1. Introduction

Ya basic. (Eleanor, *The Good Place* (NBC 2016–20) 1.13)

Robin, girls are like cartons of milk. Each one has a hotness expiration date and you've hit yours. (Barney, *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS 2005–14) 6.01)

You are human tennis elbow [sic]. You are a pizza burn on the roof of the world's mouth. You are the opposite of Batman. (Troy, *Community* (NBC 2009–14) 3.01)

Whether it is slandering a demon that tortures humans in a fake afterlife utopia in *The Good Place*, misogynist world views casually shared with friends in *How I Met Your Mother*, or insulting a fellow student because she did not give advance warning that all characters on a British television show will die in the end in *Community* – situation comedies contain a lot of disparagement, ridicule, and mockery in order to entertain and elicit humor. Disparagement humor – "humor that denigrates, belittles, or maligns an individual or social group" (T. E. Ford and M. A. Ferguson 79) – is not only "pervasive in contemporary society," it also seems to be a highly distinctive feature of the sitcom genre and of American popular culture in general (M. A. Ferguson and T. E. Ford 305). As arguably the most popular comedic televisual genre and one of the comedic pillars of television culture, situation comedies have undergone significant formal and textual changes in the investigation period, indicating, as I later discuss in more detail, a *Quality Turn* in comedy. Since the millennium, comedic formats showed a considerable differentiation and expansion, both in established genres like the sitcom as well as in recently emerging formats like the political late night show and the re-discovery of the dramedy format. The proliferation of disparaging humor becomes evident in recently pervasive techniques of humiliating, exposing, insulting, and embarrassing characters on screen. Especially through distinct disparaging humor principles, like cringe humor,

that constitute a new quality of embarrassment and shame, sitcoms invite viewers to participate in suffering with the characters as well disparagingly laughing at them.[1] Since mass media, and especially television, "are probably the most powerful conveyors of sociocultural ideals," disparagement and disparagement humor are worth examining in more detail (Tiggemann and Pickering 199).

Intervening into these debates, this book introduces the concept of invectivity[2] to analyze disparaging, humiliating, and mocking dynamics and constellations in contemporary US American situation comedies. Through the lens of invectivity, I strive to examine the poetics and politics of popcultural sitcom texts that utilize disparagement both as a narrative device and a major source of humor in order to explore how popcultural practices of debasement echo understandings of social order and hierarchy. Throughout this study, my key argument is that the contemporary situation comedy genre's developmental dynamics are fed by, rely, and depend on an oscillation between the affirmation and reflection on, up to and including the breaking of invective conventions. With the help of a modal approach, I seek to describe manifold invective techniques and their staging. The analyzed sitcom texts unfold their cultural work at the intersection of transgression and taboo. While sitcoms are devised to entertain by lightheartedly trangressing social norms, the genre's humor imminently expresses and emphasizes difference and, thus, a social hierarchy between the laugher and the laughee (cf. Kanzler, "(Meta-)Disparagement Humour" 15). Furthermore, I argue that invective structures and the subsequent invective humor are the grounding of the genre. Moreover, they can function as a catalyst for exploring the genre's own boundaries and self-understanding. The study, therefore, proposes that invective dynamics repeatedly play an important role in the boundary work of the genre – the ways in which the material

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1   As Middleton argues, cringe comedy first came to be known with the accomplishments of mockumentaries, like *The Office* (BBC 2001–03; NBC 2005–13), that took advantage of "the mock-documentary framework to heighten [the show's] awkward humor, through devices including long periods of dead air, and contradictions between characters' self-representation in interviews and their behavior captured on tape" (*Documentary's Akward Turn* 2).

2   The term 'invectivity' was newly coined for the purposes of the Special Research Unit "Invectivity. Constellations and Dynamics of Disparagement." The neologism is borrowed from the classical literary and rhetoric form of 'invectiva oratio' or 'vituperatio' (cf. Ellerbrock et al. 7).

adapts the situation comedy's traditional conventions to changing social and discourse-political constellations.

