3. Invective Humor: Discourses of Otherness

This chapter investigates how contemporary American situation comedy texts rely on distinct strategies of disparagement and mockery. Within the sitcom genre, deprecation and humiliation are framed as humorous. When characters are portrayed as deficient in some way or are insulted and devalued because of certain attributes, discourses of otherness and alterity in the respective texts are utilized to invectively elicit humor. This chapter, therefore, focuses on how sitcoms employ invective strategies to draw pleasure from narrative, formal, and aesthetic patterns of disparagement based on 'otherness.' Through a meticulous analysis of the dynamics and constellations of invective practices in situation comedies, I examine the poetics and politics of the texts, emphasizing their cultural work within the present cultural moment.

As argued in the previous chapter, laughter and humor play a significant role in the sedimentation of the invective mode in the situation comedy genre. Essential points of reference have been superiority theories of humor and Ford and Ferguson's associated research on disparagement humor (cf. T. E. Ford et al.; T. E. Ford, "Social Consequences"; M. A. Ferguson and T. E. Ford). Superiority theories emphasize laughter at the misfortunes of others and are used to manifest the superiority of the laugher over the inferior laughee. Similarly, Ford and Ferguson's disparagement humor "refers to communication that is intended to elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target" (M. A. Ferguson and T. E. Ford 171). The Cultural Studies notion of 'othering' and Goffman's concept of stigma also support the arguments for my two separate case studies in this chapter – *Mike & Molly* (CBS, 2010–16) and *2 Broke Girls*. With the outlined conceptual framework, it is possible to exemplarily trace where humorous strategies are intertwined with socially solidified discourses of 'otherness' in the two shows. Invective humor is, therefore, not only utilized

as a means of 'othering' and self-aggrandizement, it is also decidedly used to denigrate others. By way of example, I present the sitcom *Mike & Molly*, which develops humor strategies which enable invective structures through claims of inauthenticity in order to be guarded from criticism. Furthermore, I suggest that the situation comedy *2 Broke Girls* updates legacies of female self-deprecating humor in order to elicit humor while concomitantly perpetuating and manifesting socially entrenched systems of inequality.

The first subchapter revolves around the case study of the sitcom *Mike & Molly*, which aired on the network channel CBS from 2010 to 2016. The plot brings together the protagonists Molly Flynn, an elementary school teacher and later writer, and Mike Biggs, a police officer. The two characters are staged to meet at Overeaters Anonymous, setting the tone of the show. The series follows the different stages of their relationship: from falling in love, to their engagement, marriage, and eventually the planning of their own family – all the while dealing with the protagonists' demanding relatives and friends. Fatness plays a very significant role in the sitcom's plot and humor. In addition to the narrative mostly revolving around the food- and weight-related issues of the protagonists in an intradiegetic world of standardized television beauty, the episodes are well-stocked with anti-fat jokes from the supporting characters and self-deprecating jokes from the protagonists. Drawing from the literary archetype of the fool, this subchapter reads particular supporting characters as Invective Fools who are largely responsible for the fat-phobic remarks and the subsequent tenor of the show. While Invective Fools are portrayed as severely flawed individuals, they are, nevertheless, equipped with distinct invective licenses to speak. Thus, the text invites the audience to laugh not only at the inferiority of the Invective Fools but also at the invective remarks directed at the fat protagonists. I argue that the staging of Invective Fools is an authorizing and cushioning strategy to blamelessly enforce socially acceptable norms and reprimand undesirable bodies and behaviors. *Mike & Molly* utilizes invective humor through claims of inauthenticity that allow the shooting down of any criticism of marking fatness as deficient.

The second subchapter focuses on a case study of the situation comedy *2 Broke Girls*, which was broadcast on CBS from 2011 to 2017. The show revolves around an unlikely friendship between two very different women in their mid-20s in the New York City neighborhood of Williamsburg. The young socialite Caroline Channing was raised as the daughter of a billionaire. When

the cover of her father's Ponzi scheme blows, she is staged to find herself penniless in the middle of New York City on her own. The character ends up getting a job at a Williamsburg diner where she meets Max Black. Max was brought up by her neglectful mother in a single-parent household in a poor working class environment. The two women become friends, move in together, and forge out plans to open a successful cupcake business. In this subchapter, I argue that the sitcom *2 Broke Girls* is strongly informed by legacies of the gendered economy of comedy. I not only give a concise overview of past female humor traditions that show self-disparagement as a strategy to circumvent gate-keeping mechanisms of the male-dominated domain of comedy in order to not threaten patriarchal gender roles, I also reveal remnants of these gender-based comedy traditions in the CBS sitcom. Furthermore, I propose to transfer the term 'self-deprecating' to 'auto-invective' humor since it enables me to substantiate the ventriloquated and multiplied image of the 'self' in televisual texts. In the case study, I argue that the show utilizes auto-invectives directed at protagonist Max Black in order to elicit laughter. The text, as I later argue in greater depth, creates a dominant reading position from which the disparagement of the female protagonist makes sense. While the other characters rarely react to auto-invective remarks, the narrative device of the laugh track unquestioningly signals the respective scenes' humorous intent. I establish connections between Max's auto-invectives and the self-deprecating humor strategies of female US American comedians in the past. Ultimately, I argue that *2 Broke Girls*'s disparagement of one of its female protagonists hinges on a gender-based asymmetry of power and, thus, reiterates and updates discourses of 'otherness' and alterity.

With the examples of *Mike & Molly* and *2 Broke Girls*, I expose invective humor strategies that rely on disparagement and humiliation of an 'other.' In the following two subchapters, I analyze the shows' invective dynamics and constellations, and their poetics and politics, media-specific legacies, and political and social resonances.

3.1 Invective Fools in *Mike & Molly*

For 236 episodes, *Friends* (NBC 1994–2004) entertained audiences across national borders and age groups. Apart from the six protagonists, there was one character in particular who strongly shaped the television culture of the

time – Fat Monica. Although she appears on-screen in only four episodes in total, her uncanny dance moves, her insatiable hunger, and her delicate but awkward names for sexual intercourse and male genitalia entertained and captivated viewers. Actor Courtney Cox slipped into a fat suit for the role, "[depicting] dominant understandings that fat people are lazy, gluttonous, and unable to control their appetites" (Gullage 179). The show marks Monica's fat body as deviant, degenerate, and alarming – as a visual spectacle and a "one-dimensional, comedic gag" (ibid. 180). Most studies convey a somber image of fat[1] characters on screen as the 'other,' "deviant and suffering from character flaws" (Drury and Louis 555) as well as "a target for […] pity, and comedy" (Fikkan and Rothblum 585).

This subchapter analyzes invective dynamics surrounding the situation comedy *Mike & Molly*'s eponymous fat protagonists. I argue that the show frequently denigrates its characters Mike and Molly on the basis of their bodies in order to elicit humor. I show that the series stages its supporting characters to be accountable for most of its fat-phobic remarks. Proposing the figure of the Invective Fool for these characters enables me to uncover and trace the double-laughter that is inscribed in the text. Since the Invective Fools are portrayed as thoroughly flawed and inadequate people, the text, on the one hand, invites audiences to laugh at their failings. On the other hand, *Mike & Molly* provides them with distinct licenses to speak perceived truths – here, the license to reprimand undesirable fat bodies and behaviors. Aided by the narrative device of the laugh track, the text invites viewers to laugh *along* the disparaging comments of the Invective Fools as well as *at* the disparaged protagonists. I therefore read the staging of *Mike & Molly*'s Invective Fools as a cushioning and authorizing strategy to blamelessly implement allegedly socially acceptable norms as well as denounce and humiliate undesirable fat bodies through claims of inauthenticity. Although the invectives are voiced by unaccountable and inadequate Invective Fools, the show, nevertheless, includes fat-phobic remarks that perpetuate and reiterate processes of 'othering' deviant bodies that do not fit the norm. In a first step, I derive the figure of the Invective Fool from the literary archetype of the (Holy) Fool. This proposition enables me to get a better hold

1 Following Fat Studies research, I am using the term 'fat' as a neutral descriptor of the human body. Terms like 'overweight' and 'obese' imply negative connotations and refer to myriad normative and medical discourses I do not have the time nor the space to comment on. See Saguy for further information.

of the complexities of disparagement in televisual texts. I also briefly outline historical and contemporary constructions of fatness, including the attached stigmatization and disadvantaged representation on television screens. This subchapter's case study, then, illustrates *Mike & Molly*'s disparagement of fat 'others.'

Foolishness, as Stott states, "is not the same as idiocy, but rather an expression of the ambiguous, doubled, and inverted ideas of wisdom and folly that existed in the medieval period" (45). Having roots in ancient Egypt, China, and medieval Europe, the Holy Fool was widely incorporated in the Christian religion as the symbol of divine folly, making recourse to Paul's "distinction between worldly wisdom and the one true wisdom which can only be found in God" (Heller 2). The secular version of the fool, the court jester, either "had a physical or mental deficiency and was cruelly employed to provide amusement through inappropriate behaviours," or was portrayed "as possessing wisdom and [advising] the 'noble' by way of jest" (Westwood 786). The either childlike and/or calculating quality of fools, according to Heller, "grants them the freedom to speak painful truths that no one else dares to speak" (6). To legitimately offer criticism, the fool avoids affronting her opposite by "assuming a specific role and by disguising the critique in humor" (Westwood 786). Westwood traces the trajectory of the archetype of the fool, from the Harlequin to the Pierrot, from vaudeville to "more recent mechanisms for the institutionalization of the comic," like comic movies and situation comedies (787).

Some situation comedies install characters who are equipped with distinct invective licenses to speak, whom I conceptualize as Invective Fools. These characters are depicted as heavily flawed, deficient in some way, and possessing child-like qualities. Installed as supporting characters, Invective Fools are staged to invectively enforce social and cultural norms by evoking laughter that acts, as Meyer argues, as a "social corrective" (314). While the court jesters portrayed unwanted manners of conduct themselves in order to "show that such behaviors and beliefs were unacceptable in serious society," the Invective Fool, although depicted as heavily flawed, points out and exposes the social and cultural transgression of others (ibid.). Along the lines of superiority theories of humor, the viewers are invited to see themselves as superior to both disparaged characters, the Invective Fool and its victim of abuse. The humorous deprecation keeps the storyworld "in order as those who disobey are censured by laughter, and people are made to feel part of a group by laughing at some ridiculed other" (ibid. 315). I

propose that the heavily flawed portrayals of these supporting characters are a staged attempt to soften and cushion their invective comments. By portraying the invector as laughable and inadequate, the show is able to deflect any criticism for their invective remarks. The Invective Fools' flawed natures and subsequent inferior status discredit their comments. The show is, however, still able to include the norm-enforcing invectives by shifting the responsibility of judging them to the viewer. I read the staging of Invective Fools as a cushioning strategy that enforces (hetero)normative principles and ideals through the social control of laughter.

