fantasy of children—young, fresh-faced naïfs in need of parental and community guidance to nurture them into adolescence and then adulthood—an often true yet strikingly simplistic assessment of their maturation process. Of course, this is not to deny the obvious fact that children require nurture, support, and affection during their upbringing and that the category “children” represents real human beings. At the same time, the children examined in this study are fictional characters who, by the very fact of their design to fit into a commercial entertainment product and thus to generate revenue, advance particular ideological fantasies of childhood. Similar to race, sex, and sexual orientation, children and childhood reflect an unremarkable condition, yet these cultural markers often become the defining, if not overriding, aspect of a young person’s identity. “Childhood is thus to a considerable degree a function of adult expectations,” opines historian Colin Heywood.³⁷ Furthermore, the concepts of children and childhood in Western culture have radically shifted over the centuries, which highlights the ways in which children must live their lives at the intersection of their biological reality and cultural constructions of what they represent. Within a television show’s story lines, children *always* serve as cultural scripts that illuminate how and why they are so constructed and to what ends they are deployed: there is no “real child” in a fictional program. The ideological construction of the Child overwrites children’s individuality, amalgamating them into an undifferentiated collective in need of nurture and

protection—and often, as Helen Lovejoy’s cry attests, through sentimentally moralistic appeals on their behalf.

In this regard, children’s sexual innocence is not an inherently natural state of human development but a collective fantasy that attempts to protect and regulate the social order. Gary Cross and David Buckingham, in their groundbreaking studies of children’s depictions in various cultural texts, argue that children’s innocence merely cloaks adults’ need of children’s innocence for their own designs. Cross avows, “The child increasingly has borne the obligation of imposing cultural standards on a society that is at war with itself over such standards. . . . Sheltering innocence may be more about the deep moral conflicts among adults than the needs of children.”³⁸ For Buckingham, the figure of the Child, in its role as a signifier of social innocence, demarcates normative behaviors and pleasures for adults: “The idea of childhood serves as a repository for qualities which adults regard both as precious and as problematic—qualities which they cannot tolerate as part of themselves; yet it can also serve as a dream world into which we retreat from the pressures and responsibilities of maturity.”³⁹ Childhood innocence stands as virtually an unquestioned social good, for innocence’s opposite is guilt, and who wants a guilty child? Here again the faulty logic of binaries reveals itself, for the opposite of innocence need not be guilt but instead knowledge, awareness, or simply comprehension. Preserving children’s innocence on television, however, requires regulating adult actions, including those of the producers, actors, and consumers of television programs straitjacketed by network censors demanding a rigorous submission to normative codes of social and sexual behavior and the nebulous parameters of “family-friendly programming.” Coded with so many conflicting and variant meanings, the fictional children of numerous narratives often ironically emerge as queer figures who highlight, rather than dampen, the tensions of depicting their eternal innocence.

Family sitcoms with young children in their casts construct these characters as they are needed for their narratives, yet the child actors selected for these roles inevitably mature, thus continually testing the foundations of youthful innocence on which a given program is built. Moreover, as much as the producers of a family sitcom might prefer for their show to resist evolving in order to generate more episodes and greater profits, these programs by necessity must recognize the maturing bodies of their child actors in their story lines. The jokes and plots appropriate for five- or six-year-old children, including both actors and audience members, will no longer be appropriate when they turn ten or eleven and will be even less so when they turn fifteen or sixteen. Live-action family sitcoms thus face the conundrum of seeking the stasis of their narrative frameworks while also acknowledging that the child actors and child viewers jointly responsible for their success will one day outgrow their current interests—and more so, outgrow their current bodies—as they proceed into

adolescence and beyond. As producer Dan Guntzelman of *Growing Pains* and *Just the Ten of Us* (1988–90) explains, “Most successful sitcoms have a life of five, six, or seven years, then the pressures start to mount: Actors want to move on, the show gets top heavy. (How many executive producers does it take to screw in a light bulb? About 10 in the fifth year of a series.) A family sitcom has an even greater incentive. (Kids grow up and there goes the family.)”⁴⁰ No television family can fully resist the ravages of time, which is registered in the faces of even the youngest stars.