As widely attested in scholarly writings, vituperation, debasement, and disparagement seem to enjoy a particular upsurge in contemporary times (cf. Ellerbrock et al.; Kanzler, "Invective Spectacle"; Ellerbrock and Fehlemann; Kanzler and Scharlaj). According to these articles, phenomena like insults, vilification, rudeness, and symbolic or verbal violence and aggression share the common and pejorative feature of singling out, discriminating against, and changing the social position of the disparaged. TU Dresden's Special Research Unit "Invectivity. Constellations and Dynamics of Disparagement" attends to those elements of communication – "either verbal or non-verbal, oral or written, gestural or graphic" – that are utilized to harm, disparage, or exclude others (Ellerbrock et al. 3). The intellectual framework throughout this book has been greatly informed by and takes its cues from the analytical category of invectivity and Ellerbrock et al.'s programmatic text (ibid.). The central component of the Special Research Unit's concept is that invectivity helps to describe distinct social dynamics and defines the disparaging incidents as *invective*, "identifying quintessential modalities through comparison and highlighting invective characteristics in all kinds of cultural phenomena" (ibid. 6f., translation mine). Based on Fowler's *mode* concept (*An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*), Kanzler introduces an approach to theorize invective forms across media and historical periods, the *invective mode*, to comprise the range and fluidity of invective structures in American popular culture. She argues that the invective mode is able to pour itself into continually developing local formats, transcends media and genre boundaries, and uncovers representational and affective strategies and socio-cultural functions of disparagement and symbolic abuse (cf. "Invective Mode"). For the analysis of invective phenomena in contemporary US American situation comedies, the analytical category of invectivity enables me to examine the complexities of popcultural disparagement and to observe society's view of itself and its own dealings with disparagement. For invective phenomena to be adequately analyzed in sitcoms, then, they have to be examined in their discursive, medial, and social contexts. Comparatively few concepts and notions of disparagement have been argued to zoom in on similar elements of American popular culture – aspects of Middleton's 'Cringe Comedy,' Schwind's 'Embarrassment Humor,' and Mills's 'Comedy Verité' come to mind – yet I propose that introducing the notion of invectivity not only benefits research in Popular Television Studies but it

also addresses the complexities of popcultural texts and counteracts the deficiencies in current scholarship (cf. Middleton, *Documentary's Akward Turn*; Schwind, "Embarrassment Humor"; Mills, "Comedy Verité").

1.1   Methodology

This study locates itself in the field of American Studies and, more specifically, within the field of Cultural and Literary Studies. In order to analyze the constellations and dynamics of invective phenomena in contemporary American situation comedies, I primarily draw from these scholarly backgrounds. The methodological interdisciplinarity characteristic of American Studies is able to explore and investigate the interrelation between my material's formal and textual principles, media-specific conditions and procedures, the politics of affect, and the cultural work it performs. My broad understanding of what constitutes texts, likewise, comes from Cultural Studies. As is traditional in American Studies, Cultural Theorist and Media scholar John Fiske defines a text as "a signifying construct of potential meanings operating on a number of levels [...]. [T]hese meanings are determined partly by the structure of the text itself, partly by the social characteristics and discursive practices of [its] reader" (43). Within the framework of this concept, texts are not bound by the medium of print, but they enclose various media, including the moving images of televisual artifacts.

My firm interest in the cultural work of texts greatly informs this study. In her influential analysis of 19th century texts, Jane Tompkins addresses a text's "cultural work within a specific historical situation" by "providing society with a means of thinking about itself, defining certain aspects of a social reality which the authors and their readers shared, dramatizing its conflicts, and recommending solutions" (200). Literary texts, according to her, do work in "expressing and shaping the social context that produced them" (ibid.). Paul Lauter, more than a decade later, further outlines the concept by arguing that the cultural work of a text "helps construct the frameworks, fashion the metaphors, create the language by which people comprehend their experiences and think about their world" (23). The concept of cultural work, therefore, focuses on the interactions between literary texts (in the broadest sense) and society and culture. Based on the assumption that society is not only heterogeneous but also structured

along asymmetrical power relations, this study, on the one hand, assumes that interpretations are always embedded in processes of negotiation that are dependent, among other things, on interpretive claims of the prevalent social conceptions of order. On the other hand, it is assumed that texts offer more or less ambiguous readings in which privileged meanings are nevertheless inscribed. In my analytical chapters, these complexities are carved out meticulously. This study uses the concept of cultural work as a starting point for a range of interdisciplinary methods. Besides approaches from Cultural and Literary Studies, this study, as I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, utilizes insights from several other disciplines and fields throughout the following chapters, that emphasize processes of distinction and devaluation, 'othering,' and the distribution of and claim to power. With regard to the significance of humor in the sitcom genre, I utilize, most prominently, theories and concepts from the field of Humor Studies, with a particular emphasis on superiority theories of humor as well as insights from Media and Television Studies. All of these interdisciplinary impulses facilitate and support my overall goal of describing and analyzing the contemporary situation comedy genre's dynamics of affirming, reflecting on, and breaking invective conventions.

