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You don't have to be a bad girl to
love crime: femininity and women's
labor in U.S. broadcast crime
programming, 1945-1975

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Dissertation

**YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A BAD GIRL TO LOVE CRIME:
FEMININITY AND WOMEN'S LABOR IN U.S. BROADCAST CRIME
PROGRAMMING, 1945-1975**

by

CATHERINE ELOISE MARTIN

B.A., University of California, Los Angeles, 2006
M.F.A., Boston University, 2012

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Approved by

First Reader

Deborah L. Jaramillo, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Film & Television Studies

Second Reader

Charles J. Rzepka, Ph.D.
Professor of English

Third Reader

Elana Levine, Ph.D.
Professor of English
University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Fourth Reader

Bruce J. Schulman, Ph.D.
William E. Huntington Professor of History

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Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2020

Major Professor: Deborah Jaramillo, Associate Professor of Film & Television Studies

ABSTRACT

You Don't Have to Be a Bad Girl to Love Crime uses archival research, textual analysis, and industrial and cultural studies frameworks to re-evaluate women's representation in post-World War II American radio and television crime dramas. It complicates popular and scholarly understandings that postwar broadcasters simply responded to audience desires by marginalizing women across their schedules and removing recurring female characters from crime dramas altogether. Rather, the three major networks (NBC, CBS, and ABC) that dominated the broadcast industry's transition from radio to television joined conservative religious and anti-communist groups to silence public debate over women's roles. While late-1940s network radio programming incorporated varied opinions about postwar women's desire and potential to expand their influence in the workplace and politics, postwar television naturalized a vision of passive housewives embracing husbands' patriarchal authority. Women who chose to fight crime challenged this authority by claiming the right to enforce the law and judge their fellow citizens.

This dissertation is organized into two parts: The first explores the industrial and

cultural discourses that set the stage for postwar restrictions on women in crime. Network executives and anti-communist conservatives did not see each other as natural allies, but they mobilized complementary gender discourses emphasizing women as passive consumers rather than public actors. Archival industry research shows network executives ignored evidence female audiences liked crime programming, especially series featuring active, sympathetic women. Instead, executives and vocal conservatives framed such women as a sexualized threat to men, children, and themselves. Networks tolerated crime-curious women on radio and early television, when they struggled to retain and build a female audience. However, by the mid-1950s, executives feared such women would undermine their commercial emphasis on domestic consumption and attract regulation or censorship. Part two explores three major types of crime-curious women who appeared on postwar radio and television programming. Investigative wives and detectives' secretaries investigated crimes with male husbands or employers. Female detectives, however, directly challenged men's control over criminal justice, the most overt sign of patriarchal social power. All three types gave female audiences a powerful model of feminine agency within patriarchal society. They also established representational norms that endure in modern crime dramas.

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INTRODUCTION: KEEPING YOUR FEMININITY WHILE BEING A WORKING GIRL, OR DO YOU HAVE TO BE A FEMME FATALE TO LIKE CRIME?

Los Angeles Times television critic Howard Rosenberg began his 1982 review of *Remington Steele* (NBC TV, 1982–1987) by noting that “there is not much tradition for female private eyes on TV. Unlike policewomen, their work requires them to be independent and self-sustaining, qualities that contradict female stereotypes.”¹

Remington Steele was not alone in stating its intention to change that state of affairs. The same year, all three major American broadcast networks (NBC, CBS, and ABC) promoted primetime series that promised to challenge stereotypes of passive femininity and address working women’s lives and occupational struggles. Julie D’Acci (1994) contextualizes this shift as less a case of network executives buying into feminist ideals and more an effort to harness working women’s growing purchasing power and stem a valuable market segment’s move to newer cable channels.² As Rosenberg’s review notes, however, most of those programs fell short of this goal from the very beginning. They might show women working, but they still clung to older stereotypes by emphasizing women’s supposedly inherent proclivity for romance and empathy, and by inserting male authority figures who limited the agency for which networks wanted their heroines to be celebrated.

Matters worsened over the next year. The networks responded to the Reagan-era anti-feminist backlash by revising their working woman heroines, especially those working as detectives, to incorporate more passive, traditionally feminine values. They

¹ Howard Rosenberg, “The New Season,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1982.

² Julie D’Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 73.

also strengthened women's male partners. After its first season, *Remington Steele's* producers replaced Holt's detective agency's original staff, including her secretary and female friend, Bernice Foxe, and male assistant/potential romantic rival for Steele, Murphy Michaels, with grandmotherly secretary Mildred Krebs. Steele took an increasingly authoritative role in the pair's investigations, while Krebs frequently pushed Holt to focus more on a potential romance between Holt and Steele. Most tellingly, the program's original opening credits, in which Holt described the deep-rooted social misogyny that had driven her to create a fictional male boss to begin with, was replaced with a more conventional montage of the program's stars in action and repose. These changes do not appear to have helped the ratings: the series limped along with decreasing ratings over four subsequent seasons before it was cancelled for good.

As Rosenberg made clear to his readers, *Remington Steele's* failure to effectively push the gender boundaries producers claimed to disrupt effectively reinscribed longstanding limitations on women's independence. Rosenberg bolstered his argument about *Remington Steele's* retrograde gender politics by tracing the series' lineage back to television's first decades: *Remington Steele* was "NBC's version of 'Hart to Hart'" (ABC TV, 1979-1984), which was "really Mr. and Mrs. North," a popular World War II-era and postwar program about a married couple of amateur detectives that spanned both radio and television (NBC Radio, 1942-1946/CBS Radio, 1947-1954; CBS/NBC TV, 1952-1954). The networks had failed to move past their "stale, musty, noxious mentality" toward female detectives in the intervening decades, Rosenberg argued, preferring female detectives with Laura Holt's "vulnerable" femininity, or *Charlie's*

Angels' male-controlled sexuality to economically and sexually independent female detectives like Anne Francis' *Honey West* (ABC TV, 1965-1966).³ That series "lasted only a season because, it was said, America could not tolerate Honey's dominance over her male assistant"⁴

Despite the differences Rosenberg notes, however, *Mr. and Mrs. North* and *Honey West* had much in common. Both featured an assertive female investigator who combatted an interfering male partner's gendered resistance to her investigations and controlled her own sexuality. To varying degrees, both toed the line between drama and comedy. Both were ultimately cancelled by networks reluctant to expend too many resources appealing to female and/or youth audiences. Both went on to enjoy long syndicated runs, indicating that they resonated more with audiences than network executives were willing to admit. Still, the series had significant differences. For all her freedom to investigate, Pamela "Pam" North was still ostensibly a housewife who relied on her reluctant husband to accompany her on investigations. *Honey West* was a happily single woman who ran a business and was visibly in control of her own life, with only token supervision from a widowed aunt and male partner. As Rosenberg notes, the popular understanding was that Honey's insistence on her freedom cost her her series. The truth, I argue, was more complicated. Honey's ratings may not have reached the heights ABC would have preferred, but the program was more a victim of Cold War-era discourses that continued to argue that audiences *should* not like

³ Rosenberg, "The New Season."

⁴ Rosenberg.

independent women, rather than that they *did* not. Sympathetic depictions of crime-curious women are a valuable index of the precarious hold conservative, patriarchal power structures had over individuals living in the Cold War US precisely because they were popular enough that conservative critics found them threatening.

Depictions of crime-curious women, a category that included female detectives, married women who investigated with their husbands, and single women who worked as detectives' secretaries, posed an existential threat to the dominant social order that emerged in the decade after World War II. And, despite their efforts to dismiss crime-curious women as incidental characters in a male-dominated popular genre, the mostly-male executives who ran the three major American broadcast networks knew it. After all, as NBC's Continuity Acceptance Manager Stockton Helffrich argued, such women tended to defy conservative social norms by taking control of their own bodies and their own sexuality. If Helffrich and others of his opinion had had their way, women might have been completely removed from broadcast crime programming. However, as program production and sales executives constantly reminded Helffrich and others, sex — and especially sexy women — attracted audiences and sold products.

Helffrich's focus on crime-curious women's sexuality obscured the deeper threat that such women posed to postwar patriarchal structures. Beyond the potential that crime-curious women might use their sexuality to manipulate men, their very presence in criminal investigations questioned the validity of men's control over the nation's understanding of law, order, and justice. In seeking to investigate and pass judgment on their fellow citizens, female investigators demanded an equal voice in the nation's

justice system, a bastion of male power and patriarchal prerogatives. It also directly contradicted misogynist ideologies that elevated men's authority by associating them with intellectual pursuits and dismissed women as hopelessly tied to their bodies and unable to control their own sexuality. This false dichotomy underpinned women's historical exclusion from a range of public activities, including education, labor, and politics. It also came under increasingly direct threat in the postwar era. Indeed, the very fact that men perceived this threat so clearly in the postwar period was what made assertive, competent, and successful women in crime programming so very threatening.

Throughout this dissertation, I use the word crime to encompass a range of programs that others might define as mysteries. I have chosen "crime" because it foregrounds the legal and violent aspects of the series I study, thereby emphasizing how they conflict with postwar feminine ideals. Not all crime stories involve solving a mystery, but most of the series I explore do involve a mystery element that requires investigators — a group that includes the female characters within the narrative and the audience at home — to use their observational and reasoning abilities to follow a trail of clues to the criminal. I focus on crime because it is a genre of investigation. The detective does her best to uncover the story behind a crime. This process of investigation gives her power that is usually reserved for male subjects. A well-solved case validates her intellectual and investigative abilities. It earns her our respect. It gives her the ability to determine who will or will not be punished by the state.

At the same time, we in the audience are tasked with investigating her. Part of this investigation requires that we ask why she does what she does. In the postwar era,

that was a loaded question for women; it is trite but true to say that postwar understandings of moral authority were convoluted and contradictory. Women were held up as society's moral centers, which might appear to make them ideal arbiters of public right and wrong, but they were shut off from the official power centers where moral standards were set and enforced — dubiously, for their own protection. This included positions in law enforcement, which naturally required that their holders pass moral judgement by uncovering criminals and referring them for punishment. While the American justice system did — and still does — include several layers between apprehension and imprisonment, writers like Rex Stout often short-circuited that process by having their male detectives give the criminal a chance to take their own lives before the state got a chance.⁵ Cold War-era crime writers like Mickey Spillane made the imaginative link between detection and punishment explicit through novel titles like *I, the Jury* (1947). Instead of direct judgement, women's influence was supposed to be indirect and personal — felt within the family circle and then extending out invisibly to the rest of society.

Even that indirect influence was undermined, however, by women's supposed physical and emotional frailty. Women were positioned as weak and vulnerable to negative ideological influences that might pervert their moral compass (conveniently, justifying men in ignoring women's protests against patriarchal control). Women positioned as a detective had their moral purity put to question doubly so. If the

⁵ Bruce Beiderwell, "State Power and Self-Destruction: Rex Stout and the Romance of Justice," *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 1 (1993): 13–22.

detective, as it is sometimes said, is the criminal under another name, what does that make the female PI? A thinly-disguised femme fatale? The idea that these women could arbitrate moral order threatened to undermine the postwar structures that were built on the promise of feminine virtue – and correspondingly raised the threat that such virtue was an act.

Not June Cleaver

Mr. & Mrs. North and *Honey West* provide fitting bookends for my study of broadcast representations of women's labor in the post-World War II United States. While these series span a period of considerable change in American cultural attitudes toward women's public roles and labor, they both existed in a period when the national broadcast networks were aware of, but reluctant to court, the working women in their audiences. Indeed, the national broadcast networks and dominant Nielsen ratings did not recognize working women as an audience demographic worthy of attention – or ratings measurement – until 1976; working women were just too...unfeminine.⁶ After celebrating women's wartime sacrifice in taking on manufacturing and military labor, postwar radio – and especially postwar television – actively fêted women's equally selfless return to the home. There, the networks hoped, women would combine their traditional roles as center of the American family's moral life with the active consumption required to drive the nation's postwar economy – and with it, network advertising sales. Broadcasters' representational biases had a significant impact on postwar American views toward women and their labor: the white middle-class

⁶ D'Acci, *Defining Women*, 72.

housewife who dominated postwar American radio and television did not represent the millions of American women who continued to work through the 1950s and 1960s. Nonetheless, this housewife archetype became a potent Cold War symbol of the consumer plenty, economic mobility, and moral purity to which many postwar citizens aspired.⁷

Nevertheless, working women, and women who were interested in working, did appear in a range of network series in the years after 1945. Most critical work on postwar women's domestic and labor roles has, naturally enough, focused on 1950s television sitcom housewives like *I Love Lucy's* (CBS, 1951-1957) Lucy Ricardo and 1960s working girls like *That Girl's* (ABC, 1966-1971) Ann Marie. I argue that postwar radio and television crime narratives provide a more direct lens through which to explore the gendered restrictions placed on postwar women. Regardless of their status as detectives, secretaries, or wives pushing their way into their detective husbands' investigations, the women who worked in crime after the war could not obscure their choice of a dangerous profession behind a screen of simple economic need. Few women worked in crime, but those who did had to engage in a precarious balancing act in order to maintain their respectability and avoid becoming the cultural default for women who violated conventional feminine norms: the *femme fatale*. In so doing, they became highly public edge cases, constantly testing the limits of respectable femininity and helping to define it for a listening and viewing public whose ideas about gender

⁷ Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 11.

difference and the boundaries between public and private life were in flux themselves.

Mr. & Mrs. North and *Honey West* also span a period of considerable change in the American broadcast industry, an era which also had a significant impact on the way women and their concerns were depicted in broadcast programming. Once wartime manufacturing restrictions were lifted, established radio networks like NBC, CBS, and ABC, and new competitors like DuMont rushed to establish regular television service. Few in the industry or public foresaw the impact that the new medium would have on radio operations. By the late 1950s, however, most of the narrative and variety programs that had characterized primetime radio schedules had transitioned to television. The addition of televisual images to radio sound added a new dimension by which representations of women could be at once challenged but also evaluated and restricted.

Television also brought new challenges and opportunities for broadcasters. In the early 1950s, the industry fought off organized efforts by a range of social interest groups who sought to increase governmental censorship of the potentially dangerous images broadcast into American homes. Religious organizations and women's groups were particularly concerned with broadcast programming's purported impact on two stereotypically feminine arenas: the nation's moral standards and children's moral development. Such concerns inspired these groups to push back against the vision of daily life that they heard and saw broadcast over the public airwaves; many called for federal censorship to force the networks to eliminate objectionable representations. Pressure to avert this proposed censorship made the networks wary of taking risks.

Finally, increasing production costs and a series of scandals implicating advertisers for excessive commercialism helped broadcasters cement control over the program production and scheduling which they had previously shared with advertisers. While few advertisers had been interested in truly rebellious programming, network control over production meant that fewer points of view were represented or considered in program production. Instead of targeting different programs at advertiser-specific audiences, the networks tended target a generalized mass audience, which they constructed to serve their need to sell large quantities of manufactured goods to male-dominated postwar households. Suburban housewives with growing families fit this agenda perfectly. Working women, with their smaller incomes and limited leisure time, did not.

In our rush to prove that real American women were “not June Cleaver,” we have forgotten that *Leave it to Beaver*’s oft-maligned mother was not the only woman on postwar radio or television.⁸ While the June Cleaver-style television housewife was a prominent standard by which postwar women were evaluated and found – or found themselves – wanting, she was not the only popular culture standard available. It is true that postwar representations of women did become more conservative in the postwar decades, especially during the primetime series that were directed toward the general family audience. However, even before the wide-scale eruption of Second Wave feminism forced society to openly reconsider women’s public roles and rights in the

⁸ Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

1960s and 1970s, cultural texts were grappling with them in subtle, muted ways. Postwar broadcasters mostly acknowledged women's expanding public and labor roles at the margins of primetime series that centered romance and domesticity; sitcoms like *I Love Lucy* revolved around housewives and, by the late-1950s, their children, but occasionally depicted women working in factories or entertainment. Working girl sitcoms centered their heroine's romantic lives but could not completely occlude their labor.

This dissertation examines how cultural changes in women's roles were understood and explored through representations of women in radio and television crime series broadcast on the major networks between 1945 and 1975. Popular memory and critical scholarship most often recall the women who appeared in broadcast crime programs as helpless victims or evil femmes fatales.⁹ However, even the appellation of victim carries with it a hint of condemnation. While stereotypical views of feminine weakness position women as the natural victims of crime, a social propensity to blame the victim means that even the most apparently innocent come under some suspicion of having done *something* to court danger. Women appearing in postwar crime series, like their cinematic sisters, existed under intense narrative and audience scrutiny. Crime narratives' emphasis on close observation and uncovering hidden truths applies just as much to the detective as to the people they detect; audience members learn to uncover crime and restore the moral status quo by watching the detective do it first.¹⁰

⁹ Diana M. Meehan, *Ladies of the Evening: Women Characters of Prime-Time Television* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983).

¹⁰ Charles J. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2005), 22.

I highlight three recurring character types in postwar crime series who managed to avoid both the victim and fatale labels. The “good girls” of broadcast crime included housewives who investigated crime on an amateur basis, detectives’ secretaries, and female detectives. These three types of crime-curious women balanced their interest in working outside the home with the pressure to adhere to properly feminine values and behavior. They negotiated a precarious and contradictory line between respectability and scandal. As Rosenberg noted in the 1980s, women in crime dramas challenge closely held gender norms, including the ideas that women belong in the private sphere, that their labor is inherently domestic, and that they are physically and intellectually weaker and less capable than men. These norms were especially salient to the postwar public and remain contested to this day. Finally, crime-curious women highlighted the contradictions inherent in postwar discourses that valorized women’s moral superiority while arguing that feminine virtues required constant, patriarchal defense. The very act of stepping – or forcing – their way out of protected domestic spaces and into the public world of crime fighting opened women up to public critique and condemnation. Not only did crime-curious women insist on working in an era when femininity was defined through domesticity, but they also insisted on working in a field that opened them up to the near-constant threat of physical assault and violation by unsavory characters. The fact that they were able to do so at all indicates that postwar audiences — or at least some members of those audiences — were more receptive to flexible gender norms than we typically believe in the present day.

Still, no genre had more difficulty adapting to the conservative postwar climate

than crime series. There was, simply put, no way to make women's involvement in solving crime appear to be anything other than what it was: a direct violation of their supposedly natural domestic virtues and occupations. Sitcom housewives like Lucy Ricardo might be express interest in working outside the home, but they ultimately accepted their domestic roles. Almost all of the small number working girls who appeared on 1950s television made their desire for marriage clear. Moreover, they were limited to subordinate positions in feminized fields like clerical work and education, which limited the threat their labor posed to postwar patriarchal power structures. Women who worked as or for detectives, however, had made an affirmative decision to place themselves in physical and spiritual danger by choosing employment in a field that would expose them to disreputable, potentially corrupting criminal elements. In so doing, they risked being perceived as the good girl's supposed polar opposite, the femme fatale. After all, what nice girl would leave behind the safety of home and family in order to seek out adventure in the city's urban underbelly? Could any woman's virtue truly withstand such an onslaught of negative influences?

The answer to this last question, at least for many of the vocal conservatives who took it upon themselves to police the postwar airwaves, was an emphatic "no." Rather, they argued that crime-curious women, both the ones who appeared on radio and the ones who listened at home, were inherently suspect. They might simply be weak-minded victims who let broadcasters lead them astray, but they might also be Communist infiltrators, intent on subverting the American justice system and destroying the nation's democratic virtues. Still, as contemporary audience research and ratings

data showed, many disagreed; crime series, especially programs with active, recurring female characters, had particularly loyal fan bases, and retained audiences better than most other genres.¹¹ This was especially important to network executives and sponsors during the tumultuous transition between radio and television, when ratings and advertising revenues dropped across the board.

As I demonstrate in the chapters that follow, 1940s radio crime dramas attempted to answer postwar concerns over crime-curious women's virtue and cement their respectability by counter-balancing female detectives', detectives' wives', and detectives' secretaries' allegedly deviant interest in crime with overtly feminine traits. By the 1950s, however, television broadcasters had largely stopped trying. While network executives argued that they were simply responding to audience preferences, their decision to sideline or eliminate recurring female characters in crime series was based in economic and regulatory incentives. The major broadcasters thought that it would be more profitable for them to court housewives through daytime television, and they feared that audience criticism of sex and violence on television would motivate the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) or Congress to regulate the emerging medium.

Broadcast crime series certainly did position crime-curious women as unique aberrations. Unlike most of the female detectives who appeared in contemporary

¹¹ "Rating Points From NBC Sales Planning," March 13, 1952, Folder 8; Box 221; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; "A Research Study of Mystery Writers Theatre," February 5, 1957, Folder 28; Box 194; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; Shaun Treat, Daniel Grano, and Jon Croghan, "The Shadow Knows: The Counter-Fantasy of the American Antihero and Symbolic Divergence in Golden Age Radio," *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 16, no. 1 (2009): 30-49.

novels, ranging from teenage Nancy Drew to spinster Miss Marple, the good girls who appeared on broadcast crime series were isolated in an otherwise decidedly masculine world. Their struggles to get along and succeed in competition with male competitors may have given some audience members pause. However, their successes created a space – limited and fantastic though it may have been – where women were depicted engaging in rewarding work outside of the domestic space. As Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch (2000) argue, television serves a ritual function by providing a liminal space where society can effectively “allow our monsters to come out and play.”¹² Radio and television programs have both historically offered fantasy spaces where new ideas can be tested in a contained space. Within this liminal space, social ideas about women’s labor could be explored and examined at a safe distance.¹³ They could also be debated on the public stage.¹⁴ Conservative religious and political groups certainly recognized radio and television’s role as a cultural forum when they wrote to the networks, sponsors, and federal regulators. Most used anti-Communist discourses to argue that representations of crime, sex, and violence were destroying citizens’ moral fiber and dooming the nation. Women like Mrs. Nell Kendrick, who wrote in 1946 to warn President Harry Truman that if the nation’s leaders did not “abolish” murder on radio, the nation would go “down in crime, as ancient Rome did,” did not intend to let representations of women fighting crime be normalized without a fight.¹⁵ Indeed,

¹² Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, “Television as a Cultural Form,” in *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb, Sixth Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 564.

¹³ Newcomb and Hirsch, 563.

¹⁴ Newcomb and Hirsch, 569.

¹⁵ “Letter from Mrs. Nell H. Kendrick to President Truman,” November 21, 1946, File 44-1; Complaints (Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Miscellaneous); Box 188; General

women's supposedly natural roles as domestic wives and mothers were central to the way of life for which conservative groups advocated.

Historian Wendy Wall (2008) argues that conservative and anti-Communist groups were able to mobilize wartime discourses centering national unity against external threats to codify patriarchal gender norms as an integral part of “the American way.”¹⁶ According to anti-Communist discourses promoted by groups like the American Legion and powerful commentators like Hedda Hopper, progressives who advocated for women's and civil rights were actually Communist agents seeking to subvert and destroy American families.¹⁷ National advertisers and network executives were particularly sympathetic to this message. As businessmen themselves, they had opposed many of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal policies as socialist and were eager for any chance to undo them.¹⁸ Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and NBC President David Sarnoff and CBS President William Paley joined with advertising executives to support Dwight Eisenhower's campaign and presidency in the early 1950s.¹⁹ They were also deeply invested in the idea that women — or at least white

Correspondence, 1927-46; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁶ Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the “American Way”: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

¹⁷ See Cynthia B. Meyers, “Advertising, the Red Scare, and the Blacklist: BBDO, US Steel, and ‘Theatre Guild on the Air,’ 1945–1952,” *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 4 (2016): 55–83; Jennifer Frost, *Hedda Hopper's Hollywood: Celebrity Gossip and American Conservatism* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), chap. 5; Carol A. Stabile, *The Broadcast 41: Women and the Anti-Communist Blacklist* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2018).

¹⁸ Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, vol. 2: 1933-1953, A History of Broadcasting in the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

¹⁹ Craig Allen, *Eisenhower and the Mass Media: Peace, Prosperity, and Prime-Time TV* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 16.

women — belonged in the home.

When post-WWII anti-Communists fretted about women's changing roles, they were really worried about the prospect that white women would choose to remain in the workforce instead of marrying and returning to the home to raise children. In truth, American women stood in an awkward position at the end of World War II. Having answered the call to serve their country by entering the wartime labor force, they faced intense social pressure to return to the home and focus on raising children in peacetime. Elaine Tyler May (1988) argues that postwar emphasis on youthful marriage, high birthrates, and the nuclear family represented a temporary break in long term social trends; domestic containment was a coping strategy for a generation struggling to deal with the effects of the Great Depression and WWII, as well as the continuing uncertainty of the Cold War.²⁰ However, Maureen Honey (1984) demonstrates how wartime propaganda laid the groundwork for this containment by promoting white women's wartime labor as a temporary sacrifice that naturally domestic women made on behalf of their country and in service of their husbands fighting abroad.²¹

Postwar domesticity meant different things to different groups of women. While white middle-class women's magazines celebrated their readers' potential to achieve individual self-realization and independence through wartime factory or military labor, working-class narratives presented housewife status as the ultimate sign of American

²⁰ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

²¹ Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, 215.

class mobility.²² It was also status that was only open to white women. Where discourses of white femininity celebrated white women's domesticity, married Black women were criticized for "'play[ing] the lady' while their husbands supported them."²³ Black women were also largely excluded from the higher paying manufacturing jobs that were temporarily opened to white women during WWII.²⁴ Nevertheless, the Black press encouraged war work for men and women as an avenue toward racial and economic equality, and a way to fight workplace discrimination that forced Black women into "the white folks' kitchen."²⁵

White women were simultaneously centralized in the postwar home and marginalized in the public sphere as the white, nuclear family's idealized home life became "a primary means of reconstituting and resocializing the American family after World War II."²⁶ The sitcom family, with its detached, single-family suburban house filled with the latest in consumer appliances and comforts, became a key symbol in the United States' ideological battle against Soviet-style communism.²⁷ Within this family, the white, middle-class housewife became a symbol of American consumer bounty and moral virtue. As Mary Beth Haralovich (1989) indicates, the idea that women were

²² Honey, 214.

²³ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (1992): 260.

²⁴ Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 55.

²⁵ Mei-ling Yang, "'It's a Woman's War Too': Gender, Race, and the Dissemination of Government Propaganda through the White Press and the Black Press in World War II" (Dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2000), 252.

²⁶ Mary Beth Haralovich, "Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11, no. 1 (1989): 61-62.

²⁷ Haralovich, "Sitcoms and Suburbs."

white, heterosexual, morally virtuous, sexually restrained, and domestic was further codified through popular media representations of women. Media scholars like Philippa Gates (2011), Jason Loviglio (2005), and Roy Grundmann (2012) have shown how popular film, radio, and television frequently pathologized women who did not accept the new domestic status quo.²⁸ While women were given implicit permission and patriotic cover for working during the war, it was emphatically withdrawn in peacetime.²⁹ Postwar radio and television programs usually depicted working women as either young and eager to marry or older, single, and frigid.

Despite popular media's emphasis on happy white housewives, however, reality was markedly different for many women. While female employment did drop from a wartime high of 36% in 1945 to 29% in 1947, it rose again to 37.7% by 1960.³⁰ Significantly, a majority of this growing female workforce – 60% by 1962 – was married, exactly the women expected to remain at home. Jessica Weiss (2000) has demonstrated that the sitcom family organization was a transitory stage for most post-war families. Citing data from long-term population studies, she argues that the white women who married and left the workforce after WWII were increasingly likely to seek

²⁸ Philippa Gates, *Detecting Women: Gender and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011); Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting And Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Roy Grundmann, "Taking Stock at War's End: Gender, Genre, and Hollywood Labor in 'The Strange Love of Martha Ivers,'" in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, ed. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon, vol. Volume 2 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 495–529.

²⁹ Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, 12.

³⁰ Rochelle Gatlin, *American Women Since 1945* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 25.

out paid labor as they aged.³¹ Many of these women were temporary or seasonal laborers, but the number of female workers continued to grow in the following decades. Women with in-demand skills, like nurses, actually faced concerted pressure to remain in the workforce even when they had young children.³²

Black women also continued to work in larger numbers after the war. Half of all black women of childbearing age (25-34) participated in the workforce between 1948 and 1960, compared to one third of white women. Furthermore, 31% of married black mothers of pre-school-aged children worked, compared to 18% of white mothers.³³ Black women also struggled to be respected as mothers. Ruth Feldstein (1994) has shown how Mamie Till Bradley struggled to publicly assert her claim to “the roles of ‘good mother’ and respectable, moral woman” after her son, Emmett Till, was lynched in 1955. All through the ensuing trial, Bradley faced considerable opposition from white Southerners and cultural “definitions of womanhood that either excluded black women by virtue of their race or rendered black mothers as dominating and pathological.”³⁴ Unlike white women, when Black women did appear in broadcast programming they were most likely to be represented as domestic servants. Oscar winner Hattie McDaniel became the first Black woman to star in a network radio show

³¹ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 50.

³² Susan Rimby Leighow, “An ‘Obligation to Participate’: Married Nurses’ Labor Force Participation in the 1950s,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 37–56.

³³ Gatlin, *American Women Since 1945*, 31.

³⁴ Ruth Feldstein, “‘I Wanted the Whole World to See’: Race, Gender, and Constructions of Motherhood in the Death of Emmett Till,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 288.

when she took over the lead in *Beulah* (CBS & ABC Radio, 1945-1954, ABC TV, 1950-1952), a Black housekeeper who had previously been played by white men.³⁵ Such formulations helped to obscure how deeply white domestic ideals depended on labor performed by poorly paid Black women, who had few other employment prospects. *Beulah*'s concerns largely centered on the white family she served. Still, Mack Scott (2014) argues that the actresses who played *Beulah*, especially McDaniel and Ethel Waters, undercut the narrative's racism and humanized Black women's experiences through subtle performance cues that were mostly legible to Black audiences.³⁶ Likewise, I argue, female detectives and their secretarial sisters were able to use humor to highlight aspects of their own experiences with sexist men that would have been more legible to their female audiences.

When white women did work outside the home, their labor was most often characterized as temporary and financially insignificant. Since the 19th century, employers had capitalized on the cultural assumption that women could rely on financial support from husbands and fathers to justify paying women less than men.³⁷ Sharon Hartman Strom (1992) and Erin Hatton (2011) have shown how occupations like secretarial and office work have been devalued when they became identified with female workers.³⁸ Indeed, Hatton argues that the temporary employment industry was able to

³⁵ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 83.

³⁶ Mack Scott, "From Blackface to *Beulah*: Subtle Subversion in Early Black Sitcoms," *Journal of Contemporary History* 49, no. 4 (2014): 745.

³⁷ Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), xviii.

³⁸ Sharon H. Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class, and the Origins of Modern American Office Work, 1900-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Erin Hatton, *The Temp*

overcome widespread union opposition to temporary employees after WWII in part by characterizing temp work as a solution for bored married women suffering from “housewifeitis.”³⁹ This move simultaneously encouraged respectable women to take part in paid labor and reinforced the idea that such labor was inherently less valuable than men’s.

Even in their supposedly natural workplace, the home, women’s labor has historically been devalued. Jeanne Boydston (1990) has shown how the doctrine of separate gender spheres and the privatization of the home combined to remove middle-class women from the recognized work force throughout the mid-nineteenth century, redefining female labor as inherently domestic. As Daphne Spain (1992) argues, the rigid spatial segregation that accompanied 19th century shifts in production further reinforced gendered power differentials by excluding women from masculinized work and social spaces and obscuring their domestic labor, along with its social and economic value, from view.⁴⁰ Despite the efforts of prominent 19th century women like Catharine Beecher, who argued that housework should be recognized as a profession requiring specific training and hard work, the cultural valorization of Christian womanhood helped shape a conception of homemaking as an effortless “emanation of Woman’s nature.”⁴¹ While the doctrine of separate spheres was a middle-class construct, it was

Economy: From Kelly Girls to Permatemps in Postwar America (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

³⁹ Hatton, *The Temp Economy*, 16.

⁴⁰ Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 107.

⁴¹ Catharine Beecher, “How to Redeem Woman’s Profession from Dishonor,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, November 1865; Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 149.

frequently applied to the working-classes as well. Indeed, the assumption that working-class women were sources of free domestic labor also allowed Northeastern industrialists to justify paying men below-subsistence wages.⁴²

Working-class women were rarely given prominent roles on postwar radio and television. When they were, they tended to be romanticized, with programs like *The Honeymooners* (CBS TV 1955-1956) “exaggerating [Alice Kramer’s] power and the respect [she was] given in society” and her own family.⁴³ Alice was generally depicted as a powerful matriarch within the home. Still, the paid labor she occasionally undertook to help support her family was denigrated. When she was forced to find a job while her husband was out of work, her labor is treated more as a setup for jokes about her husband’s jealousy rather than a window on working-class families’ precarious economic conditions and the important role that women played in keeping their families afloat.

Not Phyllis Dietrichson

In an era when the nation was reeling from two decades of economic and military upheaval, social critics held up the twin specters of Communism abroad and juvenile delinquency at home as equal threats to the nation’s hard-won, domestic peace. Many balked at the idea that anyone would seek out crime as entertainment, much less catharsis, and those who expressed dissatisfaction with postwar suburban ideals were

⁴² Boydston, *Home and Work*, 137.

⁴³ Andrea L. Press, *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 32.

seen as deranged, and possibly dangerous.⁴⁴ This was doubly true when it came to the women who were simultaneously upheld as paragons of democratic virtue and the nation's weak link in the fight against communism and global totalitarianism.

Where women's physical and intellectual labor was consistently devalued, their emotional labor was celebrated. Women have long relied upon maternalist cultural stereotypes about their natural caretaking proclivities in order to gain greater access to the public sphere. While this reliance helped Progressive-era women's clubs to push for social change, it also helped to reinforce gendered divisions that continued to confine women to the home and domestic duties through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The white middle-class women who dominated nineteenth-century pressure groups saw themselves "as representing society more generally — often in explicit contrast to the self-interested politics pursued by their middle-class and working-class male contemporaries" who were theoretically biased by their more public, commercial concerns.⁴⁵

Still, despite their ability to work across class and ethnic — though not racial — lines, the aims and impact of clubwomen and the female professionals with whom they worked were limited by their socioeconomic status and goals. Women entering the public and professional spheres in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made the most progress in areas that dealt with women and children's issues, including social

⁴⁴ Allison McCracken, "Study of a Mad Housewife: Psychiatric Discourse, the Suburban Home and the Case of Gracie Allen," in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumin (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 50–65.

⁴⁵ Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), xv.

work, public health nursing, and home economics, where male professionals were more willing to cede authority and acknowledge women's "right to expertise."⁴⁶ However, in order to justify their interventions and assert their own expertise, such women frequently blamed non-professional working-class and immigrant women for children's problems, thereby increasing "the burden of female responsibility for child care, [and shortening] the leash that tied most women to home and children."⁴⁷ Likewise, the postwar women who complained to the networks and FCC about crime programming's social impact further reinforced the idea that women were not – or at least should not – be interested in public, male-dominated matters like law and order. They bolstered their own social power at the expense of the working-class and minority voices they argued should be silenced.

The idea that women needed to be properly educated in their domestic responsibilities by more knowledgeable, white, middle-class experts was baked into the professionalization process of many female-centric professions. This influence is especially obvious in the arrival of home economics experts who advised early radio broadcasters and advertisers, as well as the networks themselves. NBC Women's Activities Director Margaret Cuthbert argued that "NBC's Public Service programs have done more for the emancipation of women than any other single network" by "obliterating distance [and making] the woman in her home conscious of her

⁴⁶ Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xv.

⁴⁷ Muncy, xv.

responsibilities as a citizen.”⁴⁸ Women like home efficiency expert Christine Frederick sought to improve women’s lives not by advocating for gender equality, but by making the home a more efficient workplace.⁴⁹ Improved technologies, they argued, would give women more leisure to pursue their own interests. However, women like Frederick continued to conceive of those interests in terms of women’s familial obligations, with the implication that women would spend their newfound time and energy engaging with their families on a deeper emotional level. While Frederick and the advertisers she advised were happy for women to engage in paid leisure activities, they echoed the standpoint of earlier home economists like Beecher, who argued that all leisure time should be directed toward activities that would “prepare mind and body for proper discharge of duty.”⁵⁰ Frederick similarly argued that women use their free time “for educational and spiritual growth” or advocating for social reforms in areas that fell within the feminine sphere of influence, like schooling and public health.⁵¹ These biases helped to shape the types of programming directed at women during the daytime hours, as well as the types of female characters who were represented as sympathetic in all programs. This was even reflected in crime-centric programming: both Pam North and Nora Charles were members of women’s civic clubs that sought to uplift their poorer

⁴⁸ Margaret Cuthbert, “Report on History of Women’s Programs, 1926-1948,” March 26, 1948, Folder 10; Box 335; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴⁹ Janice Williams Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick and the Rise of Household Efficiency* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 2.

⁵⁰ Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home: Or, Principles of Domestic Science; Being A Guide to the Formation and Maintenance of Economical, Healthful, Beautiful, and Christian Homes* (New York: J.B. Ford and Company, 1872), 287.

⁵¹ Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, 119.

urban neighbors.

This altruistic, selfless cultural definition of femininity that circulated through popular media texts was laid out in specific opposition to another popular type: the femme fatale. Lori Landay (1998) contextualizes the femme fatale within a genus of female tricksters whose “struggle for autonomy from men...conflicts with their responsibilities to family and society” and represents “a threat to social stability with their individualistic pursuit of satisfaction and autonomy.”⁵² In many ways, the fatale represents the worst fears of the conservative cultural forces that sought to avert further feminist change after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Arguing in terms that would later be mobilized to against feminist efforts like the Equal Rights Amendment, detractors contended that the women’s movement had achieved all the equality that women required when they gained the right to vote. Any further changes, they argued, would hurt women by disrupting their relationships with men and “taking away women’s traditional privileges.”⁵³ Such arguments were propelled by anxiety that women’s demands for greater economic and social equality would disrupt traditional masculine prerogatives. Many detractors celebrated women’s new political freedoms by arguing that women should use their newfound influence to “serve others” and exert a moral influence on society.⁵⁴ Instead of working to improve the lives of others, the fatale focused on using her brains and, even more insidiously, her beauty and sex appeal

⁵² Lori Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 29.

⁵³ Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 42.

⁵⁴ Coontz, 42–43.

to achieve her own selfish ends.

Film scholar Julie Grossman (2013) has argued that the term “femme fatale” is “less critical than hysterical.”⁵⁵ Scholarship has tended to obscure the femme fatale’s cultural and historical specificity, merging and flattening a broad range of rebellious female characters into a singular representative of feminine sexuality as a “threat to the proper [patriarchal] order of things.”⁵⁶ However, her very historical specificity is what makes the fatale such a useful figure through which to explore post-WWII anxieties over women’s changing roles, as well as cultural concerns over how those roles were depicted. Unlike the supposedly natural, unaffected housewife, the fatale’s ability to manipulate the signs of femininity for her own gain drew attention to the fact that the “social practice of femininity is a form of trickery.”⁵⁷ This was especially threatening when it came to feminine sexuality, which postwar critics seized on as the tool that Communists would use to pervert and weaken American’s moral fiber.

While individual femmes fatales were more fleshed out in films noirs, the fatales who appeared in broadcast series tended to be flattened into less complicated – if not caricatured – depictions that emphasized their difference from supposedly normal, well-adjusted women, who did not try to rebel against or manipulate the men in their lives. This was especially true for televised depictions, where the National Association of Broadcasters’ (NAB) 1952 Television Code explicitly commanded that “criminality

⁵⁵ Julie Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-Up* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 6.

⁵⁶ James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, Updated and Expanded Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 221.

⁵⁷ Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women*, 11.

shall be presented as undesirable and unsympathetic” and that “law enforcement shall be upheld” and “portrayed with respect and dignity.”⁵⁸ Broadcasters’ need to present criminals – and especially criminal women – as social aberrations meant that the fatale tended to be presented as the whore, the invisible referent against which the housewife’s Madonna was evaluated. Indeed, the presumed link between feminine sex and criminality was so strong that at least one radio writer had to be admonished for using sex as shorthand for evilness in 1947: “The woman has to be made out evil, but just making her consummately (sic) sexy is hardly enough.”⁵⁹ Program executives might use women’s sexuality to attract audiences, but women who used their own sexuality for personal gain were inevitably punished.

Mediating the Space Between Housewife and Fatale

In the historical record as we have received it through television reruns – themselves a highly selective cultural forum – postwar women were happy to return to domesticity and dedicate themselves to creating welcoming, happy homes for their husbands and children. Those who did not – either by choice or for lack of opportunity – were largely obscured in the more sentimental, conservative programs to which modern audiences are typically exposed.⁶⁰ When non-domestic atypical women did appear, they were either hidden in the background or foregrounded as aberrations. In one notable example, the poor chocolate factory worker tasked with whipping Lucy and

⁵⁸ “The Television Code” (National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters, 1952), 3.

⁵⁹ “Memo from Carl Bottume to Ray O’Connell,” June 27, 1947, Folder 13; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁶⁰ Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 79.

Ethel into shape in *I Love Lucy*'s "Job Switching" episode is presented as a humorless crone, in comparison to Lucille Ball's vibrant feminine exuberance.⁶¹ Given this background, or the blissful domesticity represented in *Father Knows Best*, it seems hard to believe that the women in the Baby Boomer generation would grow up demanding the right to work. However, it is important to remember that these were not the only media messages to which postwar audiences were exposed; they are simply the ones whose records we have retained.

Feminist historians and sociologists have done much to uncover the contradictory behaviors and messages that women encountered in the postwar period. While she disputes Betty Friedan's assertion that the postwar "feminine mystique" arose out of a backlash against a series of feminist gains between 1920 and 1940, Stephanie Coontz (2011) highlights a decades-long mismatch between women's rights in the abstract and practical "acceptance of feminine independence" that made arguments like Friedan's feel true to her audience.⁶² Even as prominent female figures like Mary Pickford and Amelia Earhart were lauded throughout the 1920s and 1930s, antifeminist forces sought to avert further changes to the social order. Still, despite this pressure to adhere to traditional feminine ideals, the women who became housewives after WWII had enjoyed greater access to education than any previous generation of women, and many had worked before marriage. This was especially true of the female audience that broadcasters promoted most to early television advertisers: white, middle-class

⁶¹ William Asher, "Job Switching," *I Love Lucy* (CBS, September 15, 1952).

⁶² Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 38, 42.

housewives with young and growing families. Many members of this group were offended by the postwar networks' apparent assumption that they would become passive daytime television consumers.⁶³

Having lived through the Great Depression and WWII, many of these women were also torn between feelings of gratitude for the postwar gains that were mostly attributed to "their fathers' or husbands' hard work" and "sympathetic assurances that women were in fact capable and did deserve equality" in their relationships and society at large.⁶⁴ Their daughters also struggled to balance conflicting messages from their parents, educators, and popular media. Wini Breines (1992) argues that white girls growing up in the postwar period were frustrated by the dissonance between an education system which extolled their intellectual potential, and the gendered limits they saw placed on their mothers in daily life.⁶⁵ Women's films and other popular media texts like the Nancy Drew novels had served up fantasies of freedom and agency since the 1930s, further complicating women and girls' feelings toward their apparently all-encompassing domestic obligations.⁶⁶

Despite the popular perception that Betty Friedan was the first to highlight the "problem that has no name," popular culture narratives had been grappling with

⁶³ Jennifer Hyland Wang, "The Case of the Radio-Active Housewife': Relocating Radio in the Age of Television," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 343–66.

⁶⁴ Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, xxi. Also see Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*.

⁶⁵ Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁶⁶ Linda Mizejewski, *Hardboiled & High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 19.

conflicting discourses about women's labor and domesticity for decades.⁶⁷ Nowhere was this more true than in the arena of commercial network radio and television. Broadcast representations of women gave "material existence" to cultural ideas about women's proper public and private roles, with women in crime series serving as test cases on the edges of cultural acceptability.⁶⁸ Such marginalized representations provide a valuable lens through which to analyze the broader culture's efforts to make sense of women's changing roles.

In an era when women, a designation that mass popular culture typically reserved for middle-class white women, were supposed to return to the home and recommit to domestic life after the upheaval caused by the Great Depression and World War II, the women who appeared on postwar crime series functioned as a potent, if overlooked, point of reference for what constituted acceptable femininity. Their behavior, simultaneously rebellious and conventional, highlights the constructed nature of postwar femininity by showing how women could manipulate gendered behaviors and expectations to gain public power over criminal matters. They also provided a small, but significant, point of identification for women who rejected some elements of the postwar domestic order, even in an era when broadcasters – and society in general – defined women as inherently domestic.

Finally, as Rosenberg noted in his 1982 review of *Remington Steele*, these representations helped to set the stage for future representations by establishing the

⁶⁷ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 15.

⁶⁸ Stuart Hall, "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2, no. 2 (1985): 100.

female archetypes that continue to appear in popular crime narratives to this day. By setting the terms through which women's public roles were discussed in their own time, postwar crime series also helped to establish the representations through which later media have continued to grapple with the same issues. Just like these earlier series, which were produced in a period when the broadcast networks conceived of their female audiences as inherently domestic, 1980s series like *Remington Steele*, and even more modern twenty-first century programs, have remained hesitant to portray independent, capable women working outside of the home and apart from patriarchal systems of control. Modern female detectives may no longer have to trick their way into criminal investigations, but they continue to face pressure to meet unreasonable beauty standards and some mode of patriarchal supervision in the form of a male partner.

Historians have alternately castigated broadcast media for artificially limiting audiences' horizons and dismissed its impact as part of the collective cultural unconscious, capable of helping the public analyze and cope with cultural change. American broadcast networks' emphatically commercial nature draws particular derision in these analyses. However, as numerous broadcast historians have argued, it is precisely this commercial nature that makes broadcast programming such a crucial, warped mirror of the society it seeks to represent. While Hollywood films have also been shaped by studio links to advertising interests, the American commercial broadcasting system's direct reliance on funding from advertisers meant that broadcasters were more directly and actively concerned with performing the "crucial function" of ideological state apparatuses – that "of 'cultivating' labor (in this case,

consumption) of a certain moral and cultural kind.”⁶⁹ As scholars like Eric Barnouw, Robert McChesney (1993), and Michele Hilmes (1997) have shown, the American commercial broadcasting system formed through a convergence of social and economic factors that contributed to a uniquely commercial system.⁷⁰ Hilmes notes that “only in the United States was broadcasting allowed to develop commercially, without direct subsidy or state involvement.”⁷¹ In particular, the major commercial networks were deeply invested in attracting and grooming profitable consumers for their sponsors’ products, and broadcasters’ economic viability depended on their ability to convince advertisers that radio and television could create consumers.⁷² Broadcast executives like NBC president Niles Trammell argued that the ensuing pressure to attract as many viewers as possible made American broadcasting a uniquely democratic enterprise, claiming that “under the American system of broadcasting it is vital that we give the public what they want as contrasted with the British Broadcasting Company, which gives the public what the BBC feels they should have.”⁷³

Critical political economists like Eileen Meehan (2005) have disputed

⁶⁹ Charles Eckert, “The Carole Lombard in Macy’s Window,” in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. John Belton (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 95–118; Hall, “Signification, Representation, Ideology,” 98.

⁷⁰ Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, vol. 1: to 1933, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); Barnouw, *The Golden Web*; Erik Barnouw, *The Image Empire*, vol. 3: From 1953, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁷¹ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 7.

⁷² Cynthia B. Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsor: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 79.

⁷³ “Memo from Niles Trammell to Samuel Chotzinoff,” October 23, 1942, Folder 11; Box 114; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Trammell's assertion that broadcast ratings are truly democratic, however, pointing out that broadcasters and advertisers care less about attracting viewers than potential consumers.⁷⁴ In particular, Meehan argues that broadcasters have consistently tilted their programming to recruit the American demographic with the most disposable income: white male viewers. Nevertheless, the white suburban housewife was also central to postwar manufacturers' economic success, both as a consumer and a symbol of their technological progress.⁷⁵ White men may have greater discretionary income, but advertisers have long understood that white women have historically been responsible for most household purchases, especially in high volume categories like food products and toiletries.⁷⁶ Given this dependence, it is hardly surprising that the commercial broadcasting networks prominently featured white nuclear suburban families with a stay-at-home mother, providing the best backdrop for advertisers targeting the growing white, middle-class suburban market. Still, as scholars like D'Acci (1994, 1997) have shown, women have consistently welcomed representations of strong, capable women, especially in crime dramas.⁷⁷

Another element of Trammell's claim that the American broadcasters simply gave the public what they wanted is less readily apparent, but no less important: in claiming to be the arbiters of public taste, the networks were also, on some level,

⁷⁴ Eileen R. Meehan, *Why TV Is Not Our Fault: Television Programming, Viewers, and Who's Really in Control* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

⁷⁵ Haralovich, "Sitcoms and Suburbs," 61.

⁷⁶ Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1994), 92.

⁷⁷ D'Acci, *Defining Women*; Julie D'Acci, "Nobody's Woman? 'Honey West' and the New Sexuality," in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997), 73-93.

claiming that they were able to reflect social reality back to their listening and viewing audiences. Beyond their emphasis on supposedly realistic narratives, radio dramas adopted deep focus sound techniques from realist Hollywood films to create layered soundscapes.⁷⁸ On television, realist family sitcoms achieved the same ends by employing deep focus photography to add depth to images that appeared flat on home screens.⁷⁹ Of course, the reality that broadcast programs depicted was still bounded by the networks' racial and class biases. As I have already noted, broadcast character archetypes reflected those biases, and their promulgation through the airwaves had real-world consequences.

Part of the reason that broadcast archetypes hold so much cultural sway is that audiences approach them with a less critical eye. Media scholar David Marc (1996) has described television as “a flow of dreams, many remembered, many submerged.”⁸⁰ While Marc was referring to the number of broadcast texts that have been lost to time and the lack of technology or industrial will to preserve them, his words can just as easily describe many audience members' personal experience with radio and television, which form a consistent, pervasive, and often unexamined background to most Americans' daily lives. Even more than the Hollywood films that typically attract more popular and scholarly attention, broadcast texts subtly shape our experience of the world through what John Fiske and John Hartley (2003) have termed television's “bardic

⁷⁸ Rick Altman, “Deep-Focus Sound: Citizen Kane and the Radio Aesthetic,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 15, no. 3 (1994): 1–33.

⁷⁹ Haralovich, “Sitcoms and Suburbs,” 64.

⁸⁰ David Marc, *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture*, Revised Edition (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 20.

function.”⁸¹ Like radio before it, television represents us back to ourselves through Barthesian “mythologies,” or clusters of pre-defined cultural myths and symbols that “emerge as the *conventions* of seeing and knowing, the *a priori* assumptions about the nature of reality which most of the time a culture is content to leave unstated and unchallenged.”⁸² When they are challenged, either in broadcast programming, or in daily life, debate ensues over whether the convention or the challenger is the unnatural one. The patriarchal American sitcom family remains a potent ideological symbol, an integral part of what Stuart Hall (1985) termed the “discursive chains,” through which we imagine and debate women’s public roles in the United States.⁸³ For conservatives, the sitcom family has proven an attractive symbol for those who blame feminism for destroying the American family by pulling women out of the home. In turn, liberals cite the same programs as evidence of the progress women have made since the 1950s.⁸⁴ Likewise, feminists have embraced the femme fatale as a symbol of women’s postwar victimization and scapegoating, even as the dangerous, duplicitous woman became a fixture of 1980s neo-noirs taking part in the backlash against Second Wave feminism.⁸⁵

Audience’s experience of television is also more intimate and ongoing than their experience of film. Between 1950 and 1960, the number of television sets in the United States grew from three million to 55 million. Unlike films, which were chiefly viewed

⁸¹ John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (New York: Routledge, 2003), chap. 6.

⁸² Fiske and Hartley, 89. (Original emphasis.)

⁸³ Hall, “Signification, Representation, Ideology,” 104.

⁸⁴ Lynn Spigel, “From the Dark Ages to the Golden Age: Women’s Memories and Television Reruns,” in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and the Postwar Suburbs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 357–80.

⁸⁵ Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir*; Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

in the public setting of a theater for most of the twentieth century, radio, and subsequently television, were constructed as inherently domestic, intimate media. Despite some imagery positioning both media as home theaters, early radio and television were most consistently sold as a way to bring entertainment into the private home, thereby keeping family members safe within the family circle and away from the “threatening disorder” of the streets.⁸⁶ Audience reactions to broadcast texts bear this out, with listeners and viewers often writing to express their feelings about the “questionable influences” invading their homes.⁸⁷ Indeed, one reason that anti-crime audience members found the genre so threatening was that, when crime narratives did dramatize the sort of private, domestic crimes that would be more likely to feature women, they threatened to undermine the popular image of the home as an island of safety in an insecure world.

Of course, media representations are never so simple, or uncritically accepted, as the dominant public discourses that accrete to them imply. Media scholars like Patricia Mellencamp (1986), Andrea Press (1991), and Erin Lee Mock (2011) have highlighted many undercurrents that conflicted with postwar sitcoms’ emphasis on happy families. These range from supposedly happy women’s repeated rebellions to apparently benevolent patriarchs’ violent threats.⁸⁸ Likewise, Allison McCracken (2002) has

⁸⁶ Shaun Moores, “‘The Box on the Dresser’: Memories of Early Radio and Everyday Life,” *Media, Culture & Society* 10 (1988): 24; Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 4.

⁸⁷ Florence Schick, “Letter from Florence M. Schick to FCC,” July 15, 1946, File 44-1; Complaints (Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Miscellaneous); Box 188; General Correspondence, 1927-46; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁸⁸ Patricia Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy,”

shown how postwar radio thrillers gave a sympathetic voice to women's frustrations with their confining domestic roles, though they were expected to accept domesticity or be punished by the end of the narrative.⁸⁹ Still, few commentators appear to recall that non-domestic women appeared in broadcast programming in any capacity, except perhaps as background objects in department store scenes, or as foils through which a continuing broadcast heroine's domesticity was reaffirmed. This can partly be attributed to the fact that women have been historically underrepresented in broadcast programming, especially in prime time. Diana Meehan (1983) reports that "males outnumbered females...6 to 4 in the most popular shows of the first network season."⁹⁰ This disparity increased throughout the 1950s. More recently, it has decreased, but throughout television history a relatively small number of women have been called upon to represent their entire gender.

Under this ideological weight, academics and popular critics have flattened the women appearing in historical radio and television programs into either "progressive" or "regressive" representations. The latter are often subject to what Eve Sedgwick (2003) has termed "paranoid" readings, which seek to uncover the ways in which postwar women and their labor were systemically devalued and denigrated across all parts of

in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 80–95; Press, *Women Watching Television*; Erin Lee Mock, "The Horror of 'Honey, I'm Home!': The Perils of Postwar Family Love in the Domestic Sitcom," *Film & History* 41, no. 2 (2011): 29–50.

⁸⁹ Allison McCracken, "Scary Women and Scarred Men: Suspense, Gender Trouble, and Postwar Change, 1942-1950," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 183–207.

⁹⁰ Meehan, *Ladies of the Evening*, 109.

American society.⁹¹ While paranoid readings do highlight the myriad indignities faced by female characters and audiences alike, Sedgwick argues that scholars' singular focus on uncovering injustice leads us to overlook the other possibilities contained within media texts. Sedgwick, like cultural studies scholars such as Stuart Hall (1980), pushes scholars to attend to "the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of culture - even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them."⁹² In order to avoid such overly-simplified readings, which either overlook or deny the complexities inherent in many of the female characters who were broadcast weekly into American living rooms, Sedgwick calls for scholars to adopt a "reparative" reading position.⁹³ Such a position, she argues, will also account for audience members' varied and contingent reactions to such representations. As Jeanine Basinger (1993) has argued of women's films, the very act of depicting a woman questioning the life choices laid out by society "created the possibility of an answer different from the one [producers] intended to provide at the end of the movie."⁹⁴ Even when a female character appears to make the conventional choice and accept their patriarchally-prescribed domestic roles at the end of a narrative, scholars like Basinger, Christine Gledhill (1988), and Jackie Stacey (1999) have shown how audience members

⁹¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 138.

⁹² Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-38; Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 150-51.

⁹³ Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 147.

⁹⁴ Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 7.

identify with and build escapist fantasies from characters' earlier, more rebellious choices.⁹⁵

My work takes up this call to develop more expansive readings of postwar media texts. I argue that the crime-curious women who appeared in postwar crime series disrupted conservative ideas of femininity by reading their actions and characterizations through a feminist lens. While all of these women appeared in television's "prefeminist" period, I follow Susan Sheridan (1988) in "seeking not to identify a feminism within the text, far less in its author, but rather to invent strategies of reading in tune with...feminist aims."⁹⁶ None of these characters was explicitly intended to appear feminist. Moreover, few of the women who listened to or viewed these radio and television programs – and even fewer program producers and network and advertising executives – would have identified themselves as feminists. However, as cultural studies scholars like Stuart Hall (1980) have argued, we all experience cultural texts through the lens of our own unique backgrounds and experiences.⁹⁷ I argue that the women who listened to and watched crime-curious women on postwar radio and television would have found in them an outlet for their own frustrations with the restrictions that postwar gender norms placed on their lives.

Within the daily and weekly flow of the broadcast schedule, audiences and

⁹⁵ Christine Gledhill, "Pleasurable Negotiations," in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. E. Diedre Pribram (New York: Verso, 1988), 64–89; Jackie Stacey, "Feminine Fascinations: Forms of Identification in Star-Audience Relations," in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 196–209.

⁹⁶ Press, *Women Watching Television*, 29; Susan Sheridan, *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (New York: Verso Books, 1988), 4.

⁹⁷ Hall, "Encoding/Decoding."

broadcasters struggle for interpretive supremacy, with audience members bringing their own experiences to bear in “decoding” ideological messages and broadcasters, who in turn are “quite self-conscious about addressing viewers, already 'encoding' presumptions about viewer ‘decodings’ within the text itself.”⁹⁸ These potential decodings are further influenced by the continuing and intimate nature of so many broadcast narratives.⁹⁹ Recurring characters were especially important in this process. Secretaries like *The Adventures of Sam Spade*’s Effie Perine might be flighty and childish, but the fact of her weekly appearances in Sam’s office communicated an understated competence at her job and ability to withstand crime’s daily toll on the psyche. Her weekly presence further encouraged audiences to relate to her as a multi-dimensional human being. Some might even feel bonded to her by shared experiences and interests. Individuals who form close emotional relationships with fictional characters are often mocked as irrationally feminine, as in the case for the much-maligned soap opera fan. However, network correspondence – particularly letters written to complain about program cancellations – indicates that a broad range of audience members valued their continuing relationships with a wide range of characters and programs.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Hall; Lynne Joyrich, *Re-Viewing Reception: Television, Gender, and Postmodern Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 12.

⁹⁹ Hall, “Signification, Representation, Ideology,” 98.

¹⁰⁰ “Letter from Mrs. C.M. Hayes to Mr Don Sanford,” March 14, 1952, Folder 5; Box 13; Donald Sanford Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society; “Letter from Millicent DePalma,” September 1, 1952, Folder 41; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; “Letter from Mrs. Jack Ramsey to NBC,” February 16, 1953, Folder 72; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; “Letter from Mrs. Dorothy Hart to NBC,” October 7, 1955, Folder 11; Box 350; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; “Letter from Anthony H. Bergson to Sylvester Weaver,” October 8, 1955, Folder 11; Box 350; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; “Letter from J. Haberkost to John Cleary,” January 13, 1957,

I argue that crime-curious women were erased from postwar network television in the 1950s partly because network executives knew that they could not control how they would be perceived. As Carol Stabile (2018) argues, postwar television broadcasters embraced anti-Communist blacklisting as a way to purge progressive, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist voices from their airwaves.¹⁰¹ Crime-curious women addressed women's domestic discontents in an era where feminist activity was suppressed. In so doing, they threatened to put those concerns on the public agenda. However, crime-curious women were never completely erased from the broadcast landscape. Network executives might disapprove of women like Pam North and Honey West, but they could not completely ignore their appeal, especially when their profits were threatened.

It is not easy to trace women's presence in postwar crime dramas. J. Fred MacDonald (1979) estimates that "by 1945 there was an average of ninety minutes of crime programs broadcast daily" on American network radio.¹⁰² However, Jack French's (2004) exhaustive catalogue of "radio's lady detectives" counts just 44 female detectives on air between 1932 and the mid-1950s. Acknowledging the dearth of solo female detectives, French expands his count to include other women who "render significant assistance in mystery solving or crime-fighting" in male-dominated programs aimed at adult audiences.¹⁰³ In addition to female detectives, this count also includes a

Folder 2; Box 245; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁰¹ Stabile, *The Broadcast 41*.

¹⁰² J. Fred MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial!: Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), 155.

¹⁰³ Jack French, *Private Eyelashes: Radio's Lady Detectives* (Boalsburg, PA: BearManor Media,

number of female reporters, secretaries who took more active roles in investigations led by the male detectives for whom they worked, but not female spies. French also includes male detectives' wives, whose involvement in actual cases varied from program to program, as we will see in chapter four. During the transition to television, women were largely purged from recurring roles in crime series. Of the 44 female investigators French cites on radio, only three made the transition to television: *Mr. & Mrs. North's* Pam North, *The Thin Man's* Nora Charles (radio: NBC/CBS/ABC, 1941-1951, TV: NBC, 1957-1959), and *Perry Mason's* Della Street (radio: CBS 1943-1955, TV: CBS 1957-1966). Diana Meehan (1983) further notes that only six of the seventeen prime time detective dramas that aired between 1955 and 1965 had roles for regularly appearing female characters.¹⁰⁴

Still, women have always been integral to the crime genre's success, both as audience members and the characters themselves. Women have historically composed the majority of radio and television audiences at all times of the day. Moreover, they have always been active consumers of crime narratives across all media.¹⁰⁵ My examination of broadcasters' archival records confirms that network executives were aware of this. While most of my analysis is based on NBC's records of its own decision

2004), v.

¹⁰⁴ Meehan, *Ladies of the Evening*, 110.

¹⁰⁵ Michele Hilmes, "Desired and Feared: Women's Voices in Radio History," in *Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays*, ed. Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 17-35. Women's relationships to crime in literature, film, and television have been considered in: Mizejewski, *Hardboiled & High Heeled*; Adrienne E. Gavin, "Feminist Crime Fiction and Female Sleuths," in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 258-69; D'Acci, *Defining Women*; Gates, *Detecting Women*.

making, I have augmented the limited archival record with articles from trade magazines and other outlets that addressed broadcasters' views of women. It is unfortunate that NBC has so thoroughly dominated the historical and scholarly record by virtue of the fact that it remains the only major US broadcast network to have made its internal documents available to the public. Still, while NBC was certainly more conservative than its unabashedly commercial competitor CBS in their approach to crime, both networks appear to have seen women in similar terms. Likewise, ABC has historically been more youth-oriented than either NBC or CBS, but it also drew on the same stereotyped image of postwar femininity; ABC used its youthful reputation to promote itself as attracting the youngest housewives with the largest growing families.