In the annals of American television history *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* most successfully navigated this challenge in its fourteen-year run, whereas many other popular family sitcoms—including *Diff’rent Strokes* (1978–86), *Silver Spoons* (1982–87), *Punky Brewster* (1984–88), *Full House*, and *Home Improvement* (1991–99)—ended after about five to eight years, when their child stars were no longer children. In contrast, an animated program like *The Simpsons*, which has run more than twenty-five seasons and shows little sign of imminent cancellation, demonstrates the elasticity available to a family sitcom whose members will never mature beyond their current ages: Bart, Lisa, and Maggie look and act the same today as they did during their first season in 1989. Furthermore, as their child actors grow and their ratings sag, numerous family sitcoms have attempted to generate renewed interest and a ratings bump by introducing young cast members, as did *The Brady Bunch* with Cousin Oliver (Robbie Rist), *Family Ties* (1982–89) with Andy (Brian Bonsall), and *Growing Pains* with Luke (Leonardo DiCaprio)—a ploy rarely successful but that evinces a desire for the stasis and popularity of the past, as well as its impossibility as time passes and children grow.

Children’s innocence may appear to be a timeless value—or, more precisely, its advocates attempt to present it as a timeless value—yet images of children’s innocence have shifted remarkably within television’s relatively short history, which further adumbrates the queer potential of the child. Today no television program would depict a naked child, yet young Buffy Peterson-Davis (Anissa Jones) is shown naked from the waist up while preparing for her bath in *Family Affair* (1966–71; “Jody and Cissy”), and when demonstrating where she received her vaccines, she lifts her skirt and reveals her bare buttocks (“The Matter of School”; see figs. I.1 and I.2). In the 1960s a nude child simply represented an innocent child, and these shots of Buffy call to mind photographs of unclothed toddlers in family photo albums of the era. From the 1980s onward, in the wake of the numerous child molestation scandals involving the Catholic Church and the Boy Scouts of America, including as well the notorious McMartin preschool trial, a naked child has become the intolerable vision of a molested child.⁴¹ Television of more recent vintage might display infants’ behinds, such as when Jesse and Joey bathe baby Michelle in *Full House* (“Our Very First Show”) or in *Everybody Loves Raymond* when Ray and Debra bathe



FIGURES 1.1 AND 1.2 Innocent or perverse? Children's nudity registers the fluid vision of cultural innocence, as these images of Buffy in *Family Affair* attest. Unremarkable in their day, these images, or ones similar to them, simply do not appear in today's family sitcoms.

their twin infant sons, but notably, not their kindergarten-age daughter, Allie (“I Love You”). In this light, Buffy’s nudity highlights the ways in which depictions of childhood innocence alter according to changing cultural and historical circumstances and thus also the queer ways in which family sitcoms construct children to mark their narrative space as concomitantly innocent, despite the semiotic instability of children to achieve this goal.

Beyond this semiotic instability of the figure of the child, many young actors in family sitcoms do not want to be seen merely as children, realizing that typecasting will jeopardize their future careers. Thus, as these actors mature, many take on sexually provocative roles or discuss their sex lives candidly in an attempt to cast aside the mantle of childhood. As the ensuing chapters address, Eve Plumb from *The Brady Bunch*, Lisa Bonet from *The Cosby Show*, and Miley Cyrus from *Hannah Montana* took on risky, sexually frank roles to shed their good-girl images. Also, numerous child actors who have faded from public view exploit the titillation factor of child stars growing up into sexually active adults. Frank Bank, who played “Lumpy” Rutherford on *Leave It to Beaver*, titles a chapter of his autobiography “Speaking of Lots of Beaver,”⁴² and Dustin Diamond, who played Samuel “Screech” Powers on *Saved by the Bell* (1989–93), employs a similar tactic in his tell-all account of the show, with such chapters as “I’m Going to Disneyland . . . To Get Laid” and “Screech Is a Born Cougar Hunter.”⁴³ Family-sitcom innocence can curtail a young actor’s career, whereas sexually charged roles demand audiences to see these stars anew—thereby displaying the utility of sexuality in rebranding a young star’s celebrity persona. In both instances, sexuality defines a given actor’s career arc, with the lost aura of youthful innocence influencing casting directors’ perceptions of their appropriateness for more mature roles.