As a case study for this subchapter, I have chosen a contemporary network sitcom in which Invective Fools play a significant role: *Mike & Molly* (CBS 2010–16). As mentioned above, the six seasons of the show revolve around the two eponymous fat protagonists and their relationship with each other, as well as with their family and friends. Fatness plays a very important role in the sitcom's plot and humor and is, as I argue, utilized to disparagingly depict certain characters as the 'other.' While the plot mostly revolves around the protagonists' food- and weight-related issues, the first few seasons are especially well-stocked with weight-related jokes from the supporting characters and self-deprecating or auto-invective[2] jokes from the protagonists. The following brief excursion concerning the historical and contemporary constructions of fatness enables me to align and properly analyze the invective processes of the sitcom *Mike & Molly*.

Traditions of humiliating fat bodies and their allegedly inferior morality have a vivid history in the US. According to *The Fat Studies Reader*, beauty standards have frequently changed in the past: Up until the end of the 19th century, being fat, for example, was considered beautiful, healthy, and a sign of wealth, prosperity, and female fertility (cf. Rothblum and Solovay 11). The First World War and substantial industrial advancements in food processing thoroughly changed the image of fatness. In desperate times of war, people considered wasting rationed food a nearly criminal act. As a consequence, fat people were targeted as excessive consumers, and thinness was quickly equated to patriotism (Herndon 131). Furthermore, since food – after the War – was more accessible, "it became possible for people of modest means to become plump" and fatness was no longer seen as a sign of prestige (Fraser 12). Following Puritan traditions of spiritual fasting to prove

2 As I argue in Chapter 3.2, the term auto-invective humor helps me to describe and analyze the ventriloquized self-deprecation of fictional characters.

worthiness and to purge oneself of one's sins, thinness was now believed to be a characteristic of individuals of the upper classes with superior morality (cf. ibid. 12f.). According to Crandall, a psychology professor from Kansas, anti-fat attitudes "[reinforce] a worldview consistent with the Protestant work ethic, self-determination, a belief in a just world, and the notion that people get what they deserve" (884). Medicine, formerly advertising fat as "the most peaceful, useful and law-abiding of all our tissues" (Fraser 11), found more and more theories to support the new fashion of thinness, from money-spinning treatments to pathologized views that identify fat bodies as sick and in dire need of treatment (cf. Sherman 40). While in the traditions of the 19th century fatness served as a spectacle of oddity and uniqueness, the ensuing century exacerbated traditions of humiliating fat people and shifted the "emphasis on fat as a peculiar deformity" (Erdman Farrell 34). Freak shows saturated popular culture with images of a fat 'other,' creating invective spectacles. A noteworthy event that essentially shaped the perception of fat as transgressive was the rape trial concerning the popular, then contemporary actor Roscoe 'Fattie' Arbuckle in 1921. Before the allegations came to light, the fat actor was able to "[create] a cultural space in which fat performativity escaped the traditional associations of sloth, passivity and gluttony – in which the category contradictions enabled by fat were a source of cultural play, rather than a trigger for normate disgust" (Harker 983). Although fully acquitted, the indictment caused society to re-imagine the actor's body size as a monstrous and sexualized fat deviancy that "must destroy what it craves even as it satisfies the craving; the fat male body cannot enjoy what it destroys, [and] is incapable of satisfying itself" (ibid. 984). In light of these discourses, contemporary rhetoric surrounding fatness in the US is closely tied to the rhetoric of crisis and war, "[constructing] fat as a problem that concerns the entirety of society, [requiring] governmental intervention and [being] a threat to economic stability of the United States" (Rompola 4).

Consequently, fat people were and still are harshly discriminated against and stigmatized for their size. Following Goffman's theory of stigma, as discussed in Chapter 2.1, fatness is defined by two distinct components of social interaction: the recognition and devaluation of negatively perceived differences (cf. Goffman, *Stigma*; "Über Techniken der Bewältigung beschädigter Identität"). Without trying to contrast the severity of stigmatization between groups of people, Tomiyama and Mann suggest that fat people might be "the most openly stigmatized individuals

in our society" (4), making them very vulnerable to suffering social and psychological damages as a result of being subjected to stigmatization for a longer period of time (i.e. anxiety, isolation, loss of social support) (cf. Bos et al. 1ff.). Stigmatization, statistically, also leads to discrimination against fat people in areas like employment, wages, and health care (cf. Tomiyama and Mann 4; Maranto and Stenoien 10ff.). Other studies have shown that fat people are linked to lower socioeconomic status (cf. Crandall 883), are culturally believed to be gluttonous and lazy (cf. S. Himes), and are associated with negative features like being sloppy, dishonest, physically unattractive, and sexually unskilled (cf. Greenberg et al. 1342).

The cultural work of the media, especially of television, is often seen as a co-perpetrator in the stigmatization of and discrimination against fat people by "reflecting the social consensus of the culture, but also contributing to the shaping of norms and beliefs about weight" (S. M. Himes and J. K. Thompson 712). Besides the verbal denigration of fat characters on screen, they are frequently marginalized in the storyline. Thus, television narratives act as a powerful combination of modeled discrimination and verbal reinforcement (cf. Fouts and Burggraf, "Female Weight" 926). While fatness has been constructed historically differently for men and women, emerging female beauty standards, in particular, exalt the 'thin ideal,' characterized by a thin waist, large breasts, long legs, and flawless skin (cf. Hargreaves and Tiggemann 367). Sitcoms, according to Fouts and Burggraf, "model (a) 'thin ideal,' (b) delivering positive comments for thinness and negative for being average or heavier in weight, and (c) laughing at derogatory remarks," containing the alleged 'fat threat' ("Female Weight" ibid. 931). As shown in numerous quantitative studies, invectives against fat people, especially against fat women, are still the norm on television (cf. S. M. Himes and J. K. Thompson; Fouts and Burggraf, "Female Body Images"; "Female Weight"; Fouts and Vaughan; Kaufman; Greenberg et al.). In their 2009 article, Giovanelli and Ostertag compared the pervasive quality of mass media and its subsequent control over women's bodies with Foucault's panopticon. While relating initially to sexuality or crime, the term panopticism evolved to "[referring] to surveillance and social control where people control their behavior because they feel as if others are constantly observing and judging them" (Giovanelli and Ostertag 289). Television itself can be seen as a panopticon, defined by patriarchal beliefs and cultural beauty standards that force viewers and audiences to judge themselves based on what they see. Consequently, fatness is constructed as "the antithesis of

what it means to be appropriately feminine" (ibid. 290). In recent years, men have also been increasingly pressurized to fit media beauty standards.

Saguy's book *What's Wrong With Fat?*, that is predicated upon Goffman's 'Frame Analysis,' can shed light on how television works to invectively frame fatness in contemporary American culture. From a sociological perspective, Goffman attempts to analyze the governing structures – frames – of everyday interaction and inquires how these can be used to influence how messages are interpreted. He argues that the "[a]nalysis of frames illuminates the precise way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location – such as a speech, utterance, news report, [or television series; KS] – to that consciousness" (Entman, "Framing" 51). Saguy, likewise, investigates how individuals use frames to simplify and organize actions and experiences to make them more coherent. For fatness there are, as she argues, both positive and negative frames in use. While so-called fat pride or HAES (Health At Every Size) frames advertise a positive and unprejudiced view of body size, blame-frames analyze "who or what is to blame for the alleged crisis" of fatness in America (Saguy 69f.).

As a consequence of invectively advertising the thin ideal, fat people are frequently annihilated as well as misrepresented on screen. Studies strikingly attest to the underrepresentation of fat people on screen (Fouts and Burggraf, "Female Body Images"; "Female Weight"; Fouts and Vaughan). While nearly 40 percent of the American population was considered to be obese in 2017 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services),[3] only three in 100 women classified as fat were represented on screen (cf. Greenberg et al. 1343). Ganz, furthermore, lists various demeaning strategies that help consolidate negative messages about fat bodies on television, "such as infrequently depicting fat bodies, the use of news to perpetuate fat-phobia, as well as using the fat body as a prop to develop a joke" (211). In general, it is more than likely that fat characters are portrayed in a one-dimensional way with a limited set of profiles: as dim-whitted, victims of abuse, or as supporting characters and props for the protagonist. Fat bodies are frequently cast as the texts' villains, used as comic relief, and are more likely to be staged as depressed and sad (cf. Ospina). They are, moreover, also often linked to certain televisual tropes: (1) being fat is a result of poor

3 According to the *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*'s informational brochure, obesity is characterized by a Body Mass Index (BMI) of over 30.

life choices and/or overeating – the so-called fat-as-glutton-myth; (2) being fat is the result of a lack of exercise; and (3) being fat is unattractive. These tropes frame fat as a moral inadequacy, resulting in undermining the moral standards of fat people, as well as fueling overall negative affections (cf. Ganz 212). All these repressive measures preserve and canvas the notion that fat bodies are wrong, outside the norm, deficient 'others.' In their 2012 article on fatness as a feminist issue, Fikkan and Rothblum argue that there are only limited "opportunities for fat women […] to view favorable reflections of [themselves] in mass media" (587). More often, depictions of fat women authorize the denigrating image of fat individuals as sources of humor and pity. Popcultural texts tend to portray fat characters as the 'other,' making them the butt of jokes or staging humiliating physical comedy in order to elicit humor, and simultaneously substantiating the televisual and cultural thin ideal.[4]

In situation comedies, the narrative device of the laugh track, which is frequently directed at fat characters, encourages a superior feeling in the audience since "human beings are moved to laugh when presented with a person or situation they feel themselves to be intellectually, morally, or *physically* above" (Stott 125, emphasis mine). The texts invite viewers to adopt the imagined social and cultural hierarchies they offer. In *Mike & Molly*, a similar imbalance of power between the characters and the audience is staged with the help of the Invective Fools and the immanent laugh track. As I show in more depth in the following paragraphs, the Fools are largely responsible for the fat-phobic remarks of the show, which are sanctioned by the laugh track. By staging allegedly flawed and deficient individuals as invectors, the viewers, as Kanzler proposes, "can equally feel invited to indulge in the stereotypes invoked, to take pleasure at their iteration and laugh with them at particular social and ethnic groups, or they can feel invited to laugh at the practices of stereotyping that the show represents" ("(Meta-)Disparagement Humour" 7). This strategy not only ambiguates the power structures of the show and allows for more freedom to bypass invective taboos and discourses of political correctness, it also manifests and perpetuates disparaging images of fat people as the 'other.'