All three of the major American broadcast networks fought to position themselves as ultimate cultural authorities who were uniquely qualified to determine what should go out over their airwaves. However, many citizens disputed this authority. Some did so by writing to the networks themselves; a few of these letters survive in network archives. More letters exist in the archives of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). As the federal body tasked with regulating broadcasters in the public interest, the FCC is also required to preserve their correspondence. I draw heavily on letters preserved in their complaint files. However, as the files' name – complaint – implies, most of the audience letters available to scholars are critical of broadcasters and their programming. In order to find letters from women who connected to broadcast depictions of crime, I have turned to individual archives produced by program writers and producers. I also draw on audience research that the

networks conducted themselves, studies that show women were interested and invested in depictions of crime on radio and television.

Finally, I conduct a close reading of the programs themselves. Necessarily, this analysis is limited by the programs available. Radio fan scholars have done an admirable job in searching out and preserving many of the most popular network programs of the postwar period. Still, there is no way of knowing what we are missing. I have focused my study on programs with enough of an existing archival presence that I could draw coherent conclusions. This forced me to cut some fascinating gems, like Joan Blondell and Dick Powell's *Miss Pinkerton Incorporated* (1941), because there is only one recording of the program in existence. . However, this archival search did lead me to fascinating gems, like *Meet Miss Sherlock* (1946-1947), which exists as a surprisingly complete set of scripts in the American Radio Archives in Thousand Oaks, California.

I draw on an extensive body of sound and performance studies scholarship to analyze the ways in which crime-curious women were written, voiced, and, eventually, visualized. Sound studies scholars have pointed out that women's voices have long been seen as a problem in discourses around media and sound technology. Amy Lawrence (1991) argues that, while the "sound-recording apparatus [is regarded as] a neutral, transparent conveyance of 'real' sound," recording technologies have generally been better suited to capture the lower tones of male voices, ensuring that inferior capture of female voices was understood as a gender-specific "problem."¹⁰⁶ Arguing that women's

¹⁰⁶ Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley:

voices either had too much personality or not enough, “radio producers relegated most women’s voices [in prime-time] to roles as comic sidekicks” or in situation comedies, and by 1930, virtually all radio announcers were men.¹⁰⁷ Allison McCracken (2002) and Jacob Smith (2008) have further demonstrated how narrative and technological discourse surrounding women’s radio and film voices evinced a pervasive fear of women’s sexuality and autonomy.¹⁰⁸ Unlike male voices, which may remain disembodied and are often associated with the cinematic or radio apparatus, women’s voices become threatening without some visual affirmation that they are who they claim to be.¹⁰⁹

Once visualized, however, crime-curious women were perceived as even more threatening. Marsha Cassidy (2005) and Christine Becker (2008) highlight the carefully cultivated image of “genuine” feminine grace and loveliness that the early television networks demanded of their female stars.¹¹⁰ As Lori Landay (1998) points out, female detectives and other women who used trickery and subterfuge to get what they wanted highlighted the degree to which this aura of authenticity was constructed through cosmetics, costuming, and – most threatening of all – women’s conscious decision to adopt certain socially agreed upon behaviors to signal virtue.¹¹¹ Philippa Gates (2011),

University of California Press, 1991), 3.

¹⁰⁷ McCracken, “Scary Women and Scarred Men,” 189.

¹⁰⁸ Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); McCracken, “Scary Women and Scarred Men.”

¹⁰⁹ Hilmes, “Desired and Feared.”

¹¹⁰ Marsha F. Cassidy, *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Christine Becker, *It’s the Pictures That Got Small: Hollywood Film Stars on 1950s Television* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

¹¹¹ Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women*.

D'Acci, and others argue that postwar broadcast and film producers tried to avoid undercutting postwar feminine ideals by positioning women who did use trickery as evil aberrations and/or objectifying them as sexual objects and fallen women.¹¹² Still, female performers – especially the crime-curious women I study – resisted their objectification and dismissal through a range of creative choices.¹¹³

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is divided into two parts. The first tells the story of women's absence and erasure from radio and television crime dramas in the early 1950s. The second uses case studies to highlight the threat that representations of crime-fighting women posed to American patriarchal structures in the postwar period. In the decade after WWII, women disappeared from the prominent – if mostly supporting – roles they had played in radio crime programming through the 1940s. It is easy to see their erasure as the inevitable result of the postwar United States' re-embrace of Victorian-era gender norms that defined women in domestic terms. Still, as media historians like Michele Hilmes (1997), Philip Sewell (2014), and Carol Stabile (2018) remind us, nothing about our media environment is natural or free from construction by social and economic actors within and outside of the industry.¹¹⁴ Indeed, for a brief period during and after the war, it seemed that broadcast representations of women in atypical roles, including crime dramas, might be on the rise. Jack French's *Private Eyelashes* (2004) provides

¹¹² Gates, *Detecting Women*; D'Acci, *Defining Women*.

¹¹³ Scott, "From Blackface to Beulah."

¹¹⁴ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*; Philip W. Sewell, *Television in the Age of Radio: Modernity, Imagination, and the Making of a Medium* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014); Stabile, *The Broadcast 41*.

the most exhaustive catalogue of “radio’s lady detectives” to date. While he has managed to recover records of just 17 independent female detectives on the air between 1932 and the mid-1950s, most appeared after 1940. Furthermore, he notes that at least 27 women also operated as secretaries, junior partners, investigative lady reporters, or intrusive wives.¹¹⁵

However, by the mid-1950s, female detectives and secretaries had largely disappeared from radio, and girlfriends were becoming increasingly rare. Almost none made it to television. I argue that this happened because women working in crime – even in an unofficial, unpaid capacity - posed a dual challenge to the solidifying postwar consensus that women were suited to domestic roles by their very nature. Most obviously, they did so by working. Even worse, they muddied the lines between masculinity and femininity by drawing upon and mixing stereotypically feminine and masculine skills and traits to succeed in a dangerous, male-coded profession. Their ability to cross the boundaries between public and private demonstrated the porous, constructed nature of said restrictions. Such women provided a model of femininity that became increasingly dangerous through the late 1940s and 1950s, as the divisions between public and private hardened. Crime-curious women were especially dangerous in an era when women were told they could do anything they wanted, but were nevertheless expected to choose a “natural” life as a housewife.

My first two chapters explore the formation of the industrial and cultural “common sense” belief that good girls did not like crime. As I show in Chapter One,

¹¹⁵ French, *Private Eyelashes*.

broadcast executives drew on a combination of faulty research and their own cultural biases to construct a female audience represented by an idealized housewife who tuned in during daytime hours and was presumably “interested in her family, her home and herself, probably in that order.”¹¹⁶ This association gained strength in the early years of television, when the networks took control of program production back from individual sponsors. The early television networks – and especially NBC – actively pushed advertisers promoting what broadcasters saw as female-centric products, including cosmetics, toiletries, and food, toward daytime programming. Many of these advertisers had previously sponsored primetime radio series that deliberately courted female audiences, including crime series with prominent female characters. While programs scheduled during primetime hours, in which crime series were more likely to appear, were technically targeted at the entire family, most were directed more explicitly at men and children, under the assumption that women would watch as well – probably from the background and most likely while doing the dishes.¹¹⁷ Under this model, it would hardly make sense for a network to risk turning off potential male viewers with a female detective when a male detective would do just as well. However, as I demonstrate, network executives actively reinforced and even promoted gendered divisions in the broadcast day and program types because those divisions promoted broadcasters’ business/regulatory priorities. These priorities were in turn shaped by executives’ own gender biases, and, as we can see from the networks’ willingness to program more

¹¹⁶ Jack Landis, “Memo from Jack Landis to Richard Linkroum,” June 7, 1954, Folder 10; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹¹⁷ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*.

female-centric crime shows during lower-rated summer months and other marginal time periods, they deliberately ignored the fact that executives knew women did like crime on some level.

Network executives were not the only ones fighting to define femininity in domestic terms that would render it incompatible with an interest in crime. Chapter Two situates critical and audience discourses over broadcast crime programming within the context of larger debates over women's postwar social roles. Beginning in 1947, I trace correspondence between the major broadcast networks, the FCC, and a number of social interest groups, including religious, political, and ethnic organizations, as well as women's civic clubs. These interest groups actively protested the representations of urban sexuality and violence that they heard over the radio. Their calls for federal censorship over broadcast, with the aim of restricting representations of crime and sexuality to adhere to their own conservative ideas of what should be considered normal in the postwar US, became more pointed after television added a visual component to radio's "noise" in the late 1940s and early 1950s. By 1952, the National Association of Broadcasters instituted an industry-wide Television Code to avert the threat of local or federal censorship. Most of the women and men who complained about broadcast crime programming during this period presented their concerns in terms of broadcasters' corrupting influence on children. However, the frequency with which crime-related complaints were paired with accusations that soap operas would also pervert weak-minded audiences indicates a fear that women would be equally susceptible. The fear that these easily-corrupted women would then pervert and emasculate their husbands

and children speaks to larger contradictions within postwar ideals – ideals that simultaneously valorized and suspected women’s virtue. Anti-crime letter-writers did not make up the majority of network radio and television audiences, but they did manage to speak with more volume than women who wrote in praising crime dramas. Their ability to mobilize the threat of censorship and other additional regulation also meant that the networks were more likely to listen to them and act accordingly. While the networks resisted engaging in direct negotiations with most groups — a move that might have acknowledged such groups’ right to influence if not control network programming — they did selectively respond to concerns raised by large groups of listeners. The Cold War-era political climate, and broadcasters’ own vulnerability as the industry transitioned from radio to television, made broadcasters especially responsive to political critiques and reluctant to allow representations that might challenge conservative post-WWII political and gender norms. They were also responsive to criticism of sexuality, which became a stand-in for feminine virtue. I argue that these ongoing debates over soap operas provide crucial context on just how difficult it was to quarantine crime away from femininity.

Chapter Three demonstrates how pressure to adhere to the conservative social norms promoted by letter writers and other cultural critics shaped the representations of women that appeared in radio and television programming. Drawing on papers from NBC’s in-house censor, the Continuity Acceptance Department, I show how virtuous radio and television women were constructed in opposition to the disruptive *femme fatale*, who appeared as a symbol of feminine rebellion and perversion in crime series

and film. This was true for women of all genres, but especially for the good women who appeared in crime series. The women who appeared in postwar broadcast crime series challenged the period's increasingly conservative definitions of femininity and highlighted its constructed nature. This chapter lays the groundwork for my more detailed case studies by providing a history of the methods producers used to resolve the tensions between feminine agency and cultural demand for glamorous domesticity. While having female characters do things like profess their desire for marriage and children, or faint at the threat of violence did assert their supposed normality, such attributes often felt tacked on and served to further emphasize the untenable nature of postwar feminine ideals.

The second part of my dissertation encompasses three case studies covering the most common types of crime-curious women on postwar radio and television: detectives' wives, detectives' secretaries, and female detectives. These chapters demonstrate how program producers sought to reconcile characters' interest in working in crime with their status as properly feminine "good girls." They also show just how dangerous these crime-curious women could be to the postwar revival of Victorian separate-spheres ideologies; even as they ultimately adhered to most of the gender restrictions placed on them by postwar society, they modeled subtle ways to rebel.

Despite the continuing popularity of more sensational private detective programs, the gruff realistic stylistic shift embodied by *Dragnet* does appear to have contributed to the sidelining of more active female investigators. As we will see in chapter four, Pam North began to take a backseat in investigations in *Mr. & Mrs.*

North's final season on NBC; at the same time, the program's tone became less comedic and the crimes the Norths encountered were treated with increased gravity. This transition – from crime as enjoyable pastime to crime as deadly serious threat – reflects the uncertainty and paranoia many Americans felt as WWII ended and the Cold War intensified. If we understand radio and television series as a fantasy space in which society acknowledged other possibilities for women, then the decline in female investigators indicates that such fantasies were perceived as more dangerous to the social order. However, it is also likely that the industrial “common sense” concerning adventure programs about women led risk-averse broadcasters to avoid female detective series, or other programs featuring assertive female workers, because they assumed they would fail. Broadcasters convinced themselves that their previously-held female audience for crime on radio had never existed.

One common solution was to contain such women within a comedic frame. Media scholars have shown how comediennes like Lucille Ball and Gracie Allen used slapstick and screwball comedy to resist patriarchal gender norms within heterosexual marriages. In my fourth chapter, I expand this inquiry to show how the married women who appeared in crime sitcoms used similar comic modes to push against their domestic confinement. Wives took a range of positions when it came to crime. Some, including Pam North of *Mr. & Mrs. North*, were active investigators who took the lead in investigating the crimes they encountered. Others, like *The Thin Man*'s Nora Charles, were less enthusiastic investigators. Other wives, including *Adventures of the Abbotts*' Jean Abbott (radio: MBS 1945-1947, NBC 1955) and *It's A Crime, Mr. Collins*' Gail

Collins (radio: MBS 1956-1957) accompanied their detective husbands on cases out of apparent boredom, frequently testing the bounds and bonds of the companionate marriage. While more typically feminine romance narratives work “hard to gloss over the bumps and pitfalls of heterosexuality,” women’s roles in crime drama highlighted many of the tensions and contradictions that underpinned postwar marriage.¹¹⁸ Power struggles were dramatized through formal considerations like narrative frame and narrative debates over what areas women had the right to explore. Wives like Jean Abbott and her clone, Gail Collins, exerted their ongoing power within their marriages by seizing the power of narration, usually a male preserve. This allowed them to shape their own stories, and buttressed their ongoing claims to participation in the public sphere. Crime sitcom wives made the biggest inroads on postwar network television, perhaps because they were the most overtly contained of the women I investigate. However, they were not immune to the conservative currents that Mary Beth Haralovich (1989) traces in the postwar sitcom.¹¹⁹ By the time *The Thin Man* was adapted for television in 1957, however, Nora had retreated from investigations, reflecting the increasing cultural emphasis on feminine domesticity.

Notably, after a strong run on postwar radio networks, the crime-sitcom had faded from television by the late 1950s, just as the networks were cementing control over their program schedules. Likewise, detectives’ secretaries also largely disappeared from network crime series in TV’s early years. Chapter five explores the ways in which

¹¹⁸ Mizejewski, *Hardboiled & High Heeled*, 12; Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, xxiii.

¹¹⁹ Haralovich, “Sitcoms and Suburbs.”

detectives' secretaries were simultaneously more and less restricted in their ability to engage in crime-related labor. By defining women as middle class, broadcasters removed any theoretical excuse for them to engage in labor. However, as skilled assistants, women like *Perry Mason's* Della Street were invaluable to their employers' investigations. To obscure this dissonance, the economic underpinnings of their relationships with the detectives for whom they worked were obscured beneath layers of sentiment, framing their labor as inherently domestic. Indeed, secretaries were most often figured as detectives' office wives, with the implication that their labors would eventually be rewarded with a proposal and allow them to retire to their proper state of domestic bliss. This construction ensured that women's labor continued to be defined as temporary. Furthermore, secretaries' romantic entanglements with their detectives gave them a properly "feminine" rationale for choosing to work in such a dangerous field.

Where wives like Pam North negotiated the world of crime with the clear protection of a husband, and secretaries had their bosses, female detectives were at least ostensibly on their own. In Chapter Six, however, I show that these female detectives were still subject to containment. Even as they claimed the right to surveil others, female detectives were closely monitored by male partners or superiors, a practice that continues to this day. While many male detectives in cop shows have male partners, it is rare to find a female detective paired with another woman. Female detectives were also overtly feminized through their vocal characterizations on radio and high fashion costumes on television. This feminization could take a range of forms. Candy Matson and Honey West were celebrated as beautiful bombshells, while *Defense Attorney* (ABC

Radio 1951-1952) emphasized Marty Bryant's warm, empathic sensibilities. Jane Sherlock, of *Meet Miss Sherlock* (CBS Radio 1946-1947) was played as a comedic dizzy dame. Despite the fact that most of these women were working in an intrinsically working-class occupation, they were classed up through references to fashionable clothes and their ultimate desire for a comfortable suburban home. Still, this supposedly natural desire was contradicted by their obvious interest in their work and weekly refusal to settle down with a loving beau. In this way, the weekly series format helped to thwart the cinematic standard of forcing women to choose between detecting and romance at the end of a film.¹²⁰ Critics often regarded female detective series as fantasies, but such fantasies could be powerful, potentially subversive influences on women and girls who consumed them on a weekly basis.

Network executives had largely excise crime-curious women from the national airwaves by the mid-1950s, but many continued to circulate in syndication throughout the postwar decades. Programs like *Mr. & Mrs. North* were aired for a generation of children who grew up to demand more inclusive representations of female detectives — an a more expansive definition of women's public rights — in the 1960s and 1970s. 1960s critics may have retrospectively labeled assertive female investigators like Honey West as coming before their time, but, as I demonstrate, the truth is much more complex. *Honey West*, along with the other crime-curious women who came before her, was a victim of conflicting industry incentives. While the national networks claimed that they wanted to appeal to every member of the audience, their desire to

¹²⁰ Gates, *Detecting Women*, 10.

reach the broadest possible audience for the lowest possible price meant that they proactively chose the type of audience to which they would appeal and created programs for that idealized illusion.

Still, as my dissertation shows, the networks were aware that their idealized audience was a construction. Moreover, at crucial points of industrial change, executives were forced to re-construct their vision of the audience to bring it better in line with changing cultural forces. These points of potential change highlight the enduring power that broadcast audiences have to shape mass media. However, they also demonstrate the ways in which industrial actors have worked to limit that power and/or harness it for their own commercial advantage. During the transition between radio and television, network broadcasters felt vulnerable to an array of economic and regulatory pressures. Program producers, especially those working to retain radio listeners, sought to widen their definition of the audience to include women interested in crime. They were opposed by network censors and others who were more concerned with the potential for conservative backlash against progressive images of feminine agency. These conflicting pressures were heightened on the emerging medium of television, where executives were also concerned about the threat of new federal regulations that would curtail their power and potential profits. In the end, the national networks chose to play it safe by complying with conservative demands for censorship.

Still, sexy women never fully disappeared from postwar television. Indeed, by the time *Honey West* appeared in 1965, women's bodies served as a major draw for male-headed detective programs like *Burke's Law* (ABC 1963-1966). However, few of

those women exercised direct control over their bodies or sexuality. Those who rejected men's right to control their bodies and insisted on using their sexuality to achieve their own ends – and under their own terms, faced inevitable punishment. Networks did not simply accept these social norms because that was what audiences wanted. Rather, they helped to reinforce them by restricting women's voices to areas like daytime television and family sitcoms, where women's postwar concerns could be closely monitored and redirected through discourses that celebrated consumption and domesticity over agency and independence.

CHAPTER 1: TELEVISION FOR WOMEN MEANS TELEVISION FOR HOUSEWIVES: REINVIGORATING THE DAYTIME GHETTO ON POSTWAR TELEVISION

In 1954, NBC's Research and Planning Department issued *Television's Daytime Profile – Buying Habits and Characteristics of the Audience*. While the network initially billed the national survey as a general study of the developing TV audience's characteristics, its eventual title highlighted the industry's significant investment in promoting the value of one narrow demographic: white housewives.¹²¹ Not that the network would have admitted as much. NBC's research department claimed that *TV's Daytime Profile*, as the study was referred to internally, simply measured American women's existing purchasing habits and program preferences, which just happened to be inclined toward daytime programming. Still, executives across the network ultimately used the survey and its results to define and promote their preferred construction of the female television audience to advertisers who were nervous about investing in the new and unproven medium. The sampling biases and commercial priorities intrinsic to the survey's design helped bolster network arguments that the most lucrative female audience, and therefore the only one worth addressing, were the white, middle-class homemakers who were – theoretically at least – most reachable during daytime hours.

Network executives paired their limited definition of the female audience with a similarly circumscribed conception of women's program interests. As NBC research executive Jack Landis put it, the network presumed that any normal, well-adjusted housewife would be “interested in her family, her home and herself, probably in that

¹²¹ “Letter from H.M. Beville, Jr. to Al Lehman,” January 26, 1954, Folder 1; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

order.”¹²² This sequence of priorities supported – and was supported by – a growing conservative consensus that healthy, well-adjusted women were those who embraced their supposedly natural roles as domestic caretakers. However, rather than simply following along with external social change, the television industry helped to create, promote, and naturalize this feminine ideal. After all, the women who were selflessly dedicated to nurturing children and providing their hard-working husbands with a restful space in which to relax after a hard day toiling in public businesses needed help.

Postwar broadcasters emphasized feminine domesticity because it provided opportunities for advertisers to sell housewives the products they supposedly needed to be effective caretakers. If, as NBC’s Director of Women’s Activities Margaret Cuthbert argued in 1948, the network main contribution to women was to make “the woman in her home conscious of her responsibilities as a citizen,” then those responsibilities clearly required a great deal of shopping.¹²³

The dominant national networks’ domestic view of the female broadcast audience replicated the gendered biases that had defined earlier approaches to female radio listeners, but it was more than simply a continuation of the radio status quo. As the networks took control over program production and scheduling back from the individual sponsors and advertising agencies that had dominated large swathes of radio’s primetime, their vision of so-called normal, domestic femininity dominated the new

¹²² Jack Landis, “Memo from Jack Landis to Richard Linkroum,” June 7, 1954, Folder 10; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹²³ Margaret Cuthbert, “Report on History of Women’s Programs, 1926-1948,” March 26, 1948, Folder 10; Box 335; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

medium in a way that it had never fully controlled radio programming. Advertisers certainly agreed with their network partners' desire to sell products, but many had targeted multiple audience demographics, including working women who listened in primetime. The postwar networks' efforts to re-center the housewife audience around daytime programming, while promoting primetime as a period in which to appeal to men and children, was part of a concerted social effort to push women and their concerns to the margins of social life and public discourse. Within the television industry, this manifested as an industry-wide effort to dismiss women's economic and political value. Broadcasters knew they had to appeal to female consumers in order to remain profitable, but they did their best to cement women's position as marginal audience members who could only expect attention during time periods when no one else was watching – namely daytime.

As feminist media scholars like Jennifer Wang (2006) have shown, this view of femininity took some willful ignorance on network executives' part. Beginning in the 1930s, executives completely ignored scientific audience research showing that women listened to the radio more, and more closely, in the evening than during the day.¹²⁴ These biases only grew more extreme in the early 1950s, as the emerging television networks restricted their research on women to daytime audiences. Despite increasing evidence that the number of working women was steadily increasing through the postwar period, the dominant Nielsen ratings did not measure working women as a

¹²⁴ Jennifer Hyland Wang, "Convenient Fictions: The Construction of the Daytime Broadcast Audience, 1927-1960" (Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006), 168.

separate audience demographic until 1976.¹²⁵ Accordingly, network executives focused their primetime efforts on hailing the white men who they saw as their most lucrative audience. Women were consigned to the background, both in publicity images promoting the new medium and in the programs that populated the television screen.¹²⁶

The networks' refusal to acknowledge women's increasing consumer power was more than just a missed economic opportunity. It also helped to forestall social change. Instead of embracing changing gender roles that would have acknowledged women as equal consumers and, more importantly, citizens, the major US television networks banished most representations of women from lucrative, higher-rated evening primetime hours. This meant that women's postwar social and economic concerns remained largely invisible to a large part of the viewing public – namely the men who continued to dominate postwar-decision making. This was especially true for working women and minorities, who the networks largely excluded from their imagined television audience and, more importantly, the imagined public depicted on television screens. Instead, postwar American broadcasters centered the new medium's economic future on a daytime audience of white middle-class housewives and their supposedly domestic, commercially marketable interests.

In this chapter and the next, I explore the conjoined industrial and cultural structures that pushed broadcasters and other popular media outlets to re-harden the

¹²⁵ “Busy Dames: Daytime May Lose as Work Level Rises,” *The Billboard*, April 13, 1957; Julie D’Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 72.

¹²⁶ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 91.

boundaries separating supposedly feminine, domestic issues and interests from those of the general American public. Instead of acknowledging that women are — and always have been — an integral part of public life, broadcasters contributed to a postwar backlash against women's expanded wartime access to the public sphere. This backlash, pushed by conservative social forces who capitalized on anti-communist sentiment to counteract calls for social change, sought to push women out of the mainstream and re-center white men as the dominant cultural and political force in American political and cultural life. The three major television networks contributed to this effort by sidelining women's issues to daytime and presenting men's stories as universally relevant and relatable. This chapter outlines the national networks' interest in promoting the white, middle-class housewife as the feminine ideal, while chapter two addresses the varied ways that mostly conservative audience members responded to feminine representations that deviated from that model. These concerns were intimately connected, but it is worth taking the time to tease apart the networks' and conservative social critics' differing goals. The two groups often saw themselves as being at odds over social outlook and authority over the nation's airwaves, but both were invested in promoting a largely shared, conservative vision of what they saw as normal gender, healthy roles.

The increasingly strict division between daytime/feminine genres and primetime/masculine genres meant that women's issues went largely unexplored in the prestigious primetime anthology dramas that helped legitimate television and elevated men's postwar struggles to the level of art. By the end of the 1950s, women's issues had also faded to the background of the domestic comedies they initially dominated. The

women who did appear in postwar television crime dramas were most often featured in single episodes, which restricted their potential roles to victim, femme fatale, or passive love interest. None of these positions provided much room for the women who held them to exercise agency without incurring personal or state-sponsored punishment, much less explore the emotional and economic complexities of criminality and victimhood. Some daytime genres continued to address issues women faced balancing domestic and economic pressures, but their increasingly domestic settings limited the scope of such explorations.¹²⁷ Moreover, the fact that such programs were restricted to the daytime hours and maligned as frivolous, or even harmful wastes of time meant that a large part of the primetime audience never encountered their more varied representations of femininity. Men also dominated the vast majority of the crime narratives that made it to television in the mid-1950s, ensuring that the genre continued to center masculine viewpoints and a commitment to a top-down, law-and-order view of justice that supported patriarchal power structures.

Can Women Sell Soap While Investigating Crime?

In May of 1956, George Zachary, Radio & TV Program Manager for Lever Brothers, outlined the company's reservations about the pilot for British-produced *Adventures of Sir Lancelot*. The toiletries manufacturer and prolific broadcast advertiser objected most strongly to two of the series' lead actors on highly gendered grounds: "Sir Arthur was felt to be too effeminate both in manner and in voice" for a postwar

¹²⁷ Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting And Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 76.

American TV audience, so Zachary demanded he be replaced with “a virile person of large stature with a bass or baritone voice [suggesting] strength and majesty.”¹²⁸ This was especially crucial because the actor playing Lancelot also had “a high-pitched voice.”¹²⁹ Two such masculinity-deficient orators could hardly escape the implication of homosexuality, no matter how swashbuckling their exploits. However, if Arthur and Lancelot were insufficiently masculine, Guinevere was excessively feminine. Zachary complained that the actress, “while lovely to look at, either was not given enough to do or is incapable of reading lines well enough to be given more.” Zachary cited the company’s experience with actress Doe Avedon, who was brought in to play investigative reporter Steve Wilson’s love interest, commercial artist Diane Walker, during *Big Town*’s last season on television (radio 1937-1952, CBS/DuMont/NBC TV, 1950-1956): “I can assure you that after 20 pictures in which a girl has little to do with the advancement of plot or participation in meaningful dialogue, she becomes pretty tiresome.”¹³⁰

Zachary’s choice to blame Avedon for her character’s tiresome peripherality is ironic, considering that Diane Walker’s passive character was brought in to replace an active female investigator, longstanding and popular star reporter Lorelei Kilbourne. Lorelei had made the jump from radio to television with the rest of the series’ characters, and her personality tested well with the crime program’s female audiences, but she

¹²⁸ Sapphire Films, “Letter from Sapphire Films, Ltd. to Nat Wolff,” June 21, 1956, Folder 43; Box 387; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹²⁹ Sapphire Films.

¹³⁰ Sapphire Films.

appears to have been a source of discomfort for producers.¹³¹ Four different actresses played Lorelei in the four years she remained on the television show, compared to the two who portrayed her boss and romantic interest, Steve Wilson, over the series' six-year run. Such re-castings were more common in the early days of television, but the sheer number implies that the program's producers – a group that included Lever Bros, Lever's chosen ad agencies and production companies, and the networks on which the program aired – found it difficult to bring her character to life in a way that they felt would support Lever's sales messages and be acceptable to postwar audiences. By 1954, the prominent and ambitious girl reporter was phased out and her dual investigative and romantic functions split between a young, male cub reporter and an external romantic interest.¹³² As Zachary's comments show, however, this move backfired.

Scholars have highlighted the conservative, even reactionary shift in feminine representation across television genres, but nowhere was it more visible than in crime and adventure stories. Women could fade into the domestic backgrounds of sitcoms, but it was more difficult to find a place for them in a genre that explored human perversion and brutality. If they were kept within the home, then the crime would have to follow them there, where it would highlight the domestic dysfunction that Cold War propaganda sought to deny. Let outside, they disrupted patriarchal control over the justice system, and even public space itself. However, as I demonstrate in later chapters,

¹³¹ "Study of Television Mystery Programs" (Advertest Research, March 1954), Folder 32; Box 193; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹³² Tim Brooks and Earle F. Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-Present*, Ninth Edition (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), 144.

women were a consistent, if under-appreciated, presence in radio crime dramas. Whether serious or played for laughs, crime dramas were an important part of advertisers' efforts to appeal to women across the radio schedule. Beginning in the 1930s, when Philco radios used "beautiful girl detective" Phyl Coe to sell radio tubes through short, audience participation-driven mysteries, a number of individual sponsors used female characters to hail women without alienating other members of the primetime audience.¹³³ Indeed, as John Cawelti (1976) argues, crime has historically been the only one of three basic popular fiction genres to appeal to both sexes (of the other two, romance appeals to women and adventure to men).¹³⁴ Beyond direct appeals to women who might buy supposedly gender-neutral or masculine products like Wildroot hair tonic (*The Adventures of Sam Spade*), gas from Standard Oil (*Let George Do It*), and cereal or beer (*The Thin Man*), many major primetime crime series were sponsored by supposedly female-centric companies on both radio and television. This list includes *Mr. & Mrs. North* (Woodbury facial cream, Colgate, Revlon, and linoleum manufacturer Congoleum), *Big Town* (Ironized Yeast, Bayer, and Lever Bros), *Casey, Crime Photographer* (Anchor Hawking Glass, Toni Home Permanents, and Philip Morris), *Nick Carter* (Old Dutch Cleanser, Cudahy Packing, and Libby Packing), and *Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons* (Colgate, Whitehall Pharmacal, American Chicle, Chesterfield, and Procter & Gamble).¹³⁵

¹³³ "The Case of the Dead Magician," *The Phyl Coe Mysteries* (syndicated, January 29, 1936).

¹³⁴ "Study of Television Mystery Programs"; John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

¹³⁵ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

During the transition to television, however, many agency- or independent production company-owned programs, including *Mr. & Mrs. North*, were canceled in favor of network-controlled productions. Still, the networks' desire to own their own series does not explain why they were so hesitant to originate female detectives of their own. Network executives' distaste for female-centric primetime programming is evident, however. Even when advertisers explicitly requested an audience of working women, network sales executives used their newly consolidated control over program scheduling and biased data from studies like *TV's Daytime Profile* to push advertisers to appeal to housewives and their growing families through daytime programming that centered family and domesticity instead.¹³⁶ After all, the network argued, why aim for a small audience of working women in primetime – when there was a larger, wealthier, more masculine audience to consider – when daytime TV allegedly attracted a larger audience of women when they were home alone? And, if game shows, housekeeping programs, and musical variety programs effectively encouraged daytime audiences to purchase large quantities of prepared foods, household cleaners, and cosmetics – all while generating minimal public controversy – what incentive did broadcasters have to turn toward darker genres like crime?

Like the much-maligned daytime soap opera, crime series had a tendency to explore, or at least give voice to, women's discontents with domesticity and/or their interest in working outside the home. Both genres drew increasing conservative

¹³⁶ "Memo from Marvin Baiman to David Hedley," September 21, 1956, Folder 10; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

criticism over their potential negative impact on women and children in the years after WWII. Indeed, Elana Levine (2019) has shown how television soap opera producers gradually shifted their programs away from radio soaps' emphasis on strong leading ladies. Producers like Irna Phillips countered charges that soap operas would corrupt viewers through therapeutic discourses that promoted their programs as helping "the potentially unstable woman in the home to cope with her life," partly by encouraging them to embrace their domestic roles.¹³⁷ Throughout the early television years, networks like NBC also restricted depictions of crime, sexuality, and other themes that might disrupt advertiser-friendly narratives promoting postwar domesticity from a range of daytime and primetime genres.¹³⁸ These restrictions had their deepest impact on representations of women in crime.

The precipitous decline in female detectives during the transition between radio and television exemplifies the period's growing industrial and cultural discomfort with depictions of women working outside the home, or even venturing into potentially dangerous public, urban spaces without masculine supervision. Beyond detectives themselves, *Big Town's* Lorelei and Diane were just two of dozens of secretaries, wives, and girlfriends who disappeared from, or were never adapted for, television crime dramas. This shift reflected a growing hostility to women entering the imaginative space of crime fighting as anything more than victims on screen or passive spectators at

¹³⁷ Elana Levine, *Her Stories: Daytime Soap Opera and US Television History* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming), chap. 2.

¹³⁸ "The Television Code" (National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters, 1952); Robert Pondillo, *America's First Network TV Censor: The Work of NBC's Stockton Helffrich* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010).

home. It was also at least partly the result of pressure to promote culturally dominant gender roles. Affiliate stations in more rural states like Utah and Ohio often lodged complaints with their networks when they felt programming was too risqué for their more conservative audiences. While CBS was more willing to weather such criticism in order to maintain the high ratings that crime programs garnered, NBC occasionally succumbed to public pressure to censor crime series. In 1947, NBC responded to concentrated public complaints about crime programming by promising not to air any “series of detective, crime or mystery type programs” on its radio network before 9:30 pm EST, 8:30 CST, and 9:00 PST.¹³⁹ Later memos clarified that the policy also applied to daytime serials, limited dramatic programs airing before 9pm to air one crime or mystery episode in every twelve, and extended the policy to cover television.¹⁴⁰

Of course, NBC’s anti-crime policy did not last long. The network’s high-minded ideals and fear of regulation were not enough to counter the cries of affiliate stations concerned about losing ratings and revenue. By the end of 1948, executives like Operations Manager Easton Woolley were scrambling to address affiliate complaints that the policy was hurting advertising sales.¹⁴¹ Still, the spirit that motivated the ban – and especially the ban’s application to daytime soap operas – lived on in the network’s other decision-making processes. Those restrictions were ostensibly intended to close

¹³⁹ Ken Dyke, “Memo from Ken Dyke Regarding Crime and Mystery Programs,” September 13, 1947, Folder 7; Box 573; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁴⁰ “Memo from Ken Dyke Regarding Crime and Mystery Programs,” June 9, 1948, Folder 7; Box 573; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁴¹ Easton Woolley, “Memo from Easton Woolley to Harry Kopf,” December 27, 1948, Folder 7; Box 573; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

loopholes that allowed producers to integrate crime into daytime programs children were more likely to see. However, at best they forced women to sacrifice their own pleasures for family and the nation's well-being. At worst, they implied that the adult women who enjoyed crime in soap operas were "juvenile, adolescent or impressionable" and so must be protected from the negative impact of "vivid, living" portrayals of crime for their own (and their families') good.¹⁴² This fear that women were not psychologically or physically equipped to cope with matters of crime, violence, and justice pervaded network efforts to build an ideological wall between women and crime in other ways. Women might be able to watch depictions of crime during primetime – when their husbands were home to watch with them – but then they had to make due with series aimed at other audience segments, including men, children, or the full family. And, as the 1950s progressed, it became increasingly rare for women to see positive depictions of themselves in any television crime series. Instead, the version of femininity that emerged on network television emphasized qualities like beauty, domesticity, and passivity, all of which supported the networks' commercial interests.

Creating the Female Mass Audience

Broadcast historians like Jennifer Wang (2006) have pointed out the extent to which the major US broadcast networks' cultural power over broadcasting has historically been predicated on gendered notions of authority and control. From the very beginning, the networks fought to establish themselves as "[men] of taste, experience, and independent judgment" overseeing and protecting the vulnerable new medium of

¹⁴² Dyke, "Memo from Ken Dyke Regarding Crime and Mystery Programs," September 13, 1947.

radio from attack.¹⁴³ Network executives like David Sarnoff cited numerous and diverse potential threats to radio and its audience members, ranging from vaudevillians, advertisers, regulators, and even the threatening specter of the public itself. The emerging networks' efforts to exert their authority over all of these groups built on existing gendered hierarchies in the way cultural critics discussed radio and other commercialized mass culture. Between the 1910s and late 1920s, as commercial radio programming expanded, critics re-characterized radio from an active, masculine hobby to a passive, feminized, and denigrated commercial entertainment.¹⁴⁴ NBC, and to a lesser extent, CBS, implicitly capitalized upon this public perception of broadcast chaos when they launched their national radio networks with promises to restore respectability and order to the airwaves and regulate programming in service of the public good.¹⁴⁵

One way the networks cleaned up radio programming, or at least created the appearance that they were restraining excessive commercialism, was by scheduling their most advertising-heavy programs during the daytime, when women presumably dominated the audience. Network executives justified this gender-based product and programming segregation with economic arguments. Despite their discomfort with female purchasers, the networks acknowledged that women did (and continue to do) the bulk of family purchasing, especially when it came to disposable goods. Still, few were comfortable with the idea of speaking directly to women during primetime hours.

¹⁴³ Wang, "Convenient Fictions," 29.

¹⁴⁴ Richard Butsch, "Crystal Sets and Scarf-Pin Radios: Gender, Technology and the Construction of American Radio Listening in the 1920s," *Media, Culture & Society* 20 (1998): 557–72.

¹⁴⁵ Michele Hilmes, "NBC and the Network Idea: Defining the 'American System,'" in *NBC: America's Network*, ed. Michele Hilmes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 14.

Women may have been the majority of radio, and later television, audience in every time period, but early radio executives often ignored their own research in favor of gendered biases. Beginning in the 1930s, network executives “willfully ignored” scientific studies showing that 95% of housewives tuned in to radio in the evenings.¹⁴⁶ More damning still, 79% of women surveyed reported that they only gave radio their full attention in the evening, indicating that most women, like men, were only reachable in primetime.¹⁴⁷ Still, network executives distrusted women’s self-reported preferences and continued to argue that daytime was the most reliable time for advertisers to capture female – housewife – attention. Broadcasters won over many wary sponsors by offering daytime periods at a deep discount, which made them especially valuable to advertisers selling high volumes of household goods, food products, and cosmetics, all of which they categorized as female-centric products.¹⁴⁸ By the early 1930s, there was a clear distinction between the cheaply produced, feminized, and heavily commercial daytime programming that earned the bulk of network profits and more expensively produced, prestigious evening/primetime productions.¹⁴⁹

The gendered daytime/primetime split also ensured that most of the most blatantly commercial genres, including soap operas and quiz shows, aired when male regulators, advertisers, and broadcasters themselves were less likely to encounter and be

¹⁴⁶ Wang, “Convenient Fictions,” 168.

¹⁴⁷ Wang, 168.

¹⁴⁸ Michele Hilmes, “Desired and Feared: Women’s Voices in Radio History,” in *Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays*, ed. Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 17–35.

¹⁴⁹ Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1994), 92.

offended them. Still, radio executives never had complete control over their schedules. Individual sponsors retained ownership and program control over specific time slots, sometimes for decades.¹⁵⁰ This made it possible for advertisers who purchased a primetime time franchise to tailor their programs to target specific audience segments, including working women. By the 1950s, however, the tide had turned and, instead of welcoming sponsors as programming partners, network executives used them as scapegoats for criticism of excessive broadcast commercialism.¹⁵¹ These concerns reached a fever pitch during the transition to television, when vocal audience members and local and federal regulators monitored the new medium closely to ensure it did not replicate radio's excessive commercialism. By the mid-1950s, television executives were able to use the quiz show rigging scandals to reestablish their authority as upright and trustworthy cultural patriarchs. During the public outcry and investigations that followed, network executives argued that only the networks themselves could be trusted to regulate themselves, their advertisers, and their irrational, implicitly female audience.¹⁵² Television advertisers continued to dictate the specific programs and emotional environments in which their commercials appeared, but the networks determined which programs would air, and in what order.¹⁵³

Each of the four early television networks, NBC, CBS, ABC, and DuMont, took

¹⁵⁰ Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, *Jack Benny and the Golden Age of American Radio Comedy* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 199.

¹⁵¹ Cynthia B. Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsor: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 78; William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 220.

¹⁵² Boddy, *Fifties Television*, 220.

¹⁵³ Erik Barnouw, *The Sponsor: Notes on Modern Potentates* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009).

its own approach to the emerging female audience, but focused on some version of the housewife audience. ABC argued that it had the youngest housewives; CBS claimed to have the largest number.¹⁵⁴ As I have already noted, NBC was particularly invested in proving its public service bona fides and countering accusations of excessive commercialism by promoting a vision of a daytime audience full of wealthy, well-educated, and youthful housewives. While this construct was useful for the networks' efforts to avoid charges that they were repeating radio's commercial sins, it was also a valuable selling point for a network eager to convince advertisers that they could get just as much – if not more – bang for their buck in daytime as in primetime.¹⁵⁵ And the networks certainly did need help selling daytime hours. By December of 1953, one industry-wide survey by Advertest Research reported that just under 60% of women who lived in TV-owning households watched daytime television regularly.¹⁵⁶ While that did represent a 9% increase from the previous April, 70% of those who did not watch daytime television stated that there was nothing that broadcasters could do to convince them to tune in before 5 pm, either because they worked during the day or were not interested in the programming.¹⁵⁷ Of the women who did watch television during the day, most did so in the early morning or late afternoon. NBC executives were

¹⁵⁴ Jennifer Hyland Wang, "'The Case of the Radio-Active Housewife': Relocating Radio in the Age of Television," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 362; Marsha F. Cassidy, *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 28; Thomas Wright, "Memo from Thomas Wright to Howard Gardner," November 4, 1954, Folder 20; Box 580; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁵⁵ Wang, "Convenient Fictions," 287.

¹⁵⁶ "Study of Daytime Television Number 6" (Advertest Research, December 1953), Folder 30; Box 193; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁵⁷ "Study of Daytime Television Number 6."

well aware of these statistics when they designed *TV's Daytime Profile*, but instead of acknowledging their audience's limits, they spun those limits as strengths: the daytime audience was not small – it was selective. They also ignored clear evidence that many housewives felt they were too busy to watch television and argued that, because they were home, housewives would inevitably come to love daytime television.

The networks' efforts to push advertisers promoting products like cosmetics, toiletries, food, and other small-ticket domestic items from primetime to daytime hours increased as primetime television timeslots filled up in the early 1950s.¹⁵⁸ By the end of the decade, network executives had used their newly established control over program scheduling to push anything seen as appealing primarily to women to daytime. *TV's Daytime Profile* and similar studies justified this choice by focusing audience research on housewives' consumption of foods and disposable household goods. Women's supposed interest in these categories – and just as importantly, their supposed lack of interest in others – was reinforced through research biases that emphasized housewives' concern with feeding and clothing their young and growing families.¹⁵⁹ Network executives may have acknowledged women's control over purchasing most of the cheap, disposable goods that kept a household running, but they drew a gendered line at expensive, durable goods like vehicles, refrigerators, and other home electronics. NBC's research department actually eliminated one question “regarding plans to buy various durables in the next twelve months” from earlier draft questionnaires for *TV's Daytime*

¹⁵⁸ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 182; Wang, “The Case of the Radio-Active Housewife”; Spigel, *Make Room for TV*; Boddy, *Fifties Television*.

¹⁵⁹ Wang, “Convenient Fictions,” 81.

Profile because the survey designers prioritized finding granular information on categories of food and cleaning products they thought women were more likely to purchase.¹⁶⁰

When it came to expensive durable goods, the networks argued that breadwinning husbands would not trust their home-bound wives to make large purchase by themselves. Accordingly, networks gave such advertisers preferential access to evening timeslots, when they could capture men's attention after work. Likewise, network sales executives also gave primetime preference to advertisers selling products like tobacco, beer, or over-the-counter medications, some of the few items they assumed men might purchase for themselves.¹⁶¹ Indeed, while primetime was ostensibly family viewing time, broadcasters repeatedly gave preference to male-centric products. They might discourage — or even refuse to sell — primetime hours for cosmetics and food advertising, on the grounds that such sponsors would favor programming aimed at only a small segment of the population — namely, women — but networks like NBC actively pitched the same periods to advertisers courting an exclusively masculine audience.¹⁶² In their quest to divide feminine daytime from masculine primetime, the national networks also ignored research indicating that women purchased products they associated with men. A 1952 TV Sales Facts Bulletin titled “Beer Facts” noted that

¹⁶⁰ Thomas E. Coffin, “Memo from Thomas Coffin to Robert McFadyen,” December 15, 1955, Folder 10; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; Hugh Beville, Jr., “Letter from H.M. Beville, Jr. to Al Lehman,” January 8, 1954, Folder 1; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁶¹ “Memo from William Ziegler to John Lanigan,” March 10, 1955, Folder 38; Box 391; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁶² Ziegler.

“women are becoming increasingly important as beer purchasers,” either because they were buying beer for home use themselves or influencing brand selection.¹⁶³ However, because beer did not fit the era’s conception of feminine moral virtue, sales executives continued to pitch beer advertisers on male-centric programs.

Critical political economists like Eileen Meehan (2002, 2003) have demonstrated how broadcasters and advertisers have historically prioritized upscale white male viewers during primetime hours. These men represented a small subsection of the actual viewing public but, because they continue to earn the highest incomes, broadcasters and advertisers assumed – and continue to assume – that men have more disposable income to spend on advertised products.¹⁶⁴ Major advertisers like Colgate, which maintained enough clout to have more say in their primetime programming, did prioritize appealing to women. However, their internal communications expressed hesitation at being found out. One early advice guide for writers of the company’s flagship *Colgate Theater* (NBC TV 1950) anthology program indicated that “in choosing between two stories, one with a strong appeal to the man of the house, the other with a strong appeal to the lady of the house, it is likely that our preference would be for the latter.”¹⁶⁵ Colgate executives’ passive language created rhetorical distance between the company and its desire to

¹⁶³ “Beer Facts,” March 25, 1952, Folder 9; Box 221; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁶⁴ Eileen R. Meehan, “Why We Don’t Count: The Commodity Audience,” in *Connections: A Broadcast Reader*, ed. Michele Hilmes (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 63–82; Eileen R. Meehan, “Gendering the Commodity Audience: Critical Media Research, Feminism, and Political Economy,” in *Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media*, ed. Eileen R. Meehan and Ellen Riordan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 20B9–22.

¹⁶⁵ “The Colgate Theatre: A Memorandum for Adapters” (William Esty Company, Inc, n.d.), Folder 4; Box 5; Lawrence Klee Papers, 1936-1957; Collection Number 10049, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

attract female consumers. Likewise, even when female stars headlined primetime spectacles, NBC did not promote them to the same extent that they promoted male talent. Dinah Shore was especially vociferous in expressing her disappointment with what she saw as lackluster promotion of her 1954 primetime program for Chevrolet.¹⁶⁶

In their enthusiasm to court working men, broadcasters ignored working women almost completely. When one unnamed client requested data on unmarried women's car purchases, NBC Research Director Thomas Coffin offered to cobble together data on family car purchases from *TV's Daytime Profile* and a study of *Tonight's* audience.¹⁶⁷ This lack of data makes it clear that the network did not imagine unmarried working women living outside the family circle. This was partly because they considered women who worked outside the home — and especially unmarried women — a negligible economic force. As feminist historians and critical political economists continue to remind us, single working women still earn less than their male counterparts, making them a less desirable target for advertisers seeking a stable and lucrative consumer base of frequent, high-volume consumers.¹⁶⁸ Postwar working women certainly did have lower incomes than men, but their numbers and confidence were growing. 40% of single women worked outside the home in the 1920s and, while most white women continued to leave the workforce upon marriage, this work experience taught many that

¹⁶⁶ Henry Jaffe, "Letter from Henry Jaffe to Thomas McAvity," October 11, 1954, Folder 10; Box 137; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁶⁷ Coffin, "Memo from Thomas Coffin to Robert McFadyen."

¹⁶⁸ Meehan, "Gendering the Commodity Audience"; Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

they could find financial security without a man.¹⁶⁹ Between 1920 and 1940, the divorce rate nearly doubled, mostly due to women’s increased comfort with initiating the proceedings to escape unsatisfying marriages.¹⁷⁰ Still, while the networks acknowledged women’s growing economic power during the war, they appear to have believed those women and their consumer power were successfully re-absorbed into patriarchal family structures after their men came home. Again, this was a faulty assumption. After a brief postwar dip, the number of working women increased throughout the 1950s. In 1950, 43.9% of women between 16 and 24, and 33.9% of all women over 16, worked outside the home.¹⁷¹ By 1960, slightly fewer young women worked, but the number of working women in older age brackets had increased across the board [see Table 1].¹⁷²

Table 1: Women’s civilian labor force participation rates between 1950 and 1970 (BLS).

Age	1950	1960	1970
Total	33.9%	37.7%	43.3%
16 to 24	43.9%	42.8%	51.3%
25 to 34	34.0%	36.0%	45.0%
35 to 44	39.1%	43.4%	51.1%
45 to 54	37.9%	49.9%	54.4%
55 to 64	27.0%	37.2%	43.0%
65 and older	9.7%	10.8%	9.7%

¹⁶⁹ Christina Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women’s Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 112.

¹⁷⁰ Simmons, 112.

¹⁷¹ Mitra Toossi, “A Century of Change: The U.S. Labor Force, 1950-2050,” *Monthly Labor Review*, May 2002, 22.

¹⁷² Toossi, 22.

Despite clear evidence that women, and especially young women, were earning — and likely spending — money, broadcasters designed their surveys to prioritize white, middle-class housewives. *TV's Daytime Profile's* survey takers were instructed to focus on women living in single-family homes or apartments, who were at home during the day. This sampling bias ignored the large numbers of single and working women living in urban boarding houses and residential hotels.¹⁷³ It also helped to guarantee survey planners' assumption that "about 85-to-90% of the 3,200 interviews" would be conducted with married housewives.¹⁷⁴ When survey takers did happen to encounter single women within larger households, they were instructed to ask a smaller subset of survey "questions pertaining to individuals which can be projected to the total adult female population," rather than the full battery of household purchasing questions.¹⁷⁵ This restricted participation implies that NBC's survey designers assumed single women would either be older or younger unmarried members of the family, whose purchases could be subsumed into the family unit, or domestic servants, whose households were less wealthy and therefore less worthy of network attention. It completely ignored the ways in which women living on their own might spend their money differently from those living with family members or employers. Research executives like Coffin spared little thought for these issues, however. Indeed, Coffin was much more concerned that *TV's Daytime Profile's* daytime sample underestimated

¹⁷³ See Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

¹⁷⁴ Bill Simmons, "Letter from Bill Simmons to Hugh Beville, Jr.," November 25, 1953, Folder 1; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁷⁵ Simmons.

men's purchases in homes where both husband and wife worked.¹⁷⁶

NBC sales executives deployed a range of research statistics, gendered arguments, and economic incentives to convince advertisers whose products they saw as female-centric to buy daytime hours. Sales strategy memos promoted daytime's lower cost per thousand viewers and increased commercial time; they even exploited confusing and misleading statistics, like the fact that the average number of female viewers per set was the same in daytime and primetime.¹⁷⁷ NBC's daytime audience was generally smaller than CBS's by the mid-1950s, but they took advantage of their lead over smaller networks like ABC and DuMont. NBC's Research and Planning Director Hugh Beville, Jr. suggested pitching NBC's daytime to ABC's primetime "sponsors who can profitably utilize a housewife audience."¹⁷⁸ The switch should be a no-brainer, he argued, because ABC's primetime audiences were smaller and research indicated that they had low recall for the names of advertisers who sponsored ABC programs on an alternating week schedule. Finally, by privileging housewives in the home, NBC ensured that their daytime audience would be composed of wealthier families that could afford to live on a single income. NBC sold the daytime television audience — and TV owners in general — as wealthier and more eager to buy than radio and magazine audiences.¹⁷⁹ Younger women, including working women and those

¹⁷⁶ Thomas E. Coffin, "Letter from Thomas E. Coffin to E.L. Deckinger," July 9, 1954, Folder 10; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁷⁷ "Daytime Television Values: Part 1," March 6, 1953, Folder 84; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁷⁸ "Memo from Hugh Beville, Jr to Robert McFadyen," January 7, 1954, Folder 30; Box 193; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁷⁹ "Television Today: Its Impact on People and Products" (NBC, July 9, 1956), Folder 17; Box 189; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

living away from their families, were much less likely to meet this description, even if they did watch television.

NBC executives worked hard to turn their data biases into a self-fulfilling prophecy, actively discouraging sponsors from pitching products to working women in primetime. In 1955, for example, sales executive Jerry D'Ablemont encouraged the TV Network sales staff to dispel cosmetic and toiletry advertisers' belief that "the working girl represents the major segment of their market – and that nighttime TV must be used to reach them."¹⁸⁰ D'Ablemont pushed salesmen to use network statistics, like the fact that housewives accounted for 62% of all cosmetics and toiletry sales, to convince sponsors like Revlon, which sponsored *Mr. & Mrs. North* in primetime in the early 1950s, that they were wasting their money appealing to working women when they could reach a much larger, more lucrative audience housewife audience during the days. Of course, this argument ignored the fact that working women bought a proportionally larger number of cosmetics, and that housewives also watched primetime television. Other NBC executives used similar tactics to convince manufacturers of canned meat, instant coffee, and other "'time-saving' products" that young housewives with growing families were their biggest potential market.¹⁸¹ The other networks joined suit, and none appeared interested in promoting their audience of working women, who internal research showed did not tend to turn on the television set until after 6pm.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ "Memo from Jerry D'Ablemont to TV Network Sales Staff," November 7, 1955, Folder 11; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁸¹ Marvin Baiman, "Memo from Marvin Baiman to Hal Smith," March 2, 1955, Folder 10; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁸² "Memo from Marvin Baiman to Bob Elrod," August 19, 1955, Folder 10; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

When advertisers insisted upon following their own internal polling data that designated working women as a valuable audience segment, NBC still tried to avoid giving them access to primetime slots. One 1953 memo encouraged sales executives to pitch early morning spot advertisements on the network-produced *Today* show. *Today*, Program Director Steve Krantz promised, would appeal “to the working girl, and the working man” through “tips on clothes, makeup, shopping, etiquette” and the news before work.¹⁸³ This pitch, which lumped working women together with men, implicitly rejected the very idea that working women might have their own unique concerns, separate from men’s, which were worth addressing. The grooming and etiquette tips that NBC offered workers in the morning might appear to be coded feminine, but magazines like *Esquire* had already done the cultural work to make appearance and consumption acceptable for men in the 1920s and 1930s, often by denigrating women’s tastes.¹⁸⁴ The networks were also quick to remind sponsors that women tended to work variable hours, and that teachers, presumably a female-heavy work force, were more likely to be home to watch daytime television during the summer.¹⁸⁵

Archival evidence indicates that broadcasters were not always so blind to women’s non-domestic interests, and especially to their interest in crime. During WWII, when male enlistment and other wartime exigencies meant that women far outnumbered men in the domestic audience, broadcasters, film studios, and other

¹⁸³ “Memo from Steve Krantz to Ted Cott,” January 20, 1953, Folder 10; Box 243; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁸⁴ Kenon Breazeale, “In Spite of Women: ‘Esquire’ Magazine and the Construction of the Male Consumer,” *Signs* 20, no. 1 (1994): 2.

¹⁸⁵ “Memo from Marvin Baiman to Ray Brosseau,” March 22, 1955, Folder 12; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

popular culture outlets actively reached out to women across their schedules. Many did so with programming that explored women's anxieties about changing gender roles and labor conditions. Some narratives even expressed limited discontent with patriarchal social structures during WWII. Studios marketed wartime and postwar film noirs like *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Out of the Past* (1947) to women through posters emphasizing romantic plots and complex female characters who broke gendered stereotypes.¹⁸⁶ Likewise, radio series like CBS prestige thriller anthology *Suspense* (1942-1962) dramatized the stories of women and men who rebelled against the period's increasingly strict gender constraints.¹⁸⁷

After the war, many radio broadcasters continued to use crime shows in general, and female-headed series in particular, to shore up ratings when they felt financially precarious. During the summers, for example, radio networks appear to have heeded research indicating that female-centric programs retained their audiences best in the summer months.¹⁸⁸ Throughout the 1940s, the major radio networks tended to promote female-headed crime and international spy thrillers, comedies, or mixes of both to sponsors who might be tempted to go on summer hiatus when ratings fell.¹⁸⁹ *Meet Miss Sherlock*, discussed in chapter six, served as a CBS summer replacement series for two

¹⁸⁶ Mary Beth Haralovich, "Selling Noir: Stars, Gender and Genre in Film Noir Posters and Publicity," in *A Companion to Film Noir*, ed. Helen Hanson and Andrew Spicer (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013), 245–63.

¹⁸⁷ Allison McCracken, "Scary Women and Scarred Men: Suspense, Gender Trouble, and Postwar Change, 1942-1950," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 183–207.

¹⁸⁸ "Memo from Marvin Baiman to John Rayel," September 29, 1953, Folder 12; Box 142; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁸⁹ Walter Scott, "Memo from Walter Scott to Walter Craig," June 6, 1950, Folder 8; Box 364; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

years. Other summertime investigative women included *Sara's Private Caper* (NBC radio, 1950), a detective parody featuring *Jack Benny* actress Sara Berner, and *Top Secret* (NBC radio, 1950) a spy series starring Hungarian film, theater, and radio actress Ilona Massey, "a bundle of blonde allure with a Hungarian accent," as a femme fatale-style spy.¹⁹⁰ Prominent year-round female detective programs like *Candy Matson* and *Defense Attorney* also debuted in the early-1950s, as radio was struggling to maintain audiences.

As NBC's mystery policy indicated, crime narratives were also an integral part of daytime soap operas. Indeed, one popular gimmick employed on multiple series was to allow the audience to act as jury for a heroine accused of murder: more than 200,000 women wrote in to acquit Bertha Schultz of *Today's Children*.¹⁹¹ In the late 1940s, audience members also found Meta Bauer of *The Guiding Light* not guilty of murdering her husband by reason of insanity.¹⁹² Other daytime soap operas dealt with crime in more sustained ways: *Kitty Keene* (1937-1941) and *Front Page Farrell* (1941-1954) both featured regular crime solving narratives, and the landmark *Perry Mason* (radio 1943-1955) spent twelve years as a CBS radio soap opera. *Perry Mason* novelist Erle Stanley Gardner reportedly hated the radio adaptation and refused to approve the soap opera version on television, but producers continued the series by changing the

¹⁹⁰ Gordon Mills, "Letter from Gordon Mills to Vinton Freedley," May 25, 1950, Folder 8; Box 364; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; John Crosby, "Girls Invade Thriller Stuff On Network," *Oakland Tribune*, July 14, 1950.

¹⁹¹ "Election Year 200,000 Votes," August 14, 1944, Folder 6; Box 220; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁹² Jim Cox, *The Great Radio Soap Operas* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), 66.

characters' names and retitling it *The Edge of Night* (1956-1984).¹⁹³ A Gardner-approved primetime drama version of *Perry Mason* finally aired in 1957.

Similarly, the early television networks were more willing to address women in primetime when they had fewer other options. Faced with CBS's ratings juggernaut, the family-friendly *I Love Lucy*, NBC considered a few female-centric programs, including audience participation programs like *Ladies Choice*.¹⁹⁴ Likewise, CBS earned critical praise for counter-programming a boxing match with "current hit movies" likely to appeal to women.¹⁹⁵ Of course, one of the key appeals of such programs was that they were cheap enough to make up for the fact that their ratings were guaranteed to be low. As I have already noted, the networks were also more likely to consider female-centric programs – and especially programs featuring female crime fighters – during the summer months, when ratings dropped and many major advertisers put their programs on hiatus or sought cheaper summer replacements. However, by the mid-1950s, the only television broadcasters who appeared willing to take a risk on investigative women were the independent stations that kept *Decoy*'s Casey Jones and *Mr. & Mrs. North*'s Pam North on the air in syndication throughout the 1950s.

Aside from these notable exceptions, the postwar period was marked by hardening lines dividing feminine daytime and masculine primetime. Women were re-constructed as a niche audience whose potentially destabilizing interest in gender

¹⁹³ Cox, 171.

¹⁹⁴ "Letter from Wilbur Stark to Charles Barry," July 7, 1953, Folder 13; Box 369; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁹⁵ "Tele Topics," *Radio-Television Daily*, August 13, 1954, Folder 72; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

equality and the right to work outside the home were safely, if incompletely, re-confined within the domesticated boundaries of the home and daytime broadcast schedules. At the same time, broadcasters reinforced the idea that male experiences were a universal norm to which everyone could relate. Throughout all of these debates over when and how broadcasters should appeal to women, of course, “women” meant white women. White women may have been categorized as a niche, daytime audience, but television broadcasters still acknowledged their existence.¹⁹⁶ However, while the early postwar radio and television networks were ambivalent about their reliance on white women, they largely disregarded their Black female audiences altogether. Kathy M. Newman (2000) argues that the networks left Black listeners behind when they shifted the bulk of their operations from radio to television.¹⁹⁷ The class and racial biases inherent in ratings systems meant that the Black audience went under-measured, even as wages rose after WWII.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, even as struggling radio networks and independent stations reached out to Black audiences to replace white listeners, station programmers continued to prioritize white ears and pocketbooks. Many programs that were ostensibly created for Black women to listen to while they worked as domestics also hoped to reel in those women’s white employers.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Meehan, “Gendering the Commodity Audience,” 216.

¹⁹⁷ Kathy M. Newman, “The Forgotten Fifteen Million: Black Radio, the ‘Negro Market’ and the Civil Rights Movement,” *Radical History Review* 76 (2000): 117.

¹⁹⁸ Newman, 121.

¹⁹⁹ Newman, 131.