Beyond these issues surrounding child characters and child actors in family sitcoms emerge similar concerns circulating around the children in their audiences. Commentators have long fretted over children’s exposure to the media, whether through their tendency to overindulge in its pleasures or to select inappropriate fare. Marie Winn’s *The Plug-In Drug* advises parents to “make their children’s childhood a rich and distinctive experience, one that will serve as a resource for the rest of their lives”—and to accomplish this objective by putting “television under control.”⁴⁴ Even educational children’s fare raises its own set of dilemmas, similar to those bedeviling family sitcoms, as Brian Simpson observes: “Children’s programming, it is said, must be ‘educational and informational,’ although few can agree on what this means. Quality programming seems to be desirable, yet commercial broadcasters bemoan the difficulty of producing such programming in a commercially viable manner.”⁴⁵ Further along these lines, many critics castigate television shows for modeling antisocial behavior yet without paying sufficient attention to the structures of narratology that require some type of conflict to motivate a plot. In her analysis of

sibling relationships in sitcoms, Mary Strom Larson documents that “very few examples of the support and loyalty described as key elements in siblingship exist. The sitcom siblings observed do not appear to illustrate [the] claim that television tells viewers ‘families are the best things we’ve got.’”⁴⁶ Siblings arguing with one another is immediately recognizable as the basic structure of a plot; children getting along together, however much parents might wish for it in their personal lives, makes for less compelling television. Even the children of the homey families of the 1950s disagree with one another—sometimes rather violently—more often than nostalgia might lead one to believe.

In sum, the queer fantasies of the family sitcom, of family-friendly programming, and of children themselves establish protocols of viewing that, through their inevitable self-contradictions, frequently corrupt creators’ and viewers’ attempts to circumscribe their cultural meaning as insistently guileless. This is not, of course, to argue that all family sitcoms cloak within their narrative structure a flouting of ideological codes of normativity, for a large share of these programs are truly as innocuous as one would presume. At the same time, a successful family sitcom can run for more than two hundred episodes, with numerous producers, directors, and writers all contributing their unique visions—and their unique subversions—of the genre’s prevailing surface of innocence. So family sitcoms have a queer story to tell about sexuality in the United States of America as the decades have passed, with their insistent innocence camouflaging deeper investments in questioning the cultural meaning of family, as the following chapters attest. To see family sitcoms as an ultimately queer genre is to reconceive America’s conception of itself, as portrayed through its defining television programs, in light of these programs’ impossible innocence and conflicting depictions of sexuality’s significance to the domestic sphere.

Few families can claim the outer trappings of heteronormativity as clearly as the Cleavers of *Leave It to Beaver*, a program that reigns in the American consciousness as emblematic of 1950s innocence. Yet time itself is rendered queer in the program’s construction of its backstory and of its narrative present, with further queerness anticipated in its future reception in syndication. Chapter 1, “The Queer Times of *Leave It to Beaver*: Beaver’s Present, Ward’s Past, and June’s Future,” questions the assumptions of chrononormative television criticism that attempts to pin programs down as representatives of their eras. Instead, this chapter posits the queer possibilities inherent in Beaver’s troubled assumption of masculine adolescence, in Ward’s traumatic childhood of abuse and its lingering aftereffects, and in June’s iconic domesticity that actress Barbara Billingsley subsequently transmuted into an ironic acknowledgment of the era’s feminine discontents. The Cleavers’ latent queerness dismantles viewers’ understanding of the past and its supposed innocence, for

innocence stands as a cultural marker invariably undone by time's inevitable contradictions.