4 For the few popular fat female (comedic) actors like Rebel Wilson or Melissa McCarthy, their "size is given more attention than any other aspect of [their] professional [lives,] and speculations about weight loss or regain predominate any coverage of [their] activities" (Fikkan and Rothblum 587).

In contrast, the producers behind *Mike & Molly* eagerly try to frame the show as non-invective and authentically viewer-centered. Chuck Lorre, executive producer of the show, defends the plot and casting. The two fat protagonists

> go to [Overeaters Anonymous] because they're on a journey, they want to make a change in their lives. [...] I think that speaks to a lot of people who are unhappy with the status quo in their lives. These are people who are alive. They're in process. They're not at the end of the journey, they're in the journey. And we can write about that forever. (Domanick)

The fact that producers and creators try to frame the show as a realistic American situation comedy cannot conceal the actual invective premise and staging of the characters and plot.[5] This dynamic can be seen as a part of the invective strategy itself: Paratexts[6] are staged to evoke an awareness of discriminatory discourses and are designed to signal an understanding of ever-changing social sensitivities. Besides adamantly defending the fact that *Mike & Molly* is apparently not a fat-phobic show but a sitcom about potentially realistic American life in the present, the series finds myriad ways to ridicule, humiliate, and insult their fat protagonists. Disparaging comments from the Invective Fools, auto-invective blows from the protagonists themselves, or degrading physical comedy are met with laughter in the storyworld or from the laugh track. The canned laughter signals that "there is a collectively agreed notion of when it is appropriate [...] to laugh" and invites the viewers to join in (Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). However, the process of placing the most transgressive comments about fatness in the mouths of the Invective Fools enables a cushioning and authorizing strategy to blamelessly reprimand undesirable bodies through claims of inauthenticity. Any criticism of the show's dealings with its fat characters

5 Even the protagonist's names indicate and emphasize their appearance: police officer Mike *Big*gs and teacher *Molly* (breed of a female horse and a male donkey) Flynn.

6 The concept of paratexts can be traced back to literary theorist Gérard Genette, who characterized the term as "the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public" (Genette and Maclean). In this book, the term 'paratext' in a broader sense stands for every text on the "threshold" of the respective sitcoms, "[an] undecided zone between the inside and the outside" of the text (ibid.), i.e. interviews, TV listings, and blog entries concerning the series.

can be shut down with the staging of Invective Fools – they are themselves staged to transgress social and cultural norms and are, consequently, also devalued. The staging of fat characters, nevertheless, reinforces the notion that straying from the thin ideal of television results in ridicule, humiliation, and mockery.

One of the Invective Fools of *Mike & Molly* is Mike's best and apparently only friend, colleague, and work partner, Carl McMillan. Carl, a middle-aged African American bachelor, lives with his grandmother, Nana. His relationship with Nana is mostly defined by her trenchant comments about his inability to "find [himself] a woman and get out of [her] house" (*Mike & Molly* 1.16). Carl is disparagingly portrayed as incapable of living by himself, let alone maintaining a romantic relationship with a woman. The show, moreover, constantly and disparagingly plays with the possibility of Carl being sexually attracted to men, emasculating and devaluing the character even further. When, for example, Mike and Molly start thinking about their wedding, Carl is staged to get carried away, "I'm thinkin' next spring, sunset, Lincoln Park when the azaleas are in bloom," earning him questioning and belittling looks from his scene partners (*Mike & Molly* 1.24). In Season Four, Mike cannot be bothered by the fact that Carl is out dancing with his wife Molly because "he's not a man. It's Carl," emphasizing Carl's innocuous status as a man (*Mike & Molly* 4.11). Carl's "shemale incident of '08" is not only a constant source of amusement (and humiliation) in the storyworld, it also sparked controversies about the queer politics of the show (*Mike & Molly* 3.14).

Following the logic of Invective Fools, Carl's flawed disposition qualifies him for making invective comments about his partner Mike's weight. During the run of the show, Carl frequently teases Mike about his build, his dietary choices, and his relationship issues with Molly. Carl's character flaws, emphasized and punctuated throughout the show, are usually displayed right before or after he invectively lashes out against Mike. In the pilot episode, Carl is disparagingly introduced as an incapable middle-aged man still living with his grandmother right before making a crude, fat-phobic remark at Mike's expense:

> Carl: Overeaters Anonymous on a Friday night? That is pathetic.
> Mike: Oh, I'm pathetic? Which one of us lives with his grandma?
> Carl: I'm over there because she's old and frail and needs somebody to look after her.

> Mike: She mows the lawn, Carl. [...]
> Carl: I would shoot you right now, but I don't have enough chalk to outline your body. (*Mike & Molly* 1.01)

The laugh track chimes in and signals a humorous exchange between the characters. The viewer is equally invited to laugh at the character Carl, his deficits, and at the invective remark directed at the protagonist. Consequently, the character's lighthearted threat to kill his friend and his invective weight-related comment do not have to be taken seriously and are discredited to some extent. Although Carl's inadequacies as an Invective Fool are strongly emphasized in the scene, the closing punchline, however, is staged to be the fat-phobic comment and is met with canned laughter.

Any conversation topic in the storyworld can trigger disparaging and fat-phobic remarks uttered by Invective Fools. In "Peggy Goes to Branson," Carl and Mike are staged to talk about Mike and Molly's relationship at their usual restaurant. When the possibility of children arises, the protagonist stresses his acumen to reflect on any future plans before making wrongheaded decisions. To Mike's "I'm the kind of guy that likes to think things through," Carl's invective reply is met with canned laughter, "Since when? I once saw you eat a marshmallow that was still on fire" (*Mike & Molly* 2.18). In his relationship advice, Carl is staged to frame his recommendations with the help of food, allegedly so that Mike is able to understand. In "Valentine's Piggyback," Carl tries to explain women's expectations when it comes to Valentine's Day. He is staged to belittle Mike for his ignorance:

> Carl: Yeah, let me explain this to you in a way you might understand. You know how when I go to get a milkshake and you say no? [...] And if I came back without one for you, you'd get all grumpy and mad.
> Mike: Well, we've been together a long time and I don't think I should have to ask.
> Carl: That's why I always get two milkshakes. Otherwise, I'd have to get a second straw and share with you, and that's a race I cannot win. (*Mike & Molly* 2.15)

Carl emphasizes the protagonist's allegedly gluttonous and insatiable nature, contributing to and sedimenting the invective image of fat characters on screen.

The show denies Carl any personal experiences in the areas of life on which he gives the protagonist advice. Up until the end of the show, the character is not able to secure a long-term relationship which is, in turn, marked as inadequate behavior of Carl's faulty character disposition. Regardless, while Mike and Molly go shopping for Christmas presents, Invective Fool Carl is licensed to reprimand the fat protagonists. He manages to unnecessarily insult the protagonist's fixation on food, for example when Molly is looking for Mike at the mall, "He wandered off and came back eating a lemon bar and wearing a bomber jacket. It's like going to the mall with a 300-pound toddler" (*Mike & Molly* 1.12). When Mike later admits that he does not know what Molly could possibly like, Carl counters with "Well, apparently, she likes big dumb guys" (ibid.). Although the invective remarks are seemingly cushioned by the series' staging of Invective Fools, they do not lose their pejorative jibe and serve to reiterate and manifest fatness as an inferior status of being.

The other important person in Mike's life and another one of the show's Invective Fools is his mother Peggy. Separated from her husband, the character fits the sitcom trope of the bitter divorcée who never re-married but instead purchased a loyal canine companion. Nichols argues for her character disposition "that it is in her nature to put people down" (105). The character's flaws and inadequacies surface in racially insensitive comments like "Arizona? Why would I move to Arizona? It's nothing but a furnace full of drunk Indians" (*Mike & Molly* 3.16). She is staged to deeply (over)care for her son and to act hostilely towards anyone who threatens her position as the only woman in her son's life. After reluctantly accepting Molly, she frequently tries to guilt-trip the protagonists for not spending enough time with her, "I don't cook much anymore because of my sciatica, but if giving you kids a nice hot meal means I've got to endure a sharp stabbing pain up and down my spine, then that is the price of admission" (*Mike & Molly* 1.19). She, too, is staged to make numerous invective comments about her son's weight and eating habits. When she is refusing to go to the doctor in one episode, she states, "Oh, I've lived through worse pain than this. Mikey came out 14 pounds and sideways. I'm lucky I can keep any food inside," accounting for and illustrating Mike's apparently enormous size as early as at his birth (*Mike & Molly* 1.6). The character, furthermore, does not even recoil from making invective comments about her son in front of his girlfriend. In one episode, she gives Mike a pair of pants as a present: "I got you the kind that are loose in the crotch to prevent chafing. When he was a boy, I had to butter

his thighs," simultaneously denigrating and humiliating her son, inviting the audience to laugh along, even if Molly does not (*Mike & Molly* 1.12).

The character of Samuel, the Senegalese restaurant owner, also frequently denigrates Mike. When on duty, the two police officers often eat at the character's restaurant. In contrast to the Invective Fools of the show, Samuel's invectives are not cushioned by his deficient character disposition but by his African heritage. The staging of the contradiction between the character's accounts of starvation and the protagonist's apparent gluttonous tendencies acts as a major source of humor, "You live in nice homes, have a car to drive, and clearly enough food to eat" (*Mike & Molly* 1.12). Samuel frequently comments on the dietary habits of Mike, i.e. "If we covered you in vinyl, we could use you as a booth" (*Mike & Molly* 1.14). Although Samuel is depicted as a highly exaggerated character with a thick accent and stereotypical clothing, he is not portrayed as a deeply flawed individual, and therefore cannot be read as an Invective Fool. The character's referenced hardships in the past and his staging as the flagbearer of racially oppressed minorities of the show seemingly justify and cushion his invectives. The laugh track, nevertheless, invites viewers to laugh at the protagonist's disparagement.