The Fine Line Between Women and Children

In the same way that postwar radio programmers were torn between appealing to the Black audience they knew existed and the white audience they craved, postwar television executives were often inclined to prioritize children's programming interests over their mothers'. Network executives' specific reasons for programming children's fare during women's daytime hours varied, but most cited some combination of children's growing importance in postwar social and economic life and women's roles as nurturers. At their most altruistic, NBC executives like Lud Simmel, Manager of TV and Radio Co-op Sales, suggested that daytime children's shows like *Ding Dong School* (1952-1956) would distract children too young for school and keep them "out of the way while the housework is being done."²⁰⁰ Others encouraged children to harass their mothers into buying specific brands and/or products.²⁰¹ Still others saw the growing baby boom as an opportunity to cultivate an even more valuable future market of brand-loyal consumers. Regardless of their individual aims, network executives' decisions to merge programming for women and children helped to reinforce the broader cultural tendency to link – or even subordinate – adult women's emotional needs and economic importance to those of their children.

In practice, women and children were frequently imagined as a combined market. Indeed, women were frequently expected to watch material that was produced

²⁰⁰ Lud Simmel, "Memo from Lud Simmel to Charles Barry," January 22, 1953, Folder 48; Box 367; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁰¹ Advertising Research Foundation, Inc, "Minutes of the Meeting of the Technical Committee of the Advertising Research Foundation," December 17, 1953, Folder 1; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

with children in mind: early 1950s TV programs like *The Herb Sheldon Show*, which aired during the period when NBC executives believed school children would be home for lunch, featured substantial segments aimed at drawing in a young audience; the “adult portion of the show” began “after the kids go back to school,” when their mother would presumably regain control of the television set.²⁰² Weekend series were also aimed at a family audience that presumably included women and children, but rarely men. A 1952 fact sheet for NBC radio’s *The Adventures of Archie Andrews* promoted a Saturday morning audience “composed of 38% women, 49% youngsters, and 13% men” to advertisers looking to catch “the family just before weekend shopping.”²⁰³ The fact that Archie was a teen comedy based on the long-running comic book series apparently did nothing to diminish his “universal appeal” to grown women as well as children.²⁰⁴ What exactly the women got out of such programming was never really discussed. Instead, executives assumed that mothers would listen or watch whatever their children chose.

This had the effect of increasing surveillance of women’s programs and limiting the range of stories programmed for female audiences to those topics that were also appropriate for children. Certainly, some women did get something out of programs like *The Adventures of Archie Andrews* (NBC Blue/MBS/NBC, 1943-1953). Beyond their entertainment value, comedy series could address social inequalities in indirect ways

²⁰² “Memo from Dick Pack to Steve Krantz,” April 29, 1953, Folder 10; Box 243; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁰³ “An NBC Radio Packaged Program: The Adventures of Archie Andrews,” 1952, Folder 29; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁰⁴ “An NBC Radio Packaged Program: The Adventures of Archie Andrews.”

that were more likely to make it past media censors. Media scholars like Erin Lee Mock (2011) have shown how postwar family sitcoms on television used comedy to speak to women and children as similarly situated and subjugated groups within the patriarchy. More specifically, Mock argues that jokes about wives and children's terror over being spanked by their husbands and fathers subtly highlighted the larger threat of violence that underpinned even the kindest of fathers' paternalistic authority on popular series like *I Love Lucy* and *Leave It to Beaver*.²⁰⁵ NBC's program department seemed attuned to *Archie*'s potential to undermine patriarchal family structures: in one 1952 memo, Program Department Director John Cleary fretted that one father figure on the series was "beginning to sound more like a buffoon than a father."²⁰⁶ Such treatment might be acceptable for programs aimed at adults, Cleary argued, but anything that undermined paternal claims to authority must be eliminated on a Saturday morning series aimed at children. Of course, this also limited women's access to such representations and undermined their potential solidarity with youth.

Despite comedy's transgressive potential, however, the fact remains that many felt that women needed almost as much — if not more — supervision than their children. Vocal misogynist critics like Philip Wylie argued that women were either too immature or too conniving to be trusted to nurture the nation's youth without significant masculine supervision.²⁰⁷ Many of the concerned citizens who complained about TV

²⁰⁵ Erin Lee Mock, "The Horror of 'Honey, I'm Home!': The Perils of Postwar Family Love in the Domestic Sitcom," *Film & History* 41, no. 2 (2011): 37.

²⁰⁶ John Cleary, "Memo from John Cleary to Ken MacGregor," February 13, 1952, Folder 29; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁰⁷ Michael Rogin, "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies," *Representations* 6 (1984): 7.

programming to the FCC and networks agreed that women would become corrupted by external – likely Communist – forces if they were left to control their own media diet.²⁰⁸ Even worse, unwholesome media might help cold, ambitious, and domineering Communist women to knowingly lead their witless husbands and sons astray.²⁰⁹ The only way to ensure that women remained fit for motherhood was to monitor their program intake and restrict it to the “family type” of programs that programmers assumed would “appeal very much to a [normal, healthy] womens [sic] audience.”²¹⁰

As I have already noted, NBC’s short-lived radio crime policy similarly sought to guarantee that women’s soap operas would be appropriate for the full family audience. No comparable restrictions applied to the late night hours, which the networks assumed men dominated. The network’s infantilizing attitude toward women did not mean that no radio crime programs aimed at a female audience. Afternoon crime dramas like *The Adventures of Sam Spade* (1946-1951) carried ads pitching sponsor Wildroot’s hair tonics to girls and mothers, who they hoped would purchase them for their husbands, sons, and selves. One representative pitch tried to cover all its bases by assuring listeners that “Smart girls use Wildroot Cream Oil, too – for quick good grooming and to relieve dryness between permanents. Mothers say it’s grand for training children’s hair.”²¹¹ However, as we will see in later chapters, these series were

²⁰⁸ Anne Gessler, “Dust Mop or Mic? Women’s Utopian Border-Crossings in Cold War Ham Radio,” *Radio Journal* 15, no. 2 (2017): 279–98.

²⁰⁹ Kathryn Olmsted, “Blond Queens, Red Spiders, and Neurotic Old Maids: Gender and Espionage in the Early Cold War,” *Intelligence and National Security* 19, no. 1 (2004): 78–94.

²¹⁰ “Letter from E.R. Vadeboncoeur to Charles ‘Bud’ Barry,” February 17, 1953, Folder 48; Box 367; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²¹¹ “The Adventures of Sam Spade (The Caper With Ten Clues)” (Radio Script, n.d.), Folder 3, Box 2, Bill Spier and June Havoc Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

more likely to feature women in subservient, passive, and/or comic roles, while male detectives did the difficult work of solving crimes and passing judgement on criminals. Social pressure to assert that crime was always reprehensible also prevented such series from exploring the gendered and economic inequalities that might drive an otherwise normal man – much less a woman – to commit a crime in the first place. While most radio series about specific PIs avoided such issues, they did receive fuller treatment in evening crime anthologies like *Suspense*, which spent most of its radio run in timeslots ranging from 8:00 to 9:30 pm. This scheduling supposedly ensured that children would be safely asleep. However, as multiple audience members pointed out when they wrote in to complain about such series, that was by no means guaranteed.

Unlike their hyper-gendered approach to the adult female audience, broadcasters generally avoided gendering the youth audience, despite evidence that girls and boys listened to radio differently.²¹² Of course, the lack of assigned gender usually indicates that young audiences were imagined as masculine, just as the lack of assigned race usually indicates that all audiences were imagined as white. Historian Lisa Jacobson (2004) has shown how radio fan clubs tied to children's afternoon serials were much more successful in attracting boys than girls.²¹³ Some advertisers attempted to attract more girls to their clubs, but few took the advice of studies that advised creating programs more explicitly directed at girls. Instead, advertisers were more likely to add

²¹² "Memo from EF England to C Hammond," January 28, 1948, Folder 66; Box 585; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²¹³ Lisa Jacobson, *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 196.

female sidekick characters to serials like *Terry and the Pirates*, *The Green Hornet*, and *Dick Tracy*; *Little Orphan Annie*'s fan club was the only one to attract a significant number of female members.²¹⁴ This dearth of girl-centric children's programs is especially remarkable because so many of the major serials were produced by and for the same companies that produced soap operas for women.²¹⁵ However, it did give young women early training in relating to the male characters available to them in most primetime programming.

Despite their apparent lack of interest in actually appealing to young girls, it is clear that advertisers and broadcasters were waking up to the utility of cultivating young female consumers early. Advertising research affirmed that most regular users of toiletries and cosmetics began using said products between the ages of 15 and 24, with a further 20% beginning before they reached 14.²¹⁶ Early advertisements for the NBC morning lineup featured an image of a housewife and her young daughter alongside a narrative of the programs they watched together, implying that the young girl would eventually follow in her mother's footsteps and become part of the next generation of daytime viewers.²¹⁷ While the networks took some steps to evaluate their younger female audiences during the daytime, their efforts were inconsistent: *TV's Daytime Profile* measured the ages of young girls in the *Home* audience, but failed to collect

²¹⁴ Jacobson, 195.

²¹⁵ For a discussion of the radio production empire built by Frank and Anne Hummert, see Jim Cox, *Frank and Anne Hummert's Radio Factory: The Programs and Personalities of Broadcasting's Most Prolific Producers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003).

²¹⁶ "Research and Planning Bulletin #40," July 20, 1953, Folder 84; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²¹⁷ "Memo from John Porter to NBC-TV Network Sales Staff," March 21, 1955, Folder 1; Box 389; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

coherent data on women under 18.²¹⁸

In 1955, NBC President Sylvester “Pat” Weaver agreed to meet with former *Seventeen* editor Hilda Slautterback, who wrote to pitch her services in selling television to teen girls. Slautterback argued that she had “established pretty conclusively for our advertisers that teen-agers were not watching television” while editing the teen girls’ magazine.²¹⁹ Slautterback argued that teen girls were a vital demographic for television, especially as they married younger. However, the networks should also value teenagers on their own merits. Slautterback attached an article that she’d recently written for *Jewelry Magazine*, a trade publication, in which she argued that “Teen agers are old enough to buy and there's every reason to cultivate the jewelry habit in them while they're becoming consumers.”²²⁰ Evidence that teen girls watched television differently from boys seems to have had little impact on the number of programs aimed at them.²²¹ This did have the benefit of delaying the point at which teen girls were explicitly tracked away from crime and adventure narratives and into romance, but it also meant that they had few role models explicitly aimed at them.

Intriguingly, the conflation of women’s and children’s shows did occasionally mean that children had more access to progressive representations of women in their

²¹⁸ “Memo from Marvin Baiman to Norton Gretzler,” March 1, 1955, Folder 12; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; “Age Distribution of Toiletry Buyers,” May 16, 1955, Folder 10; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²¹⁹ “Letter from Hilda Slautterback to Sylvester ‘Pat’ Weaver,” July 12, 1955, Folder 8; Box 375; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²²⁰ Slautterback.Slautterback.

²²¹ “The Teen-Ager and Television” (Advertest Research, September 1955), Folder 42; Box 193; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

early lives. *Mr. & Mrs. North* did not last long on primetime network television, perhaps because its comedic approach to crime was superseded by a more serious, law-and-order style in the decade after WWII. Network executives like Helffrich appear to have dismissed the program as either a childish fantasy or a ridiculous waste of time. In 1953, Helffrich advised rejecting the series, which was then proposed for a child-friendly Sunday afternoon time slot, because it was “real corn” that would nevertheless “create suspense and anxiety” in children – and therefore inspire public relations-damaging complaints from parents.²²² Helffrich does not appear to have based his conviction on any objective measures, but rather on his own “personal opinion...that the material lays a complete egg.”²²³ As audience survey data showed, however, the Norths’ humor and focus on interpersonal relationships were the very things that attracted audience members.²²⁴ Despite Helffrich’s objections, the Norths enjoyed a long afterlife in syndication on independent stations or affiliates filling non-network time. There, it doubtless contributed to the conflicting, and even subversive messages that encouraged many young baby boomer women to rebel against the passive gender roles that they saw their mothers embodying.²²⁵ One 1957 poll found that women ranked the Norths third among their favorite syndicated programs; men ranked it fourth and

²²² Stockton Helffrich, “Memo from Stockton Helffrich to Charles Barry,” September 15, 1953, Folder 8; Box 370; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²²³ Helffrich.

²²⁴ “Study of Television Mystery Programs.”

²²⁵ Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female With the Mass Media* (Times Books, 1995).

children ranked it seventh.²²⁶ As late as 1959, *Sponsor* magazine promoted the series as one of a number of programs that remained consistently popular with the child audience.²²⁷

If Not Crime, Then What WILL Women Watch?

As we will see in later chapters, network broadcasters' gender and racial biases skewed the types of programs that were scheduled during primetime hours. For example, despite its enduring radio popularity, both CBS and NBC were less than enthusiastic about scheduling the television version of *Mr. & Mrs. North* during primetime hours. The woman-friendly crime series was initially sponsored by Colgate, a high-volume toiletries company that retained enough industrial pull to demand a primetime slot despite its largely female consumer-base. However, when Colgate re-focused its spending on variety programs, the Norths' new sponsors, Revlon cosmetics and Congoleum flooring, appear to have had difficulty convincing any network to give it an evening slot. CBS was considerably more supportive in clearing stations to carry the RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company's *Man Against Crime* (1949-1954).²²⁸ The popular crime series became one of the first on primetime network television, but it featured few female characters and its advertisements for Camel cigarettes mostly hailed male viewers. Women certainly did watch *Man Against Crime*, but it was not scheduled or produced with them in mind. Likewise, the networks were eager to be perceived as

²²⁶ "Pulse Film Ratings for January," *The Billboard*, April 13, 1957.

²²⁷ "Film-Scope," *Sponsor*, October 24, 1959.

²²⁸ Lawrence Klee, "A Brief Review of Camel Television Programming," n.d., Folder 3; Box 5; Lawrence M. Klee Papers, 1936-1957; Collection Number 10049, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

racially inclusive, but few were willing to put in the work to achieve real change.

Indeed, in many ways, mid- to-late-1950s television programs were far less liberal and inclusive than their radio progenitors, or even television programs from the late-1940s and early-1950s. Nowhere was this more true than women's roles in crime dramas.

Even as supporting characters, women were a significant part of postwar radio crime dramas. As I argue in chapter five, many radio producers and writers considered a female love interest or secretary who assisted her detective as vital for any program hoping to attract a female audience. However, most of the male detectives who moved from radio to television did so without the female companions who presumably functioned as points of identification for female audiences: in cases like *Richard Diamond*, Diamond's long-term girlfriend, Helen, was cut from the cast. These trends also ignored clear evidence that women enjoyed crime narratives throughout the broadcast schedule. From soap operas' enduringly popular criminal story arcs, to primetime crime dramas' continued ratings success, it should have been clear to networks that crime stories were a popular and relevant way to tell women's stories to a mass audience. Instead, the national networks focused on family-friendly narratives that reinforced women's place within the home. Again, they backed this decision up with unreliable research into women's program interests.

As Wang has shown, the early radio networks had reason to distrust early audience research. Surveys conducted in the 1920s and early-1930s were often flawed and produced inconsistent data.²²⁹ However, as survey techniques improved through the

²²⁹ Wang, "Convenient Fictions," 80.

1930s, research executives shifted from arguing that their data was faulty to accusing survey respondents of lying.²³⁰ Many went beyond taking audience responses with a healthy grain of salt and argued that self-reported viewing and purchasing could not be trusted because respondents were unreliable, fickle, and prone to social acceptability biases. In one particularly telling example, NBC research supervisor Jack Landis provided *Home* producer Richard Linkroum with a ranked list of women's program topic preferences drawn from *TV's Daytime Profile*. Despite the hours NBC's research department had spent calibrating the study for maximal accuracy, Landis warned that the 46% of women who reported finding "News & Current Events" programming (ranked second in the list of women's overall program priorities) "especially interesting" had only done so "because it sounds intelligent."²³¹ At the same time, he overemphasized the conclusions programmers could draw from women's interest in other, more stereotypically domestic topics. Despite the fact that women ranked News & Current Events (46%), Sewing & Needlework (43%), and Fashion & Clothes (41%) relatively high among their program interests, Landis seized on topics that would generate more profit for network advertisers. Arguing that "the daytime audience has relatively high interest in cooking and baking [60%], home decoration [40%], make-up and personal appearance [32%] and new housekeeping aids [31%]," Landis concluded that was reasonable to assume that women's other interests were similarly domestic. Indeed, he even went so far as to argue that unsurveyed topics like "Baby and Child Care" would

²³⁰ Wang, 80.

²³¹ "Memo from Jack Landis to Richard Linkroum."

“certainly have ranked high[er than Cooking and Baking] since 64% of the daytime TV homes contained children.”²³²

Landis’s presumption that women would gravitate to domestic programs recurs in countless independent and network-originated proposals for daytime television shows with titles like *Anything For Baby*, a 1954 series that purported to play on “one of the strongest appeals for women...the desire of all women to look at babies, and listen about baby problems.”²³³ NBC ultimately passed on *Anything For Baby* because program executives agreed they had “the matter in hand” with planned baby-related segments on the NBC-produced *Home*, but they agreed with the assertion that “most women want to have babies, even if they don't have them.”²³⁴ Other daytime suggestions played to women’s stereotypical interest in beauty, romance, and keeping their husbands healthy.²³⁵ Even when it came to news programming, women’s options were limited by broadcasters’ domestic biases: In one 1951 pitch for a midday news program, NBC VP for News and Public Affairs Rud Lawrence envisioned interviews with “Cabinet members (and their wives),” “stories about the food situation...restrictions on household goods and appliances...the various welfare activities of the government...women in the Armed Services.”²³⁶ It would, of course, be hosted by a man who would be able to

²³² Landis.

²³³ “Memo from Jack Rayel to Richard Pinkham and Mike Dann,” November 13, 1954, Folder 3; Box 376; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²³⁴ “Memo from Jack Rayel to Richard Pinkham and Mike Dann.”

²³⁵ “Letter from Joseph Green to Jerry Chester,” September 2, 1954, Folder 31; Box 374; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; Ruth West, “Letter from Ruth West to Pat Weaver,” January 21, 1954, Folder 17; Box 375; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²³⁶ Rud Lawrence, “Memo from Rud Lawrence to TV Network Sales Staff,” October 30, 1951, Folder 2; Box 571; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical

explain the issues to female audiences and teach women how complex global issues applied to their lives at home.

Television historian Marsha Cassidy (2005) argues that the early television networks, and especially NBC, experimented with a broad range of daytime genres in the first half of the 1950s. These included highbrow talk shows, vaudeville-style variety series that echoed primetime spectaculars, dramatic series, and even a live anthology series that replicated the network's Broadway-style primetime productions.²³⁷ These early television programs featured male hosts, as well as hostesses who projected a range of feminine personae, including the sophisticated and urbane Arlene Francis, sexually and politically forthright Faye Emerson, and patriotic radio icon Kate Smith.²³⁸ Many fit in with NBC President Sylvester "Pat" Weaver's "enlightenment through exposure" initiative, which countered criticism of the new medium's excessive commercialism by promising to integrate "informational and cultural material into programs in all network time periods."²³⁹ Most "enlightenment material," a category that encompassed everything from operatic arias to political discussions, was integrated into news programs and daytime variety shows like *The Kate Smith Hour*, though the networks also emphasized the occasional serious storyline in dramatic and comedy programs as proof of their impact.²⁴⁰

Society.

²³⁷ Cassidy, *What Women Watched*.

²³⁸ Cassidy; Christine Becker, *It's the Pictures That Got Small: Hollywood Film Stars on 1950s Television* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

²³⁹ "Sarnoff New NBC President; Weaver Takes Board Chair," *Broadcasting/Telecasting*, December 12, 1955.

²⁴⁰ "Responsibility Report, January 1st-January 31st," February 9, 1953, Folder 10; Box 243; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

As the 1950s progressed, however, daytime television's feminine representations narrowed. Despite their early variety, late-1950s television women were increasingly expected to embody a type of feminine glamour that was carefully calibrated to appear effortless, relatable, and completely authentic.²⁴¹ Of course, this authentic femininity could only be achieved with help from a long list of advertised products, including cosmetics, fashionable clothes, and the household appliances that simultaneously alleviated women's domestic burdens and raised the standards to which their household labor was held. This style of femininity was embodied by women like *Mr. & Mrs. North* star Barbara Britton, who continued to deliver televised ads for Revlon through the 1960s. Britton became one of the "best-paid 'salesgirls'" on television by 1956 for her ability to speak to viewers about lipsticks as though she were simply chatting with her girlfriends at home.²⁴² Women like Emerson, who was too sexual and politically active, and Smith, who was too physically large to meet the delicate feminine ideal, were kicked off the air by the mid-1950s. Their more complex discussions of political issues were largely replaced by quiz shows and soap operas by the 1960s, reaffirming the networks' commitment to selling the largest volume of products to the largest number of people.

Broadcasters' increasingly gendered control over television schedules did more than simply segregate women's issues into daytime ghettos. By determining what topics would appear on the air and the manner in which they were presented, broadcasters

²⁴¹ Cassidy, *What Women Watched*, 22.

²⁴² Cassidy, 23.

helped to define the proper interests of the so-called average American woman – and, indeed, to define the average American woman herself as a domestic creature who was primarily concerned with private family matters. However, it is important to remember that this average woman was herself a construct, and a conflicted one at that.

Broadcasters were constantly torn between emphasizing their daytime audience's quality to advertisers — that is, their willingness to buy advertised products — and their quality to regulators — their intelligence and discernment.²⁴³ In the early television period, the national networks were especially concerned with emphasizing the latter definition as a way to differentiate the new medium from negative caricatures of radio's excessive commercialism. Instead of the passive, overly emotional, and gullible mass of soap opera addicts who supposedly tuned in to daytime radio, network executives argued that their daytime television audience was filled with well-educated upper- and middle-class women.²⁴⁴

Still, these imaginary wealthy, educated women's interests remained domestic. Programming that fell outside of that scope, like the news, was viewed as inherently suspect and difficult to sell to advertisers. This did not necessarily stop network executives from trying to pitch it, however. Advertisers might favor homemaking shows and quiz programs that provided uncomplicated platforms for product promotions, but, as executives like Rud Lawrence acknowledged, news did have a place on daytime. Despite its association with the re-masculinized public sphere, news programs like

²⁴³ Philip W. Sewell, *Television in the Age of Radio: Modernity, Imagination, and the Making of a Medium* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 96.

²⁴⁴ Wang, "The Case of the Radio-Active Housewife," 352.

Lawrence's 1951 proposal had the joint advantage of providing cheap programming and bolstering the network's public service bona fides. At the same time, they destabilized the gendered value judgements on which postwar ideas of quality television were built, wherein women were defined as a quality audience because of their apparent susceptibility to advertising messages, while men were seen as quality viewers because of their elevated interests. Lawrence himself appears to have realized this, because his proposal concluded with two carrots for wary advertisers: the program was cheap, and its sponsors would be the first to "stak[e] out a news program in NBC's daytime schedule."²⁴⁵ These appeals to potential sponsors' thrift and sense of prestige highlight the networks' desire to present themselves as the ultimate creators of quality, whether that be by providing intelligent programming in primetime or by educating women about supposedly masculine, public issues during the day. One area which the networks studiously avoided was educating their masculine, quality audience about women's private, domestic issues. That simply would not have been proper!

Hidden in Plain View: Women in Primetime

As Jason Mittell (2004) argues, genres function as cultural categories that ascribe extratextual meaning to individual texts.²⁴⁶ NBC's scheduling decisions effectively determined who would listen to their programs and how they would be viewed. This had been true on radio as well: despite the fact that it started life as a primetime serial, *Clara, Lu 'n' Em* became a female-centric soap opera when it was moved to fill out a

²⁴⁵ Lawrence.

²⁴⁶ Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), xiv.

block of newly developed female-centric daytime serials 1932. Meanwhile, similarly situated programs like *The Goldbergs* and *Amos 'n' Andy* became general audience comedies because they remained in primetime and were expanded to the half-hour weekly format we now recognize as the sitcom. By the mid-1930s, serials had become soap operas, and they dominated the networks' afternoon schedules. Of course, audiences did occasionally manage to influence this process. Many working women objected in 1957 when *One Man's Family* (1932-1959), a popular half-hour weekly radio program that had aired in the evenings since the 1930s, was moved to the afternoon and converted to a daily serial format.²⁴⁷ Reports of more than “2,073 vehement denunciations,” including the intelligence that “one rabid listener had resorted to taking her portable radio to her company's Ladies Lounge at 2:30 each afternoon,” encouraged the network to consider airing the program in the evening as well as the afternoon.²⁴⁸ However, as the network's initial decision to move the series to daytime demonstrates, executives were increasingly invested in drawing a strong line between masculine primetime and feminine daytime. As the 1950s progressed, primetime crime programs, along with their inherent debates of law, order, justice, and violence, were increasingly defined in resolutely masculine, patriarchal terms. At the same time, women were pushed to the margins of the programs and the audience in general.

Given the country's Cold War emphasis on law and order policing, it feels appropriate that one of the most successful postwar TV crime series – and the first that

²⁴⁷ Dunning, *On the Air*, 514.

²⁴⁸ “Memo from Kathryn Cole to Mike Horton,” August 14, 1957, Wisconsin Historical Society.

NBC proactively decided to transfer from radio to television – was *Dragnet* (NBC radio 1949-1957, TV 1951-1959). Jack Webb’s iconic police procedural departed from most of its contemporaries by eschewing their focus on individual detectives’ personal lives, romantic and/or emotional entanglements within and outside of cases, and sensationalized violence or sexuality. Instead, *Dragnet* centered on a pair of no-nonsense detectives following strict, unglamorous police procedures to solve crimes based on real case files from the Los Angeles Police Department. The program marked a stylistic return to the stripped-down, realistic tone set by 1930s crime dramas like *Gang Busters* (1935-1957) and *Calling All Cars* (1933-1939).²⁴⁹ And while *Dragnet* did portray social problems like juvenile delinquency, adultery, and drugs, it did so in a more muted, contained manner than its contemporaries.²⁵⁰ Where popular thriller series like *Suspense* might make room for audiences to sympathize with criminals who had understandable difficulties fitting in with modern society, *Dragnet* unequivocally condemned them as diseased aberrations. Perhaps most importantly of all, the series presented crime as a manageable problem: even if the social ills that caused it could never be fully eradicated, police could and would work to mitigate its impact on American citizens.

Women did appear in *Dragnet*, but they were always at the margins. Even as witnesses or victims, their stories had to pass through Webb’s Sgt. Friday before they could be translated into concrete, official action. This echoed the idealized image that

²⁴⁹ Kathleen Battles, *Calling All Cars: Radio Dragnets and the Technology of Policing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 45.

²⁵⁰ Mittell, *Genre and Television*, 138.

broadcasters had of their primetime audience:

Most of the families are either watching television [on Sunday evening] or looking forward to watching television...the atmosphere is calm, quiet, relaxed, peaceful, informal...Mother may be finishing the dishes; other members of the family might be puttering around with some odd jobs; the younger children are being put to bed. But essentially, the family is peaceful and prepared to sit down and watch television for an appreciable stretch of time. In the overwhelming majority of families, the entire family watches together..²⁵¹

This image of familial peace and cohesion might well have come from any number of network propaganda advertisements that sought to integrate radio, and then television, into the fabric of daily life. Beyond demonstrating how the new media could be smoothly incorporated into family life, images of family togetherness also helped quell criticism of broadcasting's potentially negative impacts by promoting the media's ability to bring families together within the private home.²⁵² This image left little room for programs that questioned the naturalness of conservative postwar gender norms. Finally, by positioning women in the kitchen, distractedly watching while doing the dishes, it downplayed the idea that women were paying enough attention to be worth addressing. This attitude was belied by the fact that NBC promoted *Dragnet* during daytime soap operas, but not vice versa.²⁵³

If the first major consequence of the national networks' view of women as domestic was that they restricted the viewpoints women could see in daytime to domestic issues, the second – and more pernicious – consequence was that they

²⁵¹ “Family Attitudes to the ‘Steve Allen’ and ‘Ed Sullivan’ Shows,” January 1957, 7–8, Folder 47; Box 142; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁵² Shaun Moores, “‘The Box on the Dresser’: Memories of Early Radio and Everyday Life,” *Media, Culture & Society* 10 (1988): 25; Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 3.

²⁵³ Raymond Johnson, “Letter from Raymond Johnson to Jean Boutyette,” November 3, 1954, Folder 12; Box 137; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

restricted the views of femininity visible to the rest of the audience. Scholars like Jason Loviglio (2005) have argued that the networks ghettoized women's issues by confining female-centric programming to daytime.²⁵⁴ While it is true that this restriction did allow some limited room for producers to explore (white) women's issues with less judgment from male tastemakers – especially on radio – it also excluded women's concerns from larger cultural conversations.²⁵⁵ Program titles like *For Women Only*, the name assigned to a late-1960s panel show focusing on women's medical, legal, and sexual concerns, further reinforced the assumption that women's issues were only interesting to women.²⁵⁶ NBC forced similar contemporary programs like a series of *Purex Specials for Women* from their primetime slots and into daytime because executives doubted they could garner “a substantial nighttime rating.”²⁵⁷ Such naming and scheduling decisions gave women's issues an aura of danger and threat, as though they were too sensational, shocking, or dirty to be consumed by the general public. This quarantine-style approach built on a long history of secluding so-called women's issues within the home, or during daytime broadcasts, where more responsible, sensible taste-makers could revile and castigate them from afar without engaging in their feminized explorations of emotional relationships.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public*, xxv.

²⁵⁵ See Loviglio, chap. 3. For a discussion of how religious and political groups have mobilized ideas of morality and taste to restrict free discussion women's issues on daytime, see Jennifer Hyland Wang, “‘Everything's Coming Up Rosie': Empower America, Rosie O'Donnell, and the Construction of Daytime Reality,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 45 (2000): 20–35.

²⁵⁶ “‘For Women Only' with Aline Saarinen” (National Broadcasting Company, 1967), Folder 29; Box 221; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁵⁷ “Memo from David Levy to Walter Scott,” October 19, 1960, Folder 7; Box 150; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁵⁸ Wang, “Convenient Fictions,” 286.

If network executives treated women's issues as vaguely dirty, they treated some products aimed at female consumers as virtually obscene. This was especially true of Continuity Acceptance Manager Stockton Helffrich. Helffrich reviewed advertising copy for all network commercials, and he frequently flagged advertisements – or even product categories – that he thought might damage NBC's image as a responsible steward of the airwaves. The biggest problems Helffrich saw were excessive commercialism and sexually-tinged ad messages. The biggest offenders, at least in his mind, were advertisements for products used predominantly by women. His solution was to either move such ads – and their accompanying programming – to daytime or, if they were irredeemable, to ban them from television altogether.

As I have already noted, some major radio sponsors were able to retain primetime timeslots, despite the fact that they primarily sold products to women. These included companies like Lever Brothers, Toni Home Permanents, Colgate, and Procter & Gamble, all of which retained a significant presence through NBC's 1954 schedule.²⁵⁹ However, the network was far less accommodating to others, even those they had not directly accused of being overly commercial. In 1947, when the network was still struggling to lure advertisers to the new, untested medium, NBC rejected television advertisements from the Corset and Brassiere Association, arguing that “such a client would not be particularly helpful to television publicity’ at this stage of the game.”²⁶⁰

²⁵⁹ “NBC Standard Time Program Schedule,” September 15, 1954, Folder 13; Box 183; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁶⁰ “Summary of Commercial Copy Clearance (Central, Eastern and Western Divisions) Totals for December 1-31, 1947,” December 1947, Folder 7; Box 573; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

The network began allowing daytime advertisements for foundation garments in the 1950s, but continued to ban primetime mentions through the decade, arguing that such ads were too sexual for a general audience. NBC was also not especially welcoming to cosmetics advertisers in primetime. Despite their significant sales, companies like Max Factor's repeated requests to move their program to a late-night period seem to have fallen on deaf ears. At one point NBC executive Frank Reed commented that "if by some odd chance Max Factor were [given a time period glassware manufacturer Anchor Hocking was vacating] they should" not expect any special treatment.²⁶¹ In marked contrast, manufacturers of male-centric toiletries like Gem razor blades were welcomed in primetime and late-night.²⁶²

Conclusion: Radio (and Even Television) Need Women

The major television networks may have sidelined women within their primetime lineups, but network executives could not escape the fact that women remained crucial to the industry's success. Even as the networks transferred their energies to television in the early 1950s, they also worked to keep radio – and especially daytime radio – a viable force. In late 1954, NBC radio revamped its morning schedule in an effort to retain the female listeners that were their most loyal audience.²⁶³ The resulting program lineup, as outlined in a memo from Radio Program Manager John Cleary, acknowledged the network's desperation by providing a range of feminine voices from which women

²⁶¹ "Memo from Frank J. Reed to Edward D. Madden," April 27, 1951, Folder 2; Box 567A; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁶² "Memo from William Ziegler to John Lanigan."

²⁶³ "The Television Audience of Today: Study of Radio vs. Television" (Advertest Research, May 1949), Folder 3; Box 193; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

could choose. From 10:00 to 10:05, the network featured a sold-out segment with Mary Margaret McBride, whose authoritative but personable mix of homemaking tips, news commentary, and product promotion had been an institution on daytime radio since the 1930s.²⁶⁴ McBride was followed by 10 minutes of “inspirational talk and [advice], mostly about domestic relations” from Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. Cleary was careful to specify that this program would not be religious, though he hoped that Peale’s popularity among Protestants would attract listeners; instead it would “be based to some degree on his best selling book ‘The Power of Positive Thinking.’”²⁶⁵ *Joyce Jordan*, “a very popular and well received soap opera with a fine track record” came next, with the hope that “the girl intern” protagonist would be played by well-known actress Nancy Kelly.²⁶⁶ Another popular soap opera – *The Doctor’s Wife* – rounded out the program. Cleary argued that *The Doctor’s Wife* would pair well with *Joyce Jordan* because “the problems will be seen through the eyes of a woman who is swayed and influenced more by her emotions in dealing with sick people than one who has studied the science of medicine and must treat it from that angle.”²⁶⁷ While *The Doctor’s Wife*’s 4.8 rating did not equal the 7.7 that Cleary cited for *Joyce Jordan*, the program clearly had a dedicated fan base: when *The Doctor’s Wife* was cancelled the previous year, the network “received over 600 phone calls in New York City alone objecting to its cancellation. The mail was in

²⁶⁴ “Memo from John Cleary to John Porter,” December 16, 1954, Folder 92; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society. For a history of McBride’s radio career, see Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 276–81.

²⁶⁵ “Memo from John Cleary to John Porter.”

²⁶⁶ Cleary.

²⁶⁷ Cleary.

the thousands.”²⁶⁸ Moreover, *The Doctor’s Wife* provided a valuable example of feminine emotion to counter to *Joyce Jordan’s* depiction of a working woman.

By the late-1950s, however, the networks had transitioned their soap operas to television. Eventually, the only narrative genre remaining on American network radio was crime. Indeed, the last major programs to leave the air were *Yours Truly*, *Johnny Dollar* (CBS radio, 1949-1962) and *Suspense*, both of which ended on the same day in September 1962.²⁶⁹ Given the fact that post-television radio was increasingly identified with women in general, and older housewives in particular, it is notable that crime had such staying power. Still, it should not have been a surprise. Audience research throughout the 1950s consistently affirmed that radio crime series like *Barrie Craig* were popular with women, and especially with “older housewives.”²⁷⁰ The ratings-hungry radio networks took this knowledge to heart when they turned to female detectives programs like *Candy Matson* and *Defense Attorney* to retain audiences through the late-1940s and early-1950s. Likewise, many soap opera producers and sponsors fought to include the more explicit and sensational storylines exploring alternative visions of non-domestic femininity because they thought those would retain listeners.

Still, despite their desperation, the networks remained reluctant to fully commit to female detectives. This was partly because radio production shrank along with falling advertising revenues. Despite its local popularity, NBC cancelled *Candy Matson* in

²⁶⁸ Cleary.

²⁶⁹ Dunning, *On the Air*, 647, 742.

²⁷⁰ “Research and Planning Bulletin #60 - 1952-53 NBC Tandem Audience,” July 22, 1953, Folder 84; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

1951 because the series failed to secure a consistent sponsor. ABC replaced Mercedes McCambridge's *Defense Attorney* with cheaper and lighter musical and comedy fare by 1952. However, the fact that male detectives outlasted these women by so many years indicates broadcasters and advertisers were also more comfortable with a narrower definition of femininity – one which dictated that normal, healthy women were too innocent, morally upright, and averse to violence to enjoy crime narratives. As I argue throughout this dissertation, female detectives and other crime-curious women defied postwar feminine ideals and highlighted their constructed, artificial nature. Such representations might be worth the risk of social backlash and potentially disrupted sales in periods when audiences would accept nothing else, but they were far from the networks' first programming choice. Once they had established a secure hold over postwar television broadcasting and abandoned narrative radio programming, the major networks renewed their commitment to the domestic feminine ideal. As chapter two notes, network executives did not build this conception of femininity on their own. Indeed, many women wrote to the FCC and networks to complain about crime series' harmful impact on women and children. However, those women also argued for more educational programming, a request the networks repeatedly ignored. The networks played a pivotal role in spreading and naturalizing representations of femininity that denied women's right to agency and public authority.

NBC used *TV's Daytime Public* and similar studies to create and promote a vision of the female broadcast audience that centered young, white housewives with large families and higher disposable incomes. At the same time, the networks routinely

discounted the value of other types of women, especially working women, who were mostly excluded from the daytime audience.²⁷¹ And even as the networks awoke to the importance of the \$14 billion African American market in the early 1950s, they did very little to reach out to Black audiences, meaning that Black women remained as marginalized as audience members as they were within network programs.²⁷² Instead, the networks worked with advertisers to appeal to women through daytime schedules constructed around programs addressing white housewives and their children. Primetime time slots were reserved for programs that appealed to a broader family or masculine audience, leaving women to find themselves at the margins of programs intended for others.

²⁷¹ While NBC is the only network with an extensive archival record available to scholars, ABC and CBS also promised sponsors daytime audiences full of young housewives with large families. See “Memo from Thomas Wright to Howard Gardner.”

²⁷² “Memo from Stockton Helffrich to Walter Scott,” February 6, 1953, Folder 12; Box 569; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; Newman, “The Forgotten Fifteen Million.”

CHAPTER 2: SHOULD WOMEN LIKE CRIME?: THE POSTWAR AUDIENCE DEBATES MORALITY AND FEMININITY

In 1947, Miss Marguerite Kuelling wrote to NBC's Program Department to ask a deceptively simple question: "Are you really aware of what you are broadcasting?"²⁷³ To her, the answer was a clear and emphatic 'no.' After all, what socially responsible company would knowingly consign American women and children to such a steady diet of "emotional drivel" when they could just as easily reinforce family values? Audiences might balk at first, she granted, but eventually they would come to appreciate a schedule of uplifting, educational programming that would "restore emotional order and bring happiness and peace into the lives of [the American] public."²⁷⁴ While Kuelling criticized programming across the network's daily schedule, she directed particular ire at the daytime and afternoon serials aimed at women and children, most of which featured prominent crime and mystery narratives. Much of her advice focused on mitigating soap operas' negative influence on postwar family structures: she argued that the genre taught women to hate men so much that even a level-headed woman like herself "wouldn't feel at all responsible for dropping a touch of arsenic into my husband's coffee."²⁷⁵ Her secondary concern, preserving "the virgin territory of" children's minds from the enervating impact of suspenseful juvenile adventure serials, similarly focused on protecting impressionable groups from negative influences.²⁷⁶ Like other vocal audience members and cultural critics, Kuelling blamed network programming for

²⁷³ "Letter from Marguerite Kuelling to Program Division," July 31, 1947, Folder 6; Box 355; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁷⁴ Kuelling.

²⁷⁵ Kuelling.

²⁷⁶ Kuelling.

worsening – or even causing – the social chaos that they felt surrounding them in the post-WWII era. After all, as other women who wrote to the FCC with similar complaints put it, how would the nation’s youth learn about their responsibility “to help rebuild this decaying old world” if they were constantly being instructed in the methods of crime and delinquency by programs “full of trouble and divorce and deceit and hate”?²⁷⁷ Moreover, many wondered, could women who chose to expose themselves to radio’s pernicious influences really be trusted to raise a virtuous, well-adjusted generation of American children?

Women like Kuelling wrote to the FCC and other groups concerned with the state of US broadcasting often, and their letters are well-represented in the archival record. However, not all postwar women shared Kuelling’s views on broadcast crime programming. As scholars like Shelley Stamp (2000), Mary Beth Haralovich (2013), and Julie Grossman (2013) have pointed out, women have long consumed action and crime narratives with an enthusiasm rivaled only by public moralists’ vocal concern over such women’s apparently degenerate and corrupted tastes.²⁷⁸ Female crime fans were probably best-served during World War II. The major radio networks broadcast an

²⁷⁷ Mrs. O’Ritchie, “Letter from Mrs. O’Ritchie to FCC,” August 27, 1947, File 44-1; Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Misc; Box 189; General Correspondence, 1927-46; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Ida M. Proffitt, “Letter from Ida M. Proffitt to FCC,” September 29, 1947, File 44-1; Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Misc; Box 189; General Correspondence, 1927-46; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

²⁷⁸ Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Mary Beth Haralovich, “Selling Noir: Stars, Gender and Genre in Film Noir Posters and Publicity,” in *A Companion to Film Noir*, ed. Helen Hanson and Andrew Spicer (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013), 245–63; Julie Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-Up* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

“average of ninety minutes of crime programs . . . daily” by 1945, and the Hollywood studios produced iconic noir films like *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *This Gun For Hire* (1942), and *Double Indemnity* (1944) in this period when women unequivocally dominated domestic theatergoing.²⁷⁹ These wartime productions built on Depression-era narratives featuring stronger and more complex, even sympathetic female detectives and monsters. Postwar media representations pathologized and dismissed such women, but not because they lost favor with female audiences. Rather, media historian Tim Snelson (2015) argues the shift was driven by pressure from cultural critics and psychologists who worried about the impact that rebellious representations of femininity might have on female audiences.²⁸⁰ Such films conflicted with the postwar emphasis on peace, order, and domesticity by foregrounding transgressive images of women working or involved in other sexually and physically dangerous positions. NBC audience research records verify that, while women were less interested than men in the crime series that the network broadcast after WWII, they were interested in crime and mystery programs in general. Notably, women were more likely to be interested in crime programs that featured interesting character development and significant roles for women, indicating a potentially untapped market of female crime fans eager for complex and layered crime-solvers.²⁸¹ Female-centric advertisers, including cosmetics, soap, and food

²⁷⁹ J. Fred MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial!: Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), 155.

²⁸⁰ Philippa Gates, *Detecting Women: Gender and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 5, 15; Tim Snelson, *Phantom Ladies: Hollywood Horror and the Home Front* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 10.

²⁸¹ “Study of Television Mystery Programs” (Advertest Research, March 1954), Folder 32; Box 193; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

manufacturers, certainly supported this interpretation when they sponsored radio crime series, including *Mr. & Mrs. North*, *The Thin Man*, and *The Adventures of Sam Spade*, that either directly or indirectly appealed to female consumers. Few of these series made the jump to television in the more conservative postwar period, but women continued to watch televised crime series starring male detectives.

So, how do we reconcile opposition to sensational crime narratives by women like Kuelling, along with a cadre of mostly male social critics, with the knowledge that women – even good girls – did like crime and mystery stories? And how did women on all sides of the debate understand those programs in terms of the postwar society in which they were enmeshed? Finally, how do we understand crime-loving women’s underrepresentation in the archive, in contemporary cultural imagination, and in the networks’ male-focused postwar primetime crime series, especially on television? This chapter explores the complicated relationship between postwar femininity and crime as it was mediated through radio and television and within the context of Cold War-era containment culture. Drawing on audience responses to series, measured through audience research, ratings, and direct correspondence with networks, producers, and fan publications, I explore how female audience members resisted, expanded upon, or further constricted the narrow definitions of femininity that broadcasters advocated through their programming and advertising decisions.

Many audience members echoed the conservative gender norms that pervaded postwar containment culture. Most of these women and men aligned themselves with established and powerful cultural institutions. These included the predominantly

Christian religious institutions that were experiencing a postwar resurgence, as well as middle-class women's cultural clubs and parent-teacher associations. In what follows, I highlight the ways each of these groups mobilized members to fight for a voice in the emerging postwar order. Conservative religious and political groups used anti-communist rhetoric to argue that broadcast depictions of crime and sexuality were weakening the American public, especially the men who were responsible for governing the next generation. At the same time, other women appear to have extracted feminist meanings and liberatory inspirations from crime series, even if those programs lacked explicitly feminist messages. Whether they appreciated the intellectual challenge of playing detective along with the program's hero, the fantasy space in which to imagine themselves as powerful agents of law and order, or simply the vicarious thrill of fictional danger, crime series offered women a chance to experience something new and decidedly un-domestic. Meanwhile, those who objected to broadcast crime series argued that such programs represented a violent invasion into their domestic space and a disruptive challenge to the conservative gender and racial norms that they maintained were traditional American values. Few directly attacked the networks' basic right to control the airwaves. Still, they pushed the networks to use their influence for what they considered the social good, either by providing uplifting and/or educational programming that would teach women to appreciate a limited, largely conservative idea of high culture, or by incorporating programming themes that would support their patriarchal vision for the nation's future. This vision might include crime, but it emphasized the danger that criminals – and the outside world in general – posed to

women, rather than women's ability to intervene in the justice system on their own or others' behalf.

Why not crime?

Despite the massive success of female crime writers like Agatha Christie and Mary Roberts Reinhardt and their female detectives, as well as clear evidence that women consumed crime narratives across media, the broadcast industry imagined the audience for crime series to be masculine. This assumption directly contradicted audience research indicating that women and girls also enjoyed crime and mystery programs. One 1954 study of television mystery programs, conducted for broadcasters and advertisers by Advertest, found that almost as many women watched mystery programs as men (69.5% v. 71.6%). Indeed, the number of female viewers slightly outnumbered males in the 25-34 (77.9% v. 74.1%) and 45-54 (66.5% v. 64.6%) age ranges.²⁸² Another survey of teenage audiences noted that, while teenage girls reported liking mysteries less than boys, they enjoyed programs with "suspense, adventure, [and] blood and thunder" more than those with "helpful information, narratives, humor, romance, [and] cheap language."²⁸³

Still, the sorts of pleasures generally associated with the crime genre directly contradicted the postwar feminine ideals encoded into other network genres. Most problematically, female detective stories depicted women functioning with competence and interest in the public, urban spaces from which they were increasingly being re-

²⁸² "Study of Television Mystery Programs."

²⁸³ "Teen-Agers Like Mysteries," *Sponsor*, April 1, 1948.

excluded through the mutually reinforcing return to conservative Victorian gender norms and suburban spatial reorganization.²⁸⁴ Where male and female detectives were active, mostly single, and unburdened by responsibilities for homes and children, postwar American women were pushed to leave the workforce, marry, and have children early; by the 1950s, single women as young as 21 were afraid that they would be considered old maids.²⁸⁵ Where crime stories provoked excitement through suspense, mystery, and promise of violence — or even sex — postwar American women were expected to uplift their husbands and children by exhibiting stereotypically passive feminine virtues like chastity, honesty, and domesticity. They were not supposed to enjoy exploring the dirty underbelly of American society — even vicariously — through the cynical eyes of a detective with the authority to enter places no virtuous woman would dare to tread.

As I argue in chapter one, broadcasters helped to shape and promote the suburban, domestic ideal that circumscribed so many postwar women's lives because it furthered their commercial goals. Broadcasters' decisions about what types of programs to air and for whom did not occur in a vacuum, however. Instead, they were influenced by many, often contradictory cultural currents, including regulatory pressure, critical attention, and feedback from audience members like Kuelling. The women who wrote to the networks after WWII had a conflicted relationship to the postwar culture in which

²⁸⁴ Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 27, 144; Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1993), 248.

²⁸⁵ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 23.

they were embedded, and which many of their letters simultaneously challenged and reinforced. Postwar American society was dominated by an emphasis on public consensus and containment that pervaded every aspect of citizens' political and cultural lives, from family organization, to artistic expression, to the very language used to discuss what it meant to be an American.²⁸⁶ However, as Wendy Wall (2008) argues, this consensus was by no means a foregone or untroubled conclusion. Hoping to avoid a return to the social and economic conflicts that had marked previous decades, postwar cultural and political leaders across the values spectrum promoted a unified vision of the "American Way" based in wartime unity rhetoric.²⁸⁷ Women were central to the production of this imagined cultural unity: conservative groups were especially invested in promoting the idea that working women were willing – even eager – to relinquish their wartime jobs to returning servicemen and return to the home. This impression helped to re-naturalize patriarchal social norms based in the Victorian doctrine of separate gender spheres, which idealized white women's position as nurturing wives and mothers dedicated to raising the next generation. Still, even as postwar media increasingly presented this patriarchal order as the cultural common sense, individuals, couples, and social groups actively contested gendered and racial power balances in

²⁸⁶ For discussions of containment culture in politics, art, and family organization, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). For a discussion of postwar debates over changing gender roles and social structure, see Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*; Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, Revised and Updated Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

²⁸⁷ Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the "American Way": The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

ways that ultimately undermined their supposed naturalness.²⁸⁸

Notwithstanding their protestations of neutrality, broadcasters were active participants with an outsized voice in debates over what constituted the “American way.” Audience members recognized this fact when they tried to influence the values represented through radio and television programming. This led to intriguing, often contentious, and highly gendered interactions between women and the broadcasters who claimed to serve them. While broadcasters claimed to welcome public comment on their programming, they also zealously guarded their position as the men “of taste, experience, and independent judgment” who were most fit to oversee the airwaves in the face of interference from vaudevillians, advertisers, regulators, and especially female audience members.²⁸⁹ Still, female letter writers repeatedly asserted their right to influence broadcast programming on a range of topics, especially those relating to other women and children. Most justified their influence by asserting their economic power and gendered position as moral authorities within the home. How much influence they were able to exert, and how they exerted it, is an open question that is well worth exploring.

Charlene Simmons (2009) argues that the very act of writing to a broadcaster implies that audience members expected an interactive relationship with radio and television producers.²⁹⁰ In other words, the people who wrote to networks and the FCC

²⁸⁸ Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 16.

²⁸⁹ Jennifer Hyland Wang, “Convenient Fictions: The Construction of the Daytime Broadcast Audience, 1927-1960” (Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006), 29.

²⁹⁰ Charlene Simmons, “Dear Radio Broadcaster: Fan Mail as a Form of Perceived Interactivity,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 53, no. 3 (2009): 453.

expected their words to carry weight, and made requests of broadcasters in the belief that “radio [and television] would respond.”²⁹¹ However, as Deborah Jaramillo (2018) argues, individual audience members had the least power when it came to influencing broadcast content.²⁹² While the networks claimed to welcome audience input, their national scope and commercial interests took precedence over local preferences and individual opinions. Much of the more critical audience correspondence, especially that contained in the FCC’s files, appears to have been written under the conviction that, while broadcasters *should* respond, either because the public owned the airwaves or because of the threat of advertiser boycotts, they might not. Letters, especially those protesting representations of crime across a range of program genres, explicitly charged broadcasters with violating public decency and perverting the nation’s youth – and therefore its future – through their control of the public airwaves. Critical letter-writers did their best to dispute broadcasters’ claim that they were the fittest authorities over the airwaves and reassert the public’s right – or at least the letter writers’ own right – to have a say in the programming and messages broadcast over the public-owned airwaves. To this end, many of the women who objected to crime’s influence on the public invoked the civic groups to which they belonged. This helped them position themselves as mouthpieces for broader segments of the audience, if not the audience as a whole, who felt themselves ill-served by commercial broadcasting. Meanwhile, most of the women who praised crime series wrote as individuals, a fact which may explain their

²⁹¹ Simmons, 453.

²⁹² Deborah Jaramillo, *The Television Code: Regulating the Screen to Safeguard the Industry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), chap. 4.

relative insignificance to network executives.

Kuelling did not speak for every American woman who corresponded with broadcasters and regulators in the postwar decades, but her letter does touch on several important themes that I explore throughout this chapter. First, she focused her complaint on issues where feminine authority was more generally accepted, including children's welfare and social improvement. Kuelling was not just worried about children, however. As we can see from her warnings about soap operas' potential impact on female listeners, she also regarded a substantial portion of the nation's women as a mentally and emotionally vulnerable group whose media consumption must be regulated to prevent them from harming themselves and others. Indeed, many of the same people who asked the networks to exert their patriarchal power to protect children from crime also lamented the negative influence that primetime crime dramas and daytime serials had on the stereotyped audience of hysterical housewives. As Emily Spencer (2006) reminds us, attacks on women's public roles and representations are often couched in a generalized popular celebration of domesticity and feminine beauty.²⁹³ Moreover, they are not limited to times of war. Both before and after WWII, citizens of North American nations like the United States and Canada responded to fear that democracy was under threat by calling on women to enhance their beauty and protect their virtue, both for themselves and on behalf of the men who had and would defend them overseas.²⁹⁴ Many of the women who objected to broadcast crime directly

²⁹³ Emily Spencer, "Lipstick and High Heels: War and the Feminization of Women in 'Chatelaine' Magazine, 1928-1956" (Dissertation, Royal Military College of Canada, 2006), 6.

²⁹⁴ Spencer, 11.

referenced the recent European conflicts and emerging Cold War in their warnings about the genre's potential to corrupt the nation's future.

Despite her worries about other women's emotional weakness, Kuelling took pains to position herself as a rational correspondent who was concerned by what Ann Douglas would later call "the feminization of American culture."²⁹⁵ Kuelling, Douglas, and others argued that American citizens were – or could become – so emotionally over-involved with popular media that both women and men would lose their ability to think or act productively. The fact that so many critics raised this fear in their complaints against crime programming indicates a central, deeply gendered dispute among early TV audiences and executives: while broadcasters had done their best to position the new medium as a seamless extension of their radio business – "radio with pictures" – many citizens and critics still argued that television's central function should be masculine-coded teaching rather than feminized entertainment.²⁹⁶ The networks' postwar critics seized on the fact that the broadcast networks were temporarily vulnerable, and broadcast programming unsettled, as the industry underwent its own seismic shift during the transition from radio to television. Most people who defended broadcast crime praised its entertainment value, though some child-care and mental health professionals also argued that it might serve a didactic function. Groups like the Child Study Association argued that crime series taught children to tell right from wrong and reinforced their trust in law enforcement figures. Such pro-social, supposedly rational

²⁹⁵ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (Knopf, 1977), 8.

²⁹⁶ Philip W. Sewell, *Television in the Age of Radio: Modernity, Imagination, and the Making of a Medium* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

behaviors were strongly associated with postwar patriarchal authority. By contrast, the cultural and religious groups that criticized crime focused on its deleterious impact on, or even ability to create, passive, infantilized, and presumably feminized audiences.

Kuelling acknowledged that her suggestions might inspire popular protest, but she pushed broadcasters to validate their claims to cultural authority by putting social improvement before profits. This emphasis on broadcasters as the saviors of a weak-minded populace endorsed broadcasters' own view of their female audiences as weak-minded and impressionable.²⁹⁷ It also presaged the anti-popular culture arguments levied by 1960s and 1970s conservative Christian leaders, including Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell. Many of these conservative and reactionary voices originated in religious groups that protested televised crime in the 1950s. Finally, Kuelling asserted her status as a worthwhile consumer. Lest NBC's program executives dismiss her as an old-fashioned crank, she concluded her missive with a postscript asserting that she was "twenty-six years old, not sixty-two."²⁹⁸ Variations of these concerns appeared in most of the letters that women and men wrote to sponsors, program producers, radio networks, and government regulators like the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the decades after WWII. Some wrote simply to criticize. Others, like Kuelling, offered prescriptions for change. A few praised broadcasters' program choices, but most lamented the myriad ways they saw postwar broadcasters failing American audiences, and especially American women. All hoped to influence the

²⁹⁷ Ellen Seiter, "To Teach and To Sell': Irna Phillips and Her Sponsors, 1930-1955," *Journal of Film and Video* 40, no. 1 (1989): 21-35.

²⁹⁸ Kuelling, "Letter from Marguerite Kuelling to Program Division."

programming that daily entered their homes, and, through it, the larger debates over which cultural values would prevail in the post-World War II United States.

Fighting Crime to Save the Country's Future

Network executives may have resented audience efforts to dispute their power over the airwaves, but they could not afford to ignore audience mail. While modern broadcasters have been shown to pay less attention to mail, earlier broadcasters were much more dependent on the opinions expressed therein.²⁹⁹ This was especially true during the transition between radio and television, when broadcast standards had to be re-written to accommodate the addition of television images and changing cultural norms. NBC's Continuity Acceptance Manager Stockton Helffrich frequently requested updates on audience opinions of new television features for which radio could not provide reliable censorship precedents.³⁰⁰ However, executives like Helffrich were selective about which correspondents they deemed worthy of consideration. Kuelling's letter was deemed "intelligent" enough to warrant a lengthy and considered response from Assistant National Program Manager R.T. O'Connell, but other correspondents were dismissed as cranks.³⁰¹ Even when broadcasters refused audience requests to remove crime programming from the air, their series were deeply informed by the conservative values those letter writers expressed.

Women's letters complaining about crime programming, and expressing fear

²⁹⁹ Simmons, "Dear Radio Broadcaster," 449.

³⁰⁰ Stockton Helffrich, "Memo from Stockton Helffrich to Anita Barnard," November 16, 1948, Folder 24; Box 588; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁰¹ R.T. O'Connell, "Letter from R.T. O'Connell to Marguerite Kuelling," August 27, 1947, Folder 6; Box 355; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

about crime itself, were deeply informed by their contradictory social position as protectors who themselves required protection. Broadcast programming became a prominent site of struggle over women's public and private social roles and cultural understandings of gender. As Anne Gessler (2017) points out in her study of Cold War-era female ham radio operators, American anti-communists, including the House Un-American Activities Committee, worried that broadcasters might act as a fifth column, beaming subversive messages into American homes.³⁰² Conservative, anti-communist activists were especially concerned that women, held up as the family's emotional and moral center, might be perverted by foreign influences — and then proceed to emasculate their husbands and sons.³⁰³ However, external threats were not the only dangers that letter writers heard and saw entering their home through their wireless receivers: many also worried that the nation was destroying itself from within by permitting the existence of excessively exciting crime series that would enervate and feminize their masculine and feminine audiences.

Most of the women who wrote to the FCC and the networks protesting noisy radio programs wrote as members of organized political and/or religious groups, and they used these affiliations to help assert their own citizenship-based right to speak and influence the nation's future. Despite their privileged white, middle-class status, female letter writers' movements and vocalizations were also restricted. While most straight white men could go where they wished and be as loud as they liked, loud women were

³⁰² Anne Gessler, "Dust Mop or Mic? Women's Utopian Border-Crossings in Cold War Ham Radio," *Radio Journal* 15, no. 2 (2017): 283.

³⁰³ Gessler, 285.

(and continue to be) perceived as “lower class and ‘noisy, rude, unapologetic, [and] unbridled.’”³⁰⁴ In other words, loud women were the antithesis of feminine respectability. Their presence on the masculine-coded public space of radio was also problematic. Christine Ehrick (2015) notes that women’s voices have historically been muted and/or sequestered, especially in spaces where masculine power is exercised.³⁰⁵ This historical absence made (and still does make) it all the more jarring, or noisy, when women’s voices did disrupt the patriarchal soundscape.³⁰⁶ It was no simple matter for female audience members to challenge broadcasters’ authority by taking up their pens and writing to criticize radio and television programming, but write they did. Many female (and male) letter writers demanded that radio – and later television – programs embody the strict gender norms expounded by conservative religious and political authorities, which underpinned women’s re-domestication and minorities’ urban segregation. The very act of writing to demand change from a male-dominated authority, as the networks held themselves out to be, violated ideals of feminine deference. However, most of the women who wrote to demand their right to speak and access political power did so at least partly to support silencing other, more marginalized groups – especially other, supposedly weaker women.

Few letter writers explicitly linked femininity with the cultural weakness for which they blamed radio. Nevertheless, their complaints about cultural decline were

³⁰⁴ Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 23.

³⁰⁵ Christine Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape: Women and Broadcasting in Argentina and Uruguay, 1930–1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 13.

³⁰⁶ Ehrick, 14.

often phrased in terms of a desire for “robust,” “masculine” voices and narratives drawn from presumably assertive, male-dominated classic novelists. Women like Mrs. H.A. Keiser presaged Douglas’s 1977 argument that the resulting mass culture “redefined and perhaps limited the possibilities for change in American society” when they fretted in 1947 that crime programs were “encouraging [teenagers] to use their imagination and ability in the wrong direction.”³⁰⁷ Keiser and Kuelling’s preoccupation with assertive, masculine prose resonates with Douglas’s criticism of mid-19th century Protestant ministers, who Douglas rebuked for sacrificing doctrinal purity in favor of a more palatable set of passive, sentimental values. Like Douglas, postwar letter writers objected to cultural authorities’ efforts to attract the educated white women who were “the prime consumers of American culture.”³⁰⁸ Instead of welcoming women’s growing influence in public life, this critique blamed them for injecting an overly emotional, ultimately debilitating influence into the nation’s social life and cultural values.

Douglas’s feminization thesis has strong roots in postwar American liberalism’s naturalization of “a masculine vision of ‘American’ culture that was perpetually endangered by feminization.”³⁰⁹ As Lynne Joyrich (1996) argues, the postwar “focus on TV” and radio “as ‘feminine’ masked a deeper cultural concern with masculinity.”³¹⁰

³⁰⁷ Mrs. H.A. Keiser, “Letter from Mrs. H.A. Keiser to FCC,” April 8, 1947, File 44-1; Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Misc; Box 189; General Correspondence, 1927-46; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 12–13.

³⁰⁸ Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 8.

³⁰⁹ Philip Gould, “Revisiting the ‘Feminization’ of American Culture. Introduction.,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (1999): iv.

³¹⁰ Lynne Joyrich, *Re-Viewing Reception: Television, Gender, and Postmodern Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 70.

Listener fears that others, and implicitly, they themselves, might be feminized by the heightened emotions provoked by suspenseful crime programming, permeate their letters of complaint. Mary Shupp stated this fear more directly than most in her 1947 letter to FCC Chairman Charles Denny, noting that “years ago I used to listen to [radio crime programs] because I was lonely but after I saw how nervous they made me I refuse (sic) to tune them in any more.”³¹¹ After this admission of weakness, she quickly shifted to her more socially acceptable concern for “the American youth who is really corrupted by this sort of murder and crime stories,” and asking “Is this a deeply laid plot to shatter the nerves of the American people or do these people really think their programs are entertaining?”³¹²

Feminist scholars like Jane Tompkins (1985) have turned Douglas’s critique on its head, arguing that the sentimental domestic novel and its popular descendants, including radio soap operas, sitcoms, and even crime narratives represent a “monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman’s [and other less privileged groups’] point of view.”³¹³ Letter writers’ favorite punching bags – radio crime serials and soap operas – also presented viable, if limited, alternatives to the conservative vision of white middle class domesticity that reached its peak in late-1950s family sitcoms like *Father Knows Best* (NBC/CBS 1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS/ABC 1957-

³¹¹ Albert and Mary Shupp, “Letter from Albert and Mary Shupp to Mr Charles Denny,” March 29, 1947, File 44-1; Complaints (Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Miscellaneous); Box 188; General Correspondence, 1927-46; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

³¹² Shupp.