Moving from the Cleavers to the Bradys, chapter 2, "Queer Innocence and Kitsch Nostalgia in *The Brady Bunch*," ponders the impossibility of eternal innocence in depicting the Child, even the Brady children. *The Brady Bunch* is often seen as television's last gasp of innocence before the 1970s ushered in an era of frank portrayals of sexuality and other controversial topics, yet it cannot free itself from the temporal culture in which it is set. In this light, *The Brady Bunch's* innocence is rendered queer, for in its production and reception it often broached the possibility of eroticism that its story lines appeared so strenuously to deny. This chapter also examines the numerous rebirths of the Brady family following the sitcom's cancellation in 1974, particularly the television movie *A Very Brady Christmas* (1988) and the dramedy *The Bradys* (1990). These efforts appeal to the sense of kitsch nostalgia that many *Brady* fans bring to this program—for it has proved remarkably resilient and enduringly popular in syndication and in its multiple relaunches—yet sexuality complicates these efforts as well, for it reestablishes the impossibility of the innocence on which the Bradys' attraction lies.

Among the myriad family sitcoms in television history, few invite such divergent readings as *The Cosby Show*, which has been both exalted as a pioneering achievement in portraying African American families and denigrated as insufficiently invested in relaying the challenges that blacks face in a land still grappling with slavery's legacy and the enduring threat of racism. In "No Sex Please, We're African American: *The Cosby Show's* Queer Fear of Black Sexuality," my analysis turns to the ways in which critics' varying responses to the program highlight the obstacles to representing blackness on television. In this groundbreaking program, Cosby's efforts to present a new model of androgynous fatherhood clashed with concerns over depictions of teen sexuality, to the extent that patriarchal privilege reasserts itself in the sitcom's investment in the Huxtable children's virginites. These issues flared beyond the purview of their shared sitcom when Cosby and teen actress Lisa Bonet clashed over her career choices, particularly her decision to star in the racy film *Angel Heart* (1987), with this backstage drama treated in the popular press as if it were a family squabble. Moreover, the numerous allegations of rape and sexual misconduct that have dogged Cosby decades after the show's successful run demonstrate the ways in which shifts in viewers' perceptions of actors influence the reception of their programs. Cosby's progressive vision of paternity ultimately founders against both the program's insistently innocent depiction of teen sexuality and the metanarrative controversies surrounding its stars, thus demonstrating the destabilizing intersection of race and heterosexuality when innocence can no longer be maintained as an anchoring fiction.

In its stinging economic rebuttal to the homey comforts depicted in numerous family sitcoms, Roseanne Barr's *Roseanne* embraced a gritty, blue-collar ethos coupled with frank treatments of sexuality. Feminism, economics, and various sexual issues (including abortion, pornography, homosexuality, and premarital teen sex) converge in this program, and chapter 4, "Feminism, Homosexuality, and Blue-Collar Perversity in *Roseanne*," explores the ways in which Barr uses sexuality to dismantle the economic ethos of 1980s Reagan Republicanism. Television's treatments of sexuality are implicated with economics in various, often overlooked, ways, yet *Roseanne* consistently foregrounds how financial constraints compel its characters to consider the repercussions of their sexual desires. With story lines addressing Roseanne's gay friends Nancy and Leon, her mother Bev's coming out as a lesbian, and her daughters' sexual relationships with their boyfriends, as well as with Barr's decision to cast lesbian Sandra Bernhard and porn star Traci Lords in her family sitcom, *Roseanne* stresses the potential of women's sexuality to allow an escape from the moribund present of a faltering, antiunion economy. Queerness, as enacted through disruptive sexualities, thus mitigates oppressive ideological forces, allowing teen and adult women to assert their economic, as well as erotic, desires.

