

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

individual in favor of laughing (cf. Schwind, “Embarrassment Humor” 56, 58).⁴

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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- 15 Lenny Bruce has frequently been identified as one of the “‘sick’ comedians [who] started revolutionizing comedy” with culturally based and political humor in the 1950s (Taylor 1).
- 16 Numerous paratexts also speculate about the inspiration for the protagonist as a stand-up comedian (cf. Richardson; Powers; Nussbaum, “The Cloying Fantasia”; Chaney, “Charming *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*”; Foussianes; Zuckerman). Most of the texts address the similarities to comedian Joan Rivers. Also of Jewish heritage and embracing the prominent image of the Jewish American Princess stereotype (JAP) in popular culture (cf. Caplan), she was fearless in pejoratively breaking taboos on stage, degrading the butts of her jokes. In contrast to many other female comedians, she made a point about being smartly dressed and well-coiffed. Rivers’s impeccable appearance and taboo-breaking qualities are shared by *MMM*’s protagonist. Rivers’s more disconcerting qualities, “her vengefulness, her perception of women as competitors,” as Nussbaum argues, “get displaced onto Midge’s foe, fat-joke Sophie, who lives in an opulent French-themed apartment, like the one Rivers lived in, collects furs, and, like the real Joan, wanted to be a serious actress” (“The Cloying Fantasia”). Jean Carroll, a Jewish vaudeville performer, is also associated with the protagonist (cf. Foussianes). After singing and dancing in the 1920s, she began doing solo stand-up work in the 1940s. Although audiences frequently complained about her audacious routines, she championed her refusal to utilize self-deprecating humor: “I can’t say I’m fat, I can’t talk about my mother, my husband, my child. You know, there is really very little left to say” (qtd. in L. Martin and Segrave 295).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Promising the pleasures of revisiting familiar and well-known characters and places, the contemporary trend of nostalgically reviving past television texts has been widely embraced by viewers. On May 29, 2018, however, the successful albeit stylistically and morally conservative revival of ABC's hit-sitcom *Roseanne* was canceled after just nine episodes, although being renewed for a second revival season of 13 episodes just three days after its premiere (cf. Davis and Peiser). The reason for the ungraceful exit was a Twitter rampage by the show's leading actress Roseanne Barr²³ in which she invectively spoke out against Hillary Clinton's daughter, Chelsea, and – most significantly – against former Senior Advisor to President Barack Obama, Valerie Jarrett. In her notorious tweet, Barr references the Muslim Brotherhood, the sci-fi movie *Planet of the Apes* (2001), and African American Jarrett: “muslim brotherhood & planet of the apes had a baby=vj,” supposedly, as she later argued, “comparing the movie to Iran's repressive regime” instead of insulting Jarrett (Edgers). With the tweet gaining massive attention on social media platforms, network channel ABC saw itself forced to publish a statement, condemning the tweet as “abhorrent, repugnant and inconsistent with [their] values,” and – hours later – to cancel *Roseanne*

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

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

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

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

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

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

the German term *Heimweh*, the painful longing to return home. At the end of the 17th century, nostalgia came to signify a corporeal condition with “symptoms such as insomnia, anorexia, melancholic madness or abjectness” that were frequently diagnosed in students and Swiss soldiers away from their homes (ibid.). While this corporeal condition was said to be curable by returning home, significant changes in the discourse surrounding nostalgia in the 18th century lead to the belief that it was, rather, an incurable and intense mental depression “connected to the societal changes brought about by industrialisation, migration, and urbanisation” (Kalinina, “What Do We Talk About” 9). Soon after, this yearning was not only understood to include geographical locations but also distinct points in time, “such as the personal past in the form of childhood or adolescence” (Armbruster 20). The politicized²⁶ and medicalized concept of nostalgia had, moreover, been highly gendered, especially at the end of the 19th century. Surrounding the discourses of the American Civil War, suffering from nostalgia was recognized to be a rather feminine quality and “forced men to hide or deny their *so-called mental illness*, fearing neglect and shaming, which in turn made it more difficult to diagnose” (“What Do We Talk About” 9, emphasis in the original). The term only found its way into the public discourse as late as the middle of the 20th century. Since then, ‘nostalgia’ signifies “a response to a temporal and spatial displacement [...] constructed discursively in the process of narration” (Kalinina, “The Flow of Nostalgia” 5329). It describes a person’s sense of loss regarding a place, time, or cultural artifact, a “desire to go back in time [to] spur sensations and recollection of [her] personal past” (Ju et al. 2064). Societies, according to Davies, “tend to become nostalgic in times of ‘disruption,’” when the present seems unsatisfactory and fundamental convictions and beliefs are shaken (qtd. in Kalinina, “The Flow of Nostalgia” 5329). Through sensory stimuli (i.e. objects, smells, media artefacts), nostalgic narratives are able to produce and are produced by affective and emotional experiences tied to the past. They are frequently able to reinstate a perception of continuity by triggering a sentimental yearning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

in *the Family's* Archie Bunker (CBS 1971-79) who, unlike the white-collar majority of television characters, displayed his low educational status and his absence of wisdom “by mangling common words and by spouting bigoted remarks” (Reimers 115). This unfortunate stereotype is one of the rare portrayals of the working-class population on television. For TV in general, historian Ghanoui argues that “the poor were constructed as an Other²⁸ going against the dominate of the middle-class or wealthy family,” emphasizing a white-collar-centric paradigm in popular culture (Ghanoui 10). A study showed that only eleven percent of 262 domestic situation comedies broadcast from 1946–90 had working-class protagonists (cf. Bettie). Since popular culture and, especially, television programs are “a site of struggles over meaning and over the power to represent and establish preferred meanings” (ibid. 126), the consequent class inflation and bias is evidence for Sociology scholar Stanley Aronowitz’s argument regarding the displacement of blue-collar representations in mass media. He suggests that “there are no longer direct representations of the interactions among workers on American television” (qtd. in Bettie 125). In a later study from 1994, eight out of 35 sitcoms were coded as blue-collar with a working-class lead, while only four sitcoms featured female working-class characters, substantiating class inflation claims but refuting working-class invisibility on television. One of these sitcoms was ABC’s *Roseanne*, whose characters vocally (and certainly ironically) embraced their affinity to ‘white trash.’²⁹The show is said to be the first serious, allegedly realistic, and unique depiction of a middle-class family with both parents having to work outside the home (cf. Mayerle; Bettie). Apart from uncharted territory surrounding class discourses on television, the sitcom was frequently lauded for its liberal transgressiveness, challenging conservative notions linked to gender roles, motherhood, heteronormativity, class, and race (cf. Bettie; Mayerle; Ghanoui; Gibson).

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

28 I discuss the notion of ‘the other’ in Chapter 2.1.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jackie: If he was a white guy with the exact same built in those exact same clothes, you would have done the exact same thing.

Roseanne: Yeah, well, I'm glad one of us is sure.

Jackie: Look, now, don't beat yourself up over it, Roseanne. You know, anybody else would have done just what you did.

Roseanne: Well... isn't that great. (*Roseanne* 7.09)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