³¹³ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 124.

1963).³¹⁴ For all of their racial stereotypes, works like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) fostered empathy with the plight of slaves. Likewise, radio crime and adventure dramas were more likely to feature non-white characters than other genres. This was especially true of wartime juvenile adventure serials like *Terry and the Pirates* (NBC/WGN 1937-1939, 1941-1948), which was set in Asia and included numerous Asian characters. Letter writers may not have seen themselves as silencing such representations, but their insistence that there was a correct set of values through which American life should be depicted had that effect.

Regardless of their individual political allegiances, the women who complained to the FCC agitated on behalf of a conservative, patriarchal worldview. This worldview mobilized religious doctrine and a limited view of historical gender roles to support white men's claims to power, overriding alternative, more racially and gender-inclusive postwar visions of what the so-called "American way" could be, or even if such a thing could exist. In their efforts to establish themselves as representatives of universal American values, most letter writers were loath to admit that some of their fellow citizens might be interested in, or even enjoy depictions sexuality, criminality, or other urban sensations. Instead, they asserted their affiliations with and participation in larger religious and civic organizations as proof that their support for white middle-class norms and values like law-and-order justice and sexual modesty were shared by the rest of the country. Instead of questioning their own values, many letter writers put the onus of

³¹⁴ Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting And Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), chap. 3.

action on the broadcasters, and especially advertisers, who they argued refused to give audiences the uplifting programming they needed. Instead of acknowledging the value that others might find in popular crime series, letter writers characterized them as corrupting or misleading people away from pro-social values; a person might presumably be corrupted without knowing any better, but the state of temptation acknowledges that the temptress (and ever since Eve tempted Adam, it usually has been a temptress) had something that the tempted person found desirable. Ironically, broadcast crime programs found themselves in the same position held by femmes fatales within crime series: they must be investigated and, if possible, recuperated. In the likely event that recuperation failed, they must be eliminated to prevent their perversion from spreading throughout the body politic.

The Postwar Evangelical Wave

Worldly temptation was especially high on the list of concerns put forward by the religious groups who appear to have organized much of the vocal resistance to postwar crime programming. Given the networks' powerful position in American cultural life, it is hardly surprising that those who felt most qualified to critique them were other well-established cultural and religious institutions. The Catholic Legion of Decency, for example, had a long and successful history of lobbying entertainers and Hollywood studios to censor sexuality, violence, and drug use in their productions.³¹⁵ Together with other Christian groups and individual churches, the Legion of Decency

³¹⁵ See Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, Revised and Updated Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

and its members continued to lobby broadcasters and the FCC to impose a code of censorship similar to the Hays code. While these groups were usually headed by men, many of their most active participants were women, who augmented their authority as wives and mothers through their religious connections. Religious groups agitated for more religious programming, less profanity, and prohibitions on negative representations of religious denominations, themes, and figures in broadcast series. They were also strong advocates for the conservative view of family life and structure that has been so strongly identified with 1950s television.

Religious complaints could have very real consequences for the networks. As Pastor Harold Snider of the Calvary Bible Church in Lewiston, PA noted when he wrote to NBC's president to complain about a "very plain burlesque of the Christian faith" on a 1951 episode of *Dimension X*, the program had been on his church's list of acceptable programs.³¹⁶ However, he reminded the network that that status could change if NBC continued "making it embarrassing to follow" such series by using religious terms in secular contexts and thereby "dragging sacred terminology into the dust."³¹⁷ While churches could not exert full control over their members' media diets, broadcasters took threats of boycotts seriously, even at the local level. This was especially true in the early 1950s; the same year that Snider wrote to NBC, the networks were drafting an industry-wide television code that prohibited disparagement of any religion and required that "reverence is to mark any mention of the name of God, His attributes and powers."³¹⁸

³¹⁶ Harold Snider, "Letter from Pastor Harold Snider to NBC President," October 4, 1951, Folder 20; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³¹⁷ Snider.

³¹⁸ "The Television Code" (National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters, 1952), 2.

While these regulations supposedly applied to all religions equally, in practice they promoted and naturalized the white Protestant denominations that dominated white suburban faith as an integral part of a supposedly unified American cultural identity.³¹⁹ Other religions, and even other forms of Christianity, remained niche, foreign, and open to criticism. For example, the continuing prevalence of complaints about anti-Semitic jokes and characters in comedy and other genres highlights the limits of the networks' publicly professed dedication to fostering inclusion and tolerance across all faiths.

In addition to protesting any negative – or even insufficiently positive – representations of their faiths, religious leaders also expressed their disapprobation for irreligious, intemperate, or immodest behaviors. Pastor Snider also objected to having Christianity associated with objectionable products like alcohol and tobacco through program advertising. While NBC defended its right to advertise beer – but not liquor – the network often bowed to criticism over social issues like marriage and sexuality, and their written policies and censorship decisions demonstrate their commitment to a patriarchal vision of family life and sexual control. In 1949, Stockton Helffrich noted that “numerous policies are under re-examination these days, [but] I have strong doubts about us getting too breezy on” the network’s prohibition against presenting divorce “as the solution of any problem.”³²⁰ “Catholic and other resistance to such a solution” was simply too strong and religious groups exerted too much influence over public opinion

³¹⁹ James David Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics, 1945-1965* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

³²⁰ “Memo from Stockton Helffrich to R.M. Guilbert,” October 14, 1949, Folder 17; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; “NBC Program Policies and Working Manual” (National Broadcasting Company, 1944), 11.

for the networks to dismiss their objections out of hand.³²¹ The draft of the Television Code that was approved in 1951 codified the networks' aversion to divorce, extramarital sex, and even direct presentations of marital relations.

Beyond divorce, most self-identified members of religious groups objected to any depiction of feminine sexuality and/or other threats to heterosexual marriage. While some letter writers objected to crime programs of all sorts, others merely objected to the sensationalistic tone and breezy attitude toward women's sexual availability that they perceived in the hardboiled-style dramas that dominated American airwaves. Some even granted that women could play an integral part in an entertaining mystery story, just so long as they were not sexualized. In 1953, Auleen Bordeaux Eberhardt (Mrs. Anthony Eberhardt) wrote to NBC President Sylvester "Pat" Weaver to pitch a radio or television series based on her novel, *Aunt Minnie, the Pastor's Housekeeper*, a "light-hearted, unpretentious and uncomplicated story" about a widowed aunt and housekeeper.³²² Among Minnie's talents, according to a complimentary review Eberhardt enclosed, were cooking, cleaning, golfing, and capturing a bank robber whose "larcenous head" she "bopped" with a candlestick.³²³ Widowed, presumably aged past her childbearing years, and employed in a priest's home, Eberhardt's heroine embodies an acceptably conservative, sexless form of feminine agency. Unlike contemporary hyperfeminine female investigators, including Pam North of *Mr. and Mrs. North*, which

³²¹ "Memo from Stockton Helffrich to R.M. Guilbert."

³²² Mrs. Anthony Eberhardt, "Letter from Mrs. Anthony Eberhardt to Sylvester Weaver," December 17, 1953, Folder 23; Box 374; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³²³ Eberhardt.

was still on NBC at the time, Minnie has a formidable “grenadier-like” presence, with sharp features and “a commanding voice.”³²⁴ These masculine-coded attributes were mitigated by her inherent feminine cheerfulness, expressed through her “likeable” personality, optimistic refusal to acknowledge the few setbacks that mar her general progress “from triumph to triumph,” and Eberhardt’s comic tone.³²⁵ Her position as housekeeper for a religious figure also mixes masculine and feminine attributes: while priests are often stereotyped as effeminate, giving Minnie space to play a more masculine role within the household, a man of god also holds a position of unquestioned patriarchal authority, beyond his position as her employer. All of her power comes from him.

Individuals drew upon their religious backgrounds and connections to bolster their authority when writing to the networks. Listeners like Elizabeth Smith wrote on behalf of her Sunday School classes to NBC and the ad agency responsible for producing prolific radio quiz show host Bob Hawk’s program to protest his use of the Twenty-Third Psalm.³²⁶ Other women attempted to use the implicit threat of religious boycotts to promote their own creative efforts. When Eberhardt wrote to Weaver, she used the letterhead of the Iowa Chapter of the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae, a group devoted to promoting Catholic women’s educational activities.³²⁷

Eberhardt further burnished her religious credentials by noting that “while I am *just* an

³²⁴ Eberhardt.

³²⁵ Eberhardt.

³²⁶ Elizabeth Smith, “Letter from Elizabeth Smith to Stockton Helffrich,” July 6, 1948, Folder 70; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³²⁷ “Letter from Mrs. Anthony Eberhardt to Sylvester Weaver.”

Iowa housewife, my *work* has received national publicity through the Associated Press and the Christopher movement,” where her work “in the movement to Restore Christ to Christmas” had received “world coverage.”³²⁸ Despite her repeated efforts to appear modest, it is clear that Eberhardt believed that her religious work and references warranted at least some attention from the network president she addressed. Her letter concluded with advice on how he might find the time to read her enclosed novel: “I know you have a thousand things to do in your great way – just as I have in my small way. But when I want to do something, I budget my time and then use the precious minutes for the thing I want to do. Perhaps you could squeeze out af [sic] few minutes to read ‘Aunt Minnie’ each day for 15 days. At the end of that time I truly believe you’ll be captivated by her.”³²⁹

Weaver does not appear to have taken Eberhardt up on her challenge, but her belief that her religious faith and works should increase her status is representative of a feeling shared by most of the women who wrote to the FCC and networks asking for change in the late 1940s and early 1950s: they had followed what they understood to be US society’s rules by channeling their efforts and ambitions into appropriately feminine concerns. This gave them the right to express their opinions publicly, and even to object when others threatened the social order through which they had gained their limited power. Many of the women who participated in broadcast crime debates as members of women’s civic clubs shared this belief, though some were more willing to break with

³²⁸ Eberhardt. (Emphasis added).

³²⁹ Eberhardt.

patriarchal social structures and directly assert the commercial value of their work. As we will see, this often worked to their detriment.

Women's Clubs

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, middle- and upper-class American clubwomen also played an integral role in pushing the broadcast networks to improve their program quality and variety. Clubwomen engaged in extensive lobbying campaigns to force the radio networks to prioritize educational and cultural programming through the 1930s and into the 1940s. Jennifer Wang (2006) argues that clubwomen's efforts to eliminate daytime soap operas and expand educational offerings represented an effort "to expand the [networks'] rigid conception of the daytime female audience" as mindless, immature dupes.³³⁰ While their protests generated little structural change on the network level, clubwomen's efforts to assert their right to be included in the female audience did highlight the networks' emphasis on lower-class, mass audiences.³³¹ At the same time, clubwomen's efforts to argue that women were interested in news, educational, and literary programming that would teach listeners to appreciate high culture demonstrated their own limited, elitist conviction that radio should do more to educate and uplift the uncultured (but hopefully well-washed) soap opera audiences they defined themselves against. Just as daytime soap operas hurt women, they maintained, primetime crime dramas were rendering the uncultured masses into a helpless, emotional, irrational mess. This argument explicitly crossed crime series

³³⁰ Wang, "Convenient Fictions," 33.

³³¹ Wang, 395.

off the list of respectable, quality entertainment and rendered it inherently suspicious and dangerous.

Like their Progressive-era foremothers, who had their greatest impact in public debates around stereotypically female and child-rearing issues like social work, public health, and home economics, twentieth century clubwomen framed their efforts to help shape radio broadcasting as a moral responsibility that they undertook on behalf of the nation's future generations.³³² However, despite their moral underpinnings, groups like the Women's National Radio Committee (WNRC) sought to distance themselves from the crusading reform tone more typically associated with religious groups. Instead, they focused on supposedly secular educational and cultural issues like higher "quality programming for housewives and children."³³³ While they did not envision such programming as disrupting the patriarchal status quo, clubwomen's insistence on being addressed as intellectuals did challenge deep cultural biases against feminine intelligence.

Beginning in the 1930s, the women who wrote to protest broadcast crime drama employed a number of strategies rooted in contemporary gender norms. For the most part, the WNRC attempted to work with the networks, offering their services as "the networks' conduit to American womanhood" of all classes.³³⁴ Many accepted, or at least made a point of appearing to accept, their subsidiary status as women by appealing to the networks to help them solve the nation's problems instead of directly demanding

³³² Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xv; Wang, "Convenient Fictions," 448.

³³³ Wang, "Convenient Fictions," 202.

³³⁴ Wang, 204.

change. Women like Kuelling and Janet Hicks Edwards, who wrote to the networks and FCC on behalf of the New York City Federation of Women's Clubs, appealed to the industry's own awareness "of its responsibility to furnish programs which uphold high standards of entertainment."³³⁵ Some attempted to curry favor by carefully noting that they "recognize and appreciate" the industry's efforts "to elevate the standard programs."³³⁶ Others embraced and defended the commercial system, to the point of creating an awards banquet to honor programming of which they approved and flattering the networks into expanding such offerings. However, they were rarely content with the networks' incomplete efforts.

While the networks were happy to work with women's groups who praised them, they were reluctant to cede any control over what they saw as their airwaves, especially to a group of women they saw as overly emotional and out of place in the public sphere. NBC burnished its public service image by adopting women's educational rhetoric to bolster their own power; Women's Activities Director Margaret Cuthbert went so far as to argue that NBC had "done more for the emancipation of women than any other single network."³³⁷ However, such statements reserved the role of public educator for the masculine-dominated networks, and situated "the woman in her home," where she would wait for the network to make her "conscious of her responsibilities as a

³³⁵ Janet Hicks Edwards, "Letter from Janet Hicks Edwards to FCC," December 29, 1947, File 44-1; Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Misc; Box 189; General Correspondence, 1927-46; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

³³⁶ Hicks Edwards.

³³⁷ Margaret Cuthbert, "Report on History of Women's Programs, 1926-1948," March 26, 1948, Folder 10; Box 335; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

citizen.”³³⁸ This construction reasserted women’s passive position in the broadcaster-audience relationship. It also indicates the network’s attitude toward their female correspondents: clubwomen might feel that their opinions were more noteworthy than other women, but NBC’s mostly male executives still reserved the right to choose when – and how – they would listen. And while they welcomed clubwomen’s opinions on radio programming when the women expressed those opinions directly to the network, they resented the WNRC’s efforts to exert their influence through public forums, seeing it both as unjustified interference in the network’s business prerogatives and a violation of the women’s private sphere of influence.

Postwar clubwomen were aware that their power had gendered limits. They could scarcely have been otherwise after the WNRC’s late-1930s setbacks: In 1937 the WNRC attempted to fund its advocacy by charging the networks for the member survey data they had previously provided for free. The WNRC members who had opposed this step as a threat to “their reputation as radio reformers” were proven correct when NBC used the public outrage over the news to openly dismiss the group’s efforts.³³⁹ By asserting that their labor had value to the networks and asking to be paid for it, the WNRC implicated itself in the capitalist structures that governed the system they sought to reform. This directly violated the Victorian-era norms that still governed women’s precarious social influence, and it effectively undermined the group’s public image as an impartial player in the radio content debates. As Kathryn Kish Sklar (1995) has noted,

³³⁸ Cuthbert.

³³⁹ Wang, “Convenient Fictions,” 226.

middle-class Victorian clubwomen enjoyed greater credibility as reformers because their gendered position as private citizens rather than public actors gave them ideological distance from the capitalist battles between male-dominated management, labor, and political machines.³⁴⁰

The expectation that women involved in the public sphere would operate selflessly on others' behalf remained strong through the 1930s and, if anything, became stronger with the postwar resurgence of Victorian-style separate spheres. Like the women who were represented in broadcast programming, female radio reformers were expected to eschew ambition and embrace their moral duty to others selflessly. Still, many insisted on having their say. Postwar clubwomen felt especially empowered by the period's more activist FCC, as well as the elected officials who voiced support for regulating network content and restricting their growing control over the airwaves.³⁴¹ Finally, many women invoked their renewed connection to the home to argue that broadcasters were the ones infringing upon women's traditional sphere of influence. This was especially true when it came to the postwar paranoia over juvenile delinquency.

National Security and Crime

Worries about the apparently widespread increase in juvenile delinquency had mounted throughout WWII, as American youth gained independence and parental

³⁴⁰ Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), xii.

³⁴¹ Jaramillo, *The Television Code*, 15.

supervision decreased.³⁴² By the 1950s, the battle against juvenile delinquency had become one of many enduring proxy battles against Communism, with any evidence of youthful lawbreaking touted as “evidence of social and familial disintegration.”³⁴³ Critics alternately blamed excessive and insufficient parental – and especially maternal – attention, violent radio and television programming, and comic books for this “seduction of the innocent” and their apparent instruction in a life of crime.³⁴⁴ Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, clubwomen and religious groups were particularly aggressive in their efforts to convince the networks to help them fight juvenile delinquency by curbing juvenile crime serials.³⁴⁵ The WNRC argued that broadcasters could help solve juvenile delinquency, as well as other postwar social problems, by increasing their proportion of educational programming from 10% of the weekly schedule to 50%.³⁴⁶

Contemporary complaint letters to the FCC referenced numerous aspects of radio and television programming that the writers feared would weaken audience members or inspire crimes, from the prevalence of sexual jokes, storylines, and imagery, to interracial mixing, to flippant treatment of crime.³⁴⁷ Some letter writers included clippings of newspaper stories detailing sensational crimes committed by youthful crime fans as proof that broadcasters were perverting the nation’s next generation. For

³⁴² Lisa L. Ossian, *The Forgotten Generation: American Children and World War II* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 103.

³⁴³ Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 8.

³⁴⁴ Dr. Frederic Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today’s Youth* was originally published in 1954 and became a locus around which parents organized to advocate for censorship of comic books.

³⁴⁵ Wang, “Convenient Fictions,” 396.

³⁴⁶ Wang, 251.

³⁴⁷ Jaramillo, *The Television Code*, chap. 4.

example, a 1947 letter from Mrs. Jeannette N. Millman, of White Bear Lake, MN expresses her disgust with the broadcasters and sponsors who had brushed off her repeated complaints about “radio’s crime school.”³⁴⁸ She rejected broadcaster arguments that “Such programs help keep the children off the streets” with the claim that she had “at hand over three hundred newspaper clippings, covering the past six months, mostly from our St. Paul Press-Dispatch, telling of juvenile criminals, many of whom murdered simply for the thrill, and three of these child murderers only four years old!”³⁴⁹ She concluded her letter by rejecting broadcasters’ protests that parental neglect was the true cause of juvenile delinquency: “Compared to England, our “war aftermaths” are negligible,” she argued, “and yet juvenile crime is practically non-existent (sic) in England, where they do NOT have crime programs for children.”³⁵⁰ Millman’s comparison with England, a nation that was slowly recovering from heavy wartime bombing, draws an evocative picture of the US as a nation poised on the brink of disaster: the war may have left the mainland states relatively untouched, but the peace might well destroy them if broadcasters were not brought to heel.

Other women and men were even more direct about radio noise’s potential to damage the nation as a whole. Mrs. Nell H. Kendrick, a public stenographer from San Diego, was one of many to enclose newspaper clippings enumerating crimes committed

³⁴⁸ Jeannette N. Millman, “Letter from Mrs. Jeannette N. Millman to Mr Kenneth H. Bayliss,” November 21, 1947, File 44-1; Complaints (Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Miscellaneous); Box 188; General Correspondence, 1927-46; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

³⁴⁹ Millman.

³⁵⁰ Millman.

by youths who claimed to draw their inspiration from radio.³⁵¹ Kendrick concluded her letter with a direct appeal to the US's growing role as international policeman, asking "Shall we go out into all other nations in an effort to clean them up and arrange their affairs, while our own Nation goes down in crime, as ancient Rome did??"³⁵² While Kendrick and others like her appeared to sanction their nation's international involvement, they forcefully argued that politicians should put America's future first.

Like Kendrick, and even Millman, many of the letter writers who wrote most fearfully about radio's potential to instigate youthful violence resided in suburban areas in Southern California and other locales that became hotbeds for the anti-New Deal revolution that eventually elected Ronald Reagan president.³⁵³ Few directly referenced race in their complaints, but most express their fear that urban criminality was invading the deliberately homogenous enclaves that many postwar white suburbanites saw as their chance to develop a newer, better nation. Men like David Julian, a real estate broker from Huntington, CA, a suburb near Los Angeles, invoked the dire consequences suburbanites feared would come from radio's continuing influence through news clippings with headlines like "Killing of boy, 7, leads to inquiry of immorality in public grade school." Julian did not include the full news article with his letter, but he did draw his readers' attention to its evocative picture of an apparently distraught mother, her face

³⁵¹ Nell H. Kendrick, "Letter from Mrs. Nell H. Kendrick to President Truman," November 21, 1946, File 44-1; Complaints (Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Miscellaneous); Box 188; General Correspondence, 1927-46; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

³⁵² Kendrick.

³⁵³ Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 5.

obscured from the camera, clutching her young, white son's face as he cried. Neither the image nor the caption give us any real information about the boy's family dynamics or the actual nature of his crime. Rather, they focus on the pain shared by the alleged killer and his mother, who are positioned to stand in for any loving mother/son duo [Figure 1]. The caption affirms this impression, telling us that "Mother and son weep together after he confesses slaying of lad 'Tell me you didn't do it,' pleads Mrs. Alma Lang to Howard Lang, 12."³⁵⁴ Alongside the image, Julian added a handwritten note warning that "Radio could cause this - can happen to your family as well."³⁵⁵ With no further context, it is easy to conclude that radio crime might well destroy otherwise blameless, innocent lives, no matter how well women filled their maternal roles.

³⁵⁴ David W. Julian, "Letter from David W. Julian to FCC," November 4, 1947, File 44-1; Complaints (Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Miscellaneous); Box 188; General Correspondence, 1927-46; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

³⁵⁵ Julian.

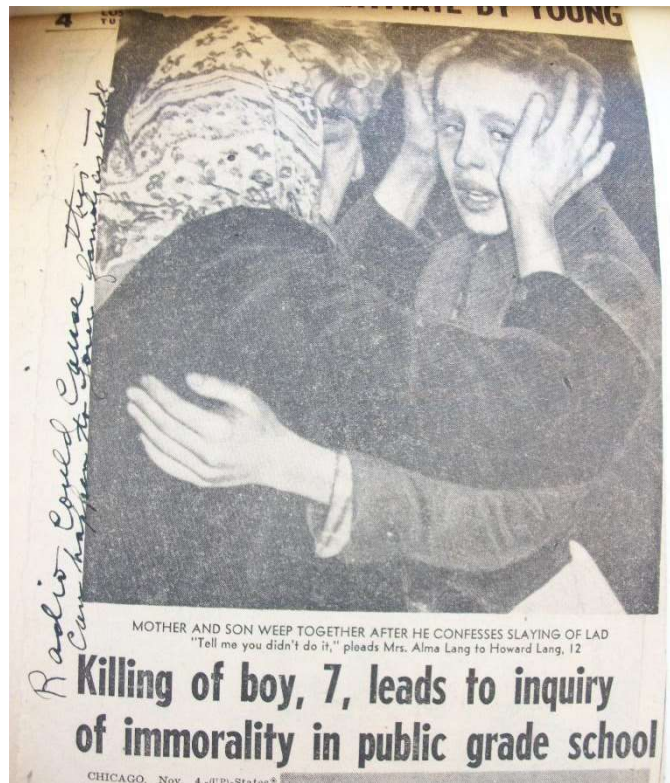


Figure 1

Many of the same people who complained about violence in broadcast crime programs also fretted that representations of sexually appealing women would pervert American's moral development and national security interests. This concern only increased with the advent of televised images that took women's potential sexuality out of the realm of imagination and put it front and center. Moral reformers had a long history of objecting to sexual innuendo on radio crime series and soap operas. However, as Continuity Acceptance reader Natalie De Capite noted in 1947, postwar standards appeared to have become more stringent. That year, she rejected a set of scripts based on the Exodus story about Potiphar's wife's failed attempt to seduce Joseph for Bible-based soap opera *Light of the World* (1940-1950), "regardless of the fact that these

scripts were used before” in 1940.³⁵⁶ De Capite justified her rejection by arguing that “standards of the public change somewhat, and a great deal more attention is given now to quality, and I think more good taste rather than less is wanted by the public.”³⁵⁷ De Capite’s misgivings reflect the impact of religious letter writers’ efforts to rein in the networks: she was particularly concerned that the producers would choose such a salacious and un-reverential story that dealt with extra-marital sex.³⁵⁸ Even worse, the story highlighted a woman’s attempt to seduce a man into following an unvirtuous course of action – postwar listeners might have interpreted it as either a suggestion to, or warning against, unscrupulous and potentially corrupting women nationwide.

Despite the fact that marriage was promoted the central building block of postwar US society, marital sex was equally frowned upon by many audience members. The same year that De Capite nixed *Light of the World*’s seduction narrative, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Russell wrote to protest “crudely pointed remarks...in regard to prospective motherhood” on *The Adventures of the Thin Man*.³⁵⁹ They found such references to biological reproduction especially harmful because the investigative couple aired in primetime, just before the popular *Baby Snooks* (CBS, 1944-1951) comedy series. This meant that young children, whose parents had not yet taught them about

³⁵⁶ Natalie DeCapite, “Memo from Natalie DeCapite to R.T. O’Connell,” May 16, 1947, Folder 72; Box 355; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁵⁷ DeCapite.

³⁵⁸ In the Book of Genesis, after Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt, Joseph is purchased by Potiphar. Potiphar puts Joseph in charge of his household, but has Joseph imprisoned after Potiphar’s wife accuses Joseph of attempted rape after Joseph resists her efforts to seduce him.

³⁵⁹ Mr. & Mrs. Thomas Russell, “Letter from Mr. & Mrs. Thomas Russell to FCC,” December 31, 1947, File 44-1; Complaints (Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Miscellaneous); Box 188; General Correspondence, 1927-46; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

“the so-called Facts of Life,” might be exposed to unsavory knowledge about pregnancy.³⁶⁰ Mrs. H.D. Johnston was more pointed when she argued that radio was “the big demoralizer. It shows up how rotten our social system is – how women are debauched and how vile man really is.”³⁶¹ Johnston appears to have felt that broadcasters were telling the truth about American society when they depicted women as sexual creatures and men as full of lust. Still, she wanted them to portray a sanitized version in the hopes that it would encourage audiences to be better.

While letter writers objected to both male and female sexuality on radio and television, they were far less forgiving of sexualized women, who they almost uniformly described in terms of femmes fatales. Many claimed that this bias was for women’s own protection, arguing that images of extended kissing and women’s low-cut gowns were encouraging teenagers to participate in “sex orgies” or even rape.³⁶² However, even as the sexual double standard claimed to protect women from men, it also upheld men’s implicit right to access women’s bodies, so long as they did so in appropriate settings, and/or so long as they abused so-called fallen-women instead of proper, middle class girls. A vocal minority of NBC’s viewers were outraged when the network allowed its 1957 “Holiday in Las Vegas” special’s sponsor, Exquisite Form Brassiere, to air

³⁶⁰ Russell.

³⁶¹ Mrs. H.D. Johnston, “Letter from Mrs. H.D. Johnston to President Truman,” October 1, 1947, File 44-1; Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Misc; Box 189; General Correspondence, 1927-46; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

³⁶² Sam Colacurcio, “Letter from Sam Colacurcio to FCC,” April 21, 1950, File 44-1; Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Misc; Box 40; General Correspondence, 1947-1950; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

commercials featuring live female models wearing their products. However, even as one anonymous correspondent called the event a crude “burlesque,” they noted that it “[belonged] at an all-male convention” where the female entertainers would likely be strippers or prostitutes rather than on home screens “for a mixed audience” of well-educated, chaste women and men.³⁶³

Dorothea Saccany was not so sure that even men were safe around depictions of feminine sexuality. In 1953 she complained that “I fail to see anything inspiring about a parade of semi-nude females to housewives and children. It is possible that they are appealing to men. In fact, doesn’t Communistic propaganda use that theme quite often — American men and soldiers depicted in cartoons surrounded by pin-ups!”³⁶⁴ Saccany and others drew a direct line from the threat female bodies posed on television – and which was most fully dramatized in postwar noir films – to the menace of Communist invasion. However, while Saccany regarded women’s sexuality as a threat to the moral strength of every American citizen, she saw it as especially problematic for women and children. Women’s bodies might lead good men astray, but they were assumed to have more moral fortitude. Women and children, on the other hand, were presumably less able to withstand the temptation to either emulate or desire the semi-clad women she felt surrounded them.

This sexual double standard was also applied to women’s images and behavior

³⁶³ Kathryn Cole, “Memo from Kathryn Cole to Mike Horton,” December 12, 1957, Folder 20; Box 179; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁶⁴ Dorothea Saccany, “Letter from Dorothea Saccany to FCC,” March 25, 1953, File 44-1; Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Misc; Box 46; General Correspondence, 1947-1956; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

throughout the 1950s. While Frank Sinatra and Ingrid Bergman both drew audience complaints after their highly public divorces, they faced different consequences. Frank Sinatra's affair with Ava Gardner and 1951 divorce from his wife Nancy helped quell his stardom for a few years, but his career began to revive in 1953 after his starring role in *From Here to Eternity*. Only three of the twenty-two viewers who called to complain about the episode of Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theater* on which Sinatra appeared in 1953 objected to him and "his recent marital escapades."³⁶⁵ Meanwhile, Ingrid Bergman continued to draw significant censure nearly a decade after her affair with director Roberto Rossellini ended her first marriage: at least 25 viewers were so enraged by her 1957 appearance on Steve Allen's evening variety show that they took the trouble of writing to NBC to voice their objections.³⁶⁶ This represented over half of the network's monthly policy complaints, and was enough to warrant a special note in January's mail report.³⁶⁷

Letter writers continued to object to sexuality in crime series and soap operas on television through the 1950s, but their most vociferous complaints were reserved for the primetime variety programs that dominated early television. Early television star Faye Emerson became a lightning rod for complaints about low-cut necklines on primetime broadcasting, but she was by no means the only personality to attract attention.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁵ Edward Whitney, "Memo from Edward Whitney to Roy Passman," February 4, 1953, Folder 3; Box 367; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁶⁶ Kathryn Cole, "Memo from Kathryn Cole to Mike Horton," February 13, 1957, Folder 20; Box 179; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁶⁷ Cole.

³⁶⁸ Christine Becker, *It's the Pictures That Got Small: Hollywood Film Stars on 1950s Television* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 91.

Viewers also held up “filthy indecent” dances on variety shows as the reason why the “younger generation is going to the devil.”³⁶⁹ Even after the 1952 TV Code committed member stations to ensure that performers’ costuming and movements stayed “within the bounds of propriety and...avoid[ed] such exposure or such emphasis on anatomical detail as would embarrass or offend home viewers,” audience members continued to complain about both.³⁷⁰ And while many conservatives objected to sexual innuendo of any kind, critics were loudest about instances where women were perceived as breaching their virtuous restraint and becoming sexual aggressors.

Christine Becker (2008) reminds us that criticism of women’s physical sexuality was more than just a sexual double standard — it was also an easy way for male critics to dismiss supposedly provocative women’s political leanings. While women like Arlene Francis studiously avoided both politics and criticism throughout their careers, Emerson became more overtly political in the mid-1950s. Instead of directly attacking her increasingly feminist discussions of women’s health and other issues, however, male critics simply ignored her message and focused on her weight gain and personal appearance.³⁷¹ Likewise, complaints about the content of variety shows’ comedy routines were often shot through with disdain for female stars’ low cut dresses.

Outspoken star Tallulah Bankhead bore the brunt of audience rage over one 1953 *All Star Revue* (1950-1955) sketch that some characterized as a “travesty on test pilots.”³⁷²

³⁶⁹ Kathryn Cole, “Memo from Kathryn Cole to Stocton Helffrich,” January 7, 1957, Folder 20; Box 179; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁷⁰ “The Television Code.”

³⁷¹ Becker, *It’s the Pictures That Got Small*, 102.

³⁷² George McGarrett, “Memo from George McGarrett to Roy Passman,” March 18, 1953, Folder 3; Box 367; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Viewers magnified their anger over the sketch by coupling their complaints about what they saw as the piece's unpatriotic humor with criticism of a low-cut dress Bankhead wore during a different part of the program.³⁷³ Of course, this tendency to sexualize women who violated other social norms further discouraged the networks from presenting women in roles that diverged from the increasingly strict maternal, domestic norm, especially female detectives. If viewers saw bad women as inherently sexy, network executives certainly had little motivation to change their minds.

Women and crime

Despite vocal criticism of many elements of broadcast crime, however, many women enjoyed crime series. As with anti-crime discourses, pro-crime discussions largely focused on women's relationship to children. This enduring, and apparently universal, emphasis on American women's maternal roles demonstrates just how deeply conservative gender norms were rooted in the postwar cultural common sense. Even as many women saw themselves as pushing for equality within the home, most still accepted gendered divisions that placed men as the family's primary breadwinner and public authority and made childrearing and domestic maintenance women's responsibility.³⁷⁴ Still, equality advocates pushed critics to recognize women as emotionally mature adults who could enjoy crime narratives separately from their offspring. Even critics worried about primetime crime programs' impact on children acknowledged that parents might get something out of them. One columnist who

³⁷³ Wm. Burke Miller, "Memo from Wm. Burke Miller to William Fineshriber, Jr.," March 14, 1953, Folder 27; Box 580; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁷⁴ Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 46.

believed that crime programs should be removed from the air admitted, “Parents were tolerant of these programs at first - some of them were interesting and different and perhaps all right for elders.”³⁷⁵ Other advocates, especially professional women working for child-advocacy groups, took an educational approach, justifying crime series as a valuable source of entertainment for women themselves, and possibly even a way to teach children that crime does not pay. At least some parents must have agreed: It is highly unlikely that a child like Mary Dobson was able to write a letter begging President Truman to intervene in the cancellation of her favorite series, *The Adventures of Sam Spade* without some parental assistance.³⁷⁶ Finally, women did enjoy crime narratives on their own, and for reasons apart from such series’ impact on children. While women’s views on their personal experience with and relationship to crime programming are rare in the archival record, existing research and correspondence indicate that women were more drawn to crime series that explored personal relationships and had strong female characters. Finally, at least a few women saw crime series as an opportunity to engage with social issues, or even to dream of a career writing crime themselves.

Professional Women: Fighting for the Right Type of Crime School

Like clubwomen, postwar female professionals framed their comments on radio crime in terms of its impact on children. However, where clubwomen argued that

³⁷⁵ Shupp, “Letter from Albert and Mary Shupp to Mr Charles Denny.”

³⁷⁶ “Letter from Mary Dobson to President Truman,” October 1950, File 44-3; Columbia Broadcasting System Complaint File; Box 54; General Correspondence, 1947-56; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

representations of crime encouraged juvenile delinquency, the female staff of professional groups like the Child Study Association (CSA) advocated for more complicated treatments of such issues as a way to introduce children to complicated issues, including war and “racial, ethnic, and religious intolerance.”³⁷⁷ Like the women against whom they argued, women like CSA President Sidonie Gruenberg and staff member Josette Frank had to find ways to assert their own authority as women. Most postwar female professionals, or at least those who achieved positions of authority, remained concentrated in social work and educational fields. There, women’s authority was limited to supervising women and children. While they had made significant progress in education and professionalization, professional women walked a fine line between being respected for their understanding of women and children and being dismissed as irrational women. They did this partly by distancing themselves from the non-professional women who wrote to complain about radio crime, and especially from the way those women framed their authority in maternalistic terms. The CSA had been founded in 1888 by a group of middle-class mothers, but by the 1930s they had fully adopted scientific childrearing approaches, building up close links to experts in male-dominated fields like psychology and child development.³⁷⁸ Within this framework, Gruenberg’s chief authority came from her ability to instruct mothers in proper childrearing techniques. She was more sympathetic to mothers’ concerns about crime’s negative impact on children than the male researchers with whom she worked, but she

³⁷⁷ Amanda Lynn Bruce, “Creating Consumers and Protecting Children: Radio, Early Television and the American Child, 1930--1960” (Dissertation, Stony Brook University, 2008), 11.

³⁷⁸ Bruce, 155.

still felt that such mothers were acting rashly in their rush to censor child-focused crime series.³⁷⁹

Gruenberg and the CSA based their public defense of juvenile crime serials on scientific research into children's interactions with other forms of media, including fairy and folk tales and comic books. In a 1944 article in *The Journal of Educational Sociology*, Gruenberg argued against people who believed that sensationalist comic books were destroying children's morals and leading them to commit crimes. Citing past moral panics over recorded music, theater, and movies, as well as their eventual resolution, she argued that comic books' "potent" influence on children could be harnessed to the social good.³⁸⁰ As comic publishers stepped up their efforts to publish books promoting racial and social justice, she hoped that parents would accept them as a positive educational tool. Likewise, Gruenberg and Frank argued that the excitement children felt when they listened to radio serials was good for their emotional and social development. Beyond giving them vicarious experience with different cultures and ways of life, they argued that adventure series helped young listeners learn to deal with complex and uncomfortable emotions like fear and loss by allowing them to experience them in a safe and contained environment and providing mental catharsis.³⁸¹ The networks eagerly cited these arguments in their defenses of crime series.³⁸² They were less eager to publicize arguments that adult women might also get more than simple

³⁷⁹ Bruce, 156.

³⁸⁰ Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg, "The Comics as a Social Force," *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 18, no. 4 (1944): 208.

³⁸¹ Bruce, "Creating Consumers and Protecting Children," 160.

³⁸² Avi Santo, "'Good Morals Are Good Business': The Cultural Economy of Children's Radio in the Late 1930s," *Popular Communication* 9 (2011): 1–21.

entertainment from crime narratives.

Finding Liberation in Crime

Even as feminists and conservatives critiqued television programming for making women into idiots, many female audience members derived enjoyment, and even empowerment, from commercial programming. Beyond the women who reported being “pleasantly surprised to find that the larger part of [soap operas] are plausible and make the daily chores of a housewife whisk by,” many constructed their own meanings from network programming’s individual components.³⁸³ As Jeanine Basinger (1993) has noted, even the most conservative media aimed at women can become unintentionally liberatory. Women’s films and soap operas might end by reaffirming patriarchal gender roles and returning their heroines to domestic spaces, but “in asking the question, What should a woman do with her life? they created the possibility of an answer different from the one they intended to provide at the end.”³⁸⁴ And broadcast crime stories certainly did question women’s postwar gender roles. This was most apparent in daytime soap operas. While postwar soaps did become more conservative than their 1930s progenitors, they were still much more likely than primetime series to focus on women who worked or led otherwise socially abnormal lives, often involving crime.³⁸⁵ Primetime radio crime series – and some early television programs – also directly or indirectly commented on women’s postwar discontents. This commentary

³⁸³ “Letter from Mrs. Thomas Greer to NBC Program Director,” January 6, 1955, Folder 11; Box 350; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁸⁴ Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman’s View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930–1960* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 7.

³⁸⁵ Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public*, 73.

was muted by the late-1950s, when most prominent, recurring female characters had disappeared from – or been pushed into the backgrounds of – network television programming, but women’s issues never fully disappeared from the margins of broadcast crime series.

Like the female detectives who appeared on radio and television, women who liked crime are more likely to appear in the archive as isolated cases, as though they were aberrations, or the exceptions that proved the rule that women disliked like crime. As Simmons notes, audience members are less likely to write unsolicited letters to broadcasters when they approve of programming than when they disapprove.³⁸⁶ While the women who wrote to object to broadcast crime programming typically wrote as members of larger groups, the women who wrote to praise it typically wrote as individuals. This had ramifications for their reception as well as the strategies they employed to make sure that the networks registered their preferences. Unlike the FCC, which is legally required as a government agency to preserve its correspondence, the networks had little motivation to preserve audience letters once they had been read and tabulated. Most series-specific letters were forwarded to program producers, meaning that few pro-crime letters remain in NBC’s archives. My own search turned up just thirteen indisputably pro-crime programming letters written between 1950 and 1958, as well as records of an additional fifteen phone calls received in 1953. Of these, two letters came from married heterosexual couples, six from women, and five from men. No genders were reported for the phone calls. There are likely other letters spread

³⁸⁶ Simmons, “Dear Radio Broadcaster,” 452.

throughout the archive, but because NBC's archival holdings retain their original file structure it is difficult to determine where other letters might be placed. Most of the letters I examined addressed the cancellation of specific programs and are concentrated in the early 1950s. As NBC's radio network retrenched, loyal radio listeners wrote to lament their disappearing favorites, including private eye series like *The Falcon* (1943-1954) and *Barrie Craig* (1951-1955), and newspaper-based crime dramas like *The Big Story* (1947-1955).³⁸⁷ I supplement these letters with audience research and ratings reports that the network collected throughout the 1940s and 1950s. During this period, women made up the majority of the radio and television audience at all times of the day, guaranteeing that crime series could not have been successful without their support.

Even as radio audiences shrank, ratings data indicated that crime series retained their listeners better than most other genres, and that fans of mystery and crime series were especially loyal to the genre.³⁸⁸ In addition to soap operas, mysteries were among the last narrative genres to leave network radio. *Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar* (1948-1962), a popular series about a freelance insurance investigator, was the final dramatic radio program to leave the air when it finally ended in 1962.³⁸⁹ The fact that crime series persisted on radio even after most radio soap operas had completed the transition

³⁸⁷ Ginny Johnson, "Letter from Ginny Johnson to NBC Director of Programs," September 15, 1952, Folder 70; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; Dorothy Hart, "Letter from Mrs. Dorothy Hart to NBC," October 7, 1955, Folder 11; Box 350; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁸⁸ "Rating Points From NBC Sales Planning," March 13, 1952, Folder 8; Box 221; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; "A Research Study of Mystery Writers Theatre," February 5, 1957, Folder 28; Box 194; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁸⁹ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 742.

to television is further proof of their appeal to women, who were more likely to continue listening to radio through the transition, either because of habit, the finances of television ownership, or because radio's aural narratives were less disruptive to their domestic routines.³⁹⁰ However, it is also notable that many of those female listeners were often the ones about which the networks cared the least, including the older housewives that were most likely to be denigrated as irrational daytime soap opera audiences.³⁹¹ The networks marginalized these older women and their opinions when they promoted their idealized vision of a new daytime television audience of young, fertile housewives with growing families to advertisers.³⁹² This orientation may help account for the fact that no independent female radio detectives made the transition to television, while several male detectives did, including Perry Mason, Dick Tracy, Sgt. Friday, Martin Kane, and Richard Diamond.

Although women were rarely explicit about which aspects of crime series gave them the most pleasure, we can extrapolate a few attributes from the existing letters in NBC and producer files. In 1952, Mrs. C.M. Hayes wrote to writer Don Sanford. While she ostensibly meant to praise *Martin Kane* (NBC TV, 1949-1954) on behalf of herself, her family, and her entire neighborhood, the bulk of her letter was devoted to criticizing the program's lead actor. Hayes noted that "the stories are good not to [sic] much murder but for heaven sake why is it you have such a pin head as Lloyd Nolan!!!!"³⁹³

³⁹⁰ "Television vs. Radio 18 Month Comparison" (Advertest Research, November 1950), Folder 13; Box 193; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁹¹ "Research and Planning Bulletin #60 - 1952-53 NBC Tandem Audience," July 22, 1953, Folder 84; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁹² Wang, "Convenient Fictions," 609.

³⁹³ Mrs. C.M. Hayes, "Letter from Mrs. C.M. Hayes to Mr Don Sanford," March 14, 1952, Folder 5;

Her objections to Nolan focused on his failure to conform to postwar masculine ideals. As Philippa Gates (2008) has argued, the suave, upper-class, European-style masculinity that dominated Depression-era popular and crime films had given way to a tougher, more working-class ideal embodied by actors like Humphrey Bogart, who went from playing gangsters in the 1930s to world-weary and wise postwar heroes.³⁹⁴ Despite Nolan's long career in crime and Western B-pictures and television series, Hayes did not find his performance convincing, likening him to a weasel and charging that "he couldn't defend himself against a child of 10 yrs. let alone knock some of the men he is supposed to floor" and that he was "afraid of his own shadow."³⁹⁵ In contrast to Nolan's perceived weakness, she praised Ralph Bellamy, the wide-shouldered star of *Man Against Crime* (NBC TV, 1949-1954). This preference for a large, visibly strong detective contradicts Hayes's stated preference for a low-violence crime show: despite her efforts to position herself as a properly peaceful, murder-hating woman, Hayes was clearly interested in watching a strong man knock out the bad guys.

Hayes's preference for a masculine detective was echoed in contemporary reviews of other programs. In 1952, prominent critic Harriet Van Horne praised actor Lee Tracey's performance in the television adaptation of *The Amazing Mr. Malone* (ABC/NBC radio 1948-1951, ABC TV 1951-1952) for giving the detective a "reckless vitality."³⁹⁶ This praise of masculine virility was encoded in the language that appeared

Box 13; Donald Sanford Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society. (Original emphasis)

³⁹⁴ Philippa Gates, "The Three Sam Spades: The Shifting Model of American Masculinity in the Three Films of The Maltese Falcon," *Framework* 49, no. 1 (2008): 8.

³⁹⁵ Hayes, "Letter from Mrs. C.M. Hayes to Mr Don Sanford."

³⁹⁶ Harriet Van Horne, "Tracy in a Bang-Up Job as 'Mr. Malone,'" February 13, 1952, Folder 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of

in writing guides and program descriptions produced by sponsors and writers. Describing the series that would become *Man Against Crime* (CBS 1949-1953, DuMont/NBC 1953-1954), radio and television writer Lawrence Klee promised a detective who would represent “the kind of virility and independence that is usually most appealing to women.”³⁹⁷ Neither a pretty boy nor sardonic, such a detective would be “healthy, generous, alert, and unostentatious,” ensuring that he would win female admiration and earn male respect and identification “in their dream-world of personal fantasy.”³⁹⁸ Such a man embodied the ideal Cold War-era: strong enough to protect his contained family from outside threats, kind enough to use his power over his dependents wisely, and sexy enough to make the patriarchy attractive to female audience members. Instead of trying to compete with such a strong protector, women would feel comfortable embracing their feminine weakness and line up to swoon into his muscular arms. Network executives remained convinced that audiences wanted masculine — and male — detectives through the 1960s. As we will see, this caused problems for female detectives, who were forced to reconcile the apparently contradictory masculine requirements of their profession with the feminine requirements of their gender. This tension was especially problematic in later programs, like *Honey West*, where the female detective directly challenged the idea that such qualities were inherently masculine.

Despite this focus on attractive, muscular heroes, the networks were hesitant to

Wyoming.

³⁹⁷ Lawrence Klee, “A Brief Review of Camel Television Programming,” n.d., Folder 3; Box 5; Lawrence M. Klee Papers, 1936-1957; Collection Number 10049, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

³⁹⁸ Klee.

directly acknowledge the pleasure — sexual or otherwise — that women might take in crime series, or any other type of programming. Beyond conservative audience criticism of female sexuality, executives like NBC Continuity Acceptance Manager Stockton Helffrich were also uncomfortable with programs like *The Continental* (CBS, 1952-1953), a late-night radio and television series in which Italian actor Renzo Cesana embodied an idealized Latin lover figure who flattered women and answered their questions about romance. Despite Cesana’s relatively mainstream advice, Helffrich advised NBC executives to reject the program because he and the managers of some Midwestern affiliates were uncomfortable with the fact that the show pandered to “millions of American women, whether single or married [who] are frustrated as women in their relations with men.”³⁹⁹ The idea that white suburban women might enjoy being romanced by a foreign, accented man was deeply unsettling to the postwar social order that depended upon but also obscured women’s domestic labor. Again, the concern with women’s sexuality covered a deeper fear of women’s agency: by allowing women a televised forum to air their grievances, the network risked publicizing and validating women’s private dissatisfaction with their domestic roles. Helffrich dismissed such attention as pandering, perhaps to further assuage fears that such a program might ultimately encourage disaffected housewives to seek out more active, public roles.

While most crime fans characterized their enjoyment in terms of a leisure activity, others saw it as a way to expand their limited domestic worlds. Women also

³⁹⁹ Stockton Helffrich, “Memo from Stockton Helffrich to Fred Wile,” November 20, 1951, Folder 16; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

wrote to their favorite radio crime writers to express their admiration, and even desire to write for such programs themselves. Eileen Draper Moore expressed such a wish when she wrote to radio crime writer Gene Wang to point out an inaccuracy in one of his scripts for *The Falcon*. Apparently taking this error as an excuse to address Wang as an equal, Moore proceeded to lament the lack of on-air credit given to hardworking writers like Wang and Ray Buffum of *The Fat Man*, whom she recognized as the true creative forces behind the programs she enjoyed.⁴⁰⁰ Indeed, Moore's letter conveys her desire to join their ranks, and even a barely concealed resentment at her exclusion. She concluded with the jealous comment that "I'd like to know just how many manhours [sic] you put in on last nights [sic] Falcon."⁴⁰¹ Despite generally wishing that she "could write one-third as well" as Wang, Moore had disliked that particular script; this appears to have added to her frustration that she might routinely "spend sixty hours [on a script] and get a polite rejection."⁴⁰²

Moore never directly acknowledges the fact that, regardless of her actual talent, her chance of writing for a network radio series were severely limited by her gender and marital status. Indeed, her frustration was common among women who attended college after WWII. Despite their elite status, social connections, and career dreams, many educated women ultimately decided that they would find more opportunities for self-expression and advancement as housewives than career girls.⁴⁰³ Unlike their male peers,

⁴⁰⁰ "Letter from Mrs. Eileen Draper Moore to Mr. Wang," June 28, 1951, Box 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

⁴⁰¹ Moore.

⁴⁰² Moore.

⁴⁰³ Babette Faehmel, *College Women In The Nuclear Age: Cultural Literacy and Female Identity, 1940-1960* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 180.

women were more likely to become disillusioned with the country's promise of meritocracy and equal opportunity precisely because they faced additional, highly gendered obstacles that went unacknowledged, and even unrecognized.⁴⁰⁴ Moore's passive aggressive conclusion conveys the depths of her frustration, but also her awareness that as a woman — and especially a married woman — she must at least appear to suppress her ambition in favor of more acceptably feminine pursuits.

It is notable that Moore wrote to Wang as a married woman who was nevertheless interested in writing professionally, and for pay. Unlike many of the married women who foregrounded their marital status by signing their letters to broadcasters with their married names, Moore signed her letter with her own name, including her married name (Mrs. Laurence H. Moore) in parentheses below. In some respects, Moore's efforts are similar to those of Mrs. Anthony Eberhardt's attempt to pitch her Aunt Minnie character to Pat Weaver. Both women aspired to take part in shaping broadcast programming. However, while Eberhardt characterized her efforts in terms of the need to reform radio and television, Moore appeared to be inspired by much of what she heard on the radio. Still, unlike the young men who wrote to broadcasters and program producers directly requesting writing advice and script samples from which to learn to write for radio and television, Moore did not ask Wang for assistance in selling the radio scripts that she apparently labored so hard over.⁴⁰⁵ Female correspondents were rarely so bold as to assert their interest in writing for radio. Still,

⁴⁰⁴ Faehmel, 8.

⁴⁰⁵ "Letter from John Bresnahan, Jr. to Donald Sanford," 1958, Folder 2; Box 1; Donald Sanford Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Moore's letter marks a tentative attempt to speak to one of her favorite writers on a somewhat equal footing. She might never become his peer, but she still wanted him to know that she understood and admired the effort that went into his craft. Even more, she wanted what she knew she could not have – to be accepted as an equal.

Finally, Moore's interest in writing radio crime dramas suggests another reason that many audience members were attracted to the genre: the fact that such programs allowed the audience "to engage in a battle of wits with the author and production group responsible for the show."⁴⁰⁶ Moore's ostensible purpose for writing to Wang was to point out an inaccuracy at the end of one of his scripts. Judging from production correspondence that emphasized writers' need to provide sufficient clues, this was a common theme of letters from mystery fans. While Moore's correction was ostensibly, if not actually, gentle, the fact that she took the time to make it indicates a deep engagement with the narrative and a desire that the writer 'play fair,' according to the rules of the genre.⁴⁰⁷ As Raymond Chandler framed them, the detective "should disclose enough to keep the reader's mind working," and the central mystery "must baffle a reasonably intelligent reader" while still having "enough essential simplicity to be explained easily when the time comes."⁴⁰⁸ More specifically, most broadcast crime series adhered to the informal rules that guide most classical detective narratives: the killer must play a prominent role in the narrative so that readers have a chance to

⁴⁰⁶ "A Research Study of Mystery Writers Theatre."

⁴⁰⁷ Charles J. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2005), 14.

⁴⁰⁸ Raymond Chandler, "Twelve Notes on the Mystery Story," in *The Notebooks of Raymond Chandler*, ed. Frank MacShane (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 36–37.

identify them, the story universe must adhere to a known, rational set of rules, and all relevant clues must be available to audience and detective.⁴⁰⁹ Despite anti-crime letter writers' focus on the genre's more prurient aspects, mystery fans were most interested in their favorite series as an intellectual exercise. The increasing number of college-educated, middle-class white women who found themselves stranded in suburban homes likely enjoyed the mental stimulation that came with matching wits with a radio detective.⁴¹⁰

Programs like the popular *Ellery Queen* (radio, 1939-1948, TV, 1950-1952) capitalized on the audience's desire to be a part of solving the mystery by asking audience members and a panel of celebrity "armchair detectives" to guess a crime's solution before the final answer was revealed by Queen. Judging by the number of program proposals that adopted this model for television – and explicitly envisioned women as their target audience – broadcast executives and programmers were well aware that women like Moore saw crime and mystery programs as an intellectual outlet. When producer Louis Cowan pitched a televised version of *Calling All Detectives* to NBC in 1953, he envisioned it as effective counterprogramming for CBS's rating juggernaut, *I Love Lucy*.⁴¹¹ Cowan's proposal for the "fast moving mystery-adventure drama" envisioned active participation from a call-in audience composed of predominantly female viewers who would be tempted away from the domestic sitcom by

⁴⁰⁹ Rzepka, *Detective Fiction*, 15.

⁴¹⁰ Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 38.

⁴¹¹ Louis Cowan, "Memo from Louis Cowan to Jack Rayel," May 12, 1953, Folder 40; Box 385; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

their desire to solve mysteries.⁴¹² Audiences demanded both originality and solvability from program producers. Prolific crime producer Bernard Schubert frequently reminded writers like Gene Wang that they could not rest on their laurels if they expected listeners to continue tuning in long-standing series like *The Falcon* as radio audiences declined in the early 1950s.⁴¹³ Viewers occasionally revolted when they were not able to confirm their assumptions by comparing them to the final solution: on February 12, 1953, at least 15 viewers called to complain that the solution to that evening's *Dragnet* had been too rushed for them to catch it.⁴¹⁴

While the archives contain few letters from female listeners praising crime programs, we can glean some hints about individuals' attitudes from letters praising another popular genre: the soap opera. As program producers were well aware, crime has long been a major — and popular — feature on daytime soap operas and their predecessors, including Victorian sensation fiction. Jennifer Hayward (1997) notes that crime is just as central to soap opera plots as more commonly cited narrative elements like romance, family and social issues, business, and suspense.⁴¹⁵ As I have already noted, multiple radio soap operas measured audience engagement by asking listeners to act as jury in a heroine's murder trial. Solving mysteries, whether they be trivial or

⁴¹² Cowan.

⁴¹³ Bernard Schubert, "Letter from Bernard Schubert to Gene Wang," October 4, 1951, Box 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming; Bernard Schubert, "Letter from Bernard Schubert to Gene Wang," November 9, 1951, Box 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

⁴¹⁴ Edward Whitney, "Memo from Edward Whitney to Roy Passman," February 16, 1953, Folder 3; Box 367; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴¹⁵ Jennifer Poole Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 151.

monumental, is a central element of the soap opera's serialized draw. Audience members complained when their favorite series were cancelled mid-storyline, especially when the cancellation left them with unanswered questions. Sometimes, just knowing the solution to a mystery was not enough: Mrs. Ruth Hill wrote twice to protest when *King's Row* ended before "Rex Belson's murderer (his former wife) [was] caught."⁴¹⁶ Though she knew the murderer's identity, Hill still felt cheated by the lack of formal narrative resolution. Some series made the mystery solving element more central than others. Radio soap operas like *Kitty Keene* and, to a lesser extent, *Perry Mason*, merged the domestic and the criminal through their central characters' occupations of private detective and investigating lawyer, respectively.

One element of radio and television crime dramas that resonated with female audience members across daytime and primetime was a strong female character. While there were few female detectives on radio, and even fewer on 1950s television, audience research indicated that audiences responded to crime series that featured prominent female characters. Participants in the Advertest study ranked two such programs, *Mr. & Mrs. North* and *Big Town*, third and eleventh respectively in the list of respondents' favorite television crime programs. When asked to identify why they had selected a certain program as their favorite, 24.4% cited *Mr. & Mrs. North's* "female element," namely the fact that "Mrs. North is typical inquisitive female; solves mystery."⁴¹⁷ Only

⁴¹⁶ "Letter from Ruth M. (Mrs. A.S.) Hill to Manager of Program Division, NBC," March 24, 1952, Folder 7; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴¹⁷ "Study of Television Mystery Programs."

8.9% cited the fact that the program was “cute and romantic,” effectively refuting the potential argument that those viewers were simply attracted to the program’s marital sitcom elements.⁴¹⁸ 16.7% of those who named *Big Town* their favorite gave Lorelei Kilbourne, the quick-witted female reporter who assisted crusading newspaper editor Steve Wilson, as the reason. This data affirms something that radio producers had understood since the 1930s, when Margo Lane was invented to attract female listeners to *The Shadow*: women responded positively to active female characters in primetime programming.⁴¹⁹ As executives from *Big Town* sponsor Lever Brothers commented on another potential program pilot, female sidekick characters must be given more to do because “after 20 pictures in which a girl has little to do with the advancement of plot or participation in meaningful dialogue, she becomes pretty tiresome” to audiences.⁴²⁰ Beyond the annoyance caused by a pointless character, audience members were likely happy to see women negotiating actual problems in realistic ways, much like 1980s fans of *Cagney and Lacey* were excited to see female detectives working in realistic situations that were closer to audience members’ own lives than the glamorous settings of prime time soap operas like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁸ “Study of Television Mystery Programs.”

⁴¹⁹ Shaun Treat, Daniel Grano, and Jon Croghan, “The Shadow Knows: The Counter-Fantasy of the American Antihero and Symbolic Divergence in Golden Age Radio,” *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 16, no. 1 (2009): 34.

⁴²⁰ “Letter from Sapphire Films, Ltd. to Nat Wolff,” June 21, 1956, Folder 43; Box 387; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴²¹ Julie D’Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 177.

Conclusion

By the 1950s, however, networks were unconcerned with the women who were interested in strong, independent women like Margo Lane. Instead, executives preferred to speak to women as mothers and homemakers. As I note earlier in this chapter, this was partly because male broadcast executives were more sympathetic to the social values expressed by conservative letter writers, and therefore more likely to express those values in their programming. The threat of boycotts was certainly a strong motivating factor, but broadcasters' social values were also more likely to align with more conservative outlooks. Network and advertising executives were largely wealthy white men who saw the world through the compounding lenses of their wealth, gender, and race; all of these encouraged them to view women who rebelled against the postwar period's increasingly patriarchal social structures as aberrations at best, and existential threats at worst.

As we will see in the next chapter, the image of postwar American life that the broadcast networks promoted was geared toward their commercial interests. Depictions of happy housewives encouraged women to engage in the sort of aspirational consumption that would sell big-ticket items to an army of suburban women. There was little room in this picture for depictions of women who sought self-fulfillment through labor outside of the home. Indeed, anything that distracted women from domestic consumption, or that questioned the naturalness of their domestic natures, threatened to subvert American democracy itself. By the late-1950s, a female detective was a risk that could not be borne.

CHAPTER 3: CAN WOMEN EVEN BE DETECTIVES?

In July of 1951, NBC producer Albert McCleery submitted a proposal for a program he was sure would boost the developing television network's bottom line. *Mysteries at Midnight* would court pulp paperback readers with a series of late-night crime dramas, starring a rotating cast of police and private detectives. Wednesday nights would feature actress Nina Foch as a "vibrant and vivacious woman detective assigned to the New York City Bureau of Investigation."⁴²² At the time, the young, blonde Foch was best known for her noir roles and guest spots on early television anthology dramas, and McCleery envisioned her stories combining "the best elements of suspense and sex."⁴²³ McCleery's television proposal may have been inspired by the success of radio series like NBC West Coast's *Candy Matson* (1949-1951). Candy's producers built up a loyal fan base up and down the West Coast, and precipitated the sexy lady investigators of the 1970s, by punctuating Candy's investigatory narratives with frequent references to her attractive figure. Candy was probably the most overtly sexualized member of the small but significant group of postwar female detectives and crime-curious women, but she was not the only one to enjoy noteworthy success on radio during the period when the major networks were transitioning their programming from radio to television. Despite this promising example, however, crime-curious women were almost unheard of on network television. By the mid-1950s, they had almost completely disappeared.

Despite vocal audience criticism, crime stories flourished on US network radio

⁴²² Albert McCleery, "A Program Proposal to Raise Additional Gross Revenue," July 30, 1951, Folder 29; Box 567A; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴²³ McCleery.

during and after World War II. By the mid-1950s, they were flourishing on television as well. After some initial hesitation from reputation- and regulation-wary executives like NBC's Continuity Acceptance Manager Stockton Helffrich, crime also became a valuable tool for attracting audiences and advertisers to the new medium. However, even as the networks' audience research repeatedly reaffirmed that women, "particularly the housewives," were an integral part of the 1950s crime audience, television program executives proved hesitant, even unwilling, to create crime dramas explicitly for or about women.⁴²⁴ Instead of following radio's lead and creating new female detectives to attract women to the new medium, television executives pushed all types of women to the margins of their developing crime dramas. This chapter argues that this was no accident. Rather, network executives made a series of deliberate, if unacknowledged, choices about how postwar women should be represented on television. As I demonstrate in the preceding chapters, these choices were partly dictated by the networks' economic and regulatory concerns. However, network executives own deeply gendered biases also predisposed them to dismiss representations of crime-curious women.