Since humor plays such a significant role in this book, I want to clarify my analytical standpoint. The arguments of this book all hinge on my interest in invective humor as one affordance of the situation comedy genre.[3] Rather than basing my epistemological interest on empirical viewer analyses, this study is exclusively interested in the textual, narrative, and audiovisual elements of the sitcoms that invite implied[4] audiences to laugh. The main approach to humor in this study is through the lens of superiority theories which propose that the "laugher always looks down on whatever [she] laughs at, and so judges it inferior by some standard," while being aware that other humor theories beneficially add to the picture (Monro, qtd. in Lintott 347).

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3   Adapted from design theory, Caroline Levine reads 'affordance' as a "term used to describe potential uses and actions latent in materials and designs" in order to reconsider literary form (6). Ultimately, she invites the reader to ask what aesthetic and literary forms are "*capable* of doing [and] what potentialities lie latent – though not always obvious – in aesthetic [...] arrangements" (ibid. 6f., emphasis in the original).

4   The term 'implied audience' is derived from the concept of the 'implied reader' that "designates the image of the recipient that the author had while writing or, more accurately, the author's image of the recipient that is fixed and objectified in the text by specific indexical signs" (Schmid 301).

Since humor and the semantics of laughter are ambivalent in "functioning either as a tool of the powerful […] or as a counter-cultural means of subverting, satirizing or ridiculing dominant norms and discourses," they either destabilize or reproduce the predominant discourses and power relations, depending on the dominant reading (Källstig and Death 4).[5]

In order to analyze invective phenomena in sitcoms, I employ close readings of as well as a Cultural Studies approach to the shows' audiovisual and narrative elements. Generally speaking, close reading is "the 'primary methodolody' of literary studies" and constitutes "[r]eading individual texts with attention to their linguistic features and rhetorical operations" (Herrnstein Smith 57). The Cultural Studies approach focuses on the interaction between the poetics and the politics of a text. In the case of this study, this means illuminating the interplay between, on the one hand, invective forms, means, and aesthetics and, on the other hand, the cultural work, the interpretational sovereignty, and the power relations the series depict. The main argument of this book, then, works through close readings as well as analyses and examinations of the cultural reverberations and functions of the fictional popcultural products.

The corpus of this study serves to exemplify many different forms of realizations of the invective mode in situation comedies. In this regard, I follow Mills's argument that "[n]o programme is wholly representative of a genre and, because of the serial nature of television, it's likely that no single episode of any programme is representative of all of its episodes" (*The Sitcom* 3). The study, therefore, illustrates distinct series' exemplary ways of dealing with invectivity from different aspects and perspectives that allow for productive and insightful readings, instead of trying to offer overgeneralized, apparently absolute statements about *the* sitcom of the 21st century. It comprises analytical readings solely of US American situation comedies, produced and broadcast after the turn of the millennium. In addition, all of the texts possess relative cultural reach in that they appeared on popular streaming platforms, national networks, or cable channels, and were, therefore, able to reach mass audiences. Finally, I have opted to concentrate on situation comedies with female protagonists as a deliberate counterbalance to existing research which often focuses on series with male

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5   McCabe argues for the idea of a 'dominant specularity,' "a reading position constructed by texts from which the world makes coherent, realistic sense" (Bodroghkozy 106; cf. C. McCabe 39).

protagonists (cf. Good et al.; E. Cooper; Zimdars). Constructions of gender, whiteness, and class intersect all of my primary texts and my analyses point out different facets and dimensions of their representation. Although the analyses in the next chapters work towards the general goal of examining manifestations of the invective mode in the sitcom genre, all nine case studies are capable of standing for themselves and add to the research of the individual television texts. While there is a small range of scholarship on most of the selected texts, my readings nevertheless emphasize their complexities as well as contributing to existing debates.

1.2   Structure

The book's examination of the politics and poetics of contemporary US American situation comedies is divided into four sections. The first chapter provides the conceptual basis and the cultural context of my study, while the three subsequent chapters analyze and examine invective dynamics and constellations. Each analytical chapter focuses on different forms of realizations of the invective mode, either grounding the sitcom genre or exploring its self-understanding and boundaries. As this book demonstrates, it is necessary to examine humorous invective phenomena in situation comedies in relation to discourses of 'otherness,' (self-)reflexivity, and the formal margins of the genre in order to expose the complexity of invective dynamics and constellations.