Since the narrative is told from Mike's perspective more than from Molly's, relationships outside of her abusive family are rarely depicted. The protagonist still lives with her mother Joyce and her sister Victoria. As the series progresses, Mike and Joyce's boyfriend, Vince, move in as well, making the Flynn house the most frequented place on the show. Both staged as Invective Fools, Joyce and Victoria have similar character dispositions. The two characters are portrayed as heteronormatively sexualized women who are struggling with but rather enjoying addiction. Joyce, a retired flight attendant, is staged as a neglectful and abusive mother. In the pilot episode, she enters her daughter's room and invectively teases her with a juicy piece of chocolate cake while Molly labors on the treadmill in order to lose weight (cf. *Mike & Molly* 1.01). Her alcohol dependency is frequently addressed and met with canned laughter, for example: "Oh, I do love my glass of wine at the end of the day. It's almost as good as the one at the beginning of the day" (*Mike & Molly* 3.11). She furthermore frequently overshares details of her sex life, making the female protagonist and her sister very uncomfortable. The character of Victoria works as an undertaker's assistant, beautifying corpses for their funerals. Most of the time, the character is staged to be on some kind of controlled substance – mostly cannabis. Both Joyce and Victoria

invectively comment on Mike and Molly's weight issues, whether mistaking Mike for a large bear (cf. *Mike & Molly* 1.10) or a sports team mascot (*Mike & Molly* 1.14), or offering Molly a bean bag chair to compensate for Mike's absence (*Mike & Molly* 1.15).

As mentioned before, the laugh track aids and assists the staging of the Invective Fools' double laughter. While many of the contemporary sitcoms relinquished the use of canned laughter in favor of interpretative ambiguity, series like *Mike & Molly*, *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2007–19), and numerous re-boots like *Will & Grace* (NBC 1998–2006, 2017–20) and *Roseanne* (ABC 1988–97, 2018), still rely on "the aural embodiment of the audience […] in order to show that real people found the events on-screen funny" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 102). Studies show that "voiced laughter […] elicits more positive evaluation than unvoiced laughter," anticipating and inviting a reciprocal response of the viewers (Bachorowski and Owren 256). So, whenever one of the Invective Fools of *Mike & Molly* makes a fat-phobic joke, the laugh track chimes in and ensures a thoroughly social experience of being part of a collective audience. The viewer, reassured by the textual device that shows that it is in fact appropriate to laugh along, feels herself situated in a safe space in which crude fat jokes are allowed to be funny and laughed at since "we are all laughing together" (Kalviknes Bore 24). The laugh track holds the promise of pleasure "in going along with the rest of the crowd" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). However, critical voices emerge and warily comment on the device's crippling of polysemic readings by cuing the viewer into laughter. Oleksinski from the *New York Post*, for example, notes that the laugh track is an unnecessary remnant of sitcom history, starting with *The Brady Bunch*, that is an affront to "TV snobs" and "sophisticated" viewers of the modern television age (cf. Oleksinski). Texts usually offer a 'dominant specularity,' a privileged reading position "from which the world makes coherent, realistic sense" (Bodroghkozy 106). Since the laugh track is an audible device, the viewers are able to notice "when the audience position offered by the programme is one that [they] cannot align themselves with" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 104). Since popcultural products depend on reaching mass audiences, sitcoms, for example, might have to "[sideline] those needs and ideologies of minorities and excluded groups" in order to turn a profit (103). Having said that, the comic success of shows like *Mike & Molly* depends on a rather unambiguous and majoritarian reading of the material. The 'dominant specularity,' consequently, is linked to power hierarchies and hegemonic messages that devalue and disparage certain groups of people and, at the

same time, naturalize and solidify, for example, the stigmatization of fat people. The laugh track serves as a source of information and social proof of funniness that guides the audience's response (cf. Lawson et al. 243). Thus, laughter in sitcoms is able to "[communicate] an injunctive norm that it is acceptable to make light of and trivialize the stereotype topic" (Rhodes and Ellithorpe 361). With regards to fatness, Eisenberg argues that invective

> instances paint a picture of the social acceptability of weight stigma as well as the expectation that people should tolerate these abuses without comment, perhaps even to the amusement of others. (764)

Mike & Molly's disparaging comments uttered by the Invective Fools combined with the laugh track enhance the social acceptability of laughing at and along crude fat-phobic jokes. The series works to cushion this mechanism by depicting the originators of the insulting comments as thoroughly flawed, deficient, and therefore laughable individuals in themselves. Hence, the series leaves the evaluating of invective comments to each viewer, abdicating its social and cultural responsibilities regarding the norm of thinness that the series advertises.

Mike & Molly is additionally characterized by numerous contradictions. In contrast to the Invective Fools' flaws and inadequacies, the protagonists are depicted as coping, responsible, and competent individuals. The staging as successful members of society is diametrically opposed to the invective quality of the majority of the show's humor. Giving fat characters positive attributes can furthermore be seen as a cushioning strategy in order to be able to introduce Invective Fools and their disparaging power. The show was additionally widely celebrated as a very progressive television show, while at the same time, harshly critiqued for its normative messages. On the one hand, *Mike & Molly* was marketed as and celebrated for its fat representation and fat pride in an otherwise abnormally thin televisual landscape. Regarding the matter of fat representation, *Mike & Molly*'s two fat lead character can indeed be seen as groundbreaking, especially when it comes to the representation of romantic relationships and sex. Fat sexuality as well as fat desire on screen had been nearly invisible until the hit situation comedy *Roseanne*, where the titular character and her husband "are unthinkable without [sex]" (Mosher 183).[7] In *Mike & Molly*, it is not the fat

7 Usually, fat sexuality is clearly gendered and most often 'shunted' aside in humorous genres. Fat women tend to be portrayed as either desperately under- or oversexualized.

protagonists who are staged as oversexualized characters but the Invective Fools Victoria and Joyce, representing thin bodies and heteronormative sexuality on screen. Their emphasized sexuality is, on the one hand, staged as a source of humor, and on the other hand, as a marker for the characters' transgression of norms (and, therefore, a sign of their flawed character disposition).[8] The special and progressive trait of *Mike & Molly*, however, resides in the very prominent and central topic of the protagonists' neither under- nor oversexualized relationship. The show neither transgressively depicts nor cancels out the couple's sex life. Rather, the series extrapolates the loving and openly physical relationship, stretching the limits of fat representation without invectively exploiting what Mosher calls the "shock value" of naked fat flesh (171). *Mike & Molly* progressively creates a wider representation of bodies on screen, breaking open genre markers of situation comedies and cultural representation. This progressive note stands in stark

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Famously oversexualized movie roles by Melissa McCarthy include Morgan from *Bridesmaids* (2011), which generated her first Oscar nomination, and, for example, Rebel Wilson's character Fat Amy in the *Pitch Perfect* trilogy. The trope of the undersexualized fat woman generally excludes the character from the center of a narrative which places such roles at the margins, i.e. the "fat best friend." Fat male sexuality also tends to be portrayed rather binarily, especially after the Arbuckle rape trial: "fat adult as child or fat man as impotent – in other words, safely either pre-sexual or non-sexual" (Harker 985). Mosher stresses the fat threat to men's patriarchal power: The hidden phallus under protruding folds of fat is "a handy visual metaphor for the impotence of patriarchal power and masculinity under siege" (170). Neither Mike nor Molly are notably over- or undersexualized, whereas most of the Invective Fools are depicted as sexually transgressive in some way or other. Interestingly, when portrayed, fat sexuality is often queered. This can be seen as an invective representation in and of itself. Television dramedy *Huge* (ABC 2010), a show about the lives and desires of fat teenagers at a weight-loss camp, queers characters who resist the weight-loss ideology of the camp and upset the heteronormative order (cf. Kosier and Renfrow 195f.). Protagonist Molly is also staged to be taken for a lesbian woman quite frequently at the beginning of the first season when, for example, mother Joyce invectively recommends extending Molly's dating pool because lesbians "seem to like the beefy gals" (*Mike & Molly* 1.01).

8 A lot of Joyce's comments can be used as examples for this double function of norm transgression and humor, i.e. "You know, when I was young, I was considered quite the catch. And not just because I put out" (*Mike & Molly* 1.11). As an undertaker's assistant, Victoria is supposed to take care of her mother after she passes away, "When I die, pull out the stops; I want to look peaceful but do-able," inviting the audience to laugh at the transgressive comment (*Mike & Molly* 1.19).

contrast to the countless fat-phobic remarks and jokes of the show that perpetuate and preserve anti-fat biases.