This chapter highlights the ways in which postwar network executives translated conservative feminine ideals into representational codes that have endured to the present day. Network executives were worried about a number of issues when it came to representing women on the small screen, but they expressed most of their concerns in

⁴²⁴ Robert McFadyen, "Letter from Robert McFadyen to Herbert Jacobson," September 2, 1952, Folder 10; Box 572; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; "Study of Television Mystery Programs" (Advertest Research, March 1954), Folder 32; Box 193; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; "A Research Study of Mystery Writers Theatre," February 5, 1957, Folder 28; Box 194; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

terms of sex. As feminist theorist Monique Wittig argues, “the category of sex tightly holds women,” making it impossible for women to be conceived, or conceive of themselves, outside of their roles within male-dominated, heterosexual systems of reproduction.⁴²⁵ Women who accepted their roles within this moral system were — at least contingently — categorized as good, virtuous, and patriotic. Those who did not were seen as using their sexuality to destroy individual men and destroy the American way of life. This fear characterized a range of paranoid postwar responses to even the most oblique aural and visual hints at women’s sexual potential, and climaxed in noir heroes’ obsession with taming the fictional femme fatale. Men like Helffrich claimed that they were simply responding to audience pressure when they implicitly and explicitly linked female characters’ moral virtue to their sexual purity, which they defined in terms of women’s pre-marital chastity and post-marital fidelity.⁴²⁶ However, as program executives like McCleery pointed out, sexualized images of attractive women also attracted audiences.

Mysteries at Midnight was ultimately pulled for lack of sponsorship, but sexy women remained an integral part of the crime genre throughout the postwar period.⁴²⁷ However, the nature of their participation changed. Between the end of WWII and the mid-1950s, network programmers and censors worked out an informal compromise, wherein network programs could capitalize on radio descriptions or televised images of

⁴²⁵ Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 8.

⁴²⁶ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 122.

⁴²⁷ Edwin Vane, “Change in Schedule on ‘Mysteries at Midnight,’” December 15, 1952, Folder 1; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

attractive women's bodies so long as those bodies' disruptive sexual potential remained firmly under (male) control; women's sexuality was visually controlled by censors who kept it from breaking the bounds of public decency, and ideologically by plots that positioned women as dependent upon men. The end result were feminine representations that perpetuated the paranoid trope that any woman who took control of her own sexuality was inherently threatening. This threat could be relatively minor; in *I Love Lucy*'s famous "Job Switching," the threat of discipline from their mannish, strict, and presumably unmarried supervisor hangs like a dark cloud over Lucy and Ethel's time in the chocolate factory. In other cases, however, women's unchecked sexual agency threatened to undermine the very foundations of American society and the country's national security. Unchaste women, a category that included any woman who rejected conventional marriages and/or resisted patriarchal authority over her body, threatened to pervert the nation's future by leading children — and the adult women responsible for raising them — astray.

Where Did All the Crime-Solving Ladies Go?

The link between sex and femininity was strongest and most threatening when it came to crime. As Neil Verma (2012) notes, tropes associated with film noir, including first-person voice-over, wise-guy heroes, and sexualized women with insinuating voices, were well established on radio by the end of WWII.⁴²⁸ As in the darkest noir films, radio criminals were represented as more pathological and less redeemable than they had been

⁴²⁸ Neil Verma, *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 185.

in the 1930s.⁴²⁹ Furthermore, many of the most visible and memorable of these criminals were women. As I and others have argued, the femme fatale was not the only character type available to women in postwar noir, nor were the women who were labeled fatales inherently or wholly evil.⁴³⁰ Rather, most so-called fatales were complicated, human characters.⁴³¹ It was the men in their lives, and later, critics relying on their own gender biases or overly-narrow visions of feminist action who interpreted them as nefarious temptresses.⁴³² Still, it does matter that many audiences — and especially conservative and/or male audience members — did interpret them thus. As chapter two details, these groups had an outsized influence over postwar broadcasting. And, because so many fewer women than men appeared in postwar crime films, fatales and their often-sensationalized sexuality had an outsized impact on the public imagination.

Early postwar radio noir explored criminal pathologies, either by giving criminals a chance to voice their motives, or by exploring parallels between criminals and the detectives pursuing them. However, this curiosity about human nature and criminal ambiguity was one of the first things purged in the anti-communist panics that began seizing the country almost as soon as peace was declared. By the early-1950s, most of

⁴²⁹ Verma, 182.

⁴³⁰ Catherine Martin, “Adventure’s Fun, but Wouldn’t You Rather Get Married?: Gender Roles and the Office Wife in Radio Detective Dramas,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 74, no. 1 (2014): 16–26; Julie Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-Up* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013); Mary Beth Haralovich, “Selling Noir: Stars, Gender and Genre in Film Noir Posters and Publicity,” in *A Companion to Film Noir*, ed. Helen Hanson and Andrew Spicer (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013), 245–63; Allison McCracken, “Scary Women and Scarred Men: Suspense, Gender Trouble, and Postwar Change, 1942-1950,” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 183–207.

⁴³¹ Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir*, 47.

⁴³² Grossman, 47.

the morally ambiguous private detectives who had dominated the airwaves were replaced by procedural programs that drew a firm line between criminals on the one hand and law-abiding citizens and investigators on the other.⁴³³ It is surely no coincidence that this was also the period in which female investigators also began to disappear from the airwaves. As I argue throughout this dissertation, representations of women in crime dramas are an important barometer of cultural concerns regarding feminine agency. Their very presence in criminal settings – especially unaccompanied by male chaperones – rendered them morally ambiguous, and therefore tainted. In effect, I argue, respectable women were virtually “defined” out of the crime genre during the transition from radio to television.

Women’s roles in crime dramas were further complicated by changing media technology. When narrative programming moved from the aural realm of radio to the visual space of ‘radio with pictures,’ its representational possibilities simultaneously expanded and narrowed. Even as televised images gave audiences more information, they short-circuited the process by which individual listeners built up narrative worlds in their own imaginations. Instead of picturing the world as they wished, television audiences were shown the world as it supposedly was. Of course, radio broadcasters had always worked to guide their listeners’ imaginations. Radio producers went to great lengths to create spaces and characters that adhered to contemporary conventions of realism.⁴³⁴ They also enforced gendered and racial separations through strict limits

⁴³³ Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 186.

⁴³⁴ Verma, *Theater of the Mind*.

around who was allowed to play what types of roles. White men could inhabit a broad range of aural spaces on radio, including passing as women or people of color. At the same time, white women were embodied through detailed physical descriptions and/or distinctive vocal intonations, and their utterances were policed by network censors and listeners.⁴³⁵ Casting directors aggressively policed racial barriers by ensuring that Black actors adhered to a stereotyped set of vocal norms based in Blackface minstrelsy.⁴³⁶ Black women's doubly subservient status in the racial/gender hierarchy was marked through scripts that ensured they never referred to white men by their first names.⁴³⁷ Still, gender and racial barriers were permeable within listeners' minds. Leah Lowe (2003) argues that male listeners were just as likely as women to identify with Gracie Allen and her active, madcap antics when they heard her on radio.⁴³⁸ After she moved to television, however, most men rejected that now-feminizing association and identified with her straight man husband, George. At last, broadcast personalities were truly embodied. And once embodied, women and people of color lost their last, best defense against being Othered and subjected to harsh patriarchal scrutiny.

Television visuals also made it more difficult for rebellious women to hide in plain sight: images removed much of the ambiguity on which radio crime writers relied to

⁴³⁵ Matthew Murray, "The Tendency to Deprave and Corrupt Morals': Regulation and Irregular Sexuality in Golden Age Radio Comedy," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 183–207.

⁴³⁶ Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 242.

⁴³⁷ Stoeber, 243.

⁴³⁸ Leah Lowe, "If the Country's Going Gracie, So Can You': Gender Representation in Gracie Allen's Radio Comedy," in *Communities of the Air: Radio Century, Radio Culture*, ed. Susan Merrill Squier (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 241.

excuse their references to the salacious sex and violence for which the crime genre was known. Seeing a virtuous woman, whether she be wife, secretary, or female detective, in physical or sexual danger threatened the very foundations of the Victorian-style cult of feminine domesticity that was being revived and adapted to postwar suburban life. The idea that women, a category that almost always referred to white, middle-class women, might choose to work outside the home was threatening enough between the end of WWII and the mid-1960s — decades during which the suburban housewife was shaped into a potent symbol of the United States' moral and economic virtues. The thought of actually seeing women risk their vaunted purity by forcing themselves into the masculine world of crime was too much for many to countenance. Worse still was the unspoken threat that women might disrupt patriarchal structures of control by demanding a voice in issues of law, order, and justice. There was nothing left for rebellious women but to conform to white, middle-class norms, or, if one was unwilling or unable to do so, be punished and exiled.

On television, as in the rest of white, middle-class life, women bore the brunt of the social pressure to embody supposedly universal American moral and spiritual virtues. Broadcasters who saw women as a secondary audience during male- and family-oriented primetime hours had little impetus to risk offending their outspoken critics by pushing the boundaries of feminine representation on television. Moreover, the idealized image of feminine moral virtue and domestic complacency that conservative critics expounded fit in well with broadcasters' and sponsors' economic goals. In this context, it is hardly surprising that women found their securest purchase on television in genres and character

types that naturalized women's roles as agents of domestic consumption. Aside from crime series, the genre that saw the biggest overall shift in women's roles was the daytime soap opera. On radio, many soap operas had taken advantage of their position within the feminized ghetto of daytime to tell stories about ambitious women working outside the home.⁴³⁹ However, while postwar television soap operas continued to deal with real issues that women faced in their daily lives, they framed those discussions in terms of their educational ability to help "the potentially unstable woman in the home cope with her life," rather than presenting alternatives outside the home.⁴⁴⁰ Soap operas, daytime dramas, game shows, and talk shows all valorized housewives' patience and self-sacrificing devotion to family. In a quieter way, primetime sitcoms, dramas, and comedies did the same. Single, working, and/or rebellious women were most likely to be presented as either adolescents just coming into bloom, or withered – even bitter – spinsters. What they could not be was sexual.

The shift toward a less varied vision of socially acceptable feminine roles did not happen overnight, but it did happen relatively quickly. Female investigators did enjoy a notable, if limited, golden age on postwar network radio. As we will see in the chapters that follow, the networks provided audiences with a consistent stream of female crime solvers and other crime curious women up until the early 1950s. However, most of these programs had ended by 1952. Only six of the seventeen primetime detective series that

⁴³⁹ Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting And Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 73.

⁴⁴⁰ Elana Levine, *Her Stories: Daytime Soap Opera and US Television History* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming), chap. 2.

premiered on television between 1955 and 1965 featured regular female characters.⁴⁴¹ Of the numerous crime-solving and/or crime-adjacent wives, secretaries, and female detectives, only Pam North, of *Mr. & Mrs. North*, and Nora Charles, of *The Thin Man*, made the leap to television, though both were materially transformed by the experience. Over the course of two seasons marked by repeated sponsor and network changes, Pam lost much of her assertive spunk. By the time she made her debut in 1957, Nora had gone from begging her husband to include her in his investigations to begging him to stay home with her. Anna May Wong's short-lived *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong* (DuMont, 1951) and Beverly Garland's *Decoy* (syndicated, 1955) were the only television-native, female-headed crime series to achieve widespread distribution until Anne Francis made waves in *Honey West* (ABC, 1965-1966). Notably, Wong appeared on the upstart and last-place DuMont network, and Garland's program was syndicated, indicating that programmers who felt more pressure to attract new audiences were more willing to experiment with stories about rebellious women.

In some cases, women were explicitly written out of male-starring radio detective series that did transition to television. The pilot script for a never-produced television adaptation of *Let George Do It* duplicated a radio episode whole-cloth, with the exception of George's loyal secretary, Brooksie.⁴⁴² When *Richard Diamond, Private Detective* (radio, 1949-1953, TV 1957-1960) transitioned from noir-inspired singing radio sleuth to

⁴⁴¹ Diana M. Meehan, *Ladies of the Evening: Women Characters of Prime-Time Television* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983), 110.

⁴⁴² David Victor, "'The Crazy Americano' Television Pilot Script," n.d., Box 60; David Victor Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

glamorous television detective, he left his steady socialite girlfriend, Helen Asher, in radioland.⁴⁴³ Aside from one failed attempt to give Diamond a steady television girlfriend in the show's third season the program's only major female presence was Sam, the woman who ran Diamond's answering service, and who only appeared on screen as a pair of shapely legs.⁴⁴⁴ Unlike radio secretaries, Sam was cut off from the dangerous male space of the PI's office. She and Diamond might flirt, but she did not experience investigations with him and she had few chances to influence their outcomes.

Network executives' choice to exclude women from most recurring roles in crime dramas was a significant shift from earlier decades. Even before the late-1950s, radio producers had viewed crime-curious women as a good gimmick, or even a necessity, for companies looking to boost program ratings and product sales. Phyl Coe, one of the earliest female detectives, debuted in 1936 or 1937 with *Phyl Coe Radio Mysteries*, a syndicated series of short mystery stories that featured a quiz contest asking listeners to guess the solution.⁴⁴⁵ Most solutions were linked to radio itself, in a nod to the series' sponsor, the Philco Radio & Television Corporation. More frequently, producers added female characters to existing narratives to attract female listeners. Orson Welles' 1937 adaptation of *The Shadow*, based on a long-running magazine character, cemented its popularity by creating Margo Lane, a refined girlfriend for its crime-solving anti-hero, Lamont Cranston.⁴⁴⁶ As I argue in chapter five and elsewhere, such women helped to

⁴⁴³ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 577.

⁴⁴⁴ Sam's legs were first played by Mary Tyler Moore, then Roxane Brooks.

⁴⁴⁵ Jack French, *Private Eyelashes: Radio's Lady Detectives* (Boalsburg, PA: BearManor Media, 2004), 6.

⁴⁴⁶ Shaun Treat, Daniel Grano, and Jon Croghan, "The Shadow Knows: The Counter-Fantasy of the

soften male detectives' rough edges and attract female listeners to masculine-dominated narratives.⁴⁴⁷ They also served as potential points of interest or identification for female listeners. Recurring female characters gave women someone to whom they could relate without necessarily rejecting other, more stereotypically feminine, parts of their personalities.

Producers were also aware that beautiful women could be a distraction. Proposing a new radio crime series based on "extensive research in the field of mystery and melodrama on the air," prolific writer Lawrence Klee argued that audiences found "casual romances unacceptable" in stories "where action is of primary importance" because "they tend to slow down the narrative."⁴⁴⁸ Instead, he proposed incorporating a loyal female assistant who would provide a "genuine romance that is touched upon subtly from week to week without interfering with the action," thereby providing "the audience with an added facet of interest and another thread of weekly continuity and familiarity" that would also bring the "central characters into even sharper focus."⁴⁴⁹ Interestingly, Klee saw the male detective's ability to attract women "as a symbol of strength and dependability" rather than merely an outlet for masculine wish fulfillment or a means to incorporate titillating seductions.⁴⁵⁰ Furthermore, "His virility and sharp mind make him

American Antihero and Symbolic Divergence in Golden Age Radio," *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 16, no. 1 (2009): 34.

⁴⁴⁷ Martin, "Adventure's Fun, but Wouldn't You Rather Get Married?"; Treat, Grano, and Croghan, "The Shadow Knows."

⁴⁴⁸ Lawrence Klee, "Proposal for Dr. Strong (Radio Series)," n.d., Folder 5; Box 5; Lawrence Klee Papers, 1936-1957; Collection Number 10049, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

⁴⁴⁹ Klee.

⁴⁵⁰ Klee.

equally attractive to men.”⁴⁵¹

Female detectives also brought a softer, more relationship-oriented approach to crime programming. In part, this tone was a defensive strategy: like their male compatriots, female detectives must display an almost criminal ability to infiltrate underworld spaces and conceal their true identities. Radio series about female investigators downplayed their inherent criminal potential by emphasizing the women’s personal relationships and moral motivations: scripts emphasized female investigators’ empathetic natures and deep emotional connections to the communities they sought to help. By the mid-1950s, however, it had become harder to position oneself as a detective without also embracing the hard, detached masculinity that was presented as the default in male-led crime program like *Man Against Crime* (CBS/DuMont/NBC 1949-1954), *Dragnet* (NBC 1951-1959), and even more flamboyant series like *Burke’s Law* (ABC 1963-1966). This was partly a matter of changes in network scheduling practices. As I detail in chapter one, the postwar television networks increasingly segregated any program that could be seen as targeting women during daytime hours. Network salesmen did their best to push food and cosmetics advertisers courting female customers with mixtures of empathy and adventure to daytime, even if those manufacturers sought an audience of working women who would presumably be away from the television during those hours. Many of these companies had been major sponsors of crime series with prominent and recurring female characters, but increasing television production costs and decreasing sponsor power over individual programs and schedule times made it difficult

⁴⁵¹ Klee.

for most sponsors to retain absolute prerogative over their choice of programs and timeslots.

The networks' efforts to exert direct, curatorial control over the programs that went out over their affiliates' airwaves had an almost immediate effect on program diversity. Instead of dealing with a varied group of advertisers with different outlooks and audience goals, program producers now had to satisfy one of four, and then three (after DuMont folded in 1956) centralized program buyers if they wanted to achieve national distribution. Crime series like *Mr. & Mrs. North*, which was produced and owned by an independent production company, had difficulty retaining a place in the primetime network television schedule without support from powerful sponsors. CBS was happy to schedule the program when Colgate, the prolific toiletries manufacturer, first brought the Norths from radio to television in 1952. However, after Colgate dropped the television version of the Norths in order to focus on their anthology drama and variety offerings, CBS refused other sponsors' pitches to adopt the detecting couple during its established Friday night timeslot. Instead, and despite the North's "very saleable" ratings, CBS replaced the independent production with the network-controlled *My Friend Irma* (1952-1954).⁴⁵² *Irma* had two advantages. Because CBS owned the property, the network was guaranteed a bigger share of its eventual profits. Furthermore, even if *Irma* did have a job, she had the feminine decency to be scatterbrained and not to get herself mixed up in crime. NBC briefly aired new episodes of the Norths in 1954, when it was

⁴⁵² Bernard Schubert, "Letter from Bernard Schubert to Charles Barry," July 2, 1953, Folder 8; Box 370; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

sponsored on alternating weeks by Revlon cosmetics and Congoleum flooring. But again, the network preferred to schedule its own programs wherever it could, and by 1955 Revlon had committed to the cheaper gameshow format with *The \$64,000 Question* (CBS, 1955-1958). Even crime series that did feature recurring female characters restricted those women's movements and roles to romance and window dressing. *Peter Gunn*'s (NBC/ABC 1958-1961) girlfriend, nightclub singer Edie Hart, was strong, intelligent, and sympathetic, but she was much more likely to be seen singing for the club's patrons in a slinky dress than actually involved in a case. Most of her empathy was reserved for her battle-hardened boyfriend.

Sponsor and network emphasis on maintaining a good sales environment also limited the roles that women could play, especially if they wanted to be considered good girls. Even if they did not directly deliver sales messages, advertisers expected female television stars to draw viewers in and sell products indirectly. Female stars did so either by using consumer products on screen – a practice that was especially common on domestic sitcoms – and/or by exuding an aura of friendly, relatable glamour to which women at home could aspire.⁴⁵³ But above all, they were expected to maintain a warm, inviting persona that viewers would perceive as authentic and naturally feminine. In practice, this meant that female actresses and the characters they played came in for extra scrutiny at every level of the production process. Sponsors demand for feminine authenticity made it even more difficult for women to find success playing morally

⁴⁵³ "Tips on Buying Film," *Sponsor*, July 11, 1955; "New Cars," *Sponsor*, December 8, 1956; "Film-Scope," *Sponsor*, October 24, 1959.

ambiguous investigators. After all, the crime genre's emphasis on uncovering hidden secrets only served to foreground femininity as a performance. If a female investigator could deviate far enough from her supposedly natural feminine virtues to pass through the criminal underworld, how was anyone to know what she really was? For all viewers knew, the female investigator selling them a product was a femme fatale in disguise. It had been difficult enough for female detectives and other crime-curious women to withstand this scrutiny on radio. On television it proved nearly impossible.

Censuring Good Women into Being

Postwar women had a complicated relationship to crime. While the genre emphasized surveillance and put their lives under a microscope, it was one of the few genres in which women could express their dissatisfaction with their increasingly constricted postwar roles. Both broadcasters' economic interests and the postwar political climate discouraged representations of women working, much less fighting crime, outside the home; even when postwar radio anthology dramas like *Suspense* (CBS 1942-1962) made room for sympathetic representations of women and men who rebelled against restrictive postwar gender norms, they concluded by punishing deviant women with death or domesticity.⁴⁵⁴ Still, such representations empathized with women's concerns about domesticity, and encouraged listeners to empathize as well. This state of affairs did not last long. Shortly after the war's end, noir and gothic-tinged Hollywood blockbusters like *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946) increasingly portrayed

⁴⁵⁴ McCracken, "Scary Women and Scarred Men."

ambitious working women as frigid, unfulfilled, and possibly dangerous.⁴⁵⁵ Female detectives fared worse; by the end of the 1950s, the few who remained in films were depicted as mentally unstable, regardless of whether they labored for money or love of the chase.⁴⁵⁶ Meanwhile, they all-but-vanished from television. These views extended to real women as well: In the 1950s, female ham radio operators were accused of reaching out and perverting otherwise monogamous homes through their seductive voices.⁴⁵⁷

Beyond their general discomfort with women working outside the home, broadcast executives were also reluctant to depict women in crime series that emphasized realistic scenes and action. In many ways, early television crime series were split between their emphases on criminal concealment and stark realism. Narratives focused on uncovering the hidden truths behind criminals' facades, but they did so in a world that was framed as insistently real. Jason Mittell (2004) details the ways in which early television crime dramas, especially the highly influential *Dragnet*, drew upon postwar semi-documentary and social realist films like *The House on 92nd St* (1945) and *The Naked City* (1948).⁴⁵⁸ Regardless of their political outlook, such films asserted their claims to truth through location shooting, black and white images, and appeals to the official authority of academic researchers, journalistic exposes of urban life, and/or law

⁴⁵⁵ Roy Grundmann, "Taking Stock at War's End: Gender, Genre, and Hollywood Labor in 'The Strange Love of Martha Ivers,'" in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, ed. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon, vol. Volume 2 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 495–529.

⁴⁵⁶ Philippa Gates, *Detecting Women: Gender and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 15.

⁴⁵⁷ Anne Gessler, "Dust Mop or Mic? Women's Utopian Border-Crossings in Cold War Ham Radio," *Radio Journal* 15, no. 2 (2017): 285.

⁴⁵⁸ Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 134.

enforcement bodies.⁴⁵⁹ The networks shied away from depicting actual violence, but they emphasized urban location filming and jargon-laden scripts. As more and more white women moved out to the suburbs, they appeared increasingly out of place in this milieu. Moreover, while the realistic urban approach proved popular, early sponsors worried that it would serve as a poor background against which to sell household goods to women. *Dragnet* and *Man Against Crime* were sponsored by cigarette companies through commercials that encouraged men to see themselves in their masculine heroes. *Perry Mason*, with its gentler patriarch, did eventually succeed in promoting household products for Procter & Gamble. However, Perry did not appear on television until 1957. By then, its path was eased by the family-friendly success of programs like *Dragnet*, as well as by the *Perry Mason* franchise's own woman-friendly reputation, earned through its years as a daytime soap opera.

Perhaps more importantly, broadcasters saw crime dramas as a problematic site for representations of women because they foregrounded the constructed nature of postwar gender roles. After decades of social and political tumult, postwar Americans, or at least white, middle-class citizens, romanticized and took refuge in a patriarchal vision of family life. Despite the fact that many young postwar couples saw themselves as engaging in a grand experiment in gender equality, the nuclear family ideal that evolved through the 1950s was based in Victorian notions of separate, highly gendered spheres.⁴⁶⁰ The idea that male breadwinners would provide for, and make major decisions about,

⁴⁵⁹ Mittell, 133.

⁴⁶⁰ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 16.

their dependent, submissive wives and children was so deeply entrenched that most received it as common sense.⁴⁶¹ Indeed, it became a matter of political faith during the Cold War, when anti-communist forces held up the unitary nuclear family, and especially the nurturing, graceful, and deferential housewife, as the sign and source of American virtues.⁴⁶² Many argued that Soviet agents were trying to destroy (white) American families by encouraging women to work and sending beautiful women to seduce away their husbands.⁴⁶³ Within this context, any woman seen as manipulating her feminine sexuality to get ahead, or even to get her husband to do the dishes, was seen as a potential threat.⁴⁶⁴ She was certainly not seen as a natural, normal woman.

Still, crime series did begin to transition to television in earnest by the early-1950s. Reputation- and regulation-wary networks like NBC expressed some trepidation when it came to adapting potentially violent crime franchises and syndicated films like *Dick Tracy* in the late 1940s.⁴⁶⁵ Executives like Continuity Acceptance Manager Stockton Helffrich were especially worried that the viewing public – or at least the public’s vocal conservative members – would reject violent and/or sexualized images on television. However, this hesitation began to dissipate after the National Association of Broadcasters’ 1951 Television Code averted the threat of federal or local censorship. Of

⁴⁶¹ Weiss, 20.

⁴⁶² Kate A. Baldwin, *The Racial Imaginary of the Cold War Kitchen: From Sokol’niki Park to Chicago’s South Side* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2016), xi.

⁴⁶³ Kathryn Olmsted, “Blond Queens, Red Spiders, and Neurotic Old Maids: Gender and Espionage in the Early Cold War,” *Intelligence and National Security* 19, no. 1 (2004): 78–94.

⁴⁶⁴ Maria DiBattista, *Fast-Talking Dames* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 17; Katherine J. Lehman, *Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 26; Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 41.

⁴⁶⁵ Stockton Helffrich, “Television Weekly Report,” July 13, 1949, Folder 24; Box 588; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

course, as NBC foresaw early in the transition from radio to television, moving crime from an aural to a visual medium meant more than just adding pictures to accompany the words listeners were used to hearing over their radio sets. In 1950, *Sponsor* worried that it would be difficult to create TV crime stories that would compare to the ones that currently existed on radio “because they rely so much on listeners’ imaginations.”⁴⁶⁶ Televised images simultaneously expanded and restricted crime series’ possibilities. A viewer who could watch a detective investigating a crime had a better chance of successfully playing along with the solution to the crime, provided the program’s sets and image quality were adequate.

NBC Continuity Acceptance Manager Stockton Helffrich was worried about pictures for other reasons. Helffrich was especially attentive to what he saw as changing audience values in the postwar period, and he wanted to ensure that television would not repeat radio’s mistakes and alienate new viewers by sensationalizing sex to sell products. While Helffrich and his continuity readers monitored all of the networks’ programming, Helffrich laid out his attitudes toward female characters who defied gender norms most clearly when it came to soap operas, which frequently employed stories involving crime and sexuality. Indeed, Helffrich appears to have seen himself and his staff as engaging in a decades-long battle to “[pare] away at the excesses which crop up in the [radio] series handled by” prolific radio soap opera producers Frank and Anne Hummert.⁴⁶⁷ By 1955, he had had enough. His communications from this period directly link radio

⁴⁶⁶ “Are Mysteries Still the Best Buy?,” *Sponsor*, October 9, 1950.

⁴⁶⁷ Stockton Helffrich, “Confidential Memo from Stockton Helffrich to Joseph Berhalter,” January 25, 1955, Folder 112; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

sensationalism to his concerns for television's precarious social status and respectability. In one January memo reporting on a listener complaint about long-running daytime series *Lorenzo Jones* (NBC radio 1937-1955), Helffrich lamented that "people like the Hummerts are exploiting old and lucrative patterns in radio broadcasting without sufficient awareness of the fact that television has upset the old patterns."⁴⁶⁸ A few weeks later, he reported that public criticism of soap operas had increased over the previous nine months, with "articulate" correspondents complaining that "the forces of evil are unrelieved and inadequately counteracted by the forces of good."⁴⁶⁹ Moreover, listeners were disappointed in the "behavior of leading characters they have learned to admire and identify with."⁴⁷⁰ While he acknowledged that ratings had not suffered, he argued that soap opera producers must be reined in for the good of the network.

Helffrich's complaints about the increase in crime and sexuality in soap operas were further intensified by the fact that the much-maligned radio genre was finally making inroads on television. The networks had initially refrained from moving their economically vital daytime programs from radio to television because they were afraid of disrupting the unacknowledged financial engines powering television's expansion. They also feared that any association with soap operas and their denigrated female listeners would taint the new medium in the eyes of culturally important critics and regulators. However, by 1955, the number of televised soap operas was steadily increasing.⁴⁷¹ With

⁴⁶⁸ Helffrich.

⁴⁶⁹ Stockton Helffrich, "Memo from Stockton Helffrich to William Fineshriber," February 11, 1955, Folder 112; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴⁷⁰ Helffrich.

⁴⁷¹ Marsha F. Cassidy, *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s* (Austin: University of

most of the new programs earning higher ratings and more advertising dollars for CBS, NBC was finding it harder to justify their lower-rated efforts at ‘quality’ daytime programming aimed at upper-middle class tastes, despite the network’s efforts to position itself as the public service-minded broadcaster.⁴⁷²

The fact that network executives and audiences were paying so much attention to the morality of female-focused daytime programming is significant for our understanding of representations of women in other dayparts. Soap operas have long been criticized for promoting conservative gender norms and consumption-heavy domesticity as the feminine ideal. However, scholars like Jason Loviglio (2005) argue that the ghettoization of female-centric programming during daytime hours created a space where women’s interests and concerns could be explored more openly in the 1930s and early 1940s.⁴⁷³ Reflecting Jeanine Basinger’s (1993) assessment of 1930s women’s films, 1930s radio soap opera story arcs often portrayed women rebelling against social restraints by rejecting conventional domestic roles, pursuing ambitious careers, or even using their beauty and sexuality to manipulate men and further their own ambitions. While most of these ambiguous heroines ultimately accepted more conservative domestic roles, audiences usually found such conclusions forced and unnatural. It was easy enough for a viewer to seize on the transgressive possibilities the story presented and ignore the damning conclusion.⁴⁷⁴

Texas Press, 2005), 158–59.

⁴⁷² Cassidy, 5.

⁴⁷³ Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public*, 73.

⁴⁷⁴ Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman’s View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930–1960* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 13.

Helffrich's dedication to monitoring and policing women's spaces made it harder for individual program producers to introduce transgressive and/or morally ambiguous female characters into daytime narratives. And if ambiguous and ambitious women were no longer safe in the relatively cloistered world of daytime, when they were presumed to be the only audience, how could women expect anything in more 'public' prime time? NBC was happy to make money with programs like *Queen for a Day*, but, after more self-consciously cultured, uplifting daytime programs like *Home* (1954-1957), a magazine-style talk show, and *Matinee Theater* (1955-1958), which sought to bring live quality drama to daytime, failed to find a lucrative audience, executives settled for monitoring soap operas and other popular daytime programming to ensure that it stayed away from controversial themes and/or viewpoints. In his quest to make soap opera characters into people with whom audience members could safely identify – in other words, to make sure they stayed out of serious, salacious trouble and adhered to patriarchal gender norms – Helffrich sought help from other NBC executives, agencies, and even the sponsors themselves.⁴⁷⁵ They particularly focused on sex, which was the most visible, and most controversial, sign of feminine rebellion. In so doing, Helffrich and his compatriots achieved the opposite of their ostensible goal. Instead of separating women from sex, they further cemented the link between the two.

Dealing With Sex

Notwithstanding their renewed emphasis on sex in television, Helffrich and his deputies did not suddenly discover soap opera sexuality and crime as a new problem in

⁴⁷⁵ Helffrich, "Confidential Memo from Stockton Helffrich to Joseph Berhalter."

the early 1950s. As the conventional wisdom goes, sex sells. Radio writers and producers more than made up for their lack of visuals by loading scripts with salacious hints and double entendres. Sex was especially important to crime series, wherein it became a barometer of women's virtue. Good girls avoided sex like the plague. Bad girls welcomed it with open arms. Indeed, the trope of the sexy fatale was so ingrained into radio crime programming that NBC Continuity Acceptance reader Carl Bottume castigated the producers of *Call The Police* (NBC radio 1947-1949) for lazy writing in one 1947 episode. "The woman has to be made out evil," Bottume acknowledged, "but just making her consumately (sic) sexy is hardly enough."⁴⁷⁶ Complaints about sex, and especially its links to violence and criminality, were not new for Helffrich and his deputies, nor were they limited to soap operas. Continuity Acceptance readers were similarly attentive to incidents of violence and sexuality in any genre, especially crime.⁴⁷⁷ And, while they disapproved of both regardless of context, they were especially intent on preserving women's sexual purity. After all, as one reader argued in a record of cuts made to a 1947 episode of *Hollywood Star Preview* (NBC radio (1947-1950), in saving women from rape, the department had actually "saved this helpless girl from a fate worse than death."⁴⁷⁸ Consensual sex was seen as equally – if not more – destructive to women's morals on radio and television and in real life.

⁴⁷⁶ "Memo from Carl Bottume to Ray O'Connell," June 27, 1947, Folder 13; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴⁷⁷ Indeed, the Hummerts' operation shows how closely linked different types of radio production were: they also produced popular daytime and primetime radio crime series like *Mr. Keen*, *Tracer of Lost Persons* (1937-1955), *Front Page Farrell* (1941-1951), *Molle Mystery Theater* (1943-1948), and *Mr. Chameleon* (1948-1953).

⁴⁷⁸ "Hollywood Star Preview 11/15/47 Cuts," November 15, 1947, Folder 36; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Sex had been a crucial, if contentious, sales tactic on radio, and it only became more so with the addition of televised images. While NBC's sales and casting departments were eager to take advantage of television's new ability to visually objectify attractive women, executives like Helffrich were wary of backlash from vocally conservative audience members. As chapter two notes, the pressure groups that advocated broadcast censorship were also preoccupied with women's sexuality, with letter writers drawing a straight line between suggestive jokes and the nation's decaying morals and increasing juvenile delinquency. When it came to television, the accusations were even more pointed. Many of the women and men who wrote to complain about early television argued that the low-cut necklines that many female performers wore were "the very cause of so many sex killings."⁴⁷⁹ Others wondered if sexually suggestive costuming and scripts were part of a deliberate Communist plot to destroy American's "Christian ideals and morality."⁴⁸⁰ Instead of disputing these charges, NBC instructed stars like Faye Emerson and Dagmar, who attracted the most direct complaints, to cover up. Likewise, Helffrich and his deputies worked steadily to rein in other aspects of women's sexuality.

Of course, the mostly male executives, producers, and writers who helped define sexualized women in these terms were the same group capitalizing on women's sexuality

⁴⁷⁹ Carol Wojcik, "Letter from Carol Wojcik to FCC," February 7, 1951, File 44-1; Complaints and Investigations Thereof, Misc; Box 44; General Correspondence, 1947-56; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴⁸⁰ Mrs. Thomas A. Purtell, "Letter from Mrs. Thomas A. Purtell to FCC," n.d., File 44-3; Wynn, Ed - Program Complaints - Individual File, March 1934-December 31, 1956; Box 65; General Correspondence, 1947-56; Office of the Executive Director; General Communications Commission, Record Group 173, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

to increase audiences and ad dollars. And, despite Helffrich's efforts to clean up television, they continued to do so. Seventeen years after Bottume chastised *Call the Police* for relying on sexuality to mark an evil woman, ABC executives warned writers for *Burke's Law* (1963-1966) that "too many murders [were being] committed by the pretty girl in the show or one of the pretty girls," and that they wanted some variety.⁴⁸¹ Whether or not they were evil, beautiful women were an integral part of the background in most male detective programs. Even on radio, where they could not be seen, beautiful women's sultry voices served as a significant draw. A 1951 booking form for the popular *Barrie Crane* radio program noted that the ideal PI was "a man with a knack for becoming involved in and solving complicated crimes, especially those concerning beautiful women."⁴⁸² As radio lost ground to television, writers sought to retain listeners by heightening the sexual tension such women brought. Proposing an exciting European sojourn for Mike Waring, of *The Falcon* (1943-1954) in 1952, prolific radio crime writer Gene Wang promised his producers an encounter with a Red agent and a "glamorous Rumanian refugee" that would be sure to help the radio program's ailing ratings.⁴⁸³ Of course, part of such characters' appeal was the fact that everyone knew there was a fine line between a beautiful woman who was nevertheless virtuous, and the femmes fatales who used their beauty to lead men astray, leaving detectives – and audiences – to guess

⁴⁸¹ Bud Kay, "Letter from Bud Kay to Mr. & Mrs. Paul Dubov," November 12, 1963, Folder 3; Box 42; Gwen Bagni Papers (Collection 1999), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

⁴⁸² Grant Tinker, "Sustaining Program Booking: Barrie Crane - Confidential Investigator," September 26, 1951, Folder 32; Box 355; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴⁸³ "Letter from Gene Wang to Richard Lewis," July 3, 1952, Box 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

which women were which. Helffrich, on the other hand, appears to have seen it as part of his job to puncture this tension by making the answer clear.

Continuity Acceptance's most common solution in their quest to clarify feminine virtue was to rely upon the age-old Madonna/whore dichotomy. Good women's sexuality was restrained and properly directed within heterosexual marriage. Women with ambiguous and/or uncontrollable sexuality were seen as guilty until proven innocent. If they insisted on misusing their sexuality for their own personal gain, they were punished. Producers, and network censors, distinguished between the two feminine types through vocal or later, costume, cues. NBC's Program Policies and Working Manual, the in-house censorship code that directed the network's program restrictions on radio and television before the 1951 Television Code provided industry-wide guidelines, dedicated more space to restrictions on sexuality than those on racist representations. After mandating that all "treatment of sex themes should be within the limits of good taste and decency," the manual went on to prohibit double entendre, white slavery, and sex perversion.⁴⁸⁴ The latter two items were listed under the joint heading of "prostitution," implying that any sex that occurred outside of heterosexual marriage was tantamount to selling one's body.⁴⁸⁵ The policy manual also specified that sexual "passion," a euphemism that appears to have covered everything from lust to actual intercourse, "should not be suggested or treated outside the necessities of plot development."⁴⁸⁶ Likewise, the NAB's 1952 Television Code prohibited sympathetic

⁴⁸⁴ "NBC Program Policies and Working Manual" (National Broadcasting Company, 1945), 8.

⁴⁸⁵ "NBC Program Policies and Working Manual," 8.

⁴⁸⁶ "NBC Program Policies and Working Manual," 8.

depictions of “illicit sex relations” and most depictions “sex crimes and abnormalities,” categories that presumably covered everything from premarital sex to extramarital affairs, and prostitution to homosexuality.⁴⁸⁷ The industry-wide code went even further than past radio codes, laying out specific restrictions for the newly visual medium. The Code limited performer costuming, movement, camera angles that might expose or emphasize any “anatomical detail [that] would embarrass or offend home viewers” or suggest “lewdness and impropriety,” as well as the use of physical locations “associated with sexual life or with sexual sin”⁴⁸⁸

Notwithstanding all of these precautions, it was hard to remove all hints of sexuality from all of broadcasting, especially given its close association with femininity. Media scholars and historians like Linda Mizejewski (2004), Georgia Hickey (2011), and Marilyn Johnson (2011) have shown how social anxieties about women’s expanding public roles have been sublimated into warnings about the sexualized dangers women face in expanding urban environments.⁴⁸⁹ Moreover, the impetus has always been placed on women to protect themselves from physical and social dangers by adhering to conservative proscriptions on their behavior that significantly restrict their movement.⁴⁹⁰ From early 20th century advice literature to news coverage of urban murders, young women have been warned to avoid contact with strangers, avoid being alone – especially

⁴⁸⁷ “The Television Code” (National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters, 1952), 2.

⁴⁸⁸ “The Television Code,” 3.

⁴⁸⁹ Linda Mizejewski, *Hardboiled & High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Georgia Hickey, “From Civility to Self-Defense: Modern Advice to Women on the Privileges and Dangers of Public Space,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 1/2 (2011): 77–94; Marilyn Johnson, “The Career Girl Murders: Gender, Race and Crime in 1960s New York,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 39 (2011): 244–61.

⁴⁹⁰ Hickey, “From Civility to Self-Defense”; Johnson, “The Career Girl Murders.”

with men or in strange places, dress and behave in ways that encourage respectful behavior from others, and to never, ever burden anyone else with their needs. Audience letters invoked these prohibitions when they responded to women's increasing public presence on television by blaming female hosts' low-cut gowns for the supposed increase in sex crimes.⁴⁹¹ And while he found many audience complaints exaggerated and overly sensationalist, Helffrich did agree with the premise that feminine sexuality was a danger, if not to a woman's life, at least to her reputation. Defending his decision to allow an *All Star Review* (TV 1950-1953) comedy sketch featuring well-known actress and comedienne Martha Raye inviting opera and Broadway star Ezio Pinza up to her room, Helffrich argued that in rehearsal the bit was "so completely hammed up and ludicrous that [we] felt it was acceptable."⁴⁹² However, as "a fan" of Raye, Helffrich agreed it might be worth warning her against similar sketches in the future, lest her popularity be "dimmed by objectionable material."⁴⁹³ This patronizing approach to an established female film and television star demonstrates the patriarchal framework through which Continuity Acceptance, and NBC in general, viewed women and their sexuality. Women were seen as fragile creatures who needed men to protect them from their baser impulses and poor decision-making capabilities.

In practice, these vaguely written restrictions applied more to female bodies than male. NBC's continuity readers regularly cut bawdy jokes and references to sexual

⁴⁹¹ Wojcik, "Letter from Carol Wojcik to FCC."

⁴⁹² Stockton Helffrich, "Memo from Stockton Helffrich to Harry Bannister," February 26, 1953, Folder 12; Box 569; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴⁹³ Helffrich.

activity from both comedic and dramatic programs.⁴⁹⁴ Still, men were allowed to express sexual interest in a way women were not. Leering at the occasional pretty girl was excused as an integral part of virile American masculinity, but virtuous women were expected to resist temptation at all costs. A summary of the continuity changes for one 1948 episode of *Molle Mystery Theatre* excised any hint that a female character might find pleasure in being seduced by a man to whom she was not married, noting that the reader deleted references to her “weakly” objecting to a man kissing her, and then “trembling” as he did so.⁴⁹⁵ Women could get in trouble for something as uncontrollable as their tone of voice. As Wang noted in a letter to *The Falcon*’s producers, it was difficult to cast a woman who could sound beautiful but not dangerous: “Carol is going to be a problem. She can’t sound like a hardened broad – she has to handle herself like a lady.”⁴⁹⁶

Most media studies scholarship on women in postwar crime dramas has focused on the femme fatale. This postwar figure of masculine paranoia and feminine empowerment was certainly a salient figure in contemporary broadcast crime dramas. However, by the mid-1940s, NBC’s Continuity Acceptance department was going to great lengths to erase female culpability in some of their most prominent productions. One 1946 radio episode of *Mr. District Attorney* ran into trouble for featuring a story

⁴⁹⁴ “Abbott & Costello Script Approvals,” January 15, 1952, Folder 1; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴⁹⁵ “Continuity Changes for ‘The Great Mellagio,’” March 18, 1948, Folder 74; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴⁹⁶ “Letter from Gene Wang to Richard Lewis,” July 28, 1952, Box 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

about “a delinquent youth who elopes with his teacher.”⁴⁹⁷ While the existing correspondence does not indicate how actively the teacher was involved in fostering the youth’s delinquency, a memo recounting the revision process shows that the network felt that more was at stake than their stated concern over protests from “the teaching profession.”⁴⁹⁸ Over a series of revisions, the teacher was changed to “a public stenographer” and “the boy marriage angle” “cleaned up” by deleting references to his age and time spent in “hotels [and] rooming houses.”⁴⁹⁹ Most significantly, the plot was changed so that “the boy proposed marriage in order that he might rob the woman of her money,” but without any intention of following through on the union.⁵⁰⁰ These changes placed blame for the proposed elopement squarely on the youth’s shoulders and converted the woman from potentially predatory co-conspirator to a pathetic victim beguiled by her desperation to find a husband. Finally, the broadcast version of the script deleted references the boy being younger than his mark, further downplaying his innocence and her potential criminality.

Continuity acceptance readers appear to have been especially troubled by couples in which the female member had more age and/or experience. A production of *Molle Mystery Theatre* from the same year was significantly toned down over objections to a “love interest [that] was morbid on several counts,” including pairing “an older woman and a young boy.”⁵⁰¹ This couple upset the assigned continuity reader because the

⁴⁹⁷ “Memo from Thomas C. McCray to C.L. Menser,” February 26, 1946, Folder 79; Box 355; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴⁹⁸ McCray.

⁴⁹⁹ McCray.

⁵⁰⁰ McCray.

⁵⁰¹ “Continuity Changes for ‘Killer Come Back to Me,’” May 17, 1946, Folder 74; Box 151; National

woman seduced the “young hopeful” in order to groom him to replace her previous boyfriend, a dead gangster, who remained “her real love.”⁵⁰² However, the reader objected more strongly to the potentially sadomasochistic nature of their relationship, singling out “two scenes in which she repeatedly slaps the ‘punk’” for special opprobrium.⁵⁰³ While Continuity Acceptance generally frowned on violence, it was more permissible when committed by men. In some cases, a man slapping a woman could even be added as a way to “build up sympathy for the girl.”⁵⁰⁴ However, a woman slapping a man – and especially an older woman slapping a younger boy – implied a level of power and lack of femininity that NBC could not stomach. Significantly, instead of depicting the boy as an innocent led astray, as often occurred in depictions of young women tempted to the dark side, the reader deleted “lines like ‘I went to Sunday School’ ...to avoid putting the boy in a sympathetic light.”⁵⁰⁵ Despite the fact that he was in the thrall of an older woman, NBC had difficulty conceiving of a model of masculinity where a male character could be the less powerful party and therefore not be held responsible for breaking the law.

As the above demonstrates, women faced a Catch-22 when it came to their roles on broadcast radio and television. If they were perceived as too sexual, they were automatically categorized as threatening. However, because women’s sexuality was seen as so all-encompassing, it was difficult for them to be perceived as anything but sexual

Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵⁰² “Continuity Changes for ‘Killer Come Back to Me.’”

⁵⁰³ “Continuity Changes for ‘Killer Come Back to Me.’”

⁵⁰⁴ “Letter from Richard Lewis to Gene Wang,” January 6, 1950, Box 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

⁵⁰⁵ “Continuity Changes for ‘Killer Come Back to Me.’”

objects. Moreover, physical attractiveness was crucial for women's success. A lack of sex appeal could actually be deadly for women on radio and television. In one episode from *The Amazing Mr. Malone's* brief television run (ABC/NBC radio 1948-1951, ABC TV 1951), writer Gene Wang was instructed to make a murdered wife sympathetic but unattractive to explain her husband's desire to kill her.⁵⁰⁶

Advocating Heterosexual Marriage

Continuity Acceptance's concern with sex was closely connected to the networks' deep and enduring investment in policing the supposedly normative gender roles required for lasting, heterosexual marriages whose "sanctity" the Television Code promised to "respect."⁵⁰⁷ While this was true even before WWII, executives like Helffrich felt that public pressure to enforce more strictly differentiated, conservative, heterosexual gender roles increased after the war. Moreover, dominant ideals of masculinity and femininity had shifted through the Great Depression and WWII. Philippa Gates (2008) traces Americans' evolving views on masculinity through the three film adaptations of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* produced between 1931 and 1941. While the 1930s Sam Spades embodied a suave, European-inflected cosmopolitan form of heroic masculinity, Humphrey Bogart's wartime Spade was a grittier, working class individualist who lacked his predecessors' weaknesses for money and attractive women.⁵⁰⁸ As the male detective became more immune to her charms, the sexy woman became more threatening. It is

⁵⁰⁶ Edgar Peterson, "Letter from Edgar Peterson to Eugene Wang," October 2, 1951, Folder 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

⁵⁰⁷ Murray, "The Tendency to Deprave and Corrupt Morals"; "The Television Code."

⁵⁰⁸ Philippa Gates, "The Three Sam Spades: The Shifting Model of American Masculinity in the Three Films of *The Maltese Falcon*," *Framework* 49, no. 1 (2008): 15.

significant that the film version of the duplicitous Brigid O'Shaughnessy only became a femme fatale in John Huston's 1941 adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon*; the 1931 film implies that its highly sexual O'Shaughnessy and Spade will reunite once she is released from a brief prison sentence.

Women and men who embodied these more permissive and fluid types of sexuality were largely sidelined and often punished both in postwar popular culture and in real life. Allison McCracken (2015) has also shown how an increasing emphasis on undisputedly heterosexual masculinity contributed to the declining popularity of genderqueer entertainers like Rudy Vallée.⁵⁰⁹ At the same time, homosexuals were being forced deeper into the closet to protect their jobs: gay men and lesbians were more likely to lose their jobs in Cold War-era anti-Communist witch hunts than actual Communist party members.⁵¹⁰ On the network level, Continuity Acceptance enforced a range of restrictions designed to force everyone – but especially women – to conform with heteronormative gender roles through the 1950s. In 1949, Helffrich reported rejecting an advertisement for Bates sheets because it showed a pair of college women “in sleeping attire as they chat in the dormitory bedroom of one of them.”⁵¹¹ Helffrich's report does not specify whether the ad was rejected because the women's clothing was insufficiently modest, or because their positioning could be read as lesbian. However, the fact that many programs did feature women in non-revealing negligees implies that the network

⁵⁰⁹ Allison McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁵¹⁰ David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁵¹¹ Stockton Helffrich, “Television Weekly Report,” March 15, 1949, Folder 24; Box 588; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

was worried about more than costuming. Indeed, for the 1951-1952 season, the network ended the day's programming with *Mary Kay's Nightcap* with no apparent concern: the program featured actress Mary Kay Stearns chatting about the day's programs and modelling attractive negligees in a set that resembled her living room.

Department memos also show that continuity readers saw swishing, or portraying a male character as effeminate, as a particular problem in comedy shows. Readers reported that they had to watch rehearsals carefully to ensure that script cues referring to "mincing steps" were not played "in any swishy manner."⁵¹² References to Christine Jorgenson, whose public transition from male to female became a scandal in the early 1950s, were strictly – and repeatedly – forbidden by both NBC and the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters' Television Code Authority.⁵¹³ However, continuity readers were more permissive when the subject matter was intended as parody. In one memo recording changes to a radio program, continuity reader Dorothy McBride included the strict reminder that, "per our conversation, leave us have no swishing" in a scene with a man.⁵¹⁴ She was less concerned "on the psychological angle" because, after discussing the issue with Helffrich they agreed that "it's just too farcical to worry about."⁵¹⁵ Male comedians who pushed the bounds of heteronormative masculinity, like Jack Benny and Milton Berle, adjusted in different ways. Benny had

⁵¹² "Television Weekly Report," September 27, 1949, Folder 24; Box 588; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵¹³ "Letter from Stockton Helffrich to Edward Bronson," January 12, 1953, Folder 12; Box 569; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵¹⁴ "Continuity Changes for 'The Koffee Klotch,'" February 14, 1950, Folder 71; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵¹⁵ "Continuity Changes for 'The Koffee Klotch.'"

become famous partly for his skill at dressing up as women, most prominently Gracie Allen, but his Midwestern-inflected star persona and infrequent television appearances may have helped limit public criticism. Still, even though complaints about positive queer characterizations on his program were usually directed at minor characters, he reduced the number of gags referencing homosexuality through the 1950s.⁵¹⁶ Milton Berle, a New York-identified comedian who was also known for his flamboyant crossdressing, lost popularity as television station coverage expanded from large cities to rural and suburban areas; by the mid-1950s, nervous sponsors and networks had refocused their investments toward more family-friendly sitcom formats.⁵¹⁷

Program producers could integrate some non-normative sexual behaviors and/or controversial issues into programs if they labeled them as farcical. However, Continuity Acceptance's decisions about what sorts of scenario were rendered acceptable as "farce" also marked out the boundaries of what they saw as possible, and what they dismissed as so ridiculous that representing it could do no harm. As a real transgender woman, Christine Jorgenson called into question the supposed naturalness of postwar gender binaries. Satirical treatments of issues like divorce, on the other hand, often helped reinforce the otherness of their socially aberrant subjects. Helffrich defended NBC to one incensed viewer accusing the network of "making light of marriage and flippant treatment of divorce" by pointing out that the program in question was "intended strictly

⁵¹⁶ Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, *Jack Benny and the Golden Age of American Radio Comedy* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 111, 116.

⁵¹⁷ Susan Murray, "Lessons from Uncle Miltie: Ethnic Masculinity and Early Television's Vaudeo Star," in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumin (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 84.

as farce.”⁵¹⁸ As Susan Douglas (2004) has shown in the case of *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, comic and farcical treatments of minority groups have historically provided a popular forum through which to explore white heterosexuals’ cultural anxieties. Projecting fears about white culture onto an out-group creates an artificial distance across which those fears become safe to mock.⁵¹⁹ Notably, there were limits to the behavior that was acceptable even in farce. Responding to a letter from an audience member angry about another program that depicted rebellious family members smoking and drinking, Helffrich again pointed out that the narrative was “meant to be a farce” intended to warn against “autocracy in the running of a home.”⁵²⁰ However, he was also quick to point out that none of the central characters – and especially none of the female characters – chose to smoke or drink.⁵²¹ Even in a program intended to serve as a warning against the consequences of paternal sternness, sympathetic women were expected to adhere to a stricter moral standard and could not adopt such signs of feminine rebellion.

Despite their willingness to allow some farcical divorce narratives, Helffrich and his deputies were particularly affected by complaints alleging the network was undercutting the sanctity of the family. In 1949, Richard Harnett wrote to complain about a program that “portrayed divorce as a satisfactory solution” to marital troubles.⁵²²

⁵¹⁸ “Letter from Stockton Helffrich to George Schneider,” January 26, 1954, Folder 36; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵¹⁹ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening in: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 107.

⁵²⁰ “Letter from Stockton Helffrich to Robert Noble,” January 15, 1957, Folder 19; Box 179; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵²¹ Helffrich.

⁵²² Richard M. Harnett, “Letter from Richard M. Harnett to NBC Television,” October 6, 1949, Folder 17; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

While Harnett based his own objections in his Catholic faith, he did not hesitate to assert that “all Americans see divorce as, at best, a necessary evil -- not to be generally encouraged as a solution to marriage problems” or included in the “wholesome constructive pictures” he hoped to see on television.⁵²³ Harnett’s letter sparked a prompt apology in which script editor Robert Guilbert agreed with the premise that depictions of divorce could negatively impact viewers and promised the program would avoid, or at least more strongly condemn divorce, in the future.⁵²⁴ This incident also prompted a broader internal recognition that the department “should stay ahead of the organized squawks” from critics and local censorship groups “and certainly well ahead of any thing that would lead to the formation of an industry-wide censorship office.”⁵²⁵ Going forward, Helffrich and his deputies did their best to stay abreast of changes in public opinion regarding television programming and policies. Helffrich frequently requested revised data on audience reactions to program categories that ranged from commercial content to dramatic series to soap operas.⁵²⁶ He also disseminated information about network policies and notable audience reactions to a closely controlled group of sales executives, writers, agencies, and others involved in television production in his monthly Radio and Television Report (CART).⁵²⁷

⁵²³ Harnett.

⁵²⁴ Robert M. Guilbert, “Letter from Robert M. Guilbert to Richard M. Harnett,” October 20, 1949, Folder 17; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵²⁵ R.M. Guilbert, “Memo from R.M. Guilbert to Stockton Helffrich,” October 14, 1949, Folder 17; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵²⁶ Stockton Helffrich, “Memo from Stockton Helffrich to Anita Barnard,” November 16, 1948, Folder 24; Box 588; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵²⁷ Stockton Helffrich, “Memo from Stockton Helffrich to Edward Madden,” February 26, 1953,

NBC's continuity readers were especially attentive to scripts that hinted that women's sexuality might destabilize heterosexual, patriarchal marriage. Even the implication that women might contemplate marital infidelity was highly frowned upon. In one 1949 Television Report, Helffrich reported that the following gag had been cut from John "Ole" Olsen and Harold "Chic" Johnson's *Fireball Fun For All* variety show: "I need some advice, my wife hasn't acted the same since we took in Gorgeous George as a boarder. Should I leave her? 'CHIC: Not for a minute.'" ⁵²⁸ When affairs were referenced in radio and television scripts, they were obscured through euphemisms. Readers repeatedly excised references to extended stays in road-side motels and mentions of young women entering men's rooms. However, it was more difficult to restrict infidelity in crime programs, where it was often a major plot point. Helffrich and his readers were not the only ones who objected. In one letter to crime writer Gene Wang, *Falcon* and *Amazing Mr. Malone* producer Bernard Schubert warned that the program's sponsor, Akron, Ohio-based Seiberling Rubber Company, was "still very conscious of what they call the 'moral calibre' of their programs."⁵²⁹ Schubert attached several script critiques asking that apparently loose women be married to the men with whom they were involved in order "to redeem the show a little."⁵³⁰ If the women must have sex,

Folder 12; Box 569; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; Stockton Helffrich, "Memo from Stockton Helffrich to Don Honrath," February 5, 1953, Folder 12; Box 569; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵²⁸ "Television Weekly Report," November 2, 1949, Folder 24; Box 588; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵²⁹ Bernard Schubert, "Letter from Bernard Schubert to Gene Wang," October 4, 1951, Box 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

⁵³⁰ Schubert.

Seiberling executives seem to have felt, they should have the decency to marry their boyfriends first.

Even within a properly sanctioned marriage, however, social critics and the networks argued that overt sexuality should be restrained. One of the most frequent complaints against crime-solving couples was their overtly sexual banter.⁵³¹ Of course, many who praised the same series cited this quality with opprobrium.⁵³² Sitcoms like *I Love Lucy* generally avoided depicting their stars indulging in overt and/or extended expressions of affection, but they still ran into trouble when it came time to depict what was supposed to be women's highest calling: pregnancy and childbirth. Lucy Ricardo's fictional pregnancy – timed to coincide with Lucille Ball's real-life pregnancy – drew a flurry of criticism, despite the fact that the word "pregnant" was never used. One *Time* article run shortly after the Lucy gave birth on the show, and in real life, assured readers that CBS had consulted three clergymen, who had also supervised episode tapings, to ensure that the storyline "was in good taste and would offend no one."⁵³³

Ensuring Racial Purity

In addition to protecting the sanctity of marriage, the networks were deeply invested in safeguarding white women's moral virtue, physical safety, and, though some might have denied it in the face of postwar calls for racial equality, their racial purity. In

⁵³¹ Anita Barnard, "Activities Report #36," September 22, 1948, Folder 32; Box 157; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵³² Gene Wang, "Letter from Gene Wang to Bernard Schubert," October 22, 1951, Box 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming; Odec., "Review: Adventures of the Thin Man," *Variety*, July 9, 1941; Hobe, "Radio Reviews: Mr. & Mrs. North," *Variety*, January 13, 1943.

⁵³³ "Birth of a Memo," *Time Magazine*, January 26, 1953.

part, this meant protecting them for the implicit threat posed by Black men. However, it also meant drawing a clear line between white women and their Black sisters. Despite rising pressure from anti-racist groups and a public commitment to improving racial representation on screen through its Integration Without Identification (IWI) program, NBC consistently resisted actually integrating black characters into its predominantly white programs until the late 1960s. It was only in 1950, after they were shamed for trailing behind their rival CBS in terms of integration, that NBC recruited Joseph V. Baker, a Black public relations expert, to help with their race problem at all.⁵³⁴ However, the network seems to have seen Baker's job as helping mitigate criticism from the increasingly lucrative African American market and vocal African American press rather than actually increasing the number of black people employed on and off the air. By 1953 pressure had mounted to the point that John Cleary, director of radio program development, had to send a memo to all directors extolling them to use "as many negro performers as possible in dramatic programs," even in supposedly non-"negro parts."⁵³⁵ This edict, as well as others that advanced what we currently call colorblind casting as a way to expand the network's audience, proved insufficient.⁵³⁶ By 1953, the black press concluded that Baker had sold them out.⁵³⁷ NBC used Baker's impaired relationship with the black press to sideline him, and he resigned in 1954. Overall, white executives

⁵³⁴ Murray Forman, "Employment and Blue Pencils: NBC, Race, and Representation, 1926-55," in *NBC: America's Network*, ed. Michele Hilmes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 124.

⁵³⁵ John Cleary, "Memo from John Cleary to All Directors," October 14, 1953, Folder 24; Box 164; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵³⁶ NBC, "NBC Executive Explains Network's Integration Program," March 16, 1953, Folder 25; Box 164; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵³⁷ Forman, "Employment and Blue Pencils," 130.

appear to have decided that, if Black and white audiences were going to find offense in their representations of Black characters, it was easier to minimize the number of Black characters than try to improve them.

Many of NBC's highest profile IWI productions from the early 1950s featured all-Black casts, or non-dramatic performers that the network found difficult, or inconvenient, to feature on non-narrative and variety programs. For example, NBC extolled its own elevation of Black pianist Natalie Hinderas, referred to by Baker, through press releases and a nation-wide tour of concerts and galas. Baker exalted the impact of a Chicago party where "NBC's top executives were hosts to the cream of Chicago's influential Negro leadership, with white representation from major organizations and the NBC staff."⁵³⁸ Not only was the Black community mollified, but the Chicago staff "found that it could socialize with topnotch people of different skin color without awakening, the next morning changed in color, themselves."⁵³⁹ However, when it came to booking Hinderas on the type of national radio and television variety programs that would have given her a nation-wide audience, executives proved unwilling to push sponsors, or even in-house producers, to book her.⁵⁴⁰ Just two years after signing her, NBC dropped Hinderas' 5-year contract.⁵⁴¹ *Jet Magazine* reported she had been "unable to secure work consistently

⁵³⁸ Joseph V. Baker, "The Hinderas Presentations (A Report on an IWI Project)," July 24, 1953, Folder 25; Box 164; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵³⁹ Baker.