Chapter 5, "Allegory, Queer Authenticity, and Marketing Tween Sexuality in *Hannah Montana*," examines the adventures of dorky adolescent Miley Stewart and her alter ego, pop sensation Hannah Montana—as well as their exploits in marketing with star Miley Cyrus. The tween market has exploded since the 1990s and 2000s, with advertisers directing their pitches directly to these young consumers. The age-old advertising mantra that "sex sells" faces the complication of camouflaging sexuality in this tale of a girl-next-door pop princess, as it also seeks to glamorize her life through a steady stream of cute beaux. By stressing Miley's authenticity (despite the irony of stressing the authenticity of a character with a secret identity), *Hannah Montana* creates the character as a trustworthy marketing icon while simultaneously preparing young viewers for Cyrus's post-*Hannah* metamorphosis into a sexually provocative pop star. The duality of Miley Stewart's everyday life and of Hannah Montana's celebrity extravagance is mirrored in the duality of Cyrus's role as actress in a tween sitcom and as herself, in which the authenticity she claims in her multiple roles shields her from any repercussions for discarding her persona of childhood innocence. Emerging as an increasingly forceful advocate of queer rights, as well as a personal avatar of queer desire, Cyrus has exploited the foundational assumption of family sitcom innocence to launch new visions of herself as an eternally protean star.

In its depiction of the intersecting lives of the Pritchetts, Tucker-Pritchetts, and Dunphys, *Modern Family* introduced a gay couple to the dynamics of the

family sitcom, as partners Mitch and Cam adopt Lily, a Vietnamese orphan, in the program's pilot. Many viewers have criticized the program's tame treatment of the men's relationship, and chapter 6, "Conservative Narratology, Queer Politics, and the Humor of Gay Stereotypes in *Modern Family*," explores the ramifications of this charge of an ultimately reactionary aspect of the sitcom's treatment of same-sex desire. By bending the expected protocols of sitcom moralism, *Modern Family* restages the ostensibly conservative narratology of the form precisely through its investment in stereotype-based humor. Furthermore, by repeatedly depicting the ways in which assumptions of heteronormativity founder against the intransigent stagings of anal eroticism, *Modern Family* posits the impossibility of tamping unruly and queer desires within the family unit, rendering the family an open site of queerness that earlier models of the sitcom tried so strenuously to hide.

My conclusion, "Tolstoy Was Wrong; or, On the Queer Reception of Television's Happy Families," surveys the ways in which the family sitcom is an oft-disparaged genre yet surmounts the inherent difficulty of portraying narrative happiness—in contrast to the lion's share of literary, cinematic, and television portrayals of familial conflict. Yes, most domestic sitcoms are predicated on the premise of normatively happy families, but, as *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom* demonstrates, representing their happiness in narrative and on television requires endless negotiations about the meaning of the family unit in their sociotemporal setting and in their sexual politics. The conclusion also posits multiple reasons for the family sitcom's degraded status as an inferior genre; by theorizing from Pierre Bourdieu's critique of aesthetics, it suggests how the form creates lasting pleasures through diachronic readings, both naive and intellectual, that enable multiple and variant queer spectatorships. In constructing purportedly normative families, these programs create interpretive spaces for queer viewers and, at least potentially, create queer pleasures for ostensibly normative viewers as well. Assessing American family sitcoms as cheerily normative necessitates overlooking the contradictions at their heart, which thus highlights the utility of queerly viewing this genre throughout its history in order to recognize its aporias, gaps, and fissures.