The progressive quality of the show can also be seen in paratexts that celebrate representative matters of fatness and that illustrate the cultural significance of fatness on screen. For example, user "radazzle" writes on the review website "Metacritic" that the show

> [is] refreshing because M&M deals with people who are not super thin, like most Hollywood celebrities are now a days [sic]. M&M is realistic and represents the average working class people. ("Metacritic – *Mike and Molly* Season One")

Fat pride blogger "Krzywoszyja" stresses the importance of representation and calls for more female-centered narratives revolving around fat people that are detached and autonomous from fat discourse:[9]

> I want to see fat women in movies and in [sic] TV where their fat isn't an issue. They just are. I want to see them doing normal things, not constantly obsessing about kilojoules with their girlfriends. I want to see them with partners, enjoying each other's company. I just want to see them. ("Fat Women in Television and Cinema")

However, the show also elicited very negative reactions in paratexts, ranging from academic reflections, online articles, and agitated comment sections. One very prominent case is a blog entry on the popular women's magazine *Marie Claire*'s website that sparked a massive controversy surrounding *Mike & Molly*. Maura Kelly published a ruthless and highly invective opinion piece

9 The power behind fat (and queered) representation can be illustrated through the Broadway musical *Head over Heels* (2018, Hudson Theater). Countless articles have been written about fat lead character Princess Pamela, who not only finds love in her lady-in-waiting but is also portrayed as the uncontested beauty of the storyworld. The thoroughly inclusive story about a kingdom, its rulers, their daughters and their suitors, and the non-binary character of The Oracle shows a world in which acceptance and tolerance are not only ideals but lived truths. Written for a fat female actor, the character of Princess Pamela is staged to be the most beautiful individual in the kingdom. This fact is not once contested, allowing her to heartily sing "Beautiful is all I see when I look at me," and to emphasize beauty's fleeting quality: "For Beauty's standard through all time defines inconstancy" (Pamela qtd. in Saint Lucy). Numerous articles and fan practices surrounding the musical stress the importance of representation on Broadway stages.

called "Should Fatties Get a Room? (Even on TV)" about the show and its fat characters. An excerpt reads:

> My initial response was: Hmm, being overweight is one thing — those people are downright obese! And while I think our country's obsession with physical perfection is unhealthy, I also think it's at least equally crazy, albeit in the other direction, to be implicitly promoting obesity! [...] No one who is as fat as Mike and Molly can be healthy. [...]
> So anyway, yes, I think I'd be grossed out if I had to watch two characters with rolls and rolls of fat kissing each other... because I'd be grossed out if I had to watch them doing anything. To be brutally honest, even in real life, I find it aesthetically displeasing to watch a very, very fat person simply walk across a room – just like I'd find it distressing if I saw a very drunk person stumbling across a bar or a heroine addict slumping in a chair. (Kelly qtd. in Stein)

Many articles and comments have pointed out *Marie Claire*'s role in promoting anti-fat and fat-phobic ideas, mostly demanding apologies from the magazine and the author.[10] Although the original post is unfortunately no longer available, other sources refer to about 1,200 mostly exasperated comments on Kelly's blog entry (Goudreau, Blog). Admitting that she had never actually seen *Mike & Molly*, Kelly seemingly took offense by the sheer existence of a show with fat lead characters (cf. Goudreau, Backlash). Controversies like these are able to shift discourses to reach larger audiences, to heighten their visibility, and to impact contemporary culture. Even though the quarrel subsided quickly, it mobilized people to come together and stand up against invective dynamics on screen.

Even on less visible platforms, invective discourses about the show and its fat protagonists arise. A thread on a popular bodybuilding website, for example, illustrates the invective scale of the discourse. User "yolked" writes, misconstruing television's representational importance,

> Look at these disgusting fuks [sic]! Im [sic] seriously raging at how these actors can get ANY praise. We're now teaching society being obese is acceptable. ("Who Else Is Apauled [sic] by *Mike and Molly*??")

10 Maura Kelly published a response, blaming her own eating disorder for her harsh words. *Marie Claire* did not issue any response or apology.

User "LeoDaVinci" agrees that "people on TV should be beautiful, not real," 'othering' the fat characters on screen (ibid.). Bodies, especially women's, "have for a long time been considered to be a matter of social concern: a sign of social decline, a scapegoat for the fear regarding changing political landscapes, and an affront to the patriarchal regime" (Sherman 37). As I have shown, fatness is a fiercely contested topic of discourse in the United States. Ever-changing definitions of beauty and its ideals have governed previous generations, culminating in the 'thin ideal' of contemporary western culture. Since television is such a vital tool in conveying and shifting cultural ideas, texts like *Mike & Molly* achieve a broader representation on screen, "[representing] a departure in an industry that has more recently featured large people mostly on reality weight loss shows" (Serjeant).

This subchapter examined invective dynamics surrounding the eponymous fat lead characters of the situation comedy *Mike & Molly*. I have shown that the supporting characters of the show are staged to be responsible for most of the fat-phobic remarks that are utilized to elicit humor. I proposed conceptualizing these dynamics with the figure of the Invective Fool, which enabled me to uncover the double laughter that is inscribed in the text. Since the Invective Fools are depicted as thoroughly deficient and inadequate, the text, on the one hand, invites the audience to laugh at the Fools. On the other hand, I have shown that they are equipped with distinct licenses to reprimand, insult, and 'other' the fat protagonists of the show. Aided and supported by the laugh track, the text thus invites audiences to join the invective laughter that humiliates the fat protagonists. I have argued that the staging of Invective Fools in *Mike & Molly* enables an authorizing and cushioning strategy to guiltlessly castigate fat bodies through claims of inauthenticity. While the show, therefore, shields itself from any criticism, it reinforces and perpetuates invective discourses about fatness on screen. Further research on Invective Fools in situation comedies could uncover other socially and culturally sedimented norms that are enforced via the double laughter inscribed in the respective texts.

3.2 Ceasing to 'Do' Female: Auto-Invective Comedy from Phyllis Diller to *2 Broke Girls*

With the Netflix special *Nanette* (2018), Australian stand-up comedian Hannah Gadsby came to transnational fame (cf. Remnick; Haaf). *Nanette* largely focuses on Gadsby's experiences with gender disparity in the comedic domain and her everyday life. She incorporates personal stories about sexual and emotional abuse, her experiences as a queer woman in the stand-up comedy world, as well as her attempts to vernacularly theorize gendered comedy. In her special, Gadsby proposes that aggressive humor is traditionally reserved for men while more complaisant humor is utilized by female performers, "I'm not very experienced in controlling anger. It's not my place to be angry on a comedic stage. I'm supposed to be doing self-deprecating humor. People feel safer when men do the angry comedy. They're the kings of the genre" (*Nanette*). Gadsby, thereby, self-reflexively lines up with the comedic tradition of self-deprecating humor – displaying one's own faults and flaws as a source of humor –[11] that is apparently clearly gendered and culturally reserved for women. With the help of self-deprecating humor, women stage themselves as the 'other,' marking themselves as deficient in order to elicit humor.

In this subchapter, I trace remnants of the comedic legacy of self-deprecating humor in the contemporary US sitcom *2 Broke Girls*. I argue that the show depicts similar invective phenomena directed at a 'self' – auto-invectives,[12] as I label them – that culturally update and perpetuate

11 As I later discuss in greater depth, self-deprecating humor has a long-standing tradition, linked to ethnic and minority humor, which has been employed by numerous female comedians in the past (cf. Greenbaum 132).

12 With the term 'auto-invective,' I want to highlight the differences between the self-disparagement of an existent individual and a fictional character from a situation comedy. Although the 'self' of a stand-up comedians like Hannah Gadsby is also staged and governed by the stand-up comedy genre's rules and conventions, it manifests itself without irritating the relation between the performer and the audience. The single comedian on stage is allegedly disparaging herself, inviting the audience to take pleasure in the deprecation. This process is complicated for televized fictional characters. There, the 'self' is multiplied by the rules of the genre and its affiliation to popular culture. The character of a situation comedy who disparages herself is embodied by an actor whose lines have been pre-written and whose movements have been captured on camera. Various groups of people are involved in the processes of editing, producing, and broadcasting the finished cultural product. To get hold

discourses of gender disparity, 'othering,' and associated power imbalances. The series frequently utilizes one of its protagonists, Max Black, to deprecate herself in order to elicit humor. As I demonstrate later, the sitcom text mellows and flattens any moment of reflexivity for the audience to pause and contemplate the resonances of auto-invective situations. I show that the text not only refuses to respond intradiegetically to the cruel remarks of the character, it also inserts the textual device of the laugh track to invite the viewers to adopt a reading position from which the auto-invective jokes make sense.[13] To this end, I firstly review the traditions and legacies of self-deprecating humor in American entertainment, especially stand-up comedy, since this comedic genre singularizes the performer and the 'self.' This allows me to identify similarities with the contemporary sitcom *2 Broke Girls*'s staging of Max's auto-invective humor. The case study, then, analyzes the distinct character constructions of the show's protagonists and their staging as a source of humor. I argue that Max's auto-invective humor, which is largely based on the character's traumatic backstory,[14] is a clear remnant of gender-based self-deprecating humor traditions of the 20th century.

Self-deprecating humor[15] comprises instances in which individuals reprimand themselves by mocking, humiliating, or disparaging themselves to elicit humor. According to Priego-Valverde, these acts "can occur anywhere in the conversation, either as a simple word or an anecdote" (1). Research on self-deprecating humor is scarce and mostly focused on ethnic and minority humor, like Jewish humor traditions. A lot of ethnic and minority humor works along the lines of an asymmetry between culturally hierarchical

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of the ventriloquized self-deprecation of fictional characters, I introduce the term 'auto-invective' to describe humor that is targeted at the originator of invectives on screen. This enables me to analyze these distinct invective structures of television series and their respective contexts.

13 Theorist Colin McCabe argues for a "dominant specularity" (39), a "reading position constructed by the texts from which the world makes coherent, realistic sense" (Bodroghkozy 106).

14 For a very basic understanding of trauma, I follow Cathy Caruth's deliberations of the term "as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" and that it is "not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 3, 4, emphasis in the original).

15 Terms like 'self-disparaging' (Priego-Valverde), 'self-effacing' and 'masochistic' (Juni and Katz), and "self-deprecating" (Marszalek; Russell) humor are used to describe the same phenomenon. In this project, I use the term 'self-deprecating humor.'

groups. According to Juni and Katz, "ethnic humor can be conceptualized as a manifestation of intrapsychic tension" and "an attempt to control victimization" (120). In particular, Precup argues that "Jewish humor can be understood as a retaliation strategy against oppressors, a self-defense mechanism that often conceals hostility" (207). Juni and Katz argue along similar lines that disparaging the self encourages assimilation and association processes with the host culture. In contrast to the Invective Fools in the previous chapter, the authors also suggest that the victim of self-deprecation shows similarities with the figure of the court jester or fool, who cleverly parodies and exposes the spite of her sovereign. Processes of reflecting on sociocultural conditions with wit and humor, therefore, try "to equalize the attacker's hold over the victim" (Juni and Katz 123).

As argued in Chapter 2.1, women have socially and culturally been constructed as a generally inferior group. Similarly to Jewish humor traditions, self-deprecation is known to be utilized by women in order to question the sociocultural conditions of this sedimented gender disparity. As Sandor suggests, "by setting itself as the victim, and this is particularly true of women's humor, the society, responsible for this victimization, is equally questioned" (Sandor, qtd. in Priego-Valverde 20). For the entertainment world, as Joan B. Levine attests in her 1976 study of male and female stand-up comedians, "self-satire can be expected to be women's niche in comedy" (J. B. Levine 174). Various women in the comedy circuit, as I later argue in more detail, have utilized self-deprecation as a strategy to *not* challenge traditional gender roles, and circumvent gate-keeping mechanisms of and gain access to the male-dominated domain of comedy.