⁵⁴⁰ Stockton Helffrich, "Memo from Stockton Helffrich to Edward Madden," December 8, 1952, Folder 25; Box 164; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵⁴¹ "NBC-TV Drops Natalie Hinderas' \$10,000 Contract," *Jet*, February 17, 1955.

after irregular appearances on Tonight, the Kate Smith and Tex and Jink (sp) shows.”⁵⁴²

Notably, network press releases promoting Hinderas, a light skinned woman who might have been mistaken for white, failed to note either her race or her status as an IWI performer.⁵⁴³ Recognizably Black women received even shorter shrift in the 1950s. As bell hooks so movingly points out in her tribute to Sapphire, Kingfisher’s much maligned wife on *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, “she was there as a man in drag, a castrating bitch” whose role was to “soften images of black men, to make them seem vulnerable, easygoing, funny, and unthreatening to a white audience.”⁵⁴⁴ More sympathetic characters like *Beulah* (CBS radio 1945-1954, ABC TV 1950-1952) were portrayed as rotund mammy figures who put the needs of their white families first.⁵⁴⁵ Women of other nationalities were virtually absent on television, and when they did appear they were often mobilized as symbols of wild ethnic cultures that white Americans had, or must, subdue. Austrian-born movie star Hedy Lamarr’s single appearance as the rebellious daughter of a Mexican-American ranch owner on *Zane Grey Theatre* (1956-1962) represented her “dysfunctional femininity” as a symptom of a larger crisis in Latino culture that could only be corrected by the arrival of suitably patriarchal American man.⁵⁴⁶ That man would have the power to tame her unchecked, ethnic sexuality and guide her energy

⁵⁴² “NBC-TV Drops Natalie Hinderas’ \$10,000 Contract.”

⁵⁴³ “Pianist Natalie Hinderas, Guest on ‘Encore,’ to Play Selection From Saint-Saens’ Concerto,” January 16, 1953, Folder 25; Box 164; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵⁴⁴ bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 202.

⁵⁴⁵ Richard Bare, “Beulah Goes Gardening,” *Beulah* (ABC, August 12, 1952).

⁵⁴⁶ Diane Negra, “Re-Made for Television: Hedy Lamarr’s Post-War Star Textuality,” in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumin (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2002), 110.

along more appropriate channels.

Selling Feminine Authenticity

In addition to sex, the major networks traded in feminine authenticity. The national networks did not eschew crime-curious women because women were not important to network sales strategies. As Marsha F. Cassidy (2005) reminds us, women were crucial to the networks' sales efforts, both as purchasers and sellers. They were simply seeking a different type of woman – one untainted by any hint of criminality, deception, or sex. Most early television personalities were expected to act as salespeople for sponsors' products, regardless of their program's format. While some radio personalities had also been tasked with sales duty, the pressure on so-called "femcees," or female TV hosts and stars, was especially intense. And, because early television was consciously constructing itself as an intimate, relatable, domestic medium, female television stars were expected to be attractive, welcoming, sincere, and, above all, relatable. Their success depended upon a conception of feminine charm that was linked to an "authentic loveliness," which could only come from fully embodying one's true, presumably glamorous, self for the camera.⁵⁴⁷ The most popular, and therefore best paid, network "salesgirls" did this while also managing to appear to be average, everyday American women rather than formal, sophisticated stars.⁵⁴⁸ This emphasis on authenticity left little room for female detectives, whose investigations of shadowy underworld figures meant that they had to manipulate their sexuality and femininity in

⁵⁴⁷ Cassidy, *What Women Watched*, 21.

⁵⁴⁸ Cassidy, 22–23.

order to survive. In the postwar context, any woman who did this could be seen as a potential femme fatale. Any woman who hid part of herself — who was not wholly knowable and authentically feminine — could also be seen as a potential threat who might seduce American consumers, many of whom had become suspicious and/or resentful of commercial radio's role in promoting consumerism, into improvident consumption.

Early television networks experimented with a few approaches to achieve their desired mix of feminine authenticity and attractiveness. The first was exemplified by Kate Smith. Smith had built up a large radio following with her warm, inviting approach, and garnered significant authority and goodwill through her patriotic wartime broadcasts. Despite the fact that she was not considered conventionally attractive, Smith continued her reign on daytime television between 1950 and 1952.⁵⁴⁹ Indeed, some saw Smith's looks as a point in her favor because housewives would not envy her beauty. A pitch for a gossip program featuring columnist Elsa Maxwell argued Maxwell's lack of glamour contributed to her psychological fitness "for a mass-appeal television show because she has the same impact as Kate Smith. No one will resent her with the happy try-anything-character we have developed for her, everyone will love her."⁵⁵⁰ Maxwell's supposed averageness, despite her celebrity connections, would be augmented by program introductions that would show her rushing home from shopping and fretting about how to manage her program before a star arrived to help her out.

⁵⁴⁹ Cassidy, 1950.

⁵⁵⁰ "Elsa Maxwell's Guest Book," n.d., Folder 16; Box 376; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

By 1953, however, Smith's supposedly relatable, authoritative presence began to be seen as nostalgic and matronly. She was subsequently replaced by slimmer models of feminine glamour exemplified by women like Arlene Francis.⁵⁵¹ These women still had to be relatable. Female film stars like Lana Turner and Loretta Young, who traded on their "glamorous distance" from audiences in prewar Hollywood had to re-make their personae if they wanted to succeed on the new medium, which emphasized accessibility and relatability.⁵⁵² Broadcast networks assisted this transformation, humanizing stars through programs like *This Is Your Life*, which merged details from stars' careers and private lives to reveal a persona that producers presented as the "ordinary human behind the star."⁵⁵³ Lesser known film stars and bit players without coherent star images, like Lucille Ball, Faye Emerson, and Barbara Britton had more success on television than did major stars with well-established personae. In fact, Britton was one of the few women who managed to be both an effective saleswoman and an investigator on *Mr. & Mrs. North*, if only for a brief period of time.

For broadcasters, the clear compromise between using women's sexuality to sell products without running afoul of vocal, boycott-threatening critics was putting attractive women in situations where their sexuality could be denied and/or contained as much as possible. Radio broadcasters attempted to have their cake and eat it too through promotional strategies that simultaneously emphasized and domesticated female stars'

⁵⁵¹ Cassidy, *What Women Watched*, 74.

⁵⁵² Negra, "Re-Made for Television," 108.

⁵⁵³ Mary Desjardins, "Maureen O'Hara's 'Confidential' Life: Recycling Stars through Gossip and Moral Biography," in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumin (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 120.

sexual attractiveness. While network publicity photos typically depicted male actors photographed in torso close-up and dressed in suits, women were pictured in a range of fashionable outfits and poses, depending on the image being cultivated at that particular moment. Prolific radio actress Frances Carlon starred in a number of popular soap operas, including the female detective soap opera *Kitty Keene* (1937-1941). Carlon also played the role of girl reporter Lorelei Kilbourne on the popular mystery program *Big Town* (1937-1952) from 1942-1952. Her publicity photos featured a range of low-cut gowns, but the captions emphasizing her home-life and other stereotypically feminine traits. One NBC image promoting her stint as a romantic rival on *The Story of Mary Marlin* simultaneously underscored her attractiveness through close shot of Carlon in a low-cut, well-fitted bodice, but promoted her patriotism and downplayed her potential “menace” to audience members’ marriages by noting that “in real life she’s Mrs. Officer Candidate Dan Sutter – and proud of it” [Figure 3].⁵⁵⁴

This balancing act became more difficult on television, where promotional images had to compete with televised depictions of women potentially acting badly. It was one thing to hear a detective and his secretary flirt over the radio. Actually seeing them kiss was a bridge too far for many, especially when they were alone and unchaperoned in a dank, seedy office. The occasional femme fatale might get away with trading banter with a detective, but such spaces were surely enough to render any woman unfit for her ultimate calling as a virtuous wife and mother. In effect, this restricted positive

⁵⁵⁴ “Dark Eyes” (NBC, n.d.), Billy Rose Theatre Division; The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

representations of women to well-supervised and chastely managed romantic situations, in which they were safely paired with an appropriate male partner, and domestic situations, in which their energy was devoted to caring for others. This applied to young girls as well as mature women. A prospectus for *My Son, Jeep* (NBC radio & TV 1953), an early NBC sitcom about a widowed doctor, his 10-year-old son, Jeep, and 13-year-old daughter, described the daughter, Peggy as a girl “who, in the process of growing up, has suddenly developed an overpowering dignity” that led her to try to act as mother to her younger brother.⁵⁵⁵

Still, women and girls were rarely the center of attention, even in their supposedly natural, domestic sphere. As the title implies, *My Son, Jeep* revolved around “Jeep’s peccadillos and entanglements,” which the rest of the family was called upon to help solve.⁵⁵⁶ Early sitcom housewives like Lucy Ricardo and Gracie Allen’s madcap antics also faded into the background.⁵⁵⁷ Despite their rebellions, both women had always ultimately accepted the patriarchal power structures that placed them within the home. Gracie, in particular, was increasingly sidelined within *The Burns and Allen Show* (radio 1933-1950, TV 1950-1958) during its transition from radio to television. When the program was reconceived from a backstage comedy about the production of a radio show to a domestic sitcom, Gracie was contained within the home and George took on a greater

⁵⁵⁵ “‘My Son, Jeep’ Package Program Promotion,” February 6, 1953, Folder 91; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵⁵⁶ “‘My Son, Jeep’ Package Program Promotion.”

⁵⁵⁷ Patricia Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy,” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 80–95; Douglas, *Listening In*, chap. 5.

role in mediating Gracie's relationship with the audience.⁵⁵⁸ While Gracie remained confined within the proscenium of the TV set, George actively broke the fourth wall to interact with viewers and translate Gracie's schemes. Later 1950s housewives were even more constrained. By the late 1950s, accommodating housewives like June Cleaver and Margaret Anderson had replaced prominent female comedians like Lucille Ball and Gracie Allen.⁵⁵⁹ Furthermore, the focus of narrative action shifted from women's lives within urban homes to their children's suburban adventures. Likewise, Lucy and Gracie's focus also gradually shifted from their own lives to their children, and they, along with other long-term radio and television families like the Goldbergs (radio 1929-1948, TV 1949-1956) moved out of the city and into single family suburban homes.⁵⁶⁰

Some series did away with mothers altogether. As Ralph LaRossa (2004) points out, many of the most popular series on 1950s television were dramatic series, especially Westerns, that featured widowed patriarchs raising their sons – and occasionally daughters – alone.⁵⁶¹ These included westerns and small-town dramas that merged law-enforcement and fatherhood, like *The Rifleman* (ABC 1958-1963), *Bonanza* (NBC 1959-1973), and *The Andy Griffith Show* (CBS 1960-1968). Such series humanized hard-working, rough-and-tumble men by allowing them to display a softer side within their family circle, even as they worked to tame the Wild West. They also further entrenched

⁵⁵⁸ Allison McCracken, "Study of a Mad Housewife: Psychiatric Discourse, the Suburban Home and the Case of Gracie Allen," in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumin (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 58.

⁵⁵⁹ Mary Beth Haralovich, "Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11, no. 1 (1989): 61–83.

⁵⁶⁰ McCracken, "Study of a Mad Housewife," 59.

⁵⁶¹ Ralph LaRossa, "The Culture of Fatherhood in the Fifties: A Closer Look," *Journal of Family History* 29, no. 1 (2004): 59.

patriarchal authority by aligning it with state authority and sanctioned violence. These series might feature women who acted as love interests for the widowed fathers and/or surrogate mothers for the childless sons, but it was always clear who was ultimately in control: no matter how brave a woman or girl might be, she was more likely to be depicted “blubbing” in fear and/or being saved by her male relatives than saving anyone herself.⁵⁶² Single mothers, on the other hand, were almost unheard of before 1970.⁵⁶³ The two notable exceptions were both Black women: *Julia*’s Julia Baker (NBC 1968-1971) and *Mannix*’s Peggy Fair (CBS 1967-1975).

When women did appear, they were almost never figures of undisputed authority. Like Peggy, of *My Son, Jeep*, who was “not as mature as she sometimes pretends,” most sitcom housewives required paternal supervision from their husbands.⁵⁶⁴ Authoritative fathers like Ward Cleaver and Jim Cooper did not become the norm until near the end of the decade, but NBC began experimenting with a gendered split of authority in early-1950s talk shows and sales pitches. This often took the form of hosting pairs – preferably a married couple – meant to appeal to women in both daytime and primetime. A 1953 poll of NBC affiliates indicated that many local stations wanted the network to program “husband-wife [sitcoms] [...] of the family type that [...] would appeal [...] to a womens audience” and “good soap operas” to aid daytime sales.⁵⁶⁵ In sales materials for a post-

⁵⁶² George Gruskin, “Letter from George Gruskin to MJ Culligan,” August 10, 1955, Folder 17; Box 389; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵⁶³ Lauren Rabinovitz, “Sitcoms and Single Moms: Representations of Feminism on American TV,” *Cinema Journal* 29, no. 1 (1989): 3.

⁵⁶⁴ “‘My Son, Jeep’ Package Program Promotion.”

⁵⁶⁵ E.R. Vadeboncoeur, “Letter from E.R. Vadeboncoeur to Charles ‘Bud’ Barry,” February 17, 1953, Folder 48; Box 367; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

boxing commentary program featuring the popular talk show host couple of John Reagan "Tex" McCrary and Eugenia Lincoln "Jinx" Falkenburg, NBC promised "the famous Mr. and Mrs. Team doing a breezy interview session from the world famous Waldorf Astoria. Tex, of course, will handle interviews with famous sports personalities, and Jinx adds the glitter with bright chatter."⁵⁶⁶ This gendered division of labor, along with the underlying attitudes about women and men's proper roles, was replicated in a range of postwar sitcoms, where increasingly passive and domesticated wives demonstrated household appliances from the background of child focused narratives while their husbands took charge of explaining the facts of life to the younger generation.⁵⁶⁷

Women were also denied the cultural authority required to pitch many types of products, especially for manufacturers who wanted to burnish their images by emphasizing their scientific bona fides and wartime progress.⁵⁶⁸ This attitude was on clear display in the commercials that Barbara Britton and Richard Denning delivered for Revlon during the period when the cosmetics manufacturer sponsored *Mr. & Mrs. North*. Throughout both their cases and the surviving advertisements that Barbara Britton and co-star Richard Denning filmed for sponsors, Britton imbued Pam with a bubbly friendliness and enthusiasm that contrasted with Denning's genial but sternly objective stance as Jerry. One 1954 spot for Revlon's Lanolite lipstick begins with a close shot of Britton seated while Denning stands behind her, hands on her shoulders. The camera

⁵⁶⁶ "NBC Time & Program Information Bulletin," January 12, 1955, Folder 4; Box 389; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵⁶⁷ Haralovich, "Sitcoms and Suburbs."

⁵⁶⁸ Susan Smulyan, *Popular Ideologies: Mass Culture at Mid-Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 58.

pulls back to reveal the vanity at which Britton is seated as Denning promises viewers that an exciting adventure is in store for them. Denning then steps out of the frame to allow Britton, dressed in a glittering evening gown with a sweetheart neckline, to reveal her own news about “a most fabulous new lipstick,” which she promises will allow viewers to “beauty treat your lips” without unsightly smears.⁵⁶⁹ Throughout this pitch, Britton’s eyes sparkle with the friendly, even mischievous smile of a good friend relaying a new shortcut to flawless beauty. The camera then cuts to Denning, who lends his masculine credibility to the product’s scientific credentials. With a serious, carefully neutral expression, Denning repeatedly praises the health benefits and affordability of lanolite, Revlon’s new, modern-sounding trade name for lanolin. Of course, Denning never mentions that lanoline, the waxy grease secreted by wool-bearing animals, had been used in cosmetics for centuries. Finally, the ad concludes with Britton enthusiastically urging women to go out and buy the lipstick tomorrow before blowing the audience a kiss from her smear-free white glove. This mix of feminine enthusiasm and masculine objectivity gave an aura of newness and technological complexity to a moisturizing product that had been used for centuries while appealing to wives to shop and husbands to sanction purchases of beauty products and more.

Britton’s enthusiasm appears to have translated into sales; she went on to have a long career as Revlon’s spokeswoman, appearing in live commercials for programs like *The \$64,000 Question* (1954-1958). However, it is telling that Revlon chose to keep their sales star but not her crime series. Many sponsors saw crime series as risky window-

⁵⁶⁹ Paul Landres, “Target,” *Mr. & Mrs. North* (NBC, February 2, 1954).

dressing for their woman-directed advertisements; women might be attracted to whodunits – a term industry-members generally used to refer to relatively straightforward, character-based mystery stories – but sponsors feared that any inkling of gore or horror would offend women’s supposedly squeamish sensibilities. Network censors watched programs like *Perry Mason* especially closely to make sure they did not offend. Likewise, Revlon continued to sponsor crime series, but it monitored them closely. In the early 1960s, company executives stopped the prestige crime anthology *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (NBC/CBS 1955-1965) from airing an episode in which a woman was sawed in half.⁵⁷⁰

Working Women

At the same time, working women all but disappeared from television, especially in primetime. When working women did appear on 1950s primetime television, it was often as background characters, like the humorless assembly line overseer who dashes Lucy and Ethel’s hopes of working in the candy factory.⁵⁷¹ Prominent female personalities like Jack Benny’s secretary Mary Livingstone, played by Benny’s real-world wife Sayde Marks Benny, disappeared from the televised versions of their programs. Kathryn Fuller Seeley (2017) has recovered Mary’s importance as an independent and un-domestic woman who was powerful enough to puncture Jack’s pretensions to heteronormative masculinity.⁵⁷² Through much of their radio career, Mary

⁵⁷⁰ William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 199.

⁵⁷¹ William Asher, “Job Switching,” *I Love Lucy* (CBS, September 15, 1952).

⁵⁷² Fuller-Seeley, *Jack Benny and the Golden Age of American Radio Comedy*, 65.

and Jack had shared top billing, but Marks Benny gradually retreated as the program shifted to a televised sitcom format.⁵⁷³ At that point, Mary's sharper heckling was replaced by the pointed, but less gendered, criticisms of Jack's African American butler, Rochester. As I note in chapter five, competent secretaries like Ann Sothern saw their roles re-written to reduce their authority and emphasize their personal lives. Other sitcoms about female secretaries or teachers like *My Friend Irma* (radio 1947-1954, TV 1952-1954), *Meet Millie* (radio 1951-1954, TV 1952-1956), and *Our Miss Brooks* (1948-1957, TV 1952-1956) mostly focused on the women's personal lives and desire for a husband. With the exception of Miss Brooks, whose chief professional strength was presented as her empathy for her students, their work was represented as idiosyncratic at best and incompetent at worst.⁵⁷⁴ All three clearly needed – and explicitly craved – the masculine supervision that would come with heterosexual marriage.

When femmes fatales made it to television, it was often as tragic figures. In “The Chinese Hangman,” a cult leader named Unesku hires detective Peter Gunn to locate Joanna Lund, an attractive blonde he claims stole \$200,000 from him. Joanna is initially presented as a femme fatale, but Peter still feels drawn to her. Instead of turning her over to his employer, Peter spends a week flirting with her after finding her in Spain. His initial feeling, that “there was a kind of beautiful, basic honesty about her,” is justified when he learns that Unesku lied – the vindictive man wanted Peter to find Joanna so that

⁵⁷³ Fuller-Seeley, 69.

⁵⁷⁴ Lisa Parks, “Watching the ‘Working Gals’: Fifties Sitcoms and the Repositioning of Women in Postwar American Culture,” *Critical Matrix* 11, no. 2 (1999): 42; Patrick A Ryan and Sevan G Terzian, “Our Miss Brooks: Broadcasting Domestic Ideals for the Female Teacher in the Postwar United States,” *NWSA Journal* 21, no. 1 (2009): 76–101.

his stooge could kill her as punishment for leaving him.⁵⁷⁵ In this case, Unesku's racial otherness overrides anything bad that Joanna might have done. She is simply a white woman who fell in with the wrong crowd. Still, the medium's moral requirements dictated that she must be punished for the misstep of involving herself with Unesku in the first place. Instead of marrying an appropriate (white) man and forming a heteronormative nuclear family, Joanna apparently let herself be tempted into sin by Unesku's wealth and foreign charisma. By the time she learned of his cruelty and perversion, it was too late to escape his jealous trap. After Joanna leaves Peter's protection, Unesku's stooge finds her and kills her. Her death is presented as heartbreaking, but inevitable.

Conclusion: Blacklisting Alternative Viewpoints

'Good' women's "symbolic annihilation" from the world of crime was one of the more extreme examples of their general erasure from postwar television, but crime was not the only genre from which women disappeared during the transition from radio to television.⁵⁷⁶ Women were even rarer in other adventure-heavy popular genres; they had long been sidelined in radio Westerns, and just three of the fifteen most popular television Westerns that aired between 1955 and 1965 featured recurring female characters.⁵⁷⁷ Female characters also became less prominent in other dramatic series: while gender ratios varied in individual years, men played between 68% and 74% of all

⁵⁷⁵ Blake Edwards, "The Chinese Hangman," *Peter Gunn* (Universal City, CA: NBC, October 27, 1958).

⁵⁷⁶ Gaye Tuchman, "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media," in *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*, ed. Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, and James Benet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 11. See also Meehan, *Ladies of the Evening*.

⁵⁷⁷ Meehan, *Ladies of the Evening*, 109.

characters in primetime dramas between 1952 and 1973.⁵⁷⁸ Women were also pushed to the background in broadcast sitcoms, a genre that had traditionally served as a platform for prominent female stars.⁵⁷⁹ As the 1950s wore on, even such rebellious women as Lucy Ricardo and Gracie Allen went from carrying out zany schemes on their own behalf to centering the lives and prospects of their male children. Likewise, Cassidy argues that early daytime television programming represented a wider range of female subjectivities. Before soap operas took over the small screen in the late-1950s, local stations and networks experimented with a range of dramatic, variety, and audience participation formats that spoke to women through different forms of address.⁵⁸⁰ The varied “visions of everyday femininity” modeled by idealized hostesses and “average” members of the audience displayed a “full range of affect, from gaiety to despair” for women at home.⁵⁸¹ While most of these programs encouraged women to seek glamour and excitement through consumption, they also helped to nurture an imagined community of women sharing cultural touchstones from within their own homes. They attracted significant criticism on both counts; many of the most reviled programs were those that “dared to expose feminine discontentment.”⁵⁸² This included audience confession/participation series like *Queen for a Day* (radio 1945-1957, TV 1956-1964), which gave women a chance to win consumer goods in exchange for exposing the intimate and painful details about their traumatic circumstances to public view.

⁵⁷⁸ Tuchman, “The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media,” 11.

⁵⁷⁹ Haralovich, “Sitcoms and Suburbs.”

⁵⁸⁰ Cassidy, *What Women Watched*, 3.

⁵⁸¹ Cassidy, 214.

⁵⁸² Cassidy, 215.

At the same time that television was complicating radio crime narratives with visuals, the genre was undergoing an ideological shift across US media. Lary May (2000) argues that both sides of the Cold War ideological divide sought to use Hollywood crime films to their own ends. Anti-communists used the genre “to dramatize the demonic quest for conformity and consensus by labeling identities [including working women, homosexuals, and racial minorities] that had once permeated public life deviant and criminal.”⁵⁸³ Major leftist artists responded by reshaping “the ‘dark’ crime film, later known as film noir, to keep alive critique of capitalism and repressive social roles” by showing how those roles twisted people’s lives and aspirations.⁵⁸⁴ Often, both of these viewpoints could be read within a single text. Television programs had fewer conflicting voices in the writers’ room. As Carole Stabile (2011, 2018) points out, artists who advocated for civil rights and feminism were among the first to be blacklisted by the major broadcasters. Women who refused to accommodate patriarchal expectations of feminine behavior, like actress Jean Muir and feminist crime writer Vera Caspary, and those who advocated for civil rights causes, like Hazel Scott, were expelled from the airwaves.⁵⁸⁵ Creators identified with specific ethnicities, like Molly Berg faced intense pressure to assimilate to white middle-class family norms: after years of pressure, Berg moved *The Goldbergs* from their diverse, ethnically specific New York tenement to the suburbs in 1957.⁵⁸⁶ At the same time, the networks rushed to clear the reputations of high

⁵⁸³ Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 218.

⁵⁸⁴ May, 218.

⁵⁸⁵ Carol A. Stabile, *The Broadcast 41: Women and the Anti-Communist Blacklist* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2018).

⁵⁸⁶ Carol Stabile, “The Typhoid Marys of the Left: Gender, Race, and the Broadcast Blacklist,”

profile, profitable stars like Lucille Ball who, for all her rebellious antics, ultimately accepted the basic restrictions of a patriarchal marriage.⁵⁸⁷ Within this context, female detectives — or any woman interested in crime — faced formidable restraints on her ability to pursue their interests.

In the chapters that follow, I will give more detailed case studies of how certain groups of women got away with breaking the rules of established femininity within the crime genre. Notwithstanding the stereotypes about postwar women, all of them broke at least some rules of containment culture. Despite the emphasis that postwar broadcast programming placed on domesticity, female characters were never fully confined to the home. As I have noted, women frequently expressed some dissatisfaction with their normative gender roles in radio thrillers like *Suspense*, and even if those protests were ultimately contained through punishment or an acceptance of domesticity, they were at least acknowledged with sympathy.⁵⁸⁸ Even sitcoms allowed female characters to express at least temporary resistance to their domestic confines, as well as discomfort with the harsh discipline demanded by many husbands and fathers.⁵⁸⁹

Like their sitcom sisters, the good girls of crime series were often contained within comedic frames that simultaneously allowed them to act out and downplayed the seriousness of those actions. Most dealt with at least one patriarchal figure who sought to control their actions and confine them within a domestic framework, and almost all of

Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies 8, no. 3 (2011): 280.

⁵⁸⁷ Stabile, 278.

⁵⁸⁸ McCracken, “Scary Women and Scarred Men.”

⁵⁸⁹ Erin Lee Mock, “The Horror of ‘Honey, I’m Home!’: The Perils of Postwar Family Love in the Domestic Sitcom,” *Film & History* 41, no. 2 (2011): 29–50.

them expressed at least some desire to eventually settle down and fulfill their feminine destiny by becoming wives and mothers. Still, despite the constant surveillance under which they lived, investigative wives, secretaries, and female detectives created an imaginative space in which women — and even some men — could picture women taking an active part in public life. Given the long-term stranglehold that patriarchal systems have held over issues of law and order in this country, that was no small feat. Indeed, it was threatening enough that crime-curious women were all-but-banished from postwar television stories for almost a decade.

Figures

Figure 2: Van Heflin as Philip Marlowe in a 4/23/1947 NBC publicity photo.



Figure 3: Frances Carlon in undated NBC publicity photo for *The Story of Mary Marlin*.



CHAPTER 4: DETECTING AS A FAMILY BUSINESS

Texts Under Analysis:

Adventures of the Abbotts (radio, MBS 1945-1947, NBC 1955), *Mr. & Mrs. North* (radio, CBS & NBC 1946-1954/TV, CBS & NBC 1952-1954), *The Thin Man* (radio, NBC/CBS/ABC 1941-1951/TV, NBC 1957-1959), *It's A Crime*, *Mr. Collins* (radio, MBS 1956-1957), *McMillan and Wife* (TV, NBC 1971-1976)

If people remember detectives' wives at all – and that is often a big if – they usually think of screwball comediennes like Gracie Allen, of *Mr. & Mrs. North* (MGM 1941), and Myrna Loy, of *The Thin Man* (MGM 1934-1947) running circles around jovial, befuddled, and/or dismissive husbands. Popular interpretations of these women range from 'crazy like a fox' to just plain crazy. This stereotype has been mobilized across radio and television criticism for decades. It even appeared in postwar reviews for programs that had nothing to do with crime. One early review of NBC's radio adaptation of *Mr. and Mrs. Blandings* (radio, 1951) dismissively traced the archetype for the lead characters to the "long suffering husbands and dumb-but-loveable wives who probably reached the[ir] artistic peak... in Nick and Nora Charles of the early 'Thin Man' films."⁵⁹⁰ Even reviewers who praised investigative couples tended to emphasize husbands' masculine, rational fortitude in the face of wives' feminine irrationality and vagueness: *The Billboard's* 1954 coverage of *Mr. & Mrs. North's* television adaptation praised Pam as "delightfully fey" and Jerry as a "patient husband."⁵⁹¹ These terms helped to situate detectives' (or detecting) wives within the confines of the so-called

⁵⁹⁰ "In Review: Mr. & Mrs. Blandings," *Broadcasting/Telecasting*, February 5, 1951.

⁵⁹¹ Alice Bundy, "Reviews: Mr. & Mrs. North," *The Billboard*, February 5, 1954.

“dizzy dame” or “dumb Dora” persona, generally a “petite and attractive but intellectually vacuous stereotype.”⁵⁹² The fact that dizzy dames were also typically “spendthrift [wives]” further entrenched them within postwar stereotypes of women as charming but irresponsible consumers.⁵⁹³ Instead of supporting so-called feminine logic as a reasonable alternative or complement to the supposedly objective facts through which men viewed the world, this interpretative frame rejected women’s intellectual and practical abilities. It also helped dismiss women’s claims that they were also rational, capable actors, with agency and abilities that might equal — or even rival — those of their husbands. Instead, critics centered their attention on husbands’ experiences as beleaguered heads of households who struggled to exercise proper patriarchal control over unruly, disobedient, wasteful wives.

Nonetheless, rebellious, crime-loving, investigative wives were a popular mainstay of postwar network radio, in part because of the subtly assertive behaviors that *The Billboard*’s reviewer dismissed as charmingly crazy, vague, and possibly, given “fey’s” more common connotations, otherworldly or queer.⁵⁹⁴ Investigative wives typically appeared in crime sitcoms, an under-recognized subgenre that merged elements of the postwar crime genre with the emerging postwar marital sitcom. This chapter explores the ways in which television’s propensity for generic hybrids like the crime sitcom made room for positive, even revolutionary, representations of crime-curious

⁵⁹² William Douglas, *Television Families: Is Something Wrong in Suburbia?* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003), 48.

⁵⁹³ Douglas, 48.

⁵⁹⁴ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Definition of FEY,” accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fey>.

women in the decade after WWII. Postwar crime sitcoms directly acknowledged their heroines' dissatisfaction within patriarchal marriages. Furthermore, instead of pushing them to find happiness within their domestic confines or labeling them unnatural, such series depicted ways in which women could resist against their husbands' more conservative expectations and demand a louder voice in their homes. Investigative wives went beyond negotiating more gender-equal rules within their own marriages, however. By fighting to be included in their husbands' investigations, or for the right to investigate themselves, they staked their claim to the right to be considered equal members of postwar society. Investigative wives pushed back against cultural critics who argued that women's emotional knowledge made them inherently suspect. Their efforts to inject their own views into criminal investigations dramatized women's struggle to retain the public authority that they had gained during the war, which they were now being forced to relinquish. More threateningly, in an era when powerful women were increasingly blamed for social ills, and even accused of using their feminine wiles to corrupt their husbands and subvert democracy with communism, they argued that women could serve an important, positive role in male-controlled political realms.

Crime sitcoms provided a flexible forum through which producers and audiences could consider conflicting views on crime-curious women. In the immediate postwar years, detectives' wives like Nora Charles, of *The Thin Man* (radio, NBC/CBS/ABC 1941-1951), and Jean Abbott, of *Adventures of the Abbotts* (radio, MBS 1945-1947, NBC 1955), fought to participate in their husbands' investigations, either directly or by

seizing the power of voice-over narration. Meanwhile, amateur detective Pam North, of *Mr. & Mrs. North* (radio, CBS & NBC 1946-1954) consistently forced her publisher husband to accompany her on her own investigative adventures. Crime-solving couples were a remarkably persistent, and well-rated, feature of radio's so-called golden age, especially in the final decade before television took over.⁵⁹⁵ Gail Collins, of *It's A Crime, Mr. Collins* (radio, MBS 1956-1957), joined the pantheon near the end of the 1950s as the Mutual Broadcasting System struggled to maintain its economic standing against better funded multi-media networks like NBC. The Mutual Broadcasting System was one of the only large radio networks not to expand into television, meaning that it did not have a secondary source of funding when radio ad revenues fell off in the mid-1950s. Given their radio popularity, it is notable that only Pam North and Nora Charles made the transition to television in the 1950s. *Mr. & Mrs. North* enjoyed a brief run on CBS, then NBC in the early 1950s (TV, CBS & NBC 1952-1954), but the networks appeared reluctant to commit long-term support for the independently produced program with its assertive heroine. Pam and Jerry continued to circulate in syndicated reruns, mostly aimed at children, through the 1970s.⁵⁹⁶ *The Thin Man* (TV, NBC 1957-1959) did not make its network TV debut until near the end of the decade. By then, however, Nora had been re-imagined to adhere to the late-1950s more conservative gender roles. Instead of forcing her way into her husband's cases, Nora did her utmost to pull him into an early domestic retirement that would ensure his safety

⁵⁹⁵ "Study of Television Mystery Programs" (Advertest Research, March 1954), Folder 32; Box 193; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁵⁹⁶ "Blacklist," *Broadcasting*, October 8, 1973.

and — though she never stated it so directly — provide her with a constant companion at home.

Nora's changing priorities did fit in with broader conservative shifts in the postwar family sitcom, wherein wives took the back seat to their children's antics, but they also sapped the crime sitcom of its energy and purpose. As later episodes of *The Thin Man* show, it became increasingly hard for husbands to maintain their image as good, devoted, family men once their wives stopped coming into the field with them. Instead, they had to struggle between their dedication to their families and their dedication to justice, neither of which could be shirked in the postwar era. In the end, it was easier to eliminate wives altogether. *The Thin Man* was briefly joined on the air by *Dick and the Duchess* (TV, CBS 1957-1958), an American-British co-production revolving around an American insurance investigator and his patrician wife.⁵⁹⁷ The next significant investigative couple, Stuart and Sally McMillan of *McMillan & Wife* (NBC TV, 1971-1977) did not appear until the 1970s. Still, even as sexy female investigators were proliferating on broadcast television, *McMillan & Wife*'s producers appeared to have trouble imagining a substantial investigative role for Sally to play in her police captain husband's investigations. In the end, Sally and her child were killed in an off-screen plane crash and the series' final season aired as *McMillan*. Given their social context, it is perhaps unsurprising that crime sitcoms did not last through the decade. Nevertheless, they — and their disruptions — continued to circulate through off-

⁵⁹⁷ "In Review: Dick and the Duchess," *Broadcasting/Telecasting*, October 7, 1957. Few records of this program remain, but I plan to investigate further as I continue to develop this project.

network syndication.

“I never knew anything legal could be so good!”:⁵⁹⁸ Postwar Marriage and the Crime Sitcom

Crime sitcoms’ heyday corresponded with a massive, nation-wide re-imagining and re-centralization of marriage as the bedrock institution of American social life. After the extended economic trauma of the Great Depression and enforced singleness of wartime mobilization, postwar women and men felt increasing pressure to get married, settle down, and raise a family, both for their own and the national good.⁵⁹⁹ This was especially true for postwar women. Indeed, marriage was considered the only real way for a woman to achieve economic and physical security and comfort throughout the postwar decades; even those women who did attend college found their career ambitions thwarted by discriminatory hiring practices and the social censure that came from defying pressure to marry young.⁶⁰⁰ Still, the young women who entered these marriages did so willingly – even eagerly – and with the sense that they were part of a larger, collaborative effort to redefine the ancient and venerable institution into a truly egalitarian partnership.⁶⁰¹

Post-WWII conceptions of marriage were built on ideas developed by 1920s social thinkers like Ben Lindsay and Margaret Sanger. Seeking to preserve marriage

⁵⁹⁸ Ralph Murphy, “Trained for Murder,” *Mr. & Mrs. North* (New York: CBS, June 12, 1953).

⁵⁹⁹ Betsy Israel, *Bachelor Girl: 100 Years of Breaking the Rules--a Social History of Living Single* (New York: William Morrow, 2002), 163.

⁶⁰⁰ Israel, 154; Babette Faehmel, *College Women In The Nuclear Age: Cultural Literacy and Female Identity, 1940-1960* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 8.

⁶⁰¹ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 46.

from the threat posed by women's increasing economic and sexual liberation, Lindsay's *The Companionate Marriage* (1927) argued that strict Victorian moral codes must bend to accommodate women's expanding public roles.⁶⁰² Sanger promoted companionate marriage as an alternative to dominant marital discourses because it decentralized Victorian emphases economic security and child-rearing. Sanger argued, birth control would rescue marriage by allowing wives and husbands more time to cement their emotional, intellectual, and sexual intimacy.⁶⁰³ Even as advocates for companionate marriage argued for more equitable marriages and personal fulfillment through mutual companionship, however, most accepted that marriage remained a patriarchal institution. Few critics ever questioned the naturalness of gendered labor divisions that placed men as the head of the family and assigned women subservient, primarily domestic roles.

In the same way that postwar companionate marriages built on earlier models of the institution, popular explorations of companionate marriage also built on earlier genres, particularly the screwball comedy. The companionate marriage received its earliest fictional treatments in 1930s screwball comedy films like *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *The Thin Man* (1934). Such films promoted the then-novel marital ideal by exploring and resolving difficulties that couples encountered as they came to an understanding and formed intellectually and emotionally intimate bonds within restrictive social norms. Likewise, postwar sitcoms drew on screwball comedy forms to explore modern couples' battles over agency and authority. Crime sitcoms further

⁶⁰² Christina Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women's Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 106.

⁶⁰³ Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern*.

intensified these contests of wills by drawing parallels between couples' internal power struggles and the broader, deeply gendered struggle for social power taking place throughout postwar American society.

Jessica Weiss (2000) argues that the young women and men who married after the war saw themselves as pioneers in the field of marriage, which they were renegotiating into a more companionate, egalitarian institution.⁶⁰⁴ However, these negotiations took place within the gendered bounds of postwar containment culture. During this period, as Lary May (2000) argues, progressive, liberalizing trends in American culture and popular media experienced a temporary setback as conservative and anti-communist voices advocated for a reversion to Victorian values.⁶⁰⁵ Even the most apparently equal of marital roles were negotiated within a patriarchal framework that privileged men as the superior partner and provided them with greater independence of motion and access to educational and employment opportunities. Female college students were encouraged to seek self-fulfillment alongside their male classmates, but they were also more likely to become disillusioned with postwar promises of a merit-based system based in individual accomplishment.⁶⁰⁶ Faced with hostile job prospects in a society that refused to directly acknowledge the unique impediments women faced in pursuing careers, many well-educated women gave up on their career ambitions and/or chose vicarious satisfaction through marriage to similarly ambitious men.⁶⁰⁷ This

⁶⁰⁴ Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 45.

⁶⁰⁵ Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 7.

⁶⁰⁶ Faehmel, *College Women In The Nuclear Age*, 7.

⁶⁰⁷ Faehmel, 180.

class-based privilege to withdraw into domesticity was a solution of sorts. Still, this was only a temporary solution for most. Many continued to resent their early lost opportunities, and most used their educational foundations to pursue their own ambitions later in life.⁶⁰⁸ Additionally, even when middle-class white women left the workforce, others remained. Half of all Black women of childbearing age (25-34) participated in the workforce between 1948 and 1960, compared to one third of white women. Furthermore, 31% of married Black mothers of pre-school-aged children worked, compared to 18% of white mothers.⁶⁰⁹ Black wives and mothers were rarely depicted on broadcast radio and television, and when they did appear they were most often caricatured as demanding harpies like *Amos 'n' Andy's* much maligned Sapphire.⁶¹⁰

Still, despite their domestic frame, the investigative wives I study routinely expressed their desire for something beyond the home and thinly-veiled resentment of their husbands' apparent ability to dictate the terms of their marriages and lives. This provided a point of identification for likeminded female listeners. Investigative wives did not go so far as to seek out paid employment, but they actively sought adventure and worked to develop the analytical detective skills typically associated with male detectives. On a more personal level, in their interactions with their husbands they voiced many of their frustrations with the gender dynamics of patriarchal marriage, including their anger that their husbands did not appear to take them seriously or

⁶⁰⁸ Faehmel, 181.

⁶⁰⁹ Rochelle Gatlin, *American Women Since 1945* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 31.

⁶¹⁰ For a longer analysis of Sapphire's meaning to and impact on black women and girls, see bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 197–213.

appreciate their contributions to cases. While the programs offered few solutions to these problems, the issues were addressed and even occasionally validated, as when a wife spotted the crucial clue ahead of her husband. Significantly, no one questioned why these women — all attractive, feminine-presenting women who were apparently of childbearing age — seemed to have chosen not to have children (Nicky Jr., the Charles' son born in *Another Thin Man* (1939), is nowhere to be found). Removing children from the narrative further supported the idea that these women should be allowed to pursue socially and personally rewarding work outside the confines of the home.

Finally, investigative wives actively contested the boundaries of the home and women's public roles. Gendered disputes about the nature of justice were a prominent undercurrent, especially in programs featuring a more active wife, like *It's a Crime*, *Mr Collins* and *Mr and Mrs North*. As D'Acci points out in the case of *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS 1982-1988), justice and legal authority are characterized differently when they are represented by men and women.⁶¹¹ While Rock Hudson's Commissioner MacMillan is the only actual police officer in this sample, all of the husbands shared a more black and white view of crime, detection, and punishment. Their wives frequently complicated this simplified vision of justice with more ambiguous arguments based on their own more intuitive, emotional knowledge of human nature. Wives' feminized investigative skills and feelings frequently dominated large parts of the investigation, but the husbands' more cut and dried law-and-order approach was typically reasserted in the end once the guilty party was discovered. In the final act, the wives were usually

⁶¹¹ D'Acci, *Defining Women*, 117.

absolved of responsibility for judgment and punishment, either because their feminine feelings meant that they would be too soft-hearted to bear the difficult task of condemning another human being, or because men refused to entrust them with the authority to make legal judgments about (often male) criminals.

I employ the term “crime sitcom” in part to call attention to the genre’s hybridity. There is no such thing as a pure female detective genre, or even a subgenre.⁶¹² This is especially true when it comes to broadcast and film texts; hybridity remains crucial in narratives about women and crime because Western patriarchal societies have long maintained an imaginative wall between respectable femininity and criminality. Kathleen Murray (2014) argues that the very presence of a female investigator forces detective films and broadcast series “into other generic terrains” more identified with femininity, especially comedy, romance, and melodrama.⁶¹³ Murray argues that narratives featuring investigating women are too diverse for audiences to understand them as a single genre with a coherent sense of rules and narrative structures that make their meaning immediately clear and legible.⁶¹⁴ To be sure, contemporary critics ascribed a number of unofficial generic labels to the series I examine in this chapter, including “whodunit,” “comedy-mystery,” “comedy-thriller,” or simply “mystery.”⁶¹⁵ However, I argue that these series do share enough attributes to warrant their own generic subcategory: the crime sitcom.

⁶¹² Kathleen Murray, “Overlooking the Evidence: Gender, Genre and the Woman Detective in Hollywood Film and Television” (Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2014), 7.

⁶¹³ Murray, 3.

⁶¹⁴ Murray, 7.

⁶¹⁵ Odec., “Review: Adventures of the Thin Man,” *Variety*, July 9, 1941; Paul Ackerman, “Network Program Reviews & Analyses: Adventures of the Thin Man,” *The Billboard*, August 9, 1947; Hobe,

“Crime sitcom” is something of a retrospective label, to be sure. David Marc (2016) argues that the term “situation comedy” was not widely employed until the 1950s, when it became a useful label for broadcasters looking to promote their expanding slates of domestic comedy series.⁶¹⁶ The term was common enough to be shortened to the colloquial “sitcom” by the 1960s. However, as Marc and others acknowledge, sitcoms have deep roots on broadcast radio. Indeed, *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), the series that helped kick off the television sitcom craze, was a reprise of Ball’s comedy series *My Favorite Husband* (1948-1951). Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (2017) argues that Jack Benny and Harry Conn were experimenting with situation-based comedy bits on Benny’s variety programs as early as 1934.⁶¹⁷ *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (NBC & CBS radio, 1937-1950, CBS TV, 1950-1958) also mixed situational comedy bits with more standard, vaudeville-style variety show fare. As I discuss later in this section, radio adaptations of *The Thin Man*, *Mr. & Mrs. North*, and their imitators drew heavily on the screwball tradition established in the *Thin Man* movie series. However, they were also shaped by the comic situations that appeared in contemporary radio series like *Fibber McGee and Molly* (1935-1959) and *The Great Guildersleeve* (1941-1957).

As the range of generic labels invoked by contemporary critics implied, crime

“Radio Reviews: Mr. & Mrs. North,” *Variety*, January 13, 1943; Bundy, “Reviews: Mr. & Mrs. North.”

⁶¹⁶ David Marc, “Origins of the Genre: In Search of the Radio Sitcom,” in *The Sitcom Reader, Second Edition: America Re-Viewed, Still Skewed*, ed. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 2.

⁶¹⁷ Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, *Jack Benny and the Golden Age of American Radio Comedy* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 23.

sitcoms told their stories through two distinct modes. Reviewers often evaluated the programs' comedy/romance and mystery elements separately, usually praising "wisecracks" over generally workmanlike but occasionally suspenseful mystery plots.⁶¹⁸ Most episodes followed a consistent structure. Every week, the central married couple would be pulled into a mystery. Over the next half hour, the husband would try and fail to prevent his wife from interfering with his own — or, in the case of the amateur Norths, the official police — investigation. Wives resisted husbands' efforts to push them back into the home through varied strategies, and for different reasons. Some, like Jean Abbott, who narrated her PI husband Pat's cases on *Adventures of the Abbotts* (radio 1945-1955), were predominantly driven by jealousy of the attractive women their husbands encountered. Others were more clearly looking for an intellectual challenge. While Nora Charles was often jealous of Nick's flirtations, she also enjoyed matching wits with her PI husband. Meanwhile, Pam North actively forced her husband Jerry, a publisher, out of his comfortable office and/or living room chair and into investigations that he protested were none of their business. As with other contemporary sitcoms, episodes conclude with a romantic or comedic interlude between the married couple. This final scene gave wife and husband a chance to make up and reaffirm their marital bond after any investigation-related squabbles. It also served as a final cap on the episode's disruptive events. Following the sitcom tendency to revert to stasis, marital crime series contained any disruptions to the patriarchal order and returned their

⁶¹⁸ Odec., "Review: Adventures of the Thin Man."

characters to a point of apparent normalcy by the end.⁶¹⁹

As we will see in what follows, crime sitcoms used their comic framing to simultaneously empower and constrain their heroines' actions. Investigative wives like Pam North disrupted their husbands' neat, orderly, law-abiding lives with carnivalesque chaos. However, even if the essence of Bakhtin's carnival "is its inversion of the rules that discipline everyday life," and an admission that those rules are stifling, the fact remains that the carnival itself is limited in time and space.⁶²⁰ And television episodes are even more limited. After a half-hour of defying the patriarchal forces that would ensure her silence, the investigative wife ultimately gave way to her husband, and then to the next program in the network's scheduled flow. Furthermore, even within their brief carnival period, investigative wives were still isolated from other women and surrounded by male authority figures, including husbands and male police officers. And unlike male detectives, whose investigative role usually overrode every other aspect of their identity, even the most assertive, clearly marked female detective was also always something else. In the case of the crime sitcom, that something was "wife." And on postwar network radio and television, happy marriages — a must if the network hoped to avoid criticism from the pro-marriage lobby — were best understood, and merchandised, through the sitcom format, which put marital success above all else.

⁶¹⁹ Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television" in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*. Robert C. Allen (ed). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (1992), 138-159, 146.

⁶²⁰ John Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2011), 112.

It's So Much Easier to Have Fun When You're Rich: Tracing the Crime Sitcom's Screwball Roots

This work is primarily concerned with broadcast representations, but the crime sitcom's cinematic roots are direct enough to warrant a more detailed history. The sitcom format was still emerging in the 1940s, when *The Thin Man* first debuted on network radio, but the link between marriage, crime, and comedy extends back to the origin of the series in the 1930s. In 1934, MGM adapted Dashiell Hammett's jaded, alcohol-soaked novella about an ex-detective's investigation into the secrets of a debauched upper-class family into a successful screwball comedy. *The Thin Man* was a massive hit, earning over one million dollars at the box office and spawning five sequels over the next ten years. Warner Brothers, which had filmed the first of three adaptations of Hammett's earlier hit *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) in 1931, rapidly remade that iconic hardboiled tale in a similarly comic vein: *Satan Met a Lady* (1936) ends with Warren William's Ted Shane (aka Sam Spade) running off with his secretary Miss Murgatroyd, played by Marie Wilson. While *Satan Met a Lady* has largely (if not completely deservedly) faded from public memory, *The Thin Man* remains one of the best known and loved screwball crime comedies ever made. It is also the only screwball comedy to focus on a stable married couple rather than a couple in the process of forming – or re-forming – their romantic bonds.

Like the postwar sitcom, *The Thin Man* film and its sequels framed marriage as a stable, romantic relationship between upper class, white, heterosexual partners. Wife and husband might experience joy, laughter, frustrations, jealousies, but their bond was

enduring. Nora and Nick Charles provided a “blueprint for a fun, companionate marriage” between two equal and mutually respectful partners.⁶²¹ However, like so many postwar sitcoms, their coupling became increasingly “conventionalised (sp) and eventually domesticated” during the postwar period.⁶²² The Charles marriage was atypical in many ways, even within the world of *The Thin Man*. Nevertheless, it embodied the contemporary ideal of companionate marriage. *The Thin Man* picked up where most screwball narratives left off, exploring the marriages that resulted from the unconventional courtships of strong-willed and apparently mismatched couples. These courtships, portrayed in films like *It Happened One Night* (1934), suggested a “cultural fascination with the possibility of sexual equality in [1930s] America.”⁶²³ Still, they left many questions unanswered. Despite their promise of happily ever after, screwball narratives failed to answer the important question of how their central couple, who had only found happiness together after retreating from society’s harsh demands and gendered divisions, would weather the challenges, disillusionments, and mundanity of daily life.⁶²⁴ Furthermore, even as they gesture toward female empowerment, screwball films typically imply that their heroines will accept patriarchal gender norms within their marriages, just as they ultimately learn to be guided by the hero’s greater knowledge about the world.⁶²⁵ Nora Charles, wife of retired detective Nick Charles, is no exception to this rule. She recognizes her husband’s superior knowledge of the world and looks to

⁶²¹ Kathrina Glitre, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy: States of the Union, 1934-1965* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 65.

⁶²² Glitre, 65.

⁶²³ Glitre, 3.

⁶²⁴ Glitre, 3–4.

⁶²⁵ Glitre, 3.

him to explain it to her. However, she stakes her claim to equality by forcing him to share that knowledge with her.

In the early *Thin Man* films, the Charleses engage in the same style of playful banter that marks most screwball courtships. Their private games and in-jokes enable them to maintain the secluded intimacy of courtship even as they move through public spaces, and Nora's ability to trade witty but affectionate barbs with her husband underscores the fact that they remain on equal footing. While Nick is never presented as mercenary or un-masculine, his patriarchal authority is undercut by his early admission that he lives off his wife's fortune. Furthering the egalitarian impression, Nora constantly forces her way into her husband's business instead of retreating into the home like other wives of their acquaintance. Her propensity to push her reluctant husband to accept cases and frequent insistence on joining in the "fun" of his investigations asserted her right to enjoy the same public excitement as her husband and contradicted the notion that women were primarily interested in domesticity.⁶²⁶ Nick's apparent inability to thwart her participation and/or interference further undermined his position as family head. Indeed, even after becoming a mother in *Another Thin Man* (1939), the series' third film, Nora is more interested in following Nick's criminal investigations than staying home with their young son, Nicky Jr.

Of course, Nora's ability to go gallivanting with her husband – and Nick's ability to take on temporary investigative work without endangering his family's livelihood – depends upon Nora's inherited wealth. Like the sitcoms that succeeded them, screwball

⁶²⁶ W. S. Van Dyke, *Another Thin Man*, 1939.

comedies portrayed a world where romance was enabled by the sort of leisure time that would be impossible for anyone who had to work a full-time job. Apart from a few outlaws and chorus girls, screwball women almost always came from the upper echelons of society. Screwball men, however, were usually employed in educated professions, including news reporting, law, or academia. Despite their middle- to upper-class backgrounds, however, screwball heroes tended to evince a hard-scrabble practicality that aligned them with the working classes, or at least the idealized working-class values that popular and political culture extolled as quintessentially American. Screwball men's practicality, resourcefulness, and common sense understanding of the world were important elements of their masculine authority. In the same way, screwball women's upper- or occasionally lower-class refusal to accept mundane reality were part of their feminine freedom and incorrigibility. However, even as women acted out against the restrictions imposed by their class and gender, only men had the ability to accurately diagnose and critique social problems. Unsurprisingly, this emphasis on the supremacy of masculine values and thought meant that supposedly feminine concerns like domestic discord or relationship complications were routinely ignored and/or dismissed as immaterial at best or signs of irrationality at worst.

Screwball comedy's melding of class and gender concerns had real and lasting consequences for broadcast comedy as well. Kathleen Rowe (1995) argues that screwball comedies displaced class issues onto gendered disputes between working men and frivolous heiresses.⁶²⁷ Read in their most patriarchal light, screwball comedies tell

⁶²⁷ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of

stories about men learning to use a working-class-inspired no nonsense affect and middle-class rationality to tame unruly heiresses and vagabond showgirls. These women's "disruptive potential" is harnessed "to create a new and not-very-improved male hero."⁶²⁸ At the same time, screwball comedies also obscured patriarchal beliefs about women's inherent irrationality by characterizing heroes' impatience with heroines' actions as a justified, quintessentially American annoyance with upper-class frivolity. Postwar radio and television sitcom women, and especially wives, might not be heiresses, but they did inherit screwball heroines' upper-class coding, or at least its negative implications. Even as they extolled an American Dream characterized by economic mobility and product-filled, upper-middle-class lifestyles, broadcast sitcoms denigrated women's supposedly extravagant spending on expensive clothing. A man's ability to buy his wife jewelry and furs was treated as a sign of the family's success, but women's own desire for such presents was a sure sign of her inherent selfishness and frivolity. Husbands must be vigilant if they wished to keep their wives from spending money like the heiresses they were not. Left unchecked, women's desire for the signs of wealth threatened to bankrupt hardworking men and destroy the family's economic and social status.

Still, the networks needed women to spend money. Indeed, the perception of women as unstoppable shopping machines was integral to commercial broadcasters' business strategies; female consumers might be an easy target for critics of American

Texas Press, 1995), 118.

⁶²⁸ Rowe, 118.

consumerism, but they also purchased the vast majority of products sold by high-volume advertisers like Procter & Gamble and Colgate. Portraying women as middle-class housewife-consumers was a natural step in the networks' efforts to foment such a business-friendly reality. Women's middle-class identification was also a way that the networks could guarantee to audiences that their female characters were – and would remain – chaste and virtuous: middle-class women had presumably learned the proper values from their parents and had the resources and social support to maintain them. Unlike lower-class femmes fatales, who sold their bodies for status and luxury items, and heiresses, who were tainted by their connection to a monied aristocracy with decadent, anti-democratic roots, all-American, middle-class housewives were perceived as the least nefarious of women. They could not escape all of the suspicions to which women were subjected, but sitcom housewives like June Cleaver, or even Lucille Ball, were appropriately situated within and accepting of patriarchal social and economic structures. Even if they rebelled against their containment, they did not threaten the underlying social order, perhaps because they knew that their ultimate social status and economic position depended upon their connection to a successful husband.

As the *Thin Man* films progressed, MGM producers gradually redefined the Charles family in terms of middle-class values. Nora never lost her vast wealth, but she and Nick progressively embraced more conventionally middle-class behaviors and moral standards as the 1930s progressed. The pair continued to enjoy fine dining and nightclubs, but Motion Picture Code Administration correspondence indicates that local censors and community groups were increasingly vocal in protesting depictions of

drinking and sexual innuendo.⁶²⁹ Many of the same people who protested radio crime also argued that the Charleses freewheeling, cosmopolitan approach to serious matters like law, order, and marriage, were providing a bad example for children whose lives were already being disrupted by economic depression and war. MGM appears to have taken these critiques — or at least their potential impact on profits — into account.

Through the late 1930s, the Charleses habits also became more domestic. *The Thin Man Goes Home* (1945) spoke directly to the postwar idealization of small-town America by revealing Nick's small town, middle-class background.

At the same time, Nora was increasingly sidelined in investigations, and her relationship with Nick shifted to reflect the wartime tensions between women's desire for new freedoms and the growing culture of political and domestic containment. Where Nick's efforts to trick Nora into staying away from the action felt like a spirited game in the early *Thin Man* films, they acquired a punitive tone by the late 1930s. Nora responded with a rebellion that transitioned from playful to angry by the early 1940s. The battle of the sexes was no longer a joke to her. At the same time, the films simultaneously valorized Nick's skill as a professional detective and gently mocked him by aligning him with their mischievous young son. By *The Thin Man Goes Home*, (1945), Nora was largely reduced to the role of supportive wife and cheerleader to Nick as he struggled to win his father's approval. *Song of the Thin Man* (1947) went even

⁶²⁹ Joseph Breen, "Letter from Joseph Breen to Louis Mayer," October 8, 1936, After The Thin Man, Production Files, Motion Picture Association of America. Production Code Administration Records, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.; Joseph Breen, "Letter from Joseph Breen to Louis Mayer," September 24, 1946, Song of the Thin Man, Production Files, Motion Picture Association of America. Production Code Administration Records, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

further, forcing Nora into the equally unflattering roles of jealous wife and commanding matron. The only real power she retained was the power to force her husband to take on more authoritative, conventionally patriarchal roles. In one particularly disturbing scene, she forces her reluctant husband to discipline Nicky Jr. by spanking him. Her angry, authoritative glare contrasts with Nick's childish hesitancy and Nicky Jr.'s abject fear to invoke the specter of momism run amok and unite father and son against her. Instead of inhabiting a private, semi-egalitarian utopia with her husband, Nora was pushed to the fringes of her own family unit and assigned the role of the wicked witch.

It is not that Nora's interest in crime decreased. Rather, Nick got better at blocking her efforts to force her way into the field. Nora's continuing desire to be part of the action reflected postwar women's unwillingness to be relegated to the home after marriage. Nora's desire to be both active and useful was justified by her ability to provide small but significant assistance in solving Nick's cases, and it remained salient for women after World War II. Better educated and more used to working outside the home than their mothers who married in the 1920s and 1930s, the young women who married after WWII were likewise torn between older feminine ideals and expanding opportunities for independence. However, as women's postwar roles were re-defined in terms of domesticity, the language of companionate marriage was mobilized to argue that women could — and should — find intellectual fulfillment at home instead of seeking adventure and employment abroad.

Screwball Comedy Comes to Radio

As with other crime subgenres, broadcast crime sitcoms followed a different periodization from that of screwball crime comedy films.⁶³⁰ Gracie Allen's brief turn as dizzy dame investigator Pam North in MGM's *Mr. & Mrs. North* (1941) failed to inspire any sequels, and the *Thin Man* film cycle had played out by 1947, but investigative couples did not reach their height on postwar network radio until the late-1940s. *The Thin Man* (radio, NBC/CBS/ABC 1941-1951/TV, NBC 1957-1959) was the earliest of the four radio series I analyze in this chapter. Both *Adventures of the Abbotts* (radio, MBS 1945-1947, NBC 1955) and *Mr. & Mrs. North* (radio, CBS & NBC 1946-1954/TV, CBS & NBC 1952-1954) debuted after peace was declared in 1945. Finally, *It's A Crime, Mr. Collins* (radio, MBS 1956-1957), a thinly veiled *Abbotts* knock-off, debuted in the mid-1950s as its network, Mutual, struggled to fight off televised competition. These programs are the best preserved primetime series featuring wives who took an active part in investigations, but they were not the only ones on air in the 1940s. NBC's Blue network and Canada Dry attempted to duplicate *The Thin Man*'s early success with *Michael and Kitty*, later renamed *Michael Piper, Private Detective*, in the fall of 1941, but the Pipers were off the air by February 1942. The single surviving recording indicates a more serious, less overtly comic or sexual tone.⁶³¹ *Front Page Farrell* (MBS 1941-1942, NBC 1942-1954) also featured a wife assisting her star reporter husband with criminal investigations; that series began as a daytime soap opera,

⁶³⁰ Neil Verma, *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 186.

⁶³¹ "Erie Basin Murder," *Michael and Kitty* (New York: NBC Blue, 1942).

but was moved to the late afternoon when it was transferred to NBC in 1942. Despite their success on radio, however, crime sitcoms were rare on television. It would be a stretch to ascribe the generic label to *McMillan and Wife* (TV, NBC 1971-1976), the latest series I examine, and the only one native to television. *McMillan and Wife* did attempt to replicate *The Thin Man*'s humorous tone – as it was translated through Rock Hudson and Doris Day's 1960s sex comedies – but that dynamic was complicated by the series' format, casting, and the more serious turn that television crime series had taken in the intervening decades.

By the early 1950s, certain elements of the crime sitcom had taken hold in the minds of the writers who produced scripts for many of the same series. Crime series revolving around a married pair were expected to be sexy comedies that focused on personality over crime solving. Radio crime writer Gene Wang articulated this formula when he foresaw problems adapting the Frances Cranes Abbott novels for television in 1951. Wang, who developed his own formula writing for series like *The Amazing Mr. Malone*, *Mr. District Attorney*, and *Gang Busters*, as well as both *The Thin Man* and *Mr. and Mrs. North*, assessed the Abbotts as “a pretty colorless team.”⁶³² His more pointed criticisms indicate the central role wives' personalities played in such series; while he was concerned that Pat Abbott's “pretty straight” and no-nonsense persona would bore listeners, Wang was most concerned about Jean.⁶³³ Wang warned that, because “Jean

⁶³² “Murder Due at 8 A.M.,” *Radio and Television Life*, September 14, 1949, Box 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming; Gene Wang, “Letter from Gene Wang to Bernard Schubert,” October 22, 1951, Box 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

⁶³³ Wang, “Letter from Gene Wang to Bernard Schubert,” October 22, 1951.

Abbott has neither the sexiness of Nora nor the cute dumbness of Pam North...you've got to give her something" else to engage audiences.⁶³⁴ However, instead of proposing a new character trait to fill the gap, Wang reinforced the formula by suggesting "they be handled like Nick and Nora Charles."⁶³⁵ In other words, he fell back on the formulaic conventions he claimed to know so well that he churned out full scripts in the 9-hour period before the studio messenger arrived to pick them up.⁶³⁶

The combination of crime and sitcom foregrounds the complicated gender dynamics inherent in series featuring wives who insisted upon participating in criminal investigations. As I have already noted, issues around criminal justice have historically been coded masculine in American society. Broadcast crime dramas before and after WWII generally supported the notion that men were inherently vested with the power and prerogative to regulate and enforce legal and moral rights. John Crank (2014) argues that masculinity is encoded into every aspect of American police culture. From officer training officers to social perception of police and their role, "the paternalism associated with the traditional American male role" is "intensified through the lens of police culture into a guiding principle of social order and control."⁶³⁷ Kathleen Battles (2010) has shown how radio broadcasters joined with local and federal law enforcement agencies to promote an "idealized fantasy of police bureaucratic efficiency" through fictional crime programming in the 1930s.⁶³⁸ This image of law enforcement stressed

⁶³⁴ Wang.