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 lays the conceptual groundwork and establishes the cultural context of this study. It firstly introduces the concept of invectivity and proposes that the new research perspective is able to invigorate and inform the analysis of popcultural texts, contextualizing selected existing research in a new light. The chapter, in a first section, demonstrates that invective aspects permeate historical and social realities in American culture. In a second section, the chapter explores the relation between humor and invective structures essential for an analysis of situation comedy texts. Finally, it focuses on the connection of the invective with the sitcom genre itself, giving prominence to particular affordances that enable and facilitate invective structures in the genre.

Chapter 3 investigates sitcom texts that heavily rely on discourses of 'otherness' to elicit invective humor in the network situation comedies *Mike & Molly* (CBS 2010–16) and *2 Broke Girls* (CBS 2011–17) in two distinct

subchapters. The first section analyzes the disparagement of the two fat protagonists in *Mike & Molly*, drawing on the literary archetype of the fool. This subchapter reads specific supporting characters as Invective Fools, portrayed as heavily flawed individuals, yet equipped with distinct invective licenses to speak. As an authorizing strategy, the show enforces allegedly socially acceptable norms and devalues undesirable bodies and behaviors. The second subchapter is devoted to gendered self-deprecating or, in the case of audiovisual artifacts, auto-invective structures in the sitcom *2 Broke Girls*. In a first step, this section traces the history of self-deprecation as a successful strategy for female comedians to circumvent gate-keeping mechanisms in the male-dominated domain of comedy. Secondly, it argues that the auto-invective humor of one of the show's female protagonists hinges on a gender-based disbalance of power and, thus, updates and perpetuates discourses of alterity and 'otherness' with regard to gender.

The second of the analytical chapters, namely Chapter 4, examines situation comedies that utilize invective phenomena to reflexively make disparagement (humor) a subject of discussion. Since it focuses on the sitcom cluster of Super Nice comedies, this chapter deviates from the usual structure of this book by examining and engaging with the œvre of television writer and creator Michael Schur's Super Nice sitcoms, organizing the analyses around a central sitcom text: *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009–15). The first section reads Super Niceness as an outbidding strategy in accord with Kelleter and Sudmann (cf. Kelleter and Jahn-Sudmann; Sudmann, *Serielle Überbietung*). In contrast to other texts that increase and intensify invectives to stay culturally relevant, Super Nice sitcoms prominently counterpose invectives with Super Niceness. The second section uses the notion of Super Niceness to highlight an ongoing trend within the genre: Sitcom texts tend to move away from postmodern qualities. Super Nice humor privileges sincerity and a genuine belief in human interconnection in contrast to the cynicism and nihilism of postmodern series. The final section investigates disparagement and humiliation directed at the shows' white, male, middle-aged characters, negotiating their privileges and addressing on-screen representational legacies in the genre's past and present.

Finally, the last analytical chapter analyzes the dynamism of the sitcom genre that is, in the period of investigation, characterized by a breaking

down and disruption of its formerly stable and rigid generic conventions.[6]
Invective structures, as I argue, contribute to the exploration of the sitcom's
own genre boundaries and traditions. With regard to Quality TV discourses,
this chapter frames the genre's formal and narrative developments, like
genre mixing, hybridization, and more complex character dispositions
and storylines, as a *Quality Turn* in comedy. The first section examines
embarrassment as a gendered invective strategy in the mockumentary
sitcoms *Parks and Recreation* and *The Comeback* (HBO 2005, 2014), reading
it as a culturalized technique of social control to which the protagonists
mostly fail to adhere. By introducing *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Amazon
2017–) in the second section, this subchapter argues that invective structures
play a significant role in the fusion of comedic and dramatic elements in
the period dramedy. Not only are invectives utilized in the protagonist's
stand-up comedy to escape the traditional gender roles of the time, they
also self-reflexively ridicule and expose the prevailing gender disparity by
bypassing moments of narrative conflict. From a media institution and
media practice perspective, the final section investigates how the revival of
the hit sitcom *Roseanne* (ABC 1988–97, 2018) commodifies and capitalizes on
the audience's nostalgia for, among other things, the protagonist's invectives.
Being staged as a pioneer of liberal ideals in the original run, the character
of Roseanne is utilized as a vehicle for politically conservative key issues
in the revival. The protagonist's invectives are nostalgically employed as a
political strategy of the network channel ABC to reel in viewers they felt
were neglected previous to the 2016 election.

As a concluding section, Chapter 6 summarizes the study's findings,
brings together larger contexts from the distinctive chapters, and
demarcates further areas of research. All main chapters of this book
aim at understanding how the invective mode influences and shapes the
popcultural genre of situation comedies.

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6   I acknowledge that these thoughts are greatly indebted to conversations, internal
     documents, and working papers of our subproject of the Special Research Unit in which
     I wrote my book.