Collectively, these chapters trace the ways in which sexuality and queerness can never be banished from family sitcoms but instead percolate throughout various story lines that attempt to quell their disruptive force. Also, as is apparent from these chapter overviews, my purpose is to examine the significance of sex in relation to a host of other ideological issues, each of which is addressed in the constituent chapters: time's queer potential and the limitations of chrononormative interpretations for *Leave It to Beaver*; the queerness of children's innocence and the threat of sexuality to nostalgia for *The Brady Bunch*; the struggle to represent American blackness and teen sexuality for *The Cosby*

Show; the blue-collar pessimism following Reaganomics and the disruptive force of female and queer desire for *Roseanne*; the power of marketing in creating an erotically innocent yet sexually invested tween audience for *Hannah Montana*; and the difficulties of representing queer normativity for *Modern Family* as gay Americans were achieving marital equality in the 2010s. I employ deep readings of these six programs—a curated collection of the genre—to exemplify profound shifts in the depiction of American domesticity, and I discuss additional programs to better contextualize their contributions to television’s legacy. Through this combined focus—a particular show in depth, with insights gleaned from its contemporaries—we see through these chapters the development of the American family sitcom during milestone moments in its history and its long-standing challenges with confronting sexuality.⁴⁷

These chapters also illustrate the complexity of sitcom criticism due to three distinct yet overlapping concerns: the interplays of these programs’ surfaces (e.g., plots, story lines, characters) and their symptomologies (e.g., narrative structure, ideological blind spots, silences, and other lacunae); the interpretive ambiguity of comic texts; and the variant effects of television’s inherent flow. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus distinguish between surface and symptomatic readings, outlining their import for critical practice: “a surface is what insists upon being looked *at* rather than what we trust ourselves to see *through*,” while a symptomatic reading seeks “absences, gaps, and ellipses in texts, and then ask[s] what those absences mean, what forces create them, and how they signify the questions that motivate the text, but that the text itself cannot articulate.”⁴⁸ The tension between surfaces and symptoms raises challenging interpretive questions: at what point do symptoms overtake surfaces? When, if ever, should symptomatic readings be construed as misreadings rather than readings of the televisual texts at hand? No text can account for all possible story lines that might be addressed or characters that might be included; all texts must have absences, so at what point must a narrative assume responsibility for any symptomatic (mis)interpretations it generates? Successful sitcoms offer so much surface—at the low end of this study, *Hannah Montana* consists of 99 episodes, whereas *Leave It to Beaver* consists of 235—yet they also feature a recurrent symptomology of an approximately twenty-four-minute narrative dramatizing a humorous misadventure of family life, one that ultimately ends with the family unit preserved. *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom* cannot resolve the surface-versus-symptom debate as it relates to television criticism, yet it advances the discussion by considering the tension inherent in sexuality both as surface and as symptom: sexuality frequently appears on the screen, but it is also hidden to protect the fantasy of children’s innocence, so it lies within a program’s queer symptomology as well.

The comedy intrinsic to family sitcoms similarly muddies interpretive clarity, with humor functioning both on the surface and within the symptomology of these narratives. To look at one such example, in Mary Tyler Moore's indelible performances as Mary Richards in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77), viewers can see either a breakthrough depiction of an independent, career woman or a regressive caricature of feminism's failures, one who frequently turns to her boss, Lou Grant (Ed Asner), for guidance with her trademark whimper, "Oh-h-h-h, Mr. Grant." Debates about comedy's ideological meaning teeter between celebrations of its liberatory flair and laments of its regressive force, as does the necessity of distinguishing between laughing *at* and laughing *with* various characters.⁴⁹ With a text as multifaceted as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, viewers can laugh at or with Mary Richards, enjoy the surface liberatory pleasures of her story lines or regret their regressive symptomology, or position themselves along a continuum privileging surface over symptom, or vice versa, or combine these pleasures complementarily. One finds repeatedly in the annals of television scholarship a critic tilting the interpretive balance in favor of a program's surface or of its symptomology to generate a convincing interpretation, or suggesting that a program's humor strips it of any deeper significance, yet a more compelling complexity arises when one views surface and symptom working in tandem, if not always in harmony, along with the comedy that the genre foregrounds.