⁶³⁵ Wang.

⁶³⁶ "Murder Due at 8 A.M."

⁶³⁷ John P. Crank, *Understanding Police Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 230.

⁶³⁸ Kathleen Battles, *Calling All Cars: Radio Dragnets and the Technology of Policing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 231.

the police's professionalism, impartiality, objectivity, and a sort of preternaturally disembodied omnipresence that could only be achieved through expanding, technologically enhanced surveillance networks. All of these traits were characterized in masculine terms. Women, meanwhile, were supposedly too emotional to separate the objective "truth" from individuals' more ambiguous and emotion-laden experiences. This belief justified – and was perpetuated by – their lack of access to the official, public channels of communication and oversight that enabled police surveillance.⁶³⁹ Trends in popular detective types shifted over the ensuing decades, but these masculinist traditions remained ascendant through the 1960s. They reached their purest expression in *Dragnet* (NBC radio, 1949-1957, NBC TV 1951-1959), the wildly popular police procedural that set the template for decades of procedurals to come: everyman-style police Sgt. Joe Friday's ongoing effort to discern the truth behind witnesses' meandering, emotional, and contradictory narratives embodied and helped create the postwar ideal of infallible, rational lawmen.

The sitcom, however, has historically been a preserve for strong female stars. Even before Lucille Ball helped cement that function on television, radio women like Gracie Allen and Mary Livingstone had been evading patriarchal control and puncturing fragile masculinity for well over a decade.⁶⁴⁰ Early television sitcom wives continued this trend, alternately defying or ignoring their husbands' efforts to exert patriarchal authority throughout the early 1950s. Despite their ditzzy surfaces, Gracie and Lucy's

⁶³⁹ Battles, 61.

⁶⁴⁰ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening in: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), chap. 5; Fuller-Seeley, *Jack Benny and the Golden Age of American Radio Comedy*, chap. 2.

comedic rebellions – Gracie’s refusal to conform to conventional modes of making sense and Lucy’s continuous slapstick efforts to escape domesticity – provided a space for women to express their frustrations with restricted marital and social roles.⁶⁴¹ Furthermore, they made such rebellions appealing. Gracie’s madcap schemes were much more engaging than her straight-man husband George’s efforts to contain the chaos she left in her wake.⁶⁴² But Gracie and Lucy’s comic rebellions were about more than just creating domestic chaos and driving their poor husbands to madness. Rather, sitcom wives used the limited tools at their disposal to engage in the same gendered debate with which so many postwar married couples were also concerned: how would power be balanced in the postwar companionate marriage? In the same way, radio and television crime sitcoms undercut male authority by dramatizing detectives’ inability to control their own wives. Week after week, women like Pam North and Jean Abbott echoed Nora Charles’s protest from the third *Thin Man* film: “I want to have some fun too!”⁶⁴³

Still, sitcoms did not give women the unfettered ability to speak about and rebel against their own oppression. Instead, they contained feminine rebellion within the generic realm of comedy, where it could be safely dismissed as an innocent and/or unrealistic diversion. The white, middle-class, postwar couples who saw themselves

⁶⁴¹ Patricia Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy,” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 80–95.

⁶⁴² Leah Lowe, “‘If the Country’s Going Gracie, So Can You’: Gender Representation in Gracie Allen’s Radio Comedy,” in *Communities of the Air: Radio Century, Radio Culture*, ed. Susan Merrill Squier (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 239.

⁶⁴³ Dyke, *Another Thin Man*.

represented on network television might be open to exploring new ways of relating to each other and re-negotiating their marital and gender roles, but they were still restricted within a patriarchal framework that privileged male prerogatives. Marital gender debates were represented in some of the most prominent postwar sitcoms. Couples in programs like *I Love Lucy* and its radio progenitor, *My Favorite Husband* (1949-1953), *Burns and Allen*, and *Jack Benny* engaged in different forms of gender play and gendered role-inversion, mostly driven by the women's dissatisfaction with the limitations that came with their wifely roles. Lucy fought to enter show business with her husband, Gracie rejected masculinized logic, and Mary, Jack's real-life wife and chief radio heckler, repeatedly forced Jack to take on the feminine roles she herself rejected.⁶⁴⁴ But as comic figures, unruly wives were only as serious as their audience took them. Jane Feuer (1992) reminds us that it is easy to read the sitcom format – and especially 1950s sitcoms – as ideologically conservative.⁶⁴⁵ Sitcoms tended to resist change because of their episodic program structures. Serialized narratives were especially discouraged on radio and through television's first decades because audiences had limited access to recording technologies or re-runs that could help them catch up on plot developments they might have missed. Each week some new situation would disrupt the family's peace and quiet, but that situation had to be (humorously) resolved by the end of the episode and the family returned to stasis in preparation for the

⁶⁴⁴ Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud"; Fuller-Seeley, *Jack Benny and the Golden Age of American Radio Comedy*, 72.

⁶⁴⁵ Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Robert C. Allen, Second Edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 148.

following week's situation. A wife might rebel, but she could do little else. The ongoing act of rebellion signaled her enduring dissatisfaction with domestic life, but the program's structure denied her ability to effect actual and lasting change in her circumstances. Early 1950s sitcoms acknowledged that domesticity was a problem but continued to present it as women's only valid option.

By the end of the 1950s, mainstream family sitcoms were even less willing to explore women's domestic discontents. As the decade progressed, sitcom families had children and moved to the suburbs. At the same time, the once rebellious and powerful wives receded into the background of narratives that increasingly focused on their children's antics and mutinies. To make matters worse, most of those unruly children were sons. Daughters were expected to behave themselves. Patricia Mellencamp (1986) and Susan Douglas (2004) argue that assertive and rebellious early 1950s housewives like Lucy and Gracie posed a stronger challenge to patriarchal domestic containment than later sitcom wives like June Cleaver, of *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963), and Margaret Anderson, of *Father Knows Best* (CBS & NBC TV, 1954-1960).⁶⁴⁶ However, Allison McCracken (2002) places containment even earlier: Gracie may have been the central point of identification for many radio listeners, but the program's television adaptation encouraged viewers to identify with George by allowing him to break the fourth wall and communicate directly with the audience.⁶⁴⁷ Gracie remained trapped

⁶⁴⁶ Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud"; Douglas, *Listening In*, chap. 5.

⁶⁴⁷ Allison McCracken, "Study of a Mad Housewife: Psychiatric Discourse, the Suburban Home and the Case of Gracie Allen," in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumin (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 59.

within their home, a proscenium-like set where she was protected from outside threats but also placed on display like a curious archeological discovery or zoo animal.⁶⁴⁸ Where radio Gracie had encouraged audiences to laugh with her, George displayed television Gracie for audiences to laugh at. That laughter might be loving, but it diminished her power both within and outside of her narrative. Instead of identifying with her subversive nature – and even being drawn into her rebellions – viewers were encouraged to see them as the antics of a precocious child. If marriage was, as many young postwar couples saw it, a process of growing up and maturing together, 1950s sitcoms' conservative trajectory implied that proper women would naturally mature into self-effacing, responsible adults once they married and had children.⁶⁴⁹

It was impossible for crime sitcoms to follow the same domestic trajectory. After all, what kind of responsible mother would abandon her children – or worse, endanger their lives – for cheap thrills? And what sort of normal postwar woman would give up the chance to have children for a dangerous crime-solving career? A young, unmarried woman, an older widow, or an elderly spinster might dabble in crime, but wives and mothers were presumably too busy. Moreover, they were – or should be – too mature to take part in such ridiculous fantasy play. Between the late 1930s and early 1950s, female investigators went from displaying limited but real agency on film to being denigrated and dismissed as irrational, irresponsible, and just plain crazy.⁶⁵⁰ This

⁶⁴⁸ McCracken, 56.

⁶⁴⁹ Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 25.

⁶⁵⁰ Philippa Gates, *Detecting Women: Gender and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 15.

judgment was drawn in sharp contrast to happy, healthy wives and mothers. Postwar housewives were valorized as the height of emotional maturity because they embraced their supposedly natural domestic roles instead of rebelling against them.⁶⁵¹ However, even such supposedly unobjectionable women were required to continually reassert their sanity and respect for patriarchal norms in the face of attacks from misogynist cultural critics. Men like writer Philip Wylie expressed their fear of women's domestic influence through "momist" paranoia that blamed women for ruining their husbands and sons by being alternately too loving or not loving enough, too involved or not involved enough, and/or too ambitious or not ambitious enough.⁶⁵² In a social milieu where every personality trait threatened to become a double edged sword that could be wielded against female characters, network executives were understandably reluctant to portray women doing anything outside of the increasingly narrow norms of white, middle-class, suburban domesticity.

Surely, crime-fighting work was better left to responsible, masculine authorities like *Dragnet's* Sgt. Friday. Jason Mittell (2004) has traced the program's roots in semi-documentary police procedural films and tough-guy radio thrillers, many of which creator Jack Webb starred in through the 1940s. These genres presented police and hypermasculine, independent detectives as part of a larger patriarchal justice system in which individual men were empowered to investigate, judge, and even occasionally

⁶⁵¹ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2.

⁶⁵² Michael Rogin, "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies," *Representations* 6 (1984): 7.

execute criminals on society's behalf.⁶⁵³ Sgt. Friday and his partner, Officer Frank Smith, broke with this tradition to some extent. Instead of bucking a system that held them back, Friday and Smith worked within the official police hierarchy, thereby upholding the "police system...as the authentic agent of justice."⁶⁵⁴ However, *Dragnet* perpetuated and enhanced earlier crime narratives' characterization of crime as omnipresent and inexplicable, and criminals as the binary opposites of law-abiding citizens.⁶⁵⁵ There was little room in this system for interfering wives, or, as we will see in later chapters, any other type of woman. This was especially true when those women threatened to re-inject the emotion and ambiguity that Webb and his writers had worked so hard to strip away from criminal investigations. After all, if Wylie and others were to be believed, the line between feminine empathy and communist disloyalty was thin at best. Moreover, even if wives could be trusted to respect male ideals of black and white justice, any effort to carry them out would expose them to an increasingly racialized, gritty urban underbelly and put them in an unacceptable degree of danger.

Crime sitcoms further raised the stakes of women's calls for gender equality by incorporating the dangerous – and resolutely masculine – backdrop of crime solving as the focal point for women's domestic rebellion. In so doing, they went beyond dramatizing active and often tense negotiations over women's roles within the home. In a potentially more serious and threatening move, they raised the possibility that women might have a place within the justice system, the most overt, public bastion of

⁶⁵³ Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 130–31.

⁶⁵⁴ Mittell, 137. Original emphasis.

⁶⁵⁵ Mittell, 138,146.

patriarchal control. As we will see in chapter six, this threat to male prerogatives was so acute that female detectives were typically separated from the actual locus of state power by the dual masculine buffer of boyfriend and male police officer. Female private eyes had to obtain a man's buy-in before their investigations had any real effect on the workings of law and order, thereby reaffirming men's ultimate judicial power. The threat posed by wives was simultaneously mitigated and enhanced by the fact that, while they were firmly entrenched within the patriarchal control structures of heterosexual marriage, they also rebelled against those structures. A husband might tell his wife what to do, but she did not always listen.

Finally, if crime threatened to undo law-abiding middle-class Americans' peace everywhere else, it became that much more important to keep it out of individual homes. As chapter 2 demonstrates, suburban audiences were particularly vociferous in their demands that the networks keep criminal influences out of their homes and away from their children. Crime sitcoms folded the public world of crime solving into the private, domestic worlds explored by postwar marital and family sitcoms. While this was not actually a revolution in fact, it did challenge the mounting conservative consensus that there should be an ideological – if not physical – line between suburban family life and urban criminality. 1950s private detectives were almost never married men. Police, and other members of the professional law enforcement apparatus might be married, but they were expected to leave their work at the office, just like any other 9-to-5 worker. PI's could not guarantee such a clear-cut division between their labor and leisure time, so they had to choose between working on behalf of their own family or others.

Each of the programs I examine balanced the competing needs of the crime show and sitcom differently, but the ongoing contest between the two reflected shifting ideas about marriage and the gendered nature of different types of authority in the postwar period. Series that aired in the mid-1940s and earlier 1950s allowed their wives more freedom to express their interest in crime and investigation. Whether this represented a holdover from WWII-era modes of appealing to active women, an assurance that such women would be taken as outliers, or both, these investigative wives were rarely to be found at home. They were allowed into the field, but only so long as they acknowledged that they needed their husbands' presence — if not permission — to engage in investigations. Such series presented a model of contained liberation that women might find within an ultimately patriarchal marriage. While this model acknowledged their desire to escape the bonds of domestic drudgery, it also had the potential to pathologize them to unsympathetic audiences. The wives' general unruliness, most evident in their refusal to stay home when their husbands told them to do so, was presented as alternately charming and childish. It could be read as a justifiable insistence on their right to adventure or an unjustifiable risk to themselves and their husbands, or both.

Crime Sells, and So Does Sex: The Thin Man (radio, NBC/CBS/ABC 1941-1951/TV, NBC 1957-1959)

The screwball Charleses first came to radio in 1941, in the midst of Nora's cinematic domestication. After some apparent trouble finding a sponsor, the program premiered on NBC under the aegis of Jergens, in support their Woodbury line of facial

soap.⁶⁵⁶ Early reviewers seemed to appreciate *The Thin Man*'s format, or at least its selling potential. Variety's July 1941 review predicted that sponsor Woodbury "should find the series a magnet for week-by-week attention," due to its cast's ability to mimic Loy and Powell's "crisp and diverting" repartee.⁶⁵⁷ While Nick Charles was voiced by four different actors throughout the series' run, Nora was voiced by only one: Claudia Morgan. Morgan was herself a prominent figure in radio crime series. The Broadway-trained actress came from a well-known New York theatrical family and had an active stage and screen career. On radio, she was best known for portraying Nora Charles, but she also worked on multiple soap operas and later voiced another investigative wife – Pam Abbott. Even more than in the MGM films, the series' mystery elements took second place to the central couple's flirtations with each other and members of the opposite sex. Variety's reviewer quipped that the series was "there to help sell cosmetics. What's closer akin to cosmetics than sex? This series apparently has set out to render the answer with pronounced conviction."⁶⁵⁸

By late 1942, however, Jergens had decided to align themselves with the Norths, another crime-solving couple whose female member took a more active role in solving murders.⁶⁵⁹ As one reviewer noted, this had more to do with cost than popularity: *The Thin Man* had a solid audience, but the *Mr. & Mrs. North* program package was \$1000 cheaper.⁶⁶⁰ Jergens used the cost difference to expand their station coverage on NBC's

⁶⁵⁶ Odec., "Review: Adventures of the Thin Man."

⁶⁵⁷ Odec.

⁶⁵⁸ Odec.

⁶⁵⁹ "Noted Analysis Sub For Winchell," *Broadcasting*, December 14, 1942.

⁶⁶⁰ Hobe, "Radio Reviews: Mr. & Mrs. North."

national network, and *The Thin Man* moved to CBS under the wing of General Foods. The Charleses promoted a variety of General Foods brands, including Post Toasties, Maxwell House Coffee, and Sanka coffee, through 1947.

Even after this change, sexuality remained a core part of *The Thin Man*'s radio appeal. This was especially true when it came to Nora, who promotional photographs depicted as Nick's "charming and very jealous wife."⁶⁶¹ One image of radio actress Claudia Morgan, distributed to newspapers and fan magazines ahead of the program's 1946 series, came with the suggested title of "Jealous Woman" [Figure 5].⁶⁶² This title is somewhat at odds with the full caption, which notes that "Though she is jealous of every good-looking woman encountered by her detective husband...[Nora] usually helps solve the mystery."⁶⁶³ It is also at odds with the attached image, a close-up of Morgan's face and upper torso in partial profile. The actress, clad in black and with a neckline that reveals about an inch of cleavage, directs a warm, friendly smile into the middle distance. The overall impression is one of an approachable beauty, with a hint of sex appeal. Morgan's quiet demeanor paints a stark contrast with the corresponding 1946 press photo of Les Damon, who played Nick [Figure 6].⁶⁶⁴ Where Morgan's image is essentially an undifferentiated head shot, Damon is shown posed as his "gentleman

⁶⁶¹ "'Thin Man's' Lady" (CBS Radio Photo Division, July 22, 1947), *Adventures of the Thin Man* (radio); Photo Files, Billy Rose Theatre Division; The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶⁶² "Jealous Woman" (CBS Radio Photo Division, July 30, 1946), *Adventures of the Thin Man* (radio); Photo Files, Billy Rose Theatre Division; The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶⁶³ "Jealous Woman."

⁶⁶⁴ "Gentleman Detective" (CBS Radio Photo Division, July 30, 1946), *Adventures of the Thin Man* (radio); Photo Files, Billy Rose Theatre Division; The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

detective” character, leaning suavely against a wall in a stereotypically hardboiled but neatly buttoned trench coat and fedora. This pose emphasizes his virile, nonchalant masculinity and active role in investigations, while Nora’s foregrounds her role of arm candy.

Nora did appear more assertive in her 1947 promotional photo [Figure 7], but her claim to power was centered on her sexual role rather than her investigative abilities. The full-body shot of Morgan depicts her leaning against a plain ledge, her braceleted right hand supporting her while her left rests on her hip. This pose shows off her prominent breasts, which are further enhanced by structured undergarments and a silky white blouse that emphasizes her torso in contrast to her black skirt and sleeves. Her face, tilted as though gazing at something to her right, wears an expression that mixes suspicion with a touch of humor. This caption further foregrounds her jealous nature and completely disregards the role she plays in Nick’s investigations. Instead of acknowledging her ability to find clues, CBS’s press department sums her up simply as the “‘Thin Man’s’ [charming but jealous] Lady.”⁶⁶⁵

As these promotional materials show, jealousy was a foundational characteristic for detectives’ wives. Wives’ jealousy served multiple functions within crime sitcom narratives. On a story level, wives’ jealousy provided a socially acceptable excuse for them to tag along on their husbands’ investigations. Jealousy may have reinforced negative stereotypes about women’s possessive, suspicious natures, but it also provided a convenient narrative justification for their presence outside the home. Furthermore, it

⁶⁶⁵ “‘Thin Man’s’ Lady.”

helped program producers balance the audience's interest in sex with censors' demands that women remain chaste. Investigative wives like Nora had to strike a delicate balance between appearing attractive and sexually available enough to excite audiences but demure enough to avoid criticism. This effort was complicated by the fact that they were already married. The presence of a wedding ring – and the husband that came with it – meant that investigative wives were in a position to act on their sexual impulses without social censure. This made intimations of sex simultaneously more and less permissible. Contemporary domestic comedies dealt with this problem by sublimating sex into other daily activities. Crime sitcom centered on sex as much as network censors would let them.

Wives' jealousy further reinforces the crime genre's preoccupation with illicit sex. A married man might be seen as off the market, but that conflicted with the core noir-derived assumption that detectives were virile men that women wanted to be with and men wanted to identify with, and who only escaped the threatening talons of the femme fatale du jour by virtue of their strength of character. A wife's jealousy reassured listeners that married radio detectives were still attractive and virile enough that their wives – and other women – thought them worth chasing. Wives occasionally had multiple competitors in a single episode. In 1944s "The Case of the All-American Menace," Nick convinces Nora to let him go alone to interrogate Olga, an alluringly mysterious, ethnic voice from a phone call, by teasingly speculating that he could also interrogate the other feminine suspect, a young American woman – and spank her for a second time. Nora acquiesces to Olga as the lesser of two evils, cynically quipping, "I'd

much rather you see someone you don't know quite so...intimately."⁶⁶⁶ Still, despite Nick's apparent eagerness to flirt – or engage in non-consensual sadomasochistic play – with other women, Nora's smooth, high-cultured accents do not necessarily betray a real fear that he will actually stray. When Nora is truly afraid of a criminal, or confused by a clue, Morgan's pitch rises and her tone quavers in a girlish, youthful way. When she conveys jealousy her pitch lowers and she times her wording with the exact precision of an accustomed threat or an accomplished deadpan comedian. Indeed, her jealous quips typically come across with a heavy dose of irony; it is hard to tell whether she is actually angry with her husband for flirting with other women, humoring his desire to feel desirable, or taking part in an extended joke in which they both share. Such an ambiguous characterization was certainly in the producers' interest. It gave equal room to wartime women seeking stories of empowerment to complement their expanding public roles, men who wanted to feel desired, and women who wanted to desire them.

Interestingly, and unusually among crime sitcoms, Nora also finds opportunities to engage in sexual innuendo with other men. In the same episode where Nick spans a young co-ed, the co-ed's college football star boyfriend tackles Nora to the ground – ostensibly as practice for learning how to control his own girlfriend. However, instead of taking this as a chance to even the score with her husband by flirting with another man, Nora kindly but quickly and firmly disentangles herself from the football star. As though to assure listeners that she did not really enjoy lying on the ground with a young,

⁶⁶⁶ "Case of the All American Menace Aka Blackmail Murder Case," *The Adventures of the Thin Man* (CBS, December 1, 1944).

athletic man, she laughs patronizingly and advises him to try it on his own girlfriend. Furthermore, Nick does not writhe in jealousy over his wife's flirtations. Indeed, in another 1944 episode where Nora appears to disappear with another man, Nick is (correctly) more worried about her safety than concerned that she has left him.⁶⁶⁷ This quite reasonable lack of jealousy speaks to a secure marital bond. However, it also reinforces a central truth that extended into postwar marital relations: men's infidelity was more permissible than women's. A detective might flirt with sexual danger, but even a hint of sexual impropriety was enough to ruin the most respectable married woman's reputation.

Crazy Like a Fox: Mr & Mrs North (radio, CBS & NBC 1942-1954/TV, CBS & NBC 1952-1954)

The Charleses were quickly joined on the air by another crime-solving couple: Pam and Jerry North. Unlike most other investigative couples, neither Pam nor Jerry was a professional detective. However, despite their lack of plausible excuses for involving themselves in criminal matters, crime was central to *Mr. & Mrs. North's* appeal. The program was based on a series of short marital vignettes, stories, and novels (1936-1963) by Richard and Frances Lockridge. The early vignettes, published in magazines like *The New Yorker* through the late 1930s, narrated small domestic situations like Jerry's confusion over Pam's strange hat-shopping behaviors.⁶⁶⁸ However, in 1940 *The Norths Meet Murder* began a long series of novels in which the

⁶⁶⁷ "Nora's Night Out," *The Adventures of the Thin Man* (CBS, October 6, 1944).

⁶⁶⁸ Richard Lockridge, "Mr. North Helps Shop," *The New Yorker*, October 10, 1936.

couple helped their local New York City police officers solve murders. Pam's astute observations on human, and especially criminal, nature, were usually based on observations of her cats. The characters were quickly adapted to the stage, then screen in *Mr. & Mrs. North* (1942), with William Post, Jr. playing Jerry as a quiet second fiddle to Gracie Allen's ebulliently dizzy Pam. By that time, Gracie's dizzy dame character was well established on radio, and the film's trailer billed her as "your own nitwit of the networks."⁶⁶⁹ Unlike the 1942 film adaptation, the Norths' radio series began as a relatively straightforward marital sitcom about the humorous mishaps of a young publisher and his screwball wife.⁶⁷⁰ However, as with the short stories, the radio program did not really become popular until the narratives began to incorporate mysteries.⁶⁷¹ After switching from *The Thin Man*, Jergens continued to sponsor *Mr. & Mrs. North* on NBC from 1942 to 1946.⁶⁷² In 1947, the Norths changed both network and sponsor, moving to CBS with Colgate-Palmolive. There they remained until 1954, outlasting the television adaptation's run of original episodes by at least six months.⁶⁷³

Early reviews positioned *Mr. & Mrs. North* as *The Thin Man*'s "successor" in terms of sponsor and time slot, and predicted that its "mild romantic theme" and "intrinsic entertainment quality" would make it successful despite its "workmanlike" writing and production.⁶⁷⁴ But despite this framing, *Mr. & Mrs. North* is an outlier in

⁶⁶⁹ *Mr. & Mrs. North - (Original Trailer)* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1942), <http://www.tcm.com/mediaroom/video/222369/Mr-Mrs-North-Original-Trailer-.html>.

⁶⁷⁰ "Picnic," *Mr. & Mrs. North* (New York, 1941).

⁶⁷¹ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 463.

⁶⁷² Dunning, 462.

⁶⁷³ Dunning, 462.

⁶⁷⁴ Hobe, "Radio Reviews: Mr. & Mrs. North."

the history of crime sitcoms. Because Jerry was not a professional PI, he did not dominate the couple's investigations. Instead, Pam and her screwball investigative abilities were central to the Norths' appeal. While the 1942 film is difficult to track down, available clips, advertising, and reviews imply that other characters, and especially Jerry, served as the "baffled husband" backdrop to Gracie's comic antics.⁶⁷⁵ Reviewers had mixed views of Gracie's agency. The *Showmen's Trade Review* foregrounded the passive, comic nature of her "antics," positioning her "amazing and unintentional solutions" to the murder, which cleared her husband of suspicion, as a nice side benefit to her general insanity.⁶⁷⁶ *The Hollywood Reporter's* reviewer, disagreed, complaining that the film "practically wipes out [Pam's] unique detecting abilities" in favor of laughs.⁶⁷⁷ The broadcast adaptations restored much of her agency, however. On radio and television, Pam was more likely to take the lead in examining suspicious circumstances, often pulling her resistant husband along while he bemoaned his lack of time and her violation of other people's privacy. *Variety's* reviewer noted this atypical gender balance, commenting that the series' performances were heavily influenced by the film adaptation: veteran radio performer Alice Frost captured Gracie's manic energy, but Joseph Curtain's Jerry was "a trifle less forceful" than Post had been in the movie.⁶⁷⁸

Like most amateur detectives, Pam did not seek out mysteries. Instead, they found her with rather disturbing regularity. When it comes to the investigations

⁶⁷⁵ "Advance Dope," *Showmen's Trade Review*, November 22, 1941.

⁶⁷⁶ "Advance Dope."

⁶⁷⁷ "Gracie's Funny But Book's Flavor Gone," *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 17, 1941, Mr. and Mrs. North, Production Files, Motion Picture Association of America. Production Code Administration Records, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

⁶⁷⁸ Hobe, "Radio Reviews: Mr. & Mrs. North."

themselves, Pam is not much different from any other genius detective. Again and again, she proves herself hyper-observant and capable of forming quick connections. However, because she is a woman, these observations and connections are treated as signs of feminine preoccupation with irrelevant detail, or even adorable insanity. In 1943's "Missing Sparkler," she mystifies Jerry and the audience by declaring that she is beginning the search for a missing diamond broach in their own train car because "we have to start somewhere and this is Rutherford B. Hayes, not Pocahontas."⁶⁷⁹ Her explanation is simple enough – those are the names of different cars on the train, but the names were clearly chosen to create maximum audience confusion. Later in the same episode, she inexplicably asks Jerry to find her a cat. Again, her reasoning turns out to be sound: she has realized that the diamond thieves attached the broach to their dog's collar, and she hopes to corner the dog by giving it a cat to chase. Still, while Jerry does not usually dismiss these mysterious inspirations in the same way that he would on the television show, his befuddled responses demand explanation, with the implication that she may not be able to provide one. This is a far cry from the response that a detective like Sherlock Holmes generally got from his admiring companion, John Watson – especially in their contemporary radio program: where Watson takes it for granted that he is simply too slow to guess the truth that Holmes sees, Jerry is more likely to assume Pam is caught up in a flight of unrelated fancy.

While the radio version of Jerry is more interested in investigating than his television counterpart, Pam is generally more motivated to throw herself into mysteries

⁶⁷⁹ "Missing Sparkler," *Mr. & Mrs. North* (New York, 1943).

to serve the public good. Jerry typically waits to be asked to take part in a case. Pam mostly draws upon the same excuse that previous generations of domesticated women used to justify their own forays into the public world: it was simply her duty to help anyone in need. Still, any civic-minded good intentions quickly give way to her obvious fascination with solving a case. Building on Gracie's example, Frost voiced Pam as a woman who innocently walked a fine line between being daring and demure. She got away with it by not appearing to recognize the difference. Frost's performance embraced a guileless sincerity that can be read as either childlike naïveté or quiet, steady confidence in her own abilities. Either way, her actions are earnest, heartfelt, and – even if not always strictly honest – aimed at getting to the truth. Frost signaled Pam's sincerity on the vocal level by indulging in moments of vocal excess, where she appears to be unable to control her emotional reactions. These moments are usually minor. Pam might give way to an occasional fear by babbling in a high-pitched, breathy tone. Or she might go on an extended flight of fancy about a case, or simply some household project she envisions, when alone with Jerry. In rare instances, she fully loses control of her faculties. In one 1947 episode (alternately titled in fan episode guides as “Call Me Choo Choo,” “Clarinet in the Country,” “Murder in A-Flat,” or “Jam Session”), Frost does indulge in the full range of supposedly stereotypical feminine hysterics. In an emotional performance, she spurts out a flood of uncontrollable terror, complete with frequent shallow breaths and high-pitched wails.⁶⁸⁰ However, we quickly learn that this is her

⁶⁸⁰ Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 22.

reaction to a nightmare. Later in the episode, she does almost lose control in front of a threatening criminal, but she does so in a quieter way. Instead of shrieking her terror, she descends into frightened babbles that almost give away her and her husband's identities before Jerry stops her.

In cases like these, Jerry is usually the one who brings Pam back to rationality and action through his more controlled, less emotional, even brusque tones. In "Call Me Choo Choo," he stops Pam from giving them away with an abrupt and sharp "Pam!"⁶⁸¹ This sharp, demanding interjection has the effect of destabilizing her seemingly ceaseless flow of words. For a moment, she teeters on a raspy "uh...uh..." that threatens to end in her own silence. This only lasts for a moment, however. After a brief pause, in which she has the time to collect her thoughts, Pam picks up the thread again. The next words to come out of her mouth come masked in a very different tone. Gone is her genuine, breathy flow. In its place, we hear a tightly controlled vocal mask – one that aims for the harder registers of a practiced femme fatale. Using this character, which she names Choo Choo, Pam infiltrates the criminal's jam session and unmasks a killer before he kills again. Jerry very clearly disapproves of Pam's methods. However, while his tight, masculine-coded rationality cannot stem the uncontrollable tide of Pam's excess, he can at least direct it into more useful channels. After all, it would be dangerous for an investigator to betray too much emotional truth to dangerous suspects. And without Jerry's occasional intercessions, Pam would do just that. In effect, his very

⁶⁸¹ "Call Me Choo Choo (Aka Clarinet Country, Murder in A-Flat, Jam Session)," *Mr. & Mrs. North* (New York, December 9, 1947).

presence acts as a masculine check on her feminine public presence. She can only function in public because he enables her.

Pam's ability to force her way into the public world of investigation – to have her own share of the fun – may also be the reason she suffered least from the obsessive jealousy afflicting her cohort. Even in situations that might drive Nora and others into a fit of envious rage, Pam responds with humor. When she learns that Jerry is secretly judging a beauty pageant in one early television episode, Pam goes to the pageant venue, but not to keep an eye on her husband.⁶⁸² Rather, she wants to satisfy her curiosity about the front-runner, who happens to be her Doppelgänger. In short order, Pam ends up taking the (murdered) contestant's place and wins the pageant. Accordingly, promotional materials were more likely to position Pam as an active investigator. One 1943 NBC press photo caption characterized the Norths' cases as "suave mysteries well-known in book, stage and screen form," starring a "publisher of detective yarns, while [his] pretty wife [who] nearly always outwits him and [the] police force in [unravelling]" crimes.⁶⁸³ The photo itself shows Joseph Curtain as Jerry and Alice Frost as Pam reading their scripts in front of an NBC-branded microphone. Curtain scans his lines thoughtfully, while Frost appears to be mid-statement, her eyebrows raised, nostrils flared, and upper lip raised slightly in an expression that implies wariness or disgust [see Figure 8]. Later 1940s and early 1950s CBS press photos promoted Alice Frost's role as

⁶⁸² Ralph Murphy, "Beauty Prize," *Mr. & Mrs. North*, January 23, 1953.

⁶⁸³ "It Takes a Feminine Twist of Mind!" (NBC Radio Photo Division, January 4, 1943), Curtain, Joseph; Photo Files, Billy Rose Theatre Division; The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Pam North, an “intuitive amateur detective” and “the ‘Mrs.’ half of the mirth-and-mystery team.”⁶⁸⁴

Speaking from Within the Patriarchy: Adventures of the Abbotts (radio, MBS 1945-1947, NBC 1955)

Just one month after V-E Day, and two before V-J Day finally ended WWII, the Charleses and Norths were joined by the Abbotts, another couple comprising a professional private detective, Pat Abbott, and his wife, Jean. The Abbotts were the brainchild of Frances Crane, who published 26 novels featuring the couple between 1941 and 1965. *Adventures of the Abbotts*, also known as *The Abbott Mysteries*, began life as a summer replacement for *Quick as a Flash* (1944-1954), a quiz show featuring a segment with famous radio detectives as guest hosts.⁶⁸⁵ Over the next three summers, Helbros Watches sponsored the series, in which Jean narrated the couple’s exploits with an often witty, occasionally catty mix of fascination, cynicism, and feminine rebellion. Like Nora and Pam before her, Jean was clearly interested in participating in her husband’s investigations. However, her husband went to greater, and more strident, lengths to restrain her interference – and her movements in general.⁶⁸⁶ This may be because the few surviving recorded episodes of *The Adventures of the Abbotts* come from the series’ final NBC run, in 1955. By then, television sitcom housewives were undergoing their conservative turn. The Ricardos had yet to move to the suburbs, but

⁶⁸⁴ “Mrs. North” (CBS Radio Photo Division, March 11, 1952), Frost, Alice; Photo Files, Billy Rose Theatre Division; The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; “Mrs. North” (CBS Radio Photo Division, July 1, 1947), Frost, Alice; Photo Files, Billy Rose Theatre Division; The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶⁸⁵ Dunning, *On the Air*, 558.

⁶⁸⁶ “The Rickshaw Red Lipstick,” *The Adventures of the Abbotts* (NBC, January 9, 1955).

they would by 1957. *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) premiered the year before, and despite the Anderson's early trouble finding a consistent network home, their suburban domestic setting is emblematic of the types of programs that dominated late 1950s television. Radio networks had incentives to foster different types of programs, however. By 1955, the networks were fighting for their lives and advertising dollars. Women were their most loyal audience contingent, and crime series like *Mr. & Mrs. North* remained among the most popular radio programming.⁶⁸⁷ As I argue in later chapters, these industrial circumstances did make room for some more independent representations of female investigators. However, the networks still had an economic and cultural investment in depicting women in domestic terms.

Like Nora Charles in her later films, Jean responded to her increasing constraints with a mix of aggressive self-assertion and defensive petulance. The recordings were preserved to be broadcast to soldiers stationed abroad over the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service (AFRTS), which removed broadcast artifacts like advertisements and station identifications before transmitting programming to troops stationed overseas. All feature Claudia Morgan as Jean. Morgan took on the role for the 1955 series, and we have no way of knowing how it was voiced by Julie Stevens, who originated the role in 1945, or Alice Reinhardt, who took over in 1947. It was not unusual for radio series,

⁶⁸⁷ "Research and Planning Bulletin #60 - 1952-53 NBC Tandem Audience," July 22, 1953, Folder 84; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; Bernard Schubert, "Letter from Bernard Schubert to Gene Wang," December 26, 1951, Box 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming; "Research and Planning Bulletin #68 - Radio Turnover," December 1, 1953, Folder 84; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

and especially summer replacement programs, to cycle through different actors, depending on creative concerns, talent schedules, and program budgets.

Despite the generic attitude implied by the program's willingness to change actors, Morgan brought a distinct flavor to each of her wifely duties. While Nora Charles's voice expressed a relaxed cheerfulness that was slightly breathy without sounding girlish, Morgan voiced Jean Abbott as a deep-voiced, sultry woman with a cynical, cutting edge. Neither woman was easily shocked, but they responded differently. Nora took most criminal revelations in stride, treating most things that fell short of finding a body as part of an extended game. Jean tended to emphasize the serious nature of the work. Reflecting radio noir's post-1950 shift away from lone wolf detectives and toward law and order procedurals, the surviving 1955 episodes of *Adventures of the Abbotts* emphasize crime's serious moral and social impact and reserve their comedy for Jean and Pat's marital spats.⁶⁸⁸

The Abbott's gendered battles for control over their marriage extended to episode form. Notably, Jean Abbott and her copycat, Gail Collins, were among the only women to consistently narrate their own radio series in the postwar period. The privilege of narration was usually reserved for male PIs – of the female PIs I analyze in chapter 6, only Candy Matson narrated her own cases. Other narrating women included Ilona Massey's baroness turned spy Karen Gaza, of *Top Secret* (1950).⁶⁸⁹ Amy Lawrence (1991) reminds us that there were few examples of female voices,

⁶⁸⁸ Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 186.

⁶⁸⁹ Dunning, *On the Air*, 679.

authoritative or otherwise, in classical Hollywood film and other media.⁶⁹⁰ Pam North and Nora Charles lacked this direct line to their listeners. Partly because of this lack of narrative power, they constantly found themselves struggling to justify their investigative hunches and actions to suspicious husbands. This was especially difficult for Pam, who had to defend both her investigative prowess and her right to be involved in crime at all, considering that her husband's publishing job did not provide her with a plausible cover.

Generally, women's aural underrepresentation was explained by one or more of three reasons: women's voices were either "naturally" weaker than men's, their higher pitches were seen as incompatible with sound production and transmission equipment, or women's supposedly "shrill" tones were simply distasteful to the culture at large.⁶⁹¹ Others feared that a woman's disembodied voice might have the power to seduce unsuspecting men; one *Billboard* news item from 1952 blamed a "Fem DJ" for luring "some 300 [male] spectators (many in night shirts)" to the scene of a 3-am car accident.⁶⁹² Ignoring the fascination the accident itself might have caused – police were forced to use a blowtorch to extract the driver after his car collided with a streetcar – the magazine implied that late night female DJs were dangerous, warning that "the power of a feminine voice to lure exceeds the power of music to soothe."⁶⁹³

⁶⁹⁰ Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 182.

⁶⁹¹ Lawrence, 29–31.

⁶⁹² Jennifer Fleegeer, *Mismatched Women: The Siren's Song Through the Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9; "Fem DJ Lures Men From Bed," *The Billboard*, February 23, 1952.

⁶⁹³ "Fem DJ Lures Men From Bed."

This is not to say that sexualized, or otherwise powerful women had no place on postwar radio. Prominent female hosts like the anonymous syndicated *Lonesome Gal* (1947-mid-1950s) found large audiences by addressing late night through an overtly sexualized, first-person dialogue that positioned male listeners as the absent lover she longed to see.⁶⁹⁴ However, even this subservient sexuality was rendered suspect when it came from a disembodied voice with no physical referent. Before *Lonesome Gal* Jean King finally revealed her identity in 1953, local radio stations often advertised the program with cheesecake images of other beautiful and sexualized women, giving a reassuring sense that it would be possible to master the physical woman. As the 1950s progressed, King's sexy persona shifted to a less sexualized, more maternal concern with male and female listener needs.⁶⁹⁵ On the other end of the spectrum, prominent political women like Eleanor Roosevelt and the future Queen Elizabeth forged popular, if contested, radio personae by mixing discussions of public and private concerns within privatized settings and through feminine gender codes. Roosevelt's radio appearances employed similar techniques to those used by her husband, who garnered critical praise for blurring the boundaries between public politics and private homes through his intimate Fireside Chats. While the same male critics objected to Eleanor Roosevelt's intimate address and criticized her patrician accent and higher pitch, she built up a larger popular following than FDR, and continued to appear on radio after the war.⁶⁹⁶ In

⁶⁹⁴ Mary Desjardins and Mark Williams, "'Are You Lonesome Tonight?': Gendered Address in The Lonesome Gal and The Continental," in *Communities of the Air: Radio Century, Radio Culture*, ed. Susan Merrill Squier (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 252.

⁶⁹⁵ Desjardins and Williams, 260.

⁶⁹⁶ Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting And Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 27.

England, the Princess Elizabeth began cultivating a reassuring, maternal tone through wartime and postwar radio speeches that appealed to the British nation as a family working together toward common goals.⁶⁹⁷

Still, successful as these women were, their personae continued to be defined through acceptably feminine metaphors that emphasized familial connections and empathy. Crime was altogether different. As we will see in this and later chapters, when women did speak in radio and television crime series, they often did so indirectly and/or incompletely. Britta Sjogren (2006) uses the concept of the female “voice-off” to gain a deeper understanding of how wartime and post-WWII female film audiences received “the female subject who speaks (and listens) from within patriarchy.”⁶⁹⁸

Women might not have access to the male-dominated, omnipotent voice-over, but they could gain access to the narrative reins through smaller instances of narration, including letters and diary entries that audiences might hear read from off-screen in women’s films like *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949) and thrillers like *Rebecca* (1940). These voice-offs tended to express feminine subjectivity as distinct from men’s. Instead of asserting ostensibly hard facts and a linear progression of time, women’s voice-offs highlight emotional reality by representing contradiction and difference, a circular narrative progression that emphasizes repetitive patterns and emotional truth, and a concerted – if ultimately unsuccessful – effort to take control of male-dominated discourse.⁶⁹⁹ This

⁶⁹⁷ Adrienne Munich, “In the Radio Way: Elizabeth II, the Female Voice-Over, and the Radio’s Imperial Effects,” in *Communities of the Air: Radio Century, Radio Culture*, ed. Susan Merrill Squier (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 224.

⁶⁹⁸ Britta H. Sjogren, *Into the Vortex: Female Voice and Paradox in Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 4.

⁶⁹⁹ Sjogren, 14–16.

emphasis on conflicting points of view further hailed audience members as active participants in the act of making meaning.

The voice-off provides a valuable point of reference when comparing Jean Abbott's voice-overs to similar ones presented by male PIs. Jean's narration was constrained by the terms of her genre – she had to be clear, concise, and direct in order to keep listeners engaged and avoid confusion – but she also interjected more emotion and personality than most contemporary men did. For her, the case was secondary to her relationship with her husband, Pat. Jean began each episode with an abrupt “After all” that punctured the radio silence with a definitive assertion of her presence. Her subsequent statements cryptically set the scene for the case to follow and justified her involvement in her husband's investigation. Many of these justifications involved some appeal to jealousy. She often evoked the specter of the lascivious femme fatale who might tempt her husband away from her – and justice – with her sexual wiles through statements like “After all, if your husband is chasing a murderer, it doesn't look very nice for him to have his face smeared with lipstick, now does it? Especially if it's another woman's lipstick.”⁷⁰⁰ Other introductions objected to murders interrupting the couple's romantic time together. Another case began with the question “After all, if you haven't seen your husband in weeks and he takes you to your favorite bar to drink champagne, you certainly don't want anyone joining the party, especially if they've...just been murdered.”⁷⁰¹ Only after Jean has finished this teaser did the

⁷⁰⁰ “The Rickshaw Red Lipstick.”

⁷⁰¹ “The Blood Red Diamond,” *The Adventures of the Abbotts* (NBC, March 6, 1955).

introductory music swell and the male announcer come in to introduce *The Adventures of the Abbotts*.

Jean's position as narrator ensured that she had a role in every episode of *The Adventures of the Abbotts*, even when she remained off mic for most of the episode. Jean also narrates the novels on which the program was based, but it is significant that the series producers chose to retain her in that powerful role. As narrator, Jean was able to share her most intimate hopes, fears, and ambitions with her listeners. And despite her introductory statements' efforts to frame her interference as jealousy, Jean evinced a decided wish that her husband would "[realize] at last that I was a VERY valuable assistant" and include her in investigations.⁷⁰² Jean frequently displays the skills required to be a successful detective. She is smart, inquisitive, and suitably skeptical. In a departure from the softer tones with which she portrayed Nora Charles's softer side in non-jealous conversations, actress Claudia Morgan gave Jean's voice a perpetually cynical edge. Indeed, she could easily pass for a femme fatale and seduce secrets out of men if she so chose. Moreover, Jean's jealousy is often indistinguishable from her vocal annoyance at being excluded from an investigation, further reinforcing the idea that both feelings are rooted in her desire to investigate. In 1955's "The Royal Purple Scooter," she is equally angry with Pat when he goes to interrogate an attractive woman on his own and when he later spends time playing games with a group of boys without telling her why.⁷⁰³ When Pat does appear to let her in on an investigation, she greets the chance

⁷⁰² "The Royal Purple Scooter," *The Adventures of the Abbotts* (NBC, January 23, 1955).

⁷⁰³ "The Royal Purple Scooter."

with a joyful giggle. Later, she discusses their ostensible progress on the case with a businesslike pride.

But despite Jean's authority over how the narrative was told, Pat retained control over the action that constituted the plot. He also had more success thwarting Jean's investigative efforts than either Nick Charles or Jerry North with Nora or Pam. Pat even occasionally cut in to correct Jean's narrative. In "The Royal Purple Scooter," he disrupts Jean's glee over being asked to track down leads with a hearty chuckle of his own. In one of his few direct addresses to the audience, Pat tells listeners that, while he rarely "barge[s] in on Jean's storytelling," "just between you and me," he has given Jean busywork to keep her out of the way while he interviews an attractive widow.⁷⁰⁴ Pat's narrative control assured listeners that Jean was not, in fact, a dangerously independent femme fatale. In the few cases where Jean does investigate suspects, the narrative makes it clear that she is acting under her husband's direction. She never stoops so far as to attempt to seduce another man, even as an interrogation tactic. A program might go so far as to imply that Pat Abbott kissed a blonde in Vegas, but Jean's virtue was held to a higher standard – the only acceptable dalliances with other men were those that happened before she met her husband.⁷⁰⁵ Men's patriarchal prerogative to explore their options and flirt with other women was thereby preserved.

Still, Pat's efforts to control Jean often failed at the level of speech. While he dominates the technical explanations of criminal methods and motives, Jean often

⁷⁰⁴ "The Royal Purple Scooter."

⁷⁰⁵ "The Yellow Chip," *The Adventures of the Abbotts* (NBC, January 16, 1955); "The Rickshaw Red Lipstick."

intercedes to deliver crucial information in a more emotive, dramatic register. She is the first to introduce the idea of murder in “The Royal Purple Scooter”: Pat hints at it, but Jean is the one to break into his conversation with the client. Her breathy “oh” signals her emerging realization of the truth, which she delivers in a tone that hardens into conviction: “Oh, I see Pat. Rick MacDonald was murdered!”⁷⁰⁶ This emotional outbreak is heightened by a sharp musical sting that signals to audience members that it is time to get excited about the crime. Jean’s emotional, sensual response contrasts with Pat’s calm authority. It gives listeners cues as to how they should react to the narrative without implicating the detective in their weakness. Pat’s lack of emotion is also subtly presented as the reason he is the detective: in most cases both he and Jean notice the same clues. However, where Pat is able to evaluate them with a dispassionate eye, Jean is more likely to be muddled by fear or excitement. Still, Pat appears to enjoy withholding information in order to prompt Jean’s emotional responses. Sometimes, these exchanges imitate a romantic seduction. Later in the same episode, Jean begs Pat to tell her more about what he’s learned with breathy “yes”es that sound more like she is waiting for a kiss or declaration of love than a set of cold, hard facts about a murder.⁷⁰⁷

It’s a Crime, Mr Collins (radio, MBS 1956-1957)

By the time *It’s a Crime, Mr. Collins* premiered in August of 1956, it was clear that radio was losing its primetime audiences to television. This was especially problematic for the Mutual Broadcasting System, which did not have a television

⁷⁰⁶ “The Royal Purple Scooter.”

⁷⁰⁷ “The Royal Purple Scooter.”

branch. When NBC Radio began broadcasting a version of *Adventures of the Abbotts* in 1955, Mutual responded with a thinly veiled knock-off. Like Jean Abbott, Gail Collins narrated the exploits of her PI husband, Greg. However, while *It's a Crime, Mr. Collins* replicated most aspects of *Adventures of the Abbotts*, its slight variations are interesting and informative. Instead of directly addressing the audience as Jean had done, Gail Collins, vocalized by an actress of the same name, began each episode in conversation with the program's male announcer. This subtle shift reframes Gail's narration as more of a friendly chat or feminine gossip.

Within the series, wives and husbands staked out distinctly gendered detecting positions: wives invoked feminine authority through emotional appeals to compassion and investigative happenstance like intuition and accidental discoveries. Husbands had hunches. While the two sources of knowledge were ultimately the same, men – and particularly men in authority – treated husbands' hunches as though they were reasonable, well-thought-out hypotheses. Women's intuitions, on the other hand, were dismissed as flights of fancy. Men frequently dismissed their wives' investigative skills as irrelevant, untrained, or even annoying. Likewise, men's detecting styles were not that disparate from their wives', but men were nevertheless treated as more methodical and logical, and therefore more deserving of their direct access to the patriarchal hierarchies of official legal authority. A wife might spot the guilty party, but only the husband could pronounce final judgment. This was true even in *Mr. & Mrs. North*, where Jerry lacked the official credential of a PI license.

Depending on who was listening at home, this disparity between female and

male knowledge might have been received as either reinforcing men's intellectual superiority, or critiquing of men's hypocritical stand toward women's understanding of the world. Fewer than 15 episodes of *It's a Crime, Mr. Collins* survive to the present day, but in at least one, Gail solves most of the case on her own – not that Greg is happy to admit it. “The Brown Alligator Briefcase” begins with Greg Collins grumbling dismissively when Gail insists on interjecting her feminine intuition into a case “again.”⁷⁰⁸ Gail stands by her convictions, however. While she is normally her husband's strongest cheerleader, she grows angry when he refuses to display the same faith in her abilities. Indeed, she takes his rejection of her womanly intuition as a rejection of the postwar marital ideal, wherein men and women would stick to their own spheres, but be accepted as the ultimate authority within that sphere. When Greg threatens to give the police incriminating evidence against the man she is certain is innocent, she is aghast. Her tones register incredulous disbelief as she accuses him of being “cold,” unfeeling, and discounting her abilities.⁷⁰⁹

As in other series, the actress playing Gail emphasized her character's emotional femininity through a higher vocal pitch and frequent descents into breathy panic, anger, or affection. These softer tones contrast with Greg's more even, steady, and occasionally hard masculine pronouncements. Still, he is not immune to persuasion. Like Jean, Gail has to force her way into her husband's investigations. She has more success with bribery than threats, however. She typically uses seduction to convince

⁷⁰⁸ “The Brown Alligator Briefcase,” *It's a Crime, Mr. Collins* (MBS, 1956).

⁷⁰⁹ “The Brown Alligator Briefcase.”

him to take her part.

Retreat to the Home: Investigative Wives' Disappearance from Television

In the early 1940s, reviewers attributed the apparent increase in popularity of radio programs like *The Thin Man* and *Mr. & Mrs. North* to listeners' mixed desire for escapism and wartime thrills. Writing for broadcast trade magazine *The Billboard* in 1943, Marion Radcliff classed both under the header of "the nerve-racking nineteen," a group of crime thrillers that predominantly sold soaps, food, and pharmaceuticals.⁷¹⁰ Such programs were so popular, Radcliff noted, that at least three of the major networks — NBC Blue, CBS, and Mutual — had added sustaining crime series in the hopes of attracting more listeners and new sponsors. By 1945, Keven Crossen, founder of Mystery Writers of America, Inc. estimated that "four and one-half mystery and detective stories are broadcast to the American radio audience" daily, or, to put it another way, there were "1612 [broadcast] murders committed annually."⁷¹¹ As I have already noted, crime and mystery series also retained their audiences longer than other types of programming through the rocky transition from radio to television. Prestige thrillers like CBS's *Suspense* (1940-1962), which drew heavily upon listeners' imaginations, retained radio audiences past the 1950s. At the same time, television producers struggled with shaping visual depictions of crime that would not offend censors and violence-averse viewers.

Increasing popularity did not necessarily translate into social acceptance,

⁷¹⁰ Marion Radcliff, "Walk Into My Parlor," *The Billboard*, February 20, 1943.

⁷¹¹ Kevin Crossen, "There's Murder in the Air," in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. Howard Haycraft (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1946), 304, 305.

however. This was especially true because the programs were directed at a predominantly feminine wartime audience. While Radcliff's overview of current programming trends did not mention that most of the "grownups" shrieking and shivering along with juvenile crime fans were women, she did evince discomfort with the series' impact. She noted with some disbelief that "some students of the subject [claim] that listeners 'enjoy' trembling, sweating and fainting as a result of the weird things they hear on the air" because of the "wonderful feeling of relief" they experience on "finding themselves safely sheltered in a warm, dry living room" at the end.⁷¹² Moreover, she was quick to assert that actors were reportedly "affected by their own macabre characterizations to the extent of losing weight, voices and nerve."⁷¹³ These unsubstantiated claims were augmented by a sidebar that purported to emphasize crime series' relatively high production costs, without actually comparing them to other primetime series. As J. Fred MacDonald (1979) points out, crime series were actually among sponsors' most cost-effective program options; one 1950 *Variety* estimate projected that a high profile variety show like Jack Benny's or Bing Crosby's might cost approximately \$40,000 per week, while most detective dramas ranged between \$4,000 and \$7,000.⁷¹⁴

The postwar crime sitcoms I have analyzed thus far were very much a part of the radio crimewave that Radcliff decried. Both the Abbotts and the Charleses fit well into

⁷¹² Radcliff, "Walk Into My Parlor."

⁷¹³ Radcliff.

⁷¹⁴ J. Fred MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial!: Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), 155.

the lone wolf detective cycle that peaked on American radio in the late 1940s.⁷¹⁵ Pat Abbott and Nick Charles might be married men, but they were also assertively independent investigators who would rather compete than collaborate with police officers. NBC's 1955 revival of *The Adventures of the Abbotts* debuted in a narrower field of investigators. By the mid-1950s, many lone wolf detective programs had been pushed off the air. *The Thin Man* and *The Adventures of Sam Spade* were directly tainted by their association with creator Dashiell Hammett, who appeared in Red Channels in 1951. Network censors pressured other programs about independent, rebellious PIs to emphasize investigators' ultimate respect for official law enforcement bodies.⁷¹⁶ Still, charismatic PIs like Johnny Dollar, of *Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar* (1949-1962), were among radio's longest lasting sleuths, and NBC may have seen a space for a new married couple after *Mr. & Mrs. North* left the air at the end of 1954. Producer Bernard Schubert had certainly been working to get the program back on radio, and expanded to television, since at least 1951. Correspondence between Schubert and prolific radio crime writer Gene Wang indicate Schubert was developing a pilot of the program for NBC in the fall of 1951. I have found no evidence that the pilot was actually filmed, but Schubert planned to cast Barbara Bel Geddes as Jean and Barry Nelson as Pat; Schubert had approved of Wang's suggestion for Dinah Shore and George Montgomery instead, but neither was available at the time.⁷¹⁷

⁷¹⁵ Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 186.

⁷¹⁶ "NBC Program Policies and Working Manual" (National Broadcasting Company, 1944); Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 186.

⁷¹⁷ Bernard Schubert, "Letter from Bernard Schubert to Gene Wang," November 9, 1951, Box 12; Gene Wang Papers, 1943-1956; Collection Number 11193, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

By the late 1950s, however, an increasing number of white middle-class women — both single and married — were working outside the home [See Figure 4]. This reality made investigative wives even more threatening to cultural critics and the networks' commercial interests; instead of serving as an enjoyable fantasy outlet for women at home, crime sitcoms publicly acknowledged the threatening reality that many women were not content with their supposedly natural domestic duties. We can see the networks' discomfort with the idea that their programs might validate women's domestic dissatisfaction emerging in the heightened spousal conflicts in later episodes of *Adventures of the Abbotts* and *It's a Crime, Mr. Collins*. It also manifested in the television adaptations of *Mr. & Mrs. North* and *The Thin Man*. Over the course of two brief seasons between 1952 and 1954, the Norths went from a more-or-less equal investigative pair to an increasingly patriarchal married couple. By 1957, when *The Thin Man* had shed enough of its communist associations to make it to television, Nora Charles was at war not just with her husband, but also with her genre. Throughout the series' television run, Nora fought to steer her husband — and with him, their lives and series — away from crime and into domestic sitcom.

Pam North maintained her assertive approach to investigation through her first season on television (1952-1953). This is unsurprising, considering that Colgate made few changes when it expanded the program from CBS radio to CBS television. Alice Frost and Joseph Curtain were replaced (on both radio and television) by Barbara Britton and Richard Denning, a younger, more glamorous pair who went on to have successful television careers. Britton was particularly popular on television because of

her ability to convey the approachable, intimate, emphatically “genuine” type of glamour to which television viewers – and especially advertisers – responded throughout the 1950s.⁷¹⁸ Britton maintained – and even expanded – Pam’s rebellious characterization by incorporating knowingly impish grins and assertive body movements that drew viewers’ eyes to her and encouraged audience sympathy. In one memorable example in a season one episode titled “The House Behind the Wall,” she fakes a sudden headache to force a reluctant Jerry to help her investigate a strange house with an apparent captive on its top floor. Pam is careful not to let Jerry know that she is manipulating him until they are securely ensconced within the house, but viewers see the victorious smirk Pam flashes directly at the camera as Jerry gives in to her melodramatically feminine weakness.⁷¹⁹

Still, Pam’s struggle to justify her interest in and defend her ability to detect crime increased precipitously with her transition to television. While Jerry often acted as Pam’s co-conspirator on radio, he actively resisted her television efforts to intercede in suspicious circumstances. Or as he saw it, interfere. This led Pam to resort to extraordinary measures to provide what she saw as vital assistance. In “The House Behind the Wall,” Pam must trick Jerry into helping a woman who has scrawled the word “murder” across her bedroom window in a clear cry for help. Jerry initially refuses, despite the woman’s husband’s suspicious behavior. Instead of recognizing

⁷¹⁸ Christine Becker, *It’s the Pictures That Got Small: Hollywood Film Stars on 1950s Television* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 7; Marsha F. Cassidy, *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 23.

⁷¹⁹ Ralph Murphy, “House Behind the Wall,” *Mr. & Mrs. North* (CBS, January 16, 1953), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0651798/>.

Pam's argument that it is their human duty to help others, Jerry asserts the strange man's authority over his own home, arguing that they should ignore the woman's cry for help and take the man at his word when he tells them that his wife is ill. Jerry is still a gentle patriarch, taking Pam's deception with at least apparent good humor when he learns of it, but he recognizes other men's patriarchal right to exert absolute control in their own homes, no matter the consequences.

Moreover, even though Pam is generally proven right, she constantly has to reassert her own authority. Indeed, a major source of the television series' humor is the way Jerry and their friend, Police Captain Bill Weigand, treat Pam's interjections – which regular viewers would have understood to be important based on their past experiences with the characters – as annoyances to be dismissed while the men are working. In a representative scene from “Till Death Do Us Part,” Jerry repeatedly silences Pam as she tries to share a crucial clue that identifies the murderer as the man Jerry and Bill are currently questioning. When he cannot convince her to be quiet, Jerry resorts to pulling her bodily into the background [Figure 9]. Even when they realize she has solved the case, the men treat her like a talented child – a prodigy or lucky guesser rather than an experienced criminologist. But she puts up with it. She has to. After all, she relies on them for her access to the world of crime, which helps to stave off her boredom with household pursuits. She gets to leave the domestic sphere, but only with Jerry's permission, and almost always with him as chaperone. She seems to have accepted this bargain, which allows her to experience the romantic love and companionship so frequently denied to female detectives. It is not a perfect bargain, and

it appears to rankle her, but this is as close as she can get to having it all. Of course, this would only have made her more relatable to similarly ambitious women watching at home.

Crime sitcoms' interest in fungible gender roles – or at least broadcasters' willingness to recognize them – had decreased by the mid-1950s, just as radio series were transitioning to television. Pam North and Nora Charles were the only crime sitcom wives to make the jump to television, and they underwent a transformation similar to the one Haralovich notes in other sitcom wives. While Pam rebelled against Jerry's efforts to confine her to the home in 1952, Nora had fully embraced domesticity by 1957. Indeed, Nora's ultimate goal in the televised *Thin Man* appears to be convincing Nick to retire from detecting so that he can join her in their well-appointed New York apartment. This desire does hint at disaffection with her domestic role: Nora accepts that her place is in the home, but she refuses to accept the isolation that so many suburban housewives endured. Nick's insistence on retaining his profession also signals a growing discomfort with any sign of male effeminacy. Where radio episodes of *The Thin Man* had jokingly referred to Nick as "Mr. Nora Charles," television episodes insist on centering Nick as the ultimate marital authority both in and outside the home.

Why Have a Wife When She's Not Allowed to Investigate Anything? McMillan and Wife (NBC TV, 1971-1977)

Nora may have lost her own battle to keep her husband home, but her sentiments (temporarily) won the war. Investigative wives were notably absent from the alternately gritty and sexy crime dramas that dominated 1960s television. The character type made

a limited comeback in 1970s dramas like *McMillan and Wife* (TV, NBC 1971-1976), but production correspondence – and episodes of the program – indicate that writers, producers, and the network had trouble defining a coherent role for an active wife within what was otherwise a fairly straightforward police drama. Producer Paul Mason recalls that they intended Sally to act as a “spunky” “pal, wife, [and] clue solver,” but much of the comic relief fell to the pair’s maid, Mildred because Susan Saint James, who played Sally McMillan, could not “play tight.”⁷²⁰ Despite the series’ initial comic frame, writer Sy Salkowitz later recalled that the network and producers gradually pushed the series in a more serious direction after industry members accused it of having “a bad case of the ‘cutes.’”⁷²¹ One reason for this may have been the actors’ comparative ages. Producers initially offered the role to Doris Day, but she turned it down. Their eventual choice, Saint James, was an able actress, but she was also several decades younger than Hudson. This did have the intended effect of making the aging matinee idol appear younger himself, but it also threw off the balance of power between the married pair. Whether she was displaying spunk or fear – both of which continued to be required of her as a wife – Sally inevitably came across as more childish in comparison to her older husband.

Stuart “Mac” McMillan’s authority was further cemented by the fact that he was a police commissioner, with all of the weight of that official authority behind him.

Unlike earlier investigative wives, Sally really had no plausible excuse for following

⁷²⁰ Paul Mason, Personal Communication between Catherine Martin and Paul Mason, email, March 21, 2016.

