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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.1 The Invective Logic of Serial Outbidding

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Office (NBC 2005–13)

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

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

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

Parks and Recreation (NBC 2009–15)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brooklyn 99 (FOX 2013–19, NBC 2019–)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Good Place (NBC 2016–20)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Parks and Recreation's Jerry Gergich

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brooklyn 99's Hitchcock and Scully

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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