Entertainment spaces have not always been gendered. Until the 1920s, the entertainment industry were a rather gender neutral space. Female performers have consistently been, for example, part of vaudeville acts – even though not in superior numbers. The US American vaudeville theater of the 19th century comprised "[a] broad range of female performers [who] utilized a variety of comedic techniques – skits, characters, songs, paired or solo routines – to entertain the customers" (Russell 9). Performers like Mae West lured audiences with their beauty; Sophie Tucker entertained with uninhibited, invective language and a jovial questioning of gender roles; and Eva Tanguay, the highest-paid and biggest star of the vaudeville circuit at the beginning 20th century "was not beautiful; she danced without grace; she sang poorly in a loud, high-pitched voice. Yet the audience loved her" (Lewis 319). Although female African American comedians had barely been

in the popcultural spotlight, Moms Mabley, for example, performed in front of considerable African American audiences in the early 20th century and "became known as a consistently reliable crowd pleaser, developing routines that often centered on ridiculing older black men who try to dominate women" (Rappoport 112). After World War I, the situation for female performers changed drastically due to a newly intense reaction to women in the public sphere. This sensitivity led to the exclusion and segregation of female performers. The spaces for female entertainers, consequently, moved from the spotlight to much smaller venues with less prosperity. With powerful changes in gender role allocations, women were either forced to quit the entertainment industry altogether or adjust to the new disparaging climate (cf. 111f.).

During this time, invective sentiments about the inferiority of women gained traction – including in the sphere of comedy. Based on Social Darwinism, pseudo-scientific articles proclaimed that "it was biologically unnatural for women to have a strong sense of humor" and "that it was mainly unattractive, ungainly women – the 'rejects' – who frequently told jokes and made witty remarks" (Rappoport 110). The image of the 'unattractive' female comedian is based on "conventional definitions of 'femininity' and 'lady-like' behavior [that] render the stance of superiority inherent in stand-up comedy 'inappropriate' for women" (Russell 3). Since women were expected to adhere to submissive, passive, and demure gender characteristics, humor was regarded as too aggressive. These views, only slightly varied, ran through the following decades. In a 1973 article, linguistics scholar Robin Lakoff claims that "[i]t is axiomatic in middle-class American society that, first, women can't tell jokes – they are bound to ruin the punchline, they mix up the order of things, and so on. Moreover, they don't 'get' jokes. In short, women have no sense of humor" (qtd. in Bunkers 82f.). The gendered socio-cultural shifts in society not only devalued women and female performers but also cemented traditional gender roles that left women with little agency. In order to circumvent these ideological gate-keeping mechanisms, distinct strategies had to be identified to create spaces for female performers.

While Lucille Ball opened up opportunities and paved the way for funny women on television in the 1950s, as I have discussed in Chapter 2.1, female stand-up comedians of the time not only challenged women's allegedly fixed place in the private sphere but also the prevalent patriarchal values. Like Ball on television, Phyllis Diller, for example, explored new avenues on stand-up

comedy stages in the 1950s. Only a handful of other female comedians made their way into the industry. Otherwise, Diller was confronted with an exclusively male-dominated space. As the 1992 documentary about female comedians, *Wisecracks*, argues, gender is always "(at least initially) a barrier/obstacle between [the performers] and the audience." For a stand-up act to be successful, as Russel suggests, the relationship between audience and performer has to be collaborative since "the message cannot be heard if the medium is rejected" (Russell 1). In an interview, Diller reveals that she was largely met with suspicion and rejection from colleagues and audiences, "Being a woman, right away you walk out to almost total rejection. Almost nobody wants you to be a female comic and they give you a lot of static just because of your sex" (qtd. in L. Martin and Segrave 341). When she started her career in 1955, a female comedian that "seizes centre stage, actively engages the audience and commands attention" was very much frowned upon (Russell 4). The self-determined and aggressive conduct of female comedians like Diller collided with contemporary behavioral norms that rest on gender. Russel argues that performers consequently "[cease] to 'do' female" in order to bypass the gate-keeping mechanisms that prevented numerous female entertainers from performing on professional stages (ibid. 5).

In order to rebut and counteract the irritation the female comedian causes, a distinct strategy has been proven to be a success: self-deprecation. While Ball debased herself by embodying a ditzy and naive housewife on screen, Diller told self-disparaging jokes on stage that revolved around her alleged stupidity and inadequacies as a woman and wife, for example, "Driving is too complicated for me and I tell you why: I can only handle one thing at a time. See, I have to pull off the road to blow the horn, I can't chew gum and walk, – honest to God, I have to turn off the shower to sing" (Diller).[16]

16 In her early days, Diller's routines revolved around popular topics like food, sex, family issues, and her allegedly defective self. Later on, she ventured into rather untested territory by starting to ridicule her husband Fang in order to elicit laughter from the audience. In her routine, one of her jokes goes, "My mother told me how to cure Fang's hiccoughs. Hold his head unter water," slowly but steadily macerating and opening up gendered restrictions in comedy and freeing herself and other female comedians from the constraints of self-deprecating humor (Rappoport 109).

It is interesting to note that female self-deprecating humor structurally parallels male sexist humor, which elicits laughter by deprecating women (cf. Gray and T. E. Ford 278). According to Ford, "sexist humor perpetuates power imbalances between men and women," therefore cementing and maintaining traditional gender roles as well as the allegedly superior value and status of men ("Effects Of Sexist Humor" 1094). Female self-deprecating humor also elicits laughter by denigrating the female speaker. While the mere uttering of degrading stereotypes may perpetuate and reinforce them, female self-deprecating humor is also able to destabilize the sedimented gender economy of comedy. The fact that the female performer is initiating and controlling the laughter of the audience yields agency back to the speaker. The audience is, therefore, not laughing *at* but *with* the female performer. According to Bunkers, female self-deprecation "often functions not to demean a particular woman but to establish a common ground among women" (84). In contrast to male sexist humor where the butt of the joke has no agency whatsoever, female self-deprecating humor grants agency to the butt of the joke and, thus, has the potential to subvert and ambiguate the meaning of the deprecation. By utilizing self-deprecation, female performers appropriate disparaging comedic traditions and legacies to further their professional advancement and open new ways for women in comedy. Nevertheless, the affordances of female self-deprecating humor comprise a perpetuation as well as a debalancing of gender disparity.

Besides straightforward self-disparagement, Diller also diminished herself via her appearance. In contrast to Lucille Ball's good looks, which opened the door to her television career, Diller and a lot of other female stand-up comedians have used their bodies to strategically transgress gender-based norms and ideals. For example, Diller's baggy, outlandish clothes, the excessive use of make-up, and her protruding hair quickly became her trademark. According to her obituary in the *Washington Post*, "Diller wore those clothes because she had a great body and for a woman telling jokes back then, that wasn't funny" (Curtis). Whereas Ball was able to utilize her normative beauty to advance herself on TV, Diller had to hide her body and her femaleness in order to not distract the audience from her comedy routine. In 1970 in New York City's *The Village Voice*, a male contemporary critic of Diller, for example, complained about the comedian neither striving to seduce nor appealing to the audience "as a woman should" (qtd. in L. Martin and Segrave 343). Although "Diller's very intentions were to mock the whole fantasy of the beautiful, sought-after blonde," gender-based

expectations narrowed and restricted the female comedian's range of possible forms of expression (ibid. 343). Her disguised body, therefore, served to create common ground for the audience and herself as a performer to ridicule her failures of 'being female.' Self-deprecation, as Russel argues, "allows the speaker to adopt what is essentially an authoritative stance without alienating the majority of the audience members. The (implicit) threat of the female speaker is defused when she sets herself up as the target of ridicule" (Russell 8). In concealing the female body on stage, Diller and other comedians created public female spaces in the comedy world.[17]

Contemporary popular culture frequently references the disparate conditions in the comedy world. For example, Amazon's period dramedy *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017–), which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5.2, stages the gender-based hardships of female comedians in the New York City of the 1950s. The protagonist, an aspiring female stand-up comedian, meets the great Sophie Lennon, a stand-up star in the storyworld. Similarly to Diller, Lennon's stage persona is dressed as a working-class housewife with feather duster in hand, wearing a fat suit and a headscarf. Lennon herself, in contrast, is staged as an upper class woman with a noble and lofty demeanor. When the protagonist encounters Lennon in her luxurious townhouse, she explains the gender-based rules of the comedy business of the time:

> It's a very successful charade, isn't it? [...] It's all fat suit and make-up. [...] Fans don't want to see this. They want the *Hausfrau* from Queens. [...] My goodness, you're so pretty. Why comedy? Can't you sing? [...] Darling, look at you. I mean, really – men don't want to laugh at you. They want to fuck you. You can't go up there and be a woman. You've got to be a thing. You want to get ahead in comedy? Cover up that hole. (*The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* 1.7)

17 In contrast to Diller, Joan Rivers stepped into the spotlight well dressed and groomed in the 1960s. Although she did not conceal her normative beauty, her comedy was very much focused on self-deprecation – her bodily inadequacies and her general failings as a woman. As Martin and Segrave suggest, without self-deprecating humor "she probably never would have achieved the popularity that she did [...] The public was not then ready to accept an overly aggressive female who, in some fashion, didn't pay her dues" (347). With female performances becoming more critical of patriarchal standards and norms, the "rise of self-assertive women in comedy," like Carol Burnett and Lily Tomlin in the 60s and 70s, and Ellen DeGeneres, Roseanne Barr, and Whoopie Goldberg in the 80s and 90s, was on its way (Rappoport 111).

Lennon's remarks condense self-deprecating legacies, emphasizing the need for female performers to "[cease] to 'do' female" in order to advance in the comedy industry (Russell 5). Popcultural products, like *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and Gadsby's *Nanette*, self-reflexively theorize the stand-up comedy genre, its rules, and its legacies. The vernacular theorizing of gender disparity in the genre points to deeply entrenched invective structures in the gender economy of comedy. Although the majority of televized female stand-up performances has appeared to emancipate its performers from self-deprecating content,[18] a 2002 study suggests otherwise. Russell reviews 150 stand-up comedy bits, finding that merely 4.4% of the 113 male performers and 21.6% of the 37 female performers included self-deprecation in their routines. Self-deprecating humor, as indicated, is still more prevalent in female comedic performances than in male.