Television's flow—its segmentation, framing, structure, scheduling, and other such shifts—further complicates the process of interpreting its narratives, for this concept challenges viewers to identify which elements of a program and of its broadcasting influence its reception. Raymond Williams famously defined television's flow: "What is being offered is not, in older terms, a programme of discrete units with particular insertions, but a planned flow, in which the true series is not the published sequence of programme items but this sequence transformed by the inclusion of another kind of sequence, so that these sequences together compose the real flow, the real 'broadcasting.'"⁵⁰ Since this term entered the critical lexicon in 1974, the experience of viewing television has changed dramatically, particularly with the explosion of networks and channels, the rise of streaming services, and various other technological innovations, such that William Uricchio argues that "the changing status of the term [*flow*], and particularly the criticism it generated, needs to be seen against the changing 'regime of representations' of television."⁵¹ Television's flow demands that audiences recognize the difficulties of removing a particular episode or series from its paratexts and paratechnologies, for these elements inevitably affect how it is consumed. At the risk of personalizing this critical concept, I believe it is also necessary to extend television's flow to account for the periods of one's personal viewing history, for not only do television's technological iterations affect the

perception of a program, but so, too, do the shifts in identity registered in the individuals consuming television programs—a likelihood given that viewers might watch the same show over several decades of their lives. Without ceding humanity to cyborg status, we are nonetheless viewing “technologies” ourselves, ones whose abilities to decode narratives are never stable. John Ellis cautions that “flow assembles disparate items, placing them within the same experience, but does not organize them to produce an overall meaning,” with his words an apt reminder of the potential pitfalls in interpreting a televisual text that can never elude the currents of flow through which it is consumed.⁵² *Flow* remains one of the more elliptical terms of television analysis—for some, it is “more of a critical provocation than a coherent analytical method”⁵³—yet at the very least, it reminds viewers that, reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan, the medium affects the message.⁵⁴

In gauging the play between surfaces and symptoms, between comedy and its interpretive discontents, and between stable texts and texts in flow, as further mediated through the lens of America’s vexed relationship with sexuality, this book advances a critical understanding of these compelling, multifaceted texts that have helped to constitute the meaning of family for the wider American culture. The Cleavers, Bradys, Huxtables, Conners, Stewarts, and Pritchetts, Tucker-Pritchetts, and Dunphys have allowed America to see itself and to see itself changing, all the while obscuring the meaning of sexuality for families who may not yet have broached this essential yet vexed subject with their children. Quinn Miller calls for queer television criticism that “addresses the instability of common beliefs and binary logics of identity and difference,” adding that “queer analysis of TV changes the way we see conventional representations in past eras and cultural history as a whole” by “illuminating unexpected challenges to straight conventions and spaces of non-conformity within norms.”⁵⁵ Here, too, the distinction between surface and symptom enlightens the queer dynamics of these texts, for *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Brady Bunch*, *The Cosby Show*, and *Hannah Montana* depict a surface innocence continually undone by deeper symptomatic investments, whereas *Roseanne* and *Modern Family* forthrightly address sexuality in their story lines while infusing their symptomology with the pleasures of ostensible perversities. From these contrasting perspectives, it is evident that sex builds multiple, contradictory, and ultimately queer meanings in family sitcoms, for its disruptive force pervades even the most cheekily innocent of American families—as truly it must, if these families, fictional or factual, were ever to be conceived.

Queer readings of American family sitcoms prove the lie of domestic normativity in the past while highlighting the continuing challenges of queer representation in the present. They shift our perceptions of programs, characters, and actors shielded behind the patina of normativity and offer fresh, sometimes startling, insights into the duplicities of ideology and its

blinkered presentation of identities deemed nonnormative. For many viewers, the beloved family sitcoms of their childhood continue to hold lasting appeal, often for the innocence they convey of simpler times, in the eternal nostalgic search for the Golden Age of the American Family. Denuding this fantasy as a fantasy—indeed, as the intersection of multiple fantasies of genre, marketing, and childhood itself—delivers a sharper vision of American self-construction and its discontents for a range of viewers simultaneously attracted to but alienated from these paragons of domesticity. Queering family sitcoms, in the end, allows a truer vision of the American family to emerge, one that represents, ironically and paradoxically, the many families left unrepresented.