This subchapter's case study now traces the remnants of gendered self-deprecating humor in the contemporary situation comedy *2 Broke Girls*. In the following paragraphs, I show that the series utilizes its protagonist to elicit humor. I argue that the narrative device of the laugh track, as well as the staging in general, impedes and diverts any efforts to reflexively adjudicate on the actual jocularity of the auto-invective situations. As I discuss, the auto-invective comments of protagonist Max are marked as humorous by the laugh track. They have seemingly no effect on the storyworld whatsoever and are brushed aside. However, the frequent depiction of female auto-invective humor and the subsequent 'othering' of women reinforce and perpetuate gendered invective images and discourses about gender disparity. In a first step, I introduce the protagonists of *2 Broke Girls*, describe their character constructions, and explain their staging as sources of humor. After analyzing Max's auto-invective humor, I identify similarities between the show and the comedic legacy of female self-deprecation.

18 Ali Wong, for example, frequently breaks taboos on stage. While well advanced in her pregnancy, she performed and filmed her Netflix specials *Baby Cobra* (2016) and *Hard Knock Wife* (2018). Her routine frequently touches on sensitive issues like miscarriages and breastfeeding, sex, one-night-stands, and STDs (cf. Sandberg). *Vanity Fair*'s Nast comments on the liberating quality of Wong's comedy, comparing the image of motherhood in her routines to the staged image of Kate Middleton's motherhood in 2013: "In a world where real-life princesses are still radiating perfection from actual palaces, it's nice that Ali Wong has not only made a career demolishing such façades but is thriving by doing so" (Nast).

As mentioned in the introduction to Chapter 3, the CBS sitcom revolves around the two distinctive protagonists, Max Black and Caroline Channing, and their endeavors to earn enough money to set up their own business. Novak argues that the "contrast between the visual aesthetics of the two main characters assists viewers in perceiving the differences" in their character constructions (58). While blonde Caroline is staged as an optimistic, bubbly, and formerly wealthy character who is focused on money, fashion, and outer appearance, dark-haired Max is constructed as a street-smart, feisty, and sarcastic character who dreams small and tries to get by with the little she has.[19] The protagonists' backstories are also very much contrasted in the show. While Caroline's upbringing is staged to be firmly rooted in the economically carefree upper class, Max grew up in precarious circumstances with an emotionally abusive and addicted mother. In an early episode of *2 Broke Girls*, for example, Max is staged to reminisce about a rather disturbing childhood memory that emphasizes the discrepancy between the protagonists: "I don't do impressions. Well, wait, that's not true, I do one – my mom. But to do that I need a Christmas tree, a gallon of vodka, and a lit cigarette" (*2 Broke Girls* 1.03). Whereas the character of Caroline is staged as a happy-go-lucky socialite, "Max's poorer social class limited her ability to focus on anything other than earning enough money to survive" (Novak 58).[20]

The show, aided by the laugh track,[21] utilizes its protagonists' distinct character constructions as particular sources of humor. On the one hand,

19 University of Houston–Clear Lake's Professor of English, Craig White, traces the archetype of "the fair lady and the dark lady" in Western culture. Physical features like "rosy-skinned with blonde hair, blue eyes, and adolescent or virginal figure" of the fair lady are often contrasted with features like "darker-skinned, brunette, brown-eyed, sometimes with fuller figure" of the dark lady, who "may appear as a temptress" (C. White). These distinctions not only fit the protagonists of *2 Broke Girls*, but they can also be found in numerous other contemporary US sitcoms, like ABC's *Don't Trust the B— in Apartment 23* (2012).

20 Kehya and Serdaroğlu suggest that lower-class individuals are frequently portrayed as uneducated, struggling with drug and alcohol addiction, often involved in criminal activity, and hailing from problematic backgrounds (104). Similarly, protagonist Max, although portrayed as very capable, did not officially graduate from high school (cf. *2 Broke Girls* 2.24), enjoys smoking marijuana (cf. *2 Broke Girls* 2.12), and is arrested for breaking and entering (cf. *2 Broke Girls* 4.11).

21 I discuss the narrative device of the laugh track as one of sitcom genre's affordances that enables invective structures in Chapter 2.3.

many aspects of Caroline's humor can be traced to her former lifestyle, frequently and humorously clashing with her newfound poverty after her father's Ponzi scheme collapsed. Still impeccably dressed, statements like "Good news! I just found $3 in my pocket and a peanut M&M, so we don't have to spend money on dinner" incongruously elicit humor (*2 Broke Girls* 2.12). The character is, on the other hand, also staged to insult and deprecate other characters. In a Season One episode, Caroline is harassed by a customer's son and his friend at a bar mitzvah. When the two boys rap while throwing dollar bills at her, the character invectively yells, "Listen, hit me with one more dead president and you'll be six feet under with Biggie and Tupac. You understand me, Jew-Tang Clan?" to establish superiority over the other characters (*2 Broke Girls* 1.17).

Protagonist Max is, likewise, frequently staged as a source of humor. Similarly to Caroline, aspects of the character's humor stem from incongruous comments and statements. When, in one episode, Max is staged to listen to Caroline's advice and finally plucks up the courage to kiss the man she has started to have feelings for, she finds out that the woman beside him is his girlfriend – so she goes on to kiss the girlfriend as well. To cover up her lack of knowledge, she incongruously states, "I'm Max and, um, that's how I say hi to everyone. I'm incredibly friendly" (*2 Broke Girls* 1.08). Later on in the diner, thoroughly upset, she tells Caroline, "Are you happy now? You got me to admit that I like him and then you got me to kiss him. And then I kiss his beautiful girlfriend who is black and British – the two cool things I can never be" (ibid.). The last part of her remark stands in stark contrast to the anguish the character is portraying in the scene. Nevertheless, the laugh track indicates and supports the humorous incongruence of the protagonist's statements in both instances and the story goes on.

Max's humor can also be linked to superiority theories, invectively putting down the people around her. A lot of Max's insults are based on racial stereotypes of the supporting characters' diverse ethnic backgrounds. Besides oversexualized Ukranian Oleg, Asian American Han, the owner of the diner at which the protagonists work, is arguably Max's favorite victim of abuse. She frequently and invectively makes fun of his stereotypically subpar height:[22]

22 There are also scenes where Max's behavior towards Han could be read as appreciative. When, in Season Three, Han's mother is in town, the protagonists are helping him

> Han: Guess what, everyone? I have a secret.
> Max: You're a woman trapped in a man's body?
> Han: No.
> Max: You're a man trapped in a woman's body? You're a little boy trapped in a little girl's body?
> Han: I am a man in a man's body.
> Max: We're not talking about your night life. (*2 Broke Girls* 1.18)

> Max: If you ever interrupt me while I am studying [...], I will dropkick your baby-powdered ass back to the Shire with the other Hobbits. (*2 Broke Girls* 3.15)

Various paratexts comment on the invective portrayal of the Asian American as "short, asexual and work-obsessed" and him being "ridiculed for his broken English and failing to 'get' US culture" (Elan). Racially insensitive invective phenomena like these appear in every episode. The evocation of stereotypes and the subsequent invitations for audiences to laugh ambiguate, on the one hand, the power structures of the show, yet, on the other hand, reiterate and perpetuate racially insensitive invectives ("(Meta-)Disparagement Humour" 7).[23]

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to cover up the fact that he has been lying to his mother about having a girlfriend. Although there are, again, a lot of invective jokes about Han's height, the two women agree to support and take care of the situation by visiting a strip joint and go to dinner with Han, his stripper quasi-girlfriend, and his mother (cf. *2 Broke Girls* 3.07). Although the viewer is able to notice that the personal relationships in the storyworld are, indeed, based on appreciation, the surface structure of *2 Broke Girls* appears to be organized by (racially insensitive) invectives, with the character of Max at the forefront.

23 Despite *2 Broke Girls*'s long run, the series was harshly critiqued for its use of offensive racial clichés and sexually transgressive jokes. Various online articles cover Federal Communications Commissions complaints from outraged viewers: *Jezebel*'s Stewart, for example, quotes some of the complaints, "It's 8:30 at night on a Monday and I have to explain to my child what 'fingering' is?," or "Two casual references suggesting anal sex on a first date. Are there no standards anymore on broadcast television?" ("Filthy Jokes"). Megan Angelo, writer and blogger for *Glamour*, went to the trouble of counting every single sex or sex-related joke in one episode (*2 Broke Girls* 4.04): "42, or nearly two sex jokes per minute" ("Sex Jokes"). Goodman, from *The Hollywood Reporter*, denounces the show's racist dealings with Asian American character Han: "Each week Han's broken English gets played like some sorry minstrel show" ("The Sorry State"). *New York Times*'s Emily Nussbaum partly shares in the aversion to the series and "the ensemble, which is conceived in terms so racist it is less offensive than baffling" ("Crass

Apart from incongruous statements and invective comments directed at others, protagonist Max's invective remarks directed at herself are likewise accentuated as humorous by the laugh track. *2 Broke Girls* abounds with auto-invectives, yet they are only uttered by protagonist Max. Neither Caroline nor other character are set up to partake. Auto-invective jokes about Max's poor upbringing, negligent family relations, and past traumatic sexual encounters are met with canned laughter that creates a space of "a collectively agreed notion [that] it is appropriate […] to laugh" (Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). With the marker of the laugh track, a so-called "play frame" is established "that distinguishes itself from serious talk precisely by making humour and laughter admissible" (Messerli 81). In this frame, the protagonist's exemplary auto-invective remarks are uttered:

> Welcome to the Williamsburg Diner, my name's Max because the hospital wouldn't let my mother call me 'Oops.' (*2 Broke Girls* 3.01)

> I was unconscious when I lost [my virginity] and want to see what it's like! (*2 Broke Girls* 3.07)

> Pressure ups my game. I perform my best when there's a gun to my head. Ask any of my boyfriends. (*2 Broke Girls* 3.09)

> If I learnt anything in life, it's that nothing's more flammable than my dreams. (*2 Broke Girls* 3.09)

> Booth one is all yours. If I wanted to deal with a guy who won't even acknowledge my existence, I'd track down my father. (*2 Broke Girls* 5.10)

The show repeatedly places Max's horrifying experiences of being abducted, held at gunpoint, used as a drug mule, and frequently sexually abused on display. Although *2 Broke Girls* often hints at the difficulties and hardships of its protagonist, the respective scenes are ultimately devalorized by the laugh track and their graveness and severity are, subsequently, re-evaluated as comedic.

Warfare"). Nevertheless, she emphasizes the potential of "a deep female friendship [and] raw humor about class" and the viewing pleasures attached to it (ibid.).

Other characters merely function as a blank canvas for Max's auto-invectives, only rarely staged to react to the statements, otherwise waiting for the laugh track to subside and carrying on the conversation afterwards. One of these exceptions occurs in a Season Five episode, where Han invites his employees to a work function in an Escape Room. Max auto-invectively hints at an abduction experience in her past, "What the hell is this place? This looks like the room I was kept in when that trucker 'borrowed' me for three days" (2 *Broke Girls* 5.05). Although Caroline is staged to react, she utilizes Max's horrifying statement to carry on a fight the two friends were having over paying their rent. Caroline is upset that Max has been overcharging her since she moved in years ago, so she reacts disproportionately by asking Max, "Did you overcharge him, too?" (ibid.). The laugh track chimes in and marks the exchange between the protagonists as humorous, inviting the viewers to join the apparent mirth and bypassing Max's auto-invective.

Protagonist Max's humor strategies show distinct resemblance to the discussions on the self-deprecating humor traditions that I have laid out above. In the following, I want to examine two auto-invective strategies of the show, which are evocative of and reflect on the legacies of the devaluation and restrictions of women in the comedic domain. Firstly, Max's auto-invective statements serve as a source of humor. Similarly to past female comedians, the show places auto-invectives on display as a common ground for ridicule and mockery. The protagonist's humor directed at her own traumatic backstory serves as a similar source of humor as, for example, Phyllis Diller's jokes about her bodily appearance and deficits as a woman. Since most of the auto-invective remarks revolve around the character's alleged worthlessness, "[t]he implicit threat of the female speaker is defused when she sets herself up as the target of ridicule" (Russell 8). Aided and assisted by the laugh track, Max's auto-invective comments about her past become common ground at which the viewers are invited to laugh. The protagonist's remarks allow her "to adopt what is essentially an authoritative stance without alienating the majority of the audience members" (ibid. 8).

Secondly, the character's aggressive, racially insensitive humor has to be reeled in. As Martin and Segrave attested for Joan Rivers in the 1960s, an aggressive female performer has to "pay her dues" in order to achieve any kind of success in the comedic domain (347). Following this logic, the series has to counterbalance its female protagonist's aggressive and invective humor with self-deprecation as "part of the price of admission to the ranks"

(ibid. 355). Through auto-invective humor, Max is denigrated and turned into an acceptable object of laughter. The protagonist's aggressiveness, standing in contrast to a traditional understanding of gender roles, is compensated with auto-invective features. Additionally, the show creates a duality in its protagonist. In contrast to Diller's veiling of her femininity, *2 Broke Girls* masculinizes its central figure in a different way. The character's full name, as mentioned in a Season Six episode, is Maxine George Black. The series, therefore, facilitates and encourages its protagonist to "[cease] to 'do' female" by not only giving the character a masculine middle name, it also stages her to abbreviate her given name to Max, which can be read as masculine as well (Russell 5; cf. *2 Broke Girls* 6.22). In line with Gadsby's vernacular theorizing above, the series sets up the protagonist to perform both aggressive and auto-invective humor.

Female auto-invective humor, as mentioned before, can also be read to destabilize and undermine disparaging comments. In *2 Broke Girls*, however, the subversion falls flat. As protagonist Max is constructed as a tough but traumatized individual, a victim of abuse and sexual harassment, the audience, being witness to these confessions, may be able to identify with and relate to the character. Max's auto-invectives can, thus, serve as a basis of female empowerment. Following Priego-Valverde, auto-invective humor can also be a sign of personal strength, deliberately facing one's own imperfections (cf. 3). Max, staged to have experienced trauma, could serve as an inspiring example of coming to terms with and humorously dealing with past mental and physical suffering. The laugh track of the show, however, thwarts any efforts of reading auto-invective humor as subversive. Following Brown's deliberations on "meta-disparagement humor" that "refers to jokes that explicitly target a minority while implicitly ridiculing those who would laugh at the joke at face value," the protagonist's remarks directed at herself could be read as a mocking of existing stereotypes and the people using them (Brown xi). However, as she goes on, meta-disparagement "may, in fact, reinforce and perpetuate" these stereotypes (xi, 2). *2 Broke Girls*'s laugh track instantly marks the protagonist's auto-invective remarks as humorous and laughable, offering, on the one hand, a collective experience of "[feeling] at one with the few dozen people s/he can hear laughing, and by extension with millions of others across the country" (Medhurst and Tuck 45). On the other hand, the laugh track simultaneously marks the auto-invective comments as unproblematically funny (Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). Lastly, the laugh track succinctly follows the auto-invective remarks so that any kind of reflection on

the side of an implied viewer is dismantled and obstructed. The viewer has no time to spend on contemplating the actual jocularity of the comments, let alone the social and cultural resonances of her laughter.

In the comedy special *Nanette*, Gadsby illustrates her personal experience when trauma clashes with comedy:

> What I had done with that comedy show [...] was I froze an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and I sealed it off into jokes. And that story became a routine, and through repetition, that joke version fused my actual memory of what happened. But unfortunately, that joke version was not nearly sophisticated enough to help me undo the damage done to me in reality. Punch lines need trauma because punch lines need tension, and tension feeds trauma. (*Nanette*, Netflix)

Similarly, the trauma in *2 Broke Girls* stays episodic, forgotten once the cash register chimes at the end of each episode. Messerli's "play frame" for situation comedies, "achieved by a number of external and internal humour cues, such as TV programme listings or indeed the laugh track," overrides more meaningful dealings with auto-invective comments and the related trauma in the show and converts productive conversation starters into sources of laughter (Messerli 81f.).

Following the sitcom genre's logic to reach mass audiences, minority group ideologies in *2 Broke Girls* are sidelined (cf. Mills, *The Sitcom* 103). This not only includes the racially insensitive humor for which the show was harshly criticized, it also comprises the allegedly inferior and laughable position of female characters constructed by auto-invective humor. Thus, in line with constructing a superior reading position, the viewers of *2 Broke Girls* "are being invited to find laughable the behavior of marginalized groups" (ibid. 83). The privileged reading position, aided by the laugh track, perpetuates and reiterates imbalanced gender-based relations.

In this subchapter, I have shown that the contemporary situation comedy *2 Broke Girls*'s staging of one of their protagonists is strongly informed by the traditions and legacies of the gendered economy of comedy. Therefore, I have given a brief overview of female self-deprecating humor strategies of the past. By disparaging their appearances and/or their failings as women, female performers were, at times, able to circumvent gate-keeping mechanisms of the male-dominated domain of comedy without threatening traditional gender roles that would prevent them from performing in the first place. I have also proposed to transfer the term 'self-deprecating' to

'auto-invective' humor, which enables me to substantiate the ventriloquated image of the 'self' in televisual texts. In my case study, I have argued that *2 Broke Girls* utilizes auto-invective comments made by its protagonist Max Black in order to elicit humor. I have shown that the text constructs a dominant reading position from which the auto-invective humor of the protagonist makes sense. Although the auto-invective remarks are based on Max's traumatic personal experiences, the laugh track unquestioningly signals humorous intent, and other characters are only rarely staged to react to them. I have also established distinct connections between the self-deprecating strategies of female comedians in the past and the staging of *2 Broke Girls*'s auto-invective humor. In both instances, women elicit laughter by deprecating themselves in myriad ways as well as "[cease] to 'do' female" (Russell 5). The show's disparagement of its female protagonist hinges on a gender-based imbalance of power, and reiterates and perpetuates discourses of 'otherness' and alterity. Gadsby, therefore, states in her comedy special:

> I built a career out of self-deprecating humor. That's what I've built my career on. And... I don't want to do that anymore. Because, do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who is already in the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me. (*Nanette*)

She proposes that self-deprecating and, by extension, auto-invective humor always comes with the risk of degrading already structurally marginalized groups of people.

Auto-invective humor, however, is rather pervasive in the US American television landscape. For example, the protagonist of NBC's *30 Rock* (2006–13) Liz Lemon is, as Nussbaum suggests, "rarely [...] an empowering role model" ("In Defense of Liz Lemon"). Her mishaps and self-aware auto-invective comments are a major source of laughter in the show. *Veep*'s protagonist Selina Meyer also auto-invectively diminishes her position as a woman in politics: "No, no, no, I can't identify as a woman! People can't know that. Men hate that. And women who hate women hate that, which, I believe, is most women" (*Veep* 3.2). While auto-invective humor is able to perpetuate stereotypes, it can also subvert existing power relations, targeting not the self but rather societal circumstances (cf. Strain et al.

88f.). In *2 Broke Girls*, however, the protagonist's auto-invective comments rather reinforce and perpetuate notions of 'otherness' and alterity.

In this chapter, I established that situation comedies strongly rely on humorous strategies of deprecation and disparagement of a particular 'other.' In two case studies, I have analyzed invective constellations and dynamics that exemplarily trace where socially manifested discourses of 'otherness' are connected with humorous strategies that invite audiences to laugh.

In the first section, I focused on an analysis of the network sitcom *Mike & Molly*, which exhibits strong deprecation of its eponymous fat protagonists. In proposing the figure of the Invective Fool – a thoroughly flawed character staged to have distinct licenses to speak – I argued that the series establishes invective humor strategies that enable claims of inauthenticity and manifest socially sedimented reservations against fat bodies on screen. The second section addressed gender-based 'othering' in the CBS situation comedy *2 Broke Girls*. I argued that the show updates and perpetuates legacies of gendered self-deprecating humor. One of the *2 Broke Girls*'s protagonists is frequently staged to utilize auto-invective remarks in order to elicit humor, while simultaneously reiterating and manifesting socially embedded and gendered systems of inequality. Through the analyses of *Mike & Molly* and *2 Broke Girls*, I have uncovered invective humor strategies that heavily rely on the disparagement and mockery of an 'other.'