⁷²¹ Sy Salkowitz, “Retrospective on ‘I Hate a Parade,’” May 26, 1972, Box 28, Folder 1; Sy Salkowitz Papers, 1956-1982, Wisconsin Historical Society.

along with her husband's investigations. Moreover, the crimes Mac was charged with solving were usually more complicated, gritty, and/or serious than those that earlier program producers had deemed appropriate for wives to explore. This echoed a shift in later television episodes of *Mr. & Mrs. North*, which tasked Jerry with dealing more serious crimes like atomic sabotage or a prison break.⁷²² In both cases, Pam retreated in fear and confusion as Jerry took charge of investigating the underlying crime and dealing with its social consequences. The less humorous the crime, and the more sweeping its social import, the less a wife had to do with finding the solution. Even in the 1970s, program producers still appear to have thought that women could not be trusted to objectively solve a crime and pass judgment on their fellow citizens. Programs like *McMillan and Wife*, as well as contemporary shows revolving around female crime-fighters, no longer worried that women were communist agents who might subvert American justice and democracy. Still, they continued to depict women as empathetic and emotional beings who required male supervision and direction.

Conclusion

The crime sitcom's decline also coincides with a broader contraction in topics considered acceptable for broadcast comedy. In some cases, this change was for the better. Through the 1950s, television sitcoms like *The Goldbergs* (1949-1955), *I Love Lucy*, and *Amos 'n' Andy* (1951-1953) shed much of the vaudevillian and minstrel show-derived ethnic and racial dialect comedy that had brought laughs on the aural medium of

⁷²² Ralph Murphy, "Breakout," *Mr. & Mrs. North* (New York: CBS, April 17, 1953), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0651792/>; George Blair, "Reunion," *Mr. & Mrs. North* (New York: NBC, February 9, 1954), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0651805/>.

radio.⁷²³ Shows that could not obscure their racist influences, like *Amos 'n' Andy*, were cancelled after public outcry from growing civil rights groups. However, for many programs, this also meant shedding what made them unique representations of varied ethnic cultures and reducing the variety of televised representations of Americanness available to the viewing public. Instead of improving racial and ethnic representation on television, the networks used public criticism as an excuse to exclude non-white groups from the medium. Only one of *Amos 'n' Andy*'s principal black actors was able to find a new television role after the program was cancelled: Amanda Randolph went from playing Kingfish's "hilarious 'battle-ax' mother-in-law" to the more stereotyped and limited role of the family maid on *The Danny Thomas Show* (1953-1964).⁷²⁴ Still, Mack Scott (2014) argues that black performers, and especially actresses like Hattie McDaniel and Ethel Waters, undercut many damaging stereotypes through their nuanced performance of stereotyped mammy roles like the titular black maid in *Beulah* (CBS radio, 1945-1954, ABC TV 1950-1953).⁷²⁵ While the white women who starred in crime sitcoms had more luck finding new roles, investigative wives did not find a new home outside of comedies.

As we will see in later chapters, female detectives and radio detectives' secretaries also received comedic treatment, even in programs that were otherwise more serious in tone. Indeed, the association between women, crime, and comedy was strong – and popular – enough that radio listeners protested when the networks attempted to

⁷²³ Marc, "Origins of the Genre," 4.

⁷²⁴ Marc, 5.

⁷²⁵ Mack Scott, "From Blackface to Beulah: Subtle Subversion in Early Black Sitcoms," *Journal of Contemporary History* 49, no. 4 (2014): 743–69.

push one investigative couple toward melodrama: In 1954, NBC sought to fill more time on their dwindling primetime schedules by converting successful comedies like *Mr. & Mrs. North* and *The Great Gildersleeve* from their half-hour weekly format to fifteen-minute daily strip series. By 1954, however, the fifteen-minute, serialized episode was strongly associated with feminized soap operas. This association was likely enhanced by the fact that radio was increasingly identified with older women as it lost audience share to television. *Mr. & Mrs. North* episodes from this period do reflect a more melodramatic sensibility, replacing comic treatments with more exaggeratedly emotional reactions to crime. This experiment was short-lived: audience complaints and the network executives' own professed opinions prompted NBC to switch both programs back to their half-hour, weekly format the next year.⁷²⁶ By then, however, networks like NBC were rapidly abandoning their primetime narrative series. Both programs were off the air for good by 1957.

NBC's failed experiment with serialization also calls attention to an important aspect of the crime sitcom's gender representation: it was one of the few genres to depict women who were more-or-less capable – or even in control – of a non-domestic area of life. Of course, crime sitcoms were not the only genre to deal with women's complicated relationship to the criminal justice system. Kristen Hatch (2002) argues that soap operas used high profile murder trials to explore the deep and, to women at least, threatening rift between male-directed criminal law enforcement and women's

⁷²⁶ Dorothy Hart, "Letter from Mrs. Dorothy Hart to NBC," October 7, 1955, Folder 11; Box 350; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; John Cleary, "Letter from John Cleary to Mrs. Dorothy Hart," October 12, 1955, Folder 11; Box 350; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

emotional intelligence about justice. Soap operas like *The Guiding Light* (CBS radio 1937-1956, CBS TV 1952-2009) never actually challenged the validity of the official justice system, but did depict morally sympathetic women driven to murder in order to protect their children. Even more powerfully, crime sitcoms did this while targeting a primetime audience that also included men and children. As we will see, that did not save them from criticism. Indeed, critical letter writers appear to have been particularly incensed by the crime sitcom's sexy tone and references to marital intimacy. However, male reviewers who might have dismissed such frank representations of female sexuality and marital romance as melodramatic pap in a soap opera – if they even bothered to listen to one — often welcomed them as a fun, sexy element of crime sitcoms.

Figures

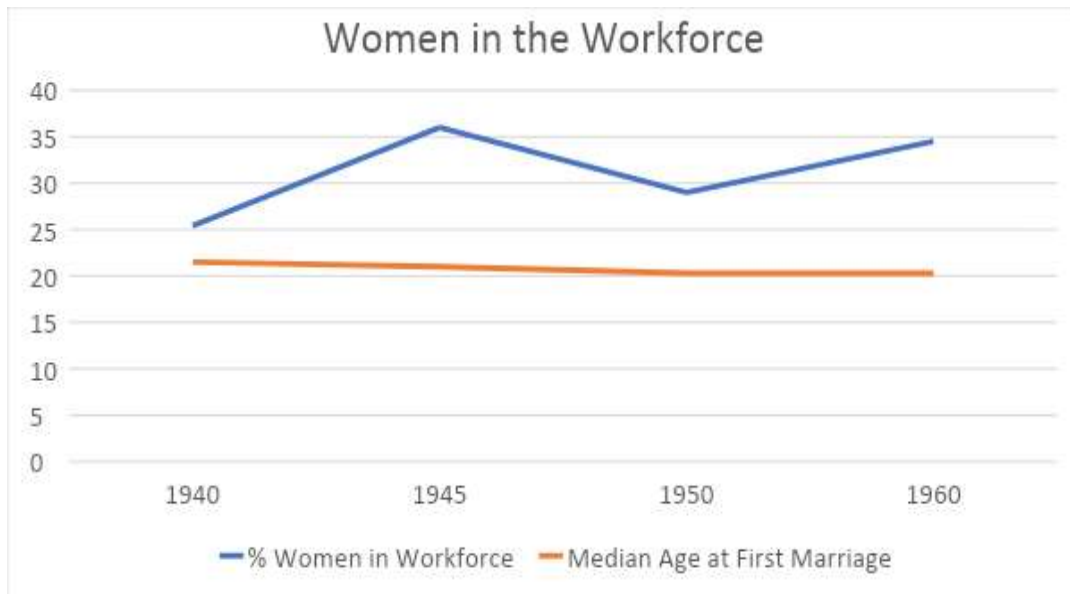


Figure 4: Women in the workforce and women's median age at first marriage, 1940-1960. Source: Valerie Kincade Oppenheimer, *The Female Labor Force in the United States*



Figure 5: Claudia Morgan as the “Jealous Woman” in 1946



Figure 6: Les Damon as the “gentleman detective” in 1946.



Figure 7: Claudia Morgan as the Thin Man's charming, jealous lady in 1947.



Figure 8: Joseph Curtain and Alice Frost record an episode of *Mr. & Mrs. North* at NBC.



Figure 9: Jerry tries to force Pam into the background as she reveals a crucial clue.

CHAPTER 5:

Texts Under Analysis:

The Adventures of Sam Spade (radio, ABC/CBS/NBC 1946-1951), *Let George Do It* (radio, West Coast Don Lee Network & syndicated 1946-1954), *Perry Mason* (radio, CBS 1943-1955/TV, CBS 1957-1966), *Mannix* (TV, CBS 1967-1975)

In the final pages of *The Case of the Lame Canary* (1937), Erle Stanley Gardner's eleventh Perry Mason novel, the superstar investigative attorney proposes marriage to his secretary, Della Street. After pausing briefly to consider, Della refuses. Instead of bringing them closer, she argues, marriage would drive them apart:

“We’re getting along swell the way it is. You’d establish me in a home somewhere as your wife. Then you’d get a secretary to help you with your work. The first thing you knew, you’d be sharing excitement and experiences with the secretary and I’d be entirely out of your life. No, Mr. Perry Mason, you aren’t the marrying kind. You live at too high speed. You’re too wrapped up in mysteries. I’d rather share in your life than in your bank roll.”⁷²⁷

As she notes in this refusal, secretaries like Della may not have officially been wives, but they shared in as much of their employers' lives as any wife might, if not more. Indeed, private secretaries like Della were often popularly referred to as “office wives,” an important reminder that, at least in the popular imagination, the line between women's labor and their romantic lives was thin-to-nonexistent. “Office wife” might have been used disparagingly by people suspicious of secretaries' close, potentially sexual, relationships with their employers, but Della's response shows how such a close, all-consuming relationship could work to women's advantage; as

⁷²⁷ Erle Stanley Gardner, *The Case of the Lame Canary* (Ankerwycke, 2016), 268.

Perry's office wife, Della could mix her interest in crime with the desire for romance that female detectives were usually denied. Rather than being frustrated by her supposedly inferior social status as a single woman, Della was content with the companionship and adventure she got from her position as Perry's secretary.

Aside from victims and suspects, private secretaries, or office wives, were the most common female characters in radio and television crime dramas. Like wives, secretaries were a consistent feminine presence within their crime drama's narrative world. Both character types were young, attractive women who enjoyed a close, personal rapport with their detective. If anything, most secretaries were more manifestly domestic than wives. Married women were more likely to be depicted chasing (or being chased by) their husbands through crime-ridden public spaces than doing housework; in separate episodes, Nora Charles and Pam North were both shown employing domestic help. Secretaries, however, were frequently depicted engaging in domestic tasks like cleaning and serving food in the office, or even in a private home. Still, the fact remains that secretaries were not wives, no matter how broadly some hinted that they would like to be. Instead, they were single, working women who supported themselves – or even their families – in the decades after World War II. They might still depend on a man for access to the public world of crime, but secretaries managed to carve out a narrow niche for independence, and even adventure, in their single lives.

Despite their continuing singleness and adventurous lives, however, the secretaries who appeared on the national radio and television networks were depicted

in highly gendered terms. Most emphasized that they – unlike Della in the late 1930s – would eventually welcome a “promotion” from office wife to real wife. They might be unmarried, wage-earning women working outside the home, but secretaries were still women. And, as earlier chapters demonstrate, network executives believed that women – or at least the women who mattered to advertisers – were primarily interested in beauty, fashion, personal relationships, and, most importantly, domesticity. This chapter explores how the detective’s office wife was characterized first sonically on the radio and then visually on television. As I have argued elsewhere, the detective’s secretary gained limited access to the exciting and potentially dangerous world of crime fighting through her work, but program scripts and promotional materials countered this apparent rebellion with emphatic reassurances that she was domestic at heart, with marriage as her ultimate goal.⁷²⁸ So long as secretaries’ labor was characterized in terms of traditionally feminine traits and responsibilities like care-taking and nurturing interpersonal relationships rather than technological acumen or desire for financial independence from men, it was acceptable. Anything else was presented as an aberration.

Secretaries’ desire to eventually return to the home justified women’s labor, but it also served as a promise to men – and reminder to women – that working women did (or should) view their employment as temporary. Moreover, the programs’ emphasis on the long-term, committed relationship between secretary and

⁷²⁸ Catherine Martin, “Adventure’s Fun, but Wouldn’t You Rather Get Married?: Gender Roles and the Office Wife in Radio Detective Dramas,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 74, no. 1 (2014): 16–26.

detective helped producers to frame the controversial sexual themes that they imported from hardboiled crime novels. As chapter two discusses, conservative audience members objected to broadcast representations of sex. However, as the detective's office wife, the secretary also helped to reassure audiences that, no matter how hardboiled his surface, her detective was a normal family man who would eventually settle down with his loyal assistant. Likewise, the office wife's love for her detective reassured listeners that she would not engage in promiscuous, potentially destructive sexual activity. She might be a young, unsupervised single woman in the city, but her sexual energy was safely channeled into a respectable, heteronormative relationship. This dynamic is paralleled in the romantic relationships between female detectives and their male partners, which remain a prominent feature of modern crime programming.

Crime-solving and Women's Public Labor

Unlike other working women on contemporary radio and television, detectives' secretaries were able to transgress gendered boundaries limiting women's participation in the public sphere. Their job responsibilities went beyond attending to their bosses' wants and needs. Where other secretaries worked in relatively private, enclosed, safe offices, detectives' secretaries came face to face with criminals and victims both in and outside of their place of work. Criminals were rarely so uncouth as to threaten a secretary personally, but such women were still exposed to all of the perils that came with their detective's dangerous job. However, instead of succumbing to the physical and moral threats that made weaker women into victims

or femmes fatales, secretaries retained their sexual and moral purity, as well as their respectability.

Whether or not their detectives or programs acknowledged it, secretaries' labor was often crucial to detectives' efforts to unravel mysteries. This made them an active and important point of potential identification for young postwar women listening to or watching detective dramas. Like detectives' secretaries, many of these women's best job prospects lay in secretarial or clerical work in expanding postwar offices.⁷²⁹ Likewise, many understood that postwar American society elevated types of labor associated with men and diminished more female-identified, relationship-oriented work by ascribing it to women's supposedly natural impulse to care for others. Broadcast crime narratives heightened this disparity by centering the action and audience focus on the detective, but secretaries were nevertheless depicted enjoying their labor. This labor also forced male audiences into some sort of relationship with secretaries: when she excitedly questioned her boss about his thoughts and actions – or even voiced her own hunches about a case – the secretary took on the sidekick's function of audience surrogate. Male, or even female, audience members might prefer to identify with the more knowledgeable detective, but the narratives' structure placed them in similarly subordinate positions; both audience and secretary relied on the detective for access to knowledge, and the emphatically male detective was firmly positioned as the interpretive authority in the

⁷²⁹ Sharon H. Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class, and the Origins of Modern American Office Work, 1900-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

case.

Crime writers may have valued secretaries most for the sexual and/or romantic prospects they introduced, but I argue that they served a deeper ideological function as anti-femmes fatale. As young working women who managed to enjoy some level of independence without seeking more, and who mixed with the world of crime without becoming corrupted by it, secretaries served as an important model of restrained independence for young female listeners. As feminist scholars like Georgia Hickey (2011) have noted, women have always been the ones tasked with regulating their behavior to accord with cultural standards of respectability. Advice books warned women that maintaining those standards was the only way women could physically and sexually protect themselves from men.⁷³⁰ Secretaries violated these rules by continuing to work and – for the most part – live alone in urban spaces instead of retreating to the suburbs. They did so even more by involving themselves in criminal matters that respectable women were taught to avoid.

In order to maintain their own respectability, secretaries engaged in overt displays of middle-class domesticity. These displays did more than simply mark individual secretaries as respectable women, however. Despite their apparently limited role within larger crime narratives, secretaries' actions – and even their very presence – reshaped the narratives of which they were a part. As in 1930s pulp narratives, secretaries enhanced their detective's masculinity. This was true

⁷³⁰ Georgia Hickey, "From Civility to Self-Defense: Modern Advice to Women on the Privileges and Dangers of Public Space," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 1/2 (2011): 78.

regardless of a secretary's individual relationship with her boss; the very fact that he needed a secretary and had the means to pay her established a detective as a successful, professional businessman. The fact that his secretary loved him established that he was a strong, attractive man who was worthy of admiration. By the 1940s, however, secretaries' femininity was coded in more domestic, less hypersexual terms. So was detectives' masculinity. Post-WWII radio detectives retained their Depression-era forefathers' strength, daring, and world-weary veneer, but the impact of the war – and changing masculine ideals – made them more caring, patient, and invested in the dominant social order than their more cynical progenitors. Rather than merely representing their detective's virility, office wives became more explicit representatives of the domestic sphere. This helped broadcast producers to downplay the hardboiled detective's transgressively violent, working-class origins. Even when a detective joked about his low bank balance or engaged in fisticuffs with criminals, his close relationship with a middle-class woman helped to identify him as a middle-class family man and frame him as a sort of universal father or older brother figure, there to help everyday citizens solve their problems.

What is an Office Wife?

Secretaries first appeared in 1920s and 1930s hardboiled magazine narratives, many of which became the basis of wartime and post-WWII film noir and radio crime dramas. During this period, Erin Smith (2000) argues, the post-WWI hardboiled detective's secretary served as his office wife, a committed relationship that blurred the lines between business and romance. Detectives were free to pursue other

attractive women at any time, but they always came home to their loyal secretaries in the end. Office wives played a crucial role within the pulp narrative, embodying their employers' virility and prosperity through their sexually charged presence.⁷³¹ The striking office wife proves that her tough-talking, rough-around-the-edges boss is prosperous enough to afford a secretary, and a trophy secretary at that. However, unlike the detective's tough talk and world-weary outlook, which have remained stock tropes in crime fiction, Smith argues that the office wife proved to be "something of a literary historical anomaly," appearing briefly in pulp novels and magazines like *Black Mask* before vanishing almost completely after 1950.⁷³²

More particularly, Smith locates the office wife's heyday in the interwar period, around the time when screwball comedies were gaining popularity onscreen. At the same time that Nora Charles was helping to renegotiate the rules of middle-class marriage, private secretaries became active figures in renegotiating working-class labor roles as women made inroads into previously male-dominated office spaces. While most of the jobs open to working-class women were menial and low wage, private secretaries like those employed by hardboiled detectives enjoyed special prestige in the office through their education, physical appearance, and access to the boss.⁷³³ These may not have been enough to secure higher pay, opportunities for advancement, or freedom from domestic obligations, but they were enough for

⁷³¹ Erin Smith, *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 150.

⁷³² Smith, 151.

⁷³³ Rochelle Gatlin, *American Women Since 1945* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987).

some working-class men to perceive them as a threat. This was especially true because, at the same time that women were becoming more visible in the workplace, many higher-paid artisanal jobs were mechanized, and the men who had previously held them lost status and income.

Given Smith's insight into their role in mediating gendered labor tensions, it is hardly surprising that the office wife enjoyed a resurgence in post-WWII crime dramas. Once again, women came under fire for taking men's jobs, this time as soldiers returned home from war. Notwithstanding widespread social discomfort with, or even disdain for the women who were either unable or unwilling to leave the workforce and embrace domesticity after WWII, the fact is that the number of women in the workplace increased throughout the 1940s and 1950s. And though the national networks preferred to imagine their female audience as middle-class housewives with large and consuming families, they could not ignore working women altogether. This was especially true in the years immediately after WWII, before demobilization was complete. Secretaries and less officially employed Girls Friday enjoyed a significant presence on nationally broadcast radio detective dramas through the late 1940s, and even the early 1950s. There they took a range of forms, from long-term girlfriends like *The Shadow's* Margo Lane (1937-1954) and *Richard Diamond, Private Detective's* Helen Asher (1949-1953) to loyal secretaries like *The Adventures of Sam Spade's* Effie Perine (1946-1951), *Let George Do It's* Claire "Brooksie" Brooks (1946-1954), and the radio and television versions of *Perry Mason's* Della Street (radio, 1943-1955; TV, 1957-1966). Regardless of their labor status, these women

continued to blur the lines between detectives' work and private relationships as they assisted their detectives by running errands, questioning suspects, and providing other sorts of emotional support.

Most Girls Friday served similar roles across postwar detective dramas, but this chapter focuses on women who were explicitly employed as secretaries because they most directly blurred the lines between their own and their detectives' public and private lives. However, while this blurry public/private boundary remained acceptable – and even expected – for male detectives on television, many conservative critics and audience members perceived it as an attack on postwar women's respectability. As new postwar families concentrated in suburban spaces, popular and psychiatric discourses increasingly identified white women's security and sanity with their seclusion inside private homes.⁷³⁴ Della and Peggy were the only women to cross this public/private binary after 1955, and they were enabled by very different sets of circumstances: Della was protected by decades of novels that would have made it impossible to adapt *Perry Mason* without her, a production staff that scrupulously safeguarded her virtue, and the subtle but ever-present implication that – eventually – she and Perry would tie the knot. Peggy was enabled by the racist expectation that Black women would continue working even after they married.⁷³⁵ Black women like Peggy had little access to the financial security, personal

⁷³⁴ Allison McCracken, "Study of a Mad Housewife: Psychiatric Discourse, the Suburban Home and the Case of Gracie Allen," in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumin (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 50–65.

⁷³⁵ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (1992): 260.

protection, and domestic privacy promised to white women who accepted the limits of patriarchal domesticity. Unlike her white predecessors, Peggy was a widowed single mother who balanced work and family life – mostly by prioritizing work – with no promise of the eventual romantic and financial security that marriage to her detective would supposedly bring. This enabled Peggy to cross those boundaries with less opprobrium, but it also left her subject to economic and physical hardship.

Through the figure of the office wife, radio detective dramas presented their listeners with a model of femininity that allowed young women to seek exciting employment outside of the home – just so long as they remembered that it was only temporary. Still, network executives appear to have found the presence of secretaries too threatening to countenance on television. Secretaries' decline on television detective programs was even more precipitous than that of investigative wives: Della Street was the only radio secretary in my sample to appear on both radio and television, and she did not make her appearance until the late 1950s, after broadcasters had resolved lingering issues of censorship and program control. Even so, CBS's internal censors were exacting when it came to eliminating any hint of sexuality on the staid program. Moreover, Della's success on *Perry Mason* did not inspire imitators. Indeed, the late 1950s were a difficult time for televised depictions of working women. CBS's three major working girl sitcoms – *My Friend Irma* (1952-1954), *Meet Millie* (1952-1956), and *Private Secretary* (1953-1957) – had all left the air by the time Della arrived in 1957. As I detail below, *The Ann Sothern Show* (1958-1961), the eponymous actress's follow-up to *Private Secretary*, struggled

to find an audience and producers who were sympathetic to its depiction of a working woman who was both assertive and in control of her workplace. As I note in my previous chapter, even sitcom housewives had become more passive. By the time Marlo Thomas's *That Girl* (ABC, 1966-1971) proved that working women were a worthwhile programming investment, the idea of a woman serving as an office-wife-style secretary to a male detective may have been seen as passé. After all, *Honey West* had already proven that women could be detectives in their own right in 1965. Honey may not have outlasted a television season, but she, and women like *The Avengers*'s Emma Peel, re-set expectations for what roles women could play in crime series. As the 1970s progressed, women became more likely to play partners to male investigators. Within this context, they remained protected and subservient, but their contributions to investigations were more likely to be acknowledged as such.

In light of this shift, it is significant that Peggy Fair, the only secretary to debut in the 1960s, was also the only Black woman of the set. Peggy serves as the exception that proves the secretarial rule. While Peggy's working conditions were certainly less restrictive than the white women she followed, they also reified Black women's subservient status in the postwar United States. Peggy was one of the most enduring of the wave of Black characters added to network television programs in the wake of the Kirshner Report's critique of American race relations, but, like *Beulah* (CBS radio, 1945-1954; ABC TV, 1950-1953) and *Julia* (NBC TV 1968-1971) before her, Peggy was confined to a caretaking role. Within those confines, she was depicted as an expert, but she did little to challenge racist views about Black women's

social roles.

Domesticating Office Work

As she moved from the male-centric world of pulp fiction to the unisex world of radio, the office wife became an increasingly public actor within the ongoing debate over women's public roles. Like their pulp ancestors, secretaries straddled the line between professionalism and domesticity. However, when push came to shove, the radio office wives made it clear that their ultimate choice would be the domestic sphere – preferably as the actual wife of their employer. Indeed, even at work, secretaries could not escape the domestic and romantic generic codes restricting popular representations of femininity. Despite their decision to work in the potentially dangerous, decidedly un-feminine world of crime, they were confined within a romantic frame that redefined their relationship with their employer in personal rather than professional terms. Within this frame, their labor and its benefits were re-characterized as the natural result of their personal attachments rather than services rendered in exchange for financial benefit. This was true whether or not a secretary expressed desire to marry her boss. Even in the supposedly public, dangerous world of crime, women could not escape domesticity and keeping house.

Like contemporary secretaries working in the real world, broadcast office wives' jobs involved both professional and domestic tasks. Detectives certainly required typing, accounting, and filing services from their secretaries, but those more overtly skilled and/or professional tasks typically took place off screen. By far, the greatest portion of the office wife's day – or at least the parts depicted for audiences –

was devoted to domestic and emotional tasks like serving food, cleaning, and managing relationships with clients or their bosses. These so-called soft skills would have been familiar to female audience members who worked as secretaries themselves. Even women who worked in clerical positions that did not directly require them to attend to an individual boss's needs, like studio script-readers, were still expected to provide unremunerated emotional and domestic labor around the office.⁷³⁶ Most male executives expected their personal secretaries to be available to do anything at any hour – many objected to hiring married women because they insisted upon being the most powerful man in their secretary's life.⁷³⁷

As office wives, detectives' secretaries' first duty was maintaining the office itself as a domestic space. The secretaries I study encompass every stage of the women's development, from Effie's youthful inexperience to Brooksie's expert but still emotional performance, to Della and Peggy's calm, polished competence. These personalities were expressed within the space of the office, from the small-scale chaos that was Effie's workspace, to the well-oiled, efficient, immaculately styled machine Della oversaw for Perry. And even secretaries who left the office over the course of a narrative were almost always there when their detective wanted anything. It was rare to see or hear an office space without some marker of the secretary's presence. Beyond their office-bound domesticity, detectives' secretaries also frequently gave their employers access to the actual domestic spaces that the

⁷³⁶ Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 7.

⁷³⁷ Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*, 391.

secretaries themselves inhabited. In addition to serving as a convenient extension of the office wherein female clients in danger could be secretly stashed, secretaries' apartments were also the sites of holiday meals. Even Effie, the only secretary who still lived with her mother, invited Sam over to celebrate the holidays. George had almost as much access to Brooksie's bachelorette pad as she did herself.

When George visited Brooksie's apartment, what he found was a far cry from the squalid, noisy walk-up that most radio PIs were depicted as inhabiting. Brooksie was represented as a properly respectable, middle-class woman. As such, she was depicted as living in a clean, warmly decorated space that bore sonic markers of middle-class femininity, including subdued kitchen noises and gently clinking china. Likewise, both Della and Peggy's apartments display their feminine, domestic instincts and access to financial resources through comfortably fashionable decorations and immaculately kept apartments. These settings contrast sharply with detective fiction's emphasis on working-class stiff and wealthy dabblers. Both backgrounds, but especially the working-class, were at odds with the predominate milieu of postwar radio and television programming. Numerous media historians have commented on the precipitous decline in working-class representation on postwar American television. While notable working-class sitcoms like *The Honeymooners* (CBS TV, 1955-1956) and long-running radio series *The Goldbergs* (radio 1929-1946, TV 1949-1954) did appear in the early 1950s, their tenure was limited. By the end of the 1950s, most television families had moved to middle-class, appliance-filled suburban homes, including initially urban couples like the Ricardos

and the Goldbergs themselves. While Mason, himself a well-educated and successful defense lawyer, needed Della's upper middle-class aura of respectability less than his rougher-edged, working-class PI contemporaries, Della and her fellow secretaries brought a sense of middle-class decorum to postwar crime series.

Male private investigators needed secretaries to bridge the gap between their working-class personae and the middle-class values that pervaded network programming. Most of the detectives who had secretaries were adapted from the hardboiled tradition and their programs characterized them as living a hard-scrabble working-class existence. Indeed, radio adaptations of hardboiled detective characters like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe over-emphasized their bare-bones lifestyle by describing their apartments as squalid, noisy spaces in which they lived almost like cowboys, subsisting on canned beans and black coffee. This hyper-masculine asceticism helped to affirm the detectives' status and authority as urban cowboys, tasked with civilizing the dark, inner-city streets. It was further contrasted with more upper-class investigators like Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, and even Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe. Despite their investigative authority, both men's colleagues routinely mocked them for indulging in feminized comforts like lavish dinners and art. Indeed, both Poirot and Wolfe employ more active, less fastidious assistants to help with the dirtier parts of their investigations, a category which, for Wolfe, involves anything that occurs outside his front door. Manly men like Sam and George Valentine, on the other hand, almost revel in the gritty worlds they encounter outside. At any rate, they are too busy solving crimes to consider such feminine luxuries as home décor or

balanced meals. However much hardboiled, lone wolf-style detective programs celebrated masculine individualism though, they still needed to adhere to network standards that encouraged consumption and celebrated middle-class domesticity. Secretaries helped reconcile this tension by being the ones who dragged their masculine detectives, often kicking and screaming (but ultimately grateful), into some appreciation of appropriately heterosexual middle-class domesticity.

Flirting with the Edge of Marriage

Of course, the ultimate sign of middle-class respectability – marriage – continued to elude detectives and their secretaries. In addition to their role in mediating gendered workplace relations, postwar office wives were also deeply implicated in debates over companionate marriage. This had been true of earlier office wives as well, though to a lesser extent. Interwar office wives were most visible in pulp fiction directed at working-class, male audiences, but they also appeared in novels and films marketed to middle-class women. In this context, the secretary-boss relationship existed in tension with the idealized marital bond advocated by proponents of companionate marriage; an ideal working relationship required that a secretary be open to and interested in all of her boss's closest concerns. Della's conviction that wives were inevitably cut off from their husbands' interests is notable given the plethora of contemporary media narratives that promoted companionate marriage as women's best path to equality and fulfillment. It also diverges from the view espoused by the similarly situated heroine of *The Office Wife*, the 1929 novel that helped popularize "office wife" as a term. Faith Baldwin's

bestseller and its ensuing film adaptation conclude with their titular secretary happily accepting her boss's proposal, secure in the conviction that she – unlike his negligent first wife – will be able to keep him because “she knew [the business] side of him, too. Nothing was sealed to her – nothing was a closed book. No one could usurp her place, no one could threaten her position. She held his heart; she knew his mind; she would retain the partnership and be the beloved.”⁷³⁸ Della's resistance to a status change that many pre- and post-war women, and especially advice columnists, considered a promotion implicitly rebuked the idea that marriage should be women's ultimate goal.

Indeed, the very implication that Della and her fellow office wives were the ones who were not the marrying kind served as a constant reminder that marriage was not postwar women's only choice. The idea that women might choose to retain their economic and sexual freedom by remaining single was threatening enough to social morality – at least as it was enforced by commercialized entertainment and conservative pressure groups – that producers of the 1930s *Perry Mason* film series briefly experimented with marrying Della and Perry in the series' fourth film, *The Case of the Velvet Claws* (1936). This move may have been intended to satisfy censors' objections to the pair's sexual banter in the earlier films, or fans who wanted a resolution to Della and Perry's “will they/won't they” romantic tension. However, as the producers of countless modern-day crime programs that capitalize romantic tension between a female and male partner have feared, this resolution proved

⁷³⁸ Faith Baldwin, *The Office Wife* (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1942), 248–49.

unsustainable. By the time the series' next installment, *The Case of the Black Cat* (1936), was released just a few months later, the pair had reverted to their single state. It is likely that producers could not conceive of any other way forward: when Della and Perry marry at the beginning of *The Case of the Velvet Claws*, she resigns as his secretary and he promises to retire from crime solving.⁷³⁹ Even if Perry had gone back on his promise and continued to investigate, it would have been difficult for producers to excuse Della's presence in the office. Given the emphasis that the 1930s films placed on Perry's financial success, it would have been inconceivable to depict a Mrs. Mason who worked.

Beyond the difficulty of justifying a married woman working – even for her husband – *Perry Mason* author Erle Stanley Gardner argued that deferring marriage was an effective way of creating suspense and ensuring audience loyalty. Gardner asserted that loyal readers' desire to see Della and Perry marry made them “violently partisan” toward her and more likely to buy future books in hopes that she and Perry would finally settle down.⁷⁴⁰ Unlike in the books, however, Perry never tempted Della with marriage on radio or television. Neither did any of the other male detectives who carried on extended flirtations with their secretaries; postwar network producers could not – or did not want to – conceive of any self-respecting postwar woman turning down the chance at a family and home. Indeed, several secretaries made it clear that they would welcome such an offer. However, in the name of

⁷³⁹ William Clemens, *The Case of the Velvet Claws* (Warner Brothers, 1936).

⁷⁴⁰ “Della Street,” 1957, Folder 1; Box 2; Barbara Hale Papers (Collection 284), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

narrative consistency, they had to settle for vague promises of future connubial bliss. Romance was all well and good, but detecting always came first. Or at least it did for the detectives themselves.

Film and broadcast producers might have resisted admitting that work was just as much Della's life as it was Perry's, but they did recognize the central fact that series like *Perry Mason* benefitted from the tension generated by the detective and secretary's perpetual courtship. Like Gardner, prolific radio crime writer Lawrence Klee saw a detective's implicit romance with his loyal secretary as a way to maintain audience interest and loyalty – especially among women – in a competitive media market. In part, Klee saw secretary-boss romances as a time-saving measure. Detectives in crime films, or in later hour-long television crime dramas, might strike up casual romances with clients or witnesses, but radio detectives simply did not have time to solve a mystery and seduce a new woman in their allotted half-hour. Casual romances required extraneous developments that, Klee argued, bogged down and distracted from action-packed crime narratives.⁷⁴¹ However, a “genuine romance that is touched upon subtly from week to week ... provides the audience with an added facet of interest and another thread of weekly continuity and familiarity.”⁷⁴² Within this context, secretaries did have limited room in which to express romantic, and even sexual, interest in men – just so long as the man in question was their boss.

Within this limbo, wherein they were simultaneously single and romantically

⁷⁴¹ Lawrence Klee, “Proposal for Dr. Strong (Radio Series),” n.d., Folder 5; Box 5; Lawrence Klee Papers, 1936-1957; Collection Number 10049, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

⁷⁴² Klee.

involved, secretaries had to present a carefully managed feminine persona in order to avoid being dismissed as fallen women. This management became increasingly difficult as social and sexual mores became more conservative through the 1950s. As we will see later in this chapter, the level of sexuality secretaries expressed depended upon their narrative age, method of distribution, medium, time period, and race. Some, like the family-friendly, network radio Effie, were represented as almost juvenile, and therefore largely innocent. On the other extreme, syndicated radio secretaries like Brooksie brought all of their sultry charms to bear in their efforts to entrap their detective into marriage. Still, their sexuality was directed toward an appropriate goal of heterosexual marriage, and they never crossed the line into premarital sin. Throughout her time on daytime network radio and primetime network television, Della existed in a precarious balance between sexual attractiveness, availability, and chastity. Likewise, *Mannix* balanced Peggy's attractive appearance and availability with the late-1960s networks' unspoken but ongoing refusal to countenance miscegenation.

The promise of eventual marriage might have been enough to satisfy some critics, but it was not enough to combat the social threat posed by unattached women's sexual potential. As I note in chapters two and three, network censors and outside pressure groups were particularly concerned with women's chastity. This was especially true as feminine sexuality was increasingly associated with the Communist menace; popular media and news coverage presented female spies as either frumpy,

frustrated spinsters or dangerously seductive Mata Haris.⁷⁴³ Both contrasted with the fresh-faced ideal of genuine, approachable beauty and personal virtue that came to dominate 1950s television, and which each office wife in my study displays in her own way. This is not to say that detectives' secretaries were completely de-sexed. Throughout his *Perry Mason* novels, Gardner makes it clear that Perry and Della are romantically involved. Hammett is less explicit, but does hint that Effie may be one of Sam's occasional lovers. Near the end of *The Maltese Falcon*, Effie resists Spade's attempt to hold her closer after he turns Brigid O'Shaughnessy over to the police with a devastated "don't touch me now – not now," implying that he has touched her that intimately before.⁷⁴⁴ "A Man Called Spade" concludes with Spade asks Effie out to a movie.⁷⁴⁵ Despite broadcasters' fear of criticism, sexual and romantic appeal remained integral to secretaries' roles in their programs.

Klee may have seen romance as a way to appeal to women, but he did not envision it as anything more than a sideline to the main plot. Indeed, Klee located that romance within the "feminine" parts of the story: while the narrative he envisioned would foreground a secretary's romantic feelings for her boss, the boss's feelings for her would and should remain ambiguous. A detective would never dash his secretary's hopes or betray her trust, but he would also resist any commitment that might infringe on his masculine freedom to do his job without restrictions.

⁷⁴³ Kathryn Olmsted, "Blond Queens, Red Spiders, and Neurotic Old Maids: Gender and Espionage in the Early Cold War," *Intelligence and National Security* 19, no. 1 (2004): 80.

⁷⁴⁴ Dashiell Hammett, "The Maltese Falcon," in *The Four Great Novels* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1982), 571.

⁷⁴⁵ Dashiell Hammett, "A Man Called Spade," in *A Man Called Spade and Other Stories* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1944), 56.

Detectives' secretaries, however, had no such freedom. Brooksie might loudly object to seeing George pretend a romance with another woman while undercover on a case, but George could matter-of-factly compartmentalize his personal life whenever a mystery presented itself. This emphasis on the secretary's romantic role also limited the time available to develop her character in other ways. If secretaries did have lives outside the office – a highly debatable proposition given that their devotion to their jobs appears to have rivaled that of their employers – it was not apparent from the programs themselves.

Secretaries on Television

Despite their popularity on radio, where they helped attract female listeners who might otherwise be turned off by a program that featured no real female characters, few office wives made the transition to television. Indeed, *Perry Mason's* Della Street is something of an outlier among the detective's secretaries I explore in this chapter. She was the only secretary of the bunch to appear on both radio and television, but she did so in widely different historical and generic contexts. Erle Stanley Gardner, author of the book series on which *Perry Mason* was based, disapproved of the soap opera that aired on CBS radio between 1943 and 1955, and refused to approve its shift to television. The radio soap opera's producers rechristened their series *The Edge of Night* (1956-1984) and altered their characters and settings enough to pass copyright muster.⁷⁴⁶ Gardner and CBS eventually agreed upon a primetime drama format and Mason and Della made their television debut in

⁷⁴⁶ Jim Cox, *The Great Radio Soap Operas* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), 171.

1957. For almost ten years, Della was the only active, fully present detective's secretary on the American airwaves – Sam, the sultry woman who ran Richard Diamond's answering service between 1959 and 1960, appeared only as a pair of shapely legs and a disembodied voice. Indeed, detectives' secretaries seem to have been one of the primary victims of efforts to purge working women from network television. By the time David Victor was developing a television pilot script for *Let George Do It*, he appeared to think it better to leave George's long-term secretary Brooksie out of the *dramatis personae*.⁷⁴⁷ Likewise, the early CBS television detective Mike Barnett of *Man Against Crime* (1949-1954), Klee's last major hit before his untimely death in 1957, eschewed the services of a secretary.

Given their role in smoothing out detectives' rough edges, it is rather surprising that secretaries vanished so completely from early television crime dramas, especially in a period when broadcasters were fighting criticism of excessive violence in those same programs. However, many may have felt that this very criticism was reason enough to exclude women from the genre altogether. If there was anything that conservative social critics disliked more than violence, it was sex, and the postwar return to more Victorian gender norms rendered the very idea of a man and woman sharing an office alone inherently lascivious. Moreover, the idea of a virtuous woman – as secretaries presumably were – being exposed to dangerous and morally corrupting criminal situations became even more threatening when the radio

⁷⁴⁷ David Victor, "The Crazy Americano' Television Pilot Script," n.d., Box 60; David Victor Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

sounds were illustrated with television pictures. Promotional materials for radio crime programs had studiously avoided showing women in peril.

Moreover, as chapter one argues, the postwar television networks drew firm lines between the types of programming that they saw as targeting women and men. Female characters' voices were muted as network executives pushed female-centric sponsors out of program production and into daytime time spots. Programs like *Man Against Crime*, produced by tobacco companies seeking a male audience, were much more likely to find a toehold in primetime. Later primetime crime series did explore their detectives' personal lives and relationships, but they did so from a masculine point of view. Della was one of the first and last secretaries to make it to primetime television, and her opinions and emotional reactions were always framed as secondary to Perry's.

Of course, detectives' secretaries were not the only clerical workers on postwar television. In her analysis of mid-1950s working girl sitcoms, Lisa Parks (1999) argues that postwar secretaries inhabited a position of precarious public power and visibility. Because of postwar labor shortages and expanding office operations, many women were able to hold on to secretarial positions, even as they were forced out of higher paid manufacturing jobs.⁷⁴⁸ However, conservative cultural discourses, often embedded in the very advertisements seeking women for secretarial positions, encouraged young women to view their positions as a path to romance, a husband,

⁷⁴⁸ Lisa Parks, "Watching the 'Working Gals': Fifties Sitcoms and the Repositioning of Women in Postwar American Culture," *Critical Matrix* 11, no. 2 (1999): 42.

and eventually a suburban home with a white picket fence. Likewise, secretaries in sitcoms embodied a “housewife-secretary” ideal that required them to complete more personal, domestic duties like cleaning, shopping, and decorating for their bosses in addition to their business functions.⁷⁴⁹ With the partial exception of Ann Sothorn’s *Private Secretary* (CBS, 1953-1957), most secretarial sitcoms’ storylines centered on their stars’ romantic lives and aspirations. Sothorn’s Susie MacNamara was depicted as a competent, efficient worker who remained loyal to her handsome boss even when he did not appreciate her. Typically, however, even when younger secretaries like Millie Bronson, on *Meet Millie* (CBS, radio 1951-1954, TV 1952-1956), and Irma Peterson, on *My Friend Irma* (CBS, radio 1947-1954, TV 1952-1954), were depicted working, they were easily flustered and barely competent on both radio and television.⁷⁵⁰ And regardless of their competence, women were positioned as working for men and in order to forward men’s goals.

We can see the way different potential gender relationships between a male boss and female subordinate were closed off in the production history of *The Ann Sothorn Show* (1958-1961), Sothorn’s follow-up to *Private Secretary*. The new series, which Sothorn helped shape after leaving *Private Secretary* over a contract dispute, initially disrupted the standard secretarial sitcom format by depicting Sothorn as the strong assistant manager of the Bartley House Hotel. Unlike in her previous series, Sothorn’s elderly, weak, emasculated boss, Mr. McCauley, relied on her to

⁷⁴⁹ Parks.

⁷⁵⁰ Parks.

attend to difficult guests. However, when ratings did not meet initial expectations in its first few months, the production company, Desilu, called in writer/producer Devery Freeman to revamp the series. Freeman fixed what he saw as a “basic error in conception” by replacing the jovial, openly dependent McCauley with a “virile and dynamic hotel manager” who would force Sothern to continually prove her worth.⁷⁵¹ Freeman’s assumption that white collar workers would relate more to a harried and unappreciated Sothern is open to debate, but his own confession of “difficulty placing the character Miss Sothern plays in any familiar stratum of society” shows a lack of imagination about the diversity of women’s lived experiences.⁷⁵² Freeman’s changes closed off the potential for women to identify with Sothern as a strong woman who was indisputably superior to her ineffective employer. Instead of lending televisual credence to alternative workplace power dynamics, and giving viewers time to adjust to the arrangement, Freeman’s changes upheld gendered stereotypes and positioned women constantly and selflessly striving to prove their worth in the face of a difficult man’s irrational demands as the only women worthy of sympathy and empathy. Finally, in replacing the elderly married boss McCauley with Mr. Devery, a young, virile man played by Don Porter, Freeman restored the “implication of love in the relationship, or unrequited love, or possible love” that “was there merely because a lusty male was placed in propinquity to a lusty female.”⁷⁵³ This romantic potential, enhanced by the fact that Porter had played Sothern’s boss on *Private Secretary* as

⁷⁵¹ Devery Freeman, “Memo from Devery Freeman to Bernie Weitzman,” January 2, 1959, Brooklyn College.

⁷⁵² Freeman. (Emphasis added.)

⁷⁵³ Freeman.

well, further muddled the lines between her work and home life and positioned her as a woman who would probably eventually give up work for marriage.

In addition to foreclosing narrative possibilities, Freeman's shift from a hen-pecked, easily mocked older man to an authoritative young boss also fundamentally shifted the tone and locus of the program's humor. As Erica Sharrer (2001) and others argue, one sitcom character's ability to make a joke at another's expense signals and further normalizes the joker's comparative power over the butt of their joke.⁷⁵⁴ Within the workplace family that Freeman envisioned for *The Ann Sothern Show*, his eventual namesake, Mr. Devery, served as a paternal figure, who should be "typically intense and preoccupied (and sometimes fierce, like a father image should be)."⁷⁵⁵ By adding an effective father figure, in marked contrast to a boss that openly relied upon her, Freeman shifted the content of the series' humor from jokes about Sothern as single parent for an assortment of workplace children to Sothern as hyper-feminine mother tasked with dealing with the whims of a controlling father. Meanwhile, Devery's powerful status also insulated him from many of the emasculating jokes to which his predecessor was subject. The series continued to poke fun at him, but the humor focused on character elements that tended to reinforce his status as a red-blooded American male, like his weakness for beautiful women or his excessive ambition. Much of the humor revolved around Sothern cleaning up after his messes. This may have allowed women at home to laugh at men's

⁷⁵⁴ Erica Scharrer, "From Wise to Foolish: The Portrayal of the Sitcom Father, 1950s-1990s," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 45, no. 1 (2001): 26.

⁷⁵⁵ Freeman, "Memo from Devery Freeman to Bernie Weitzman," January 2, 1959.

weaknesses, but it also reinforced the idea that it was women's job to compensate for men's failings. Finally, narratives framed Sothern's motivation to clean up after Devery as a desire to save him from embarrassment rather than an acknowledgement that some of his foolish actions could damage the hotel and her own employment prospects.

The secretaries who assisted popular postwar male detectives faced similar limitations. Della may have been alone for much of her televised existence, but the guidelines that restricted her reality and protected her status as the only recurring female character in *Perry Mason's* clean-cut, family-friendly world echoed limitations placed on earlier radio detectives' *Girls Friday*.⁷⁵⁶ Regardless of their bosses' moral and economic standing, and with the significant exception of the widowed Black mother Peggy Fair, detectives' secretaries were chaste, young, white women who were eager to assist their hard-working bosses and devoted to those men's professional and financial advancement. Like the investigative wives they aspired to become, secretaries often alternated between providing emotional support and expressing their jealousy over any attractive woman who competed for their detective's attention. Some, like the young and inexperienced Effie, rarely left the office, but most, including Della and Brooksie, accompanied their detectives out into the field. There, they helped with stereotypically feminine tasks like comforting

⁷⁵⁶ Jesse K. Alexander, "Memo from Jesse K. Alexander to Messrs. Art Seid & Arthur Marks," September 17, 1965, Folder 4; Ernest Frankel Scripts #12016, Rare Book Literary and Historical Papers, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Notwithstanding its criminal content, CBS's in-house censors praised *Perry Mason's* producers' "customary good taste."

victims' families, but also with more active investigatory functions. Brooksie often questioned witnesses and suspects who would not speak to George, and she occasionally went undercover to infiltrate groups that he could not. However, at the end of the day it remained clear exactly who was in charge, and that was the male private investigator. Even when a secretary discovered the crucial clue by accident or by talking to a witness, her boss was the one who ultimately made sense of it and revealed its hidden significance. Moreover, despite their presumed interest in detecting, secretaries often appeared more concerned with getting their bosses to the altar. Della may not have presumed upon her relationship with Perry, but Brooksie was vocal about her desire to settle down with George, and her frustration at his consistent deferrals. All fulfilled the secretarial ideal of the office wife by creating a semi-domesticated space within the detective's masculinized office. Likewise, when detective series featured significant comedy elements, secretaries were typically the butt of jokes made by their more powerful bosses.

Despite the many ways the relationship between secretary and PI echoed that between wives and their detecting husbands, there were important differences that changed the balance of power. Secretaries' status as unmarried, employed women enabled them to take on more active roles. Unlike Jean Abbott, they could not be summarily dismissed on the grounds that they did not belong there. George might try to send Brooksie away when he wanted to flirt with another woman, but he had more difficulty in arguing that she did not belong in the field when he himself paid her to be there. Detectives' status as employer did give them some authority over their

secretaries, but it was necessarily limited by the terms of their employment. Unlike the marital bond (at least in the divorce-shy world of postwar network television), the boss-employee relationship could be severed if either party became dissatisfied. Perhaps because of this potential instability, series writers often emphasized the emotional ties that bound young women to their detectives as surely as any marital vow. Occasionally, this worked the other way around. Detectives usually took their secretaries for granted, but in “The Death Bed Caper,” Sam loses his cool when he thinks that Effie is leaving him because she disapproves of the way he handled a suspect. After begging her to give him a chance to explain, he is relieved to learn that she is just going on a pre-planned vacation.⁷⁵⁷

How to Work in an Office Without Becoming a Slut

Learning the Ropes with Effie Perine (radio, ABC/CBS/NBC 1946-1951)

As the youngest and least experienced of the secretaries in my study, Effie was also perhaps the most relatable. This might have been especially true for the adolescent female “bobby soxers” who reported to *Sponsor* magazine that they enjoyed “suspense, adventure, blood and thunder, [and] helpful information” more than “narratives, humor, romance, cheap language.”⁷⁵⁸ Aside from her boss’s criminal focus, prolific radio actress Lurene Tuttle’s Effie fits well into a pantheon of contemporary flighty young radio comediennees that included Anne Sothern’s sometime secretary and jane-of-all-trades Maisie Revere, of *The Adventures of Maisie*

⁷⁵⁷ “The Death Bed Caper,” *The Adventures of Sam Spade* (New York: CBS, June 20, 1948).

⁷⁵⁸ “Teen-Agers Like Mysteries,” *Sponsor*, April 1, 1948.

(1945-1953) and Marie Wilson's stenographer Irma Peterson, of *My Friend Irma* (1947-1954). True, she chose to work in a more dangerous industry than your typical office worker, but she mostly remained in the office, where she was relatively protected from the violent threats Sam encountered in his investigations. And she displayed a decided, if more subdued, romantic interest in her boss. The varied, vicarious excitement that she experienced listening to Sam narrate his cases likely appealed to some of the female listeners – both young and old – that expanding postwar companies needed to recruit to staff their offices.⁷⁵⁹ Still, like her fellow entry-level clerical workers, her vital labor was routinely de-emphasized and obscured in favor of comic interludes playing on her supposed incompetence, and a narrative emphasis was placed on her personal attachments.

Aurally, Effie is encoded as the working-class girl next door – attractive and resilient, but sexually immature and amusingly naïve. Her bubbly cheer is only briefly jolted by her frequent encounters with San Francisco's corrupt underbelly, and she seems almost wholly untainted by her exposure to the endless stream of femmes fatales that stroll through Sam's office. Throughout the series' run, Effie retains an innocent goodness that is reasserted every time she collapses into hysterics at the merest hint that Sam is in danger. Actress Lurene Tuttle modulated Effie's voice to exude a breathless insecurity that emerges whenever she is eager to please Sam or a client, as well as in her frequent moments of anxiety over Sam's safety.⁷⁶⁰ While

⁷⁵⁹ Parks, "Watching the 'Working Gals.'"

⁷⁶⁰ (Dunne and Tuttle 1951)

Effie's anxiety might be seen as a negative attribute – yet another cross for poor Sam to bear – her sweet and comically manic voice and breathless desire to please counter the harder and more polished voices of the femmes fatales and other members of the underworld Sam interacts with on the job. Her presence makes Sam's office a comforting place, even if it will never quite be safe from outside invasion.

Effie is by no means incompetent at her job. Tuttle may have voiced her as an adolescent ingénue, but the sound of Effie's fingers on the typewriter came through strong and clear in the background of transition scenes set inside the office. Likewise, her need for emotional reassurance echoed that of a young housewife afraid of disappointing her new spouse, but Sam never had anything to criticize about her skill or efficiency. Still, most overt displays of specific office skills were effectively cloaked in Effie's youth and naivety. And, in scenes that presaged later television sitcom housewives' apparent reliance on – and poor understanding of – modern consumer appliances, she was shown unsuccessfully trying to introduce fancy new technologies into the office.⁷⁶¹ In “The Adam Figg Caper,” Effie greets Sam with a telephone-like device she has purchased to help remind him of appointments. She can hardly contain her excitement as she shows him the unnecessarily complicated contraption, breathing quickly and speaking in high, clipped sentences. Sam greets Effie's enthusiasm with an even tone that conveys patience and amusement with her increasingly frantic efforts to demonstrate the appointment reminder's utility, even as

⁷⁶¹ Mary Beth Haralovich, “Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11, no. 1 (1989): 61,79.

his simple questions undermine her central premise that this device will help a successful businessman like himself.⁷⁶² She quickly becomes confounded and upset when the reminder device malfunctions, and Sam has to comfort her when she dissolves into a comically exaggerated fit of tears. This exchange reinforced the related ideas that women were technologically incompetent, susceptible to advertising messages, and frivolous spenders.

Effie's technological incompetence echoed misogynist discourses prevalent in radio and television advertising. Beginning in the 1920s radio manufacturers emphasized the ease with which their mass-produced sets could be tuned with images of women at the controls.⁷⁶³ Home economists like Christine Frederick likewise emphasized domestic appliances like vacuum cleaners and stand mixers as housewives' saviors, but home and appliance repair was characterized as men's work.⁷⁶⁴ This was especially true in the 1950s, as men were encouraged to adopt home improvement as a suitably masculine and domestic hobby.⁷⁶⁵ As a benevolent patriarch, Sam is patient with Effie's failings, allowing her to move on from her shame by changing the subject and plunging into dictating his case.

Of course, Sam's abrupt transition from Effie's embarrassment to Sam's competence also shifts attention away from the two feminine-identified technologies

⁷⁶² "The Adam Figg Caper," *The Adventures of Sam Spade* (New York: CBS, October 5, 1947).

⁷⁶³ Richard Butsch, "Crystal Sets and Scarf-Pin Radios: Gender, Technology and the Construction of American Radio Listening in the 1920s," *Media, Culture & Society* 20 (1998): 557–72.

⁷⁶⁴ Janice Williams Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick and the Rise of Household Efficiency* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

⁷⁶⁵ Steven M. Gelber, "Do-It-Yourself: Constructing, Repairing, and Maintaining Domestic Masculinity," in *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader*, ed. Jennifer Scanlon (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 70–93.

that she does deploy with confidence: shorthand and the typewriter. These two female-identified technologies played a central, unacknowledged, role in producing the program's narrative. Effie may not have investigated cases with Sam, but her presence still frames each episode. Indeed, as his secretary, she is arguable the author of his "capers." Every week, Effie welcomes Sam back to the office at the end of his investigation as though welcoming him home. Indeed, he often calls ahead like a husband telling his wife he will be late to dinner. Only after he has settled into the office and bantered with Effie does Sam proceed to dictate the week's "caper." This framing device makes for an engaging story and motivates Sam's voice-over, but it also makes it unclear who exactly is the author of the narrative to which we are listening. Sam's is the voice we hear, but it is important to remember that Effie is the one who actually types up the client report to which we are presumably listening. Before they reach us, Sam's words have been doubly mediated – first when Effie takes them down on her notepad, and then again when she types them out into a coherent narrative. Unlike in the case of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, however, *The Adventures of Sam Spade* does its best to obscure Effie's role in shaping that narrative. When she does comment on Sam's actions, it comes in her own voice, and Sam has a chance to respond. Moreover, Sam's conversational style reinforces the idea that we are receiving his words direct and unaltered. However, we have no way of knowing if Effie has embellished or downplayed the events acted out by the program's cast. Taken to an extreme, one could argue that Sam is simply a figment of Effie's active imagination.

The question of authorship is apparent in one CBS publicity photo circulated to newspapers and fan magazines in 1947. The image poses actor Howard Duff as a dreamy Sam, gazing off into the distance in the background while Lurene Tuttle's Effie studiously takes dictation beside his desk [Figure 10]. Demurely dressed, with her eyes fixed on her work, Effie could be any conscientious secretary executing her professional duties. Sam, meanwhile, seems taken up with the dreamy power of his own narrative. This depiction contrasts with the photo caption describing him as a "hard as a ten-penny nail" private eye.⁷⁶⁶ In addition, Effie sits in the foreground. We see her full face, but only part of Sam's as he reclines in profile behind her, as though he were an incompletely formed figment of her imagination – a picture drawn by a young woman who had read too many detective novels... or a secretary's cynical view of her own hard work compared to her boss's lounging attitude.

While Effie is largely absent from most of the narrative, we are occasionally reminded of her physical and narrative presence when she disrupts Sam's voice-over with an enthusiastic reaction or question. These interjections carry the added weight of surprise. Kathryn Fuller Seeley (2017) reminds us that it was highly unusual for radio writers to allow a single character in a multi-character scene to monologue for an extended period of time because listeners tend to forget about characters when they have not spoken for several minutes.⁷⁶⁷ Jack Benny and his writers took advantage of this tendency to heighten the comic effect of Mary Livingstone's

⁷⁶⁶ CBS, "Private Eye," November 2, 1947, *The Adventures of Sam Spade* (radio); Photo Files, Billy Rose Theatre Division; The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁷⁶⁷ Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, *Jack Benny and the Golden Age of American Radio Comedy* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 75.

devastating jibes at Jack. Likewise, Effie fades into the program background as the cast acts out Sam's retrospective narrative, only to reappear and disrupt the narrative flow with her emotional reactions.

Regardless – or perhaps because– of her role in authoring his capers, Effie clearly believes that Sam is working selflessly for the social good. This may be why she is usually satisfied with his limited financial resources, to the point where the pair frequently shares lighthearted jokes about Sam's trouble paying her salary. However, Effie does occasionally introduce her own perspective on money into their discussions about cases. She does not object to him charging little to no fee when clients cannot afford to pay, but she sees it as an economic injustice when Sam refuses to even out his generosity by charging more to wealthy clients. After Sam unravels a massive plot to rob a group of San Francisco banks and recovers over ten million dollars in cash for the city's wealthiest citizens in "The Blood Money Caper," Effie expresses dismay that he only brought in his "regular fee of twenty-five dollars a day and expenses."⁷⁶⁸ She cannot understand why he did not ask for a larger fee or take just "one little package of that money" when he found it in the robbers' hideout.⁷⁶⁹ Sam's reply – "Effie, I'm surprised at you! That wouldn't be ethical" – further reinforces his position as an honest, upstanding member of a fully egalitarian postwar community.⁷⁷⁰ In Sam's view, the work is what matters, and he will charge fair and uniform price for his services to rich and poor alike.

⁷⁶⁸ "The Adventures of Sam Spade (The Blood Money Caper)" (Radio Script, September 29, 1946), Folder 2, Box 1, Bill Spier and June Havoc Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁷⁶⁹ "The Adventures of Sam Spade (The Blood Money Caper)."

⁷⁷⁰ "The Adventures of Sam Spade (The Blood Money Caper)."

Sam's appeal to his professional ethics contrasts with Effie's more practical reminder that "the installment is due on the office furniture," but he cannot be swayed.⁷⁷¹ This exchange might be read as asserting Sam's moral superiority, but it also speaks to his impracticality. Effie may not be a wife yet, but she is sensible enough to know that a family cannot survive without an income. The program leaves it to listeners to resolve the tension between Sam's masculine and Effie's feminine outlooks on money. Her reference to office furniture might come across as the frivolous concern of a woman who was more interested in having stylish surroundings than justice, but most listeners would also have agreed with her that the bankers could and should have paid Sam more for his valuable services.

Despite her desire for more money, Effie's moral superiority is reinforced through juxtapositions with other women who fail to live up to society's standards: Effie is the working-class girl who made good by choosing the honest path rather than dirtying herself with crime. We can see one of her corrupted doppelgangers in the character of Della, murderess of "The Midway Caper." Sam is understandably wary of Della, a circus belly-dancer who tries to use her sexuality to ensnare Sam into a complicated plot to eliminate her husband and win control of his circus. Sam refuses to be drawn in by Della's charms and eventually turns her over to the police in a conclusion reminiscent of Brigid's arrest at the end of *The Maltese Falcon*. In this case, however, Sam's reluctance to see a beautiful woman imprisoned for murder appears to come more from his empathy for her difficult life than a desire to be with

⁷⁷¹ "The Adventures of Sam Spade (The Blood Money Caper)."

her. Before Hammett's Spade hands Brigid over to the police in *The Maltese Falcon*, he tells her that he won't save her "because all of me wants to – wants to say to hell with the consequences and do it."⁷⁷² Spade knows better than to give in to his desires, but he admits that the strength of his passions makes him wish that he could. Radio Sam replaces desire with pity. Concluding his report on "The Midway Caper," Sam tells Effie:

The last I saw of Della was in the shadows behind the tents at the carnival grounds. I told Dundy to pick her up. I couldn't do it. I guess those carny gals lead a pretty rugged life. Some of them, the smart ones, make you wonder why they chose it. Maybe they didn't. Maybe it chose them. Like some smart guys are detectives, and others make a living.⁷⁷³

By reducing Della to an object of misfortune, the episode draws a sharp contrast between the corrupted Della and the steadfast Effie, who has chosen to share Sam's uncertain lot in life rather than corrupting herself with get-rich-quick schemes. When Sam jokes that Effie should leave him for the carnival's India Rubber Man, she responds "I wouldn't want to work for him, Sam. He'd want to pay me regularly and I could pay my bills....oh, it'd upset my whole schedule."⁷⁷⁴ Personal ties and honesty are Effie's guiding principles.

While radio Effie is decidedly innocent, print advertisements run by CBS and Wildroot throughout the series' run show some confusion as to how to code her visually. In the few publicity images that featured actress Lurene Tuttle, Effie was depicted as more mature and collected, but still feminine. It would have been hard to

⁷⁷² Hammett, "The Maltese Falcon," 569.

⁷⁷³ "The Adventures of Sam Spade (The Midway Caper)" (Radio Script, October 27, 1946), 26, Folder 5, Box 2, Bill Spier and June Havoc Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁷⁷⁴ "The Adventures of Sam Spade (The Midway Caper)," 26.

do otherwise given that Tuttle was in her early 40s by the time the series aired. As Figure 10 shows, Tuttle had maintained a youthful appearance, but she could not pass for a teenager. Some images used Tuttle's age as a way to anchor her character to the actress's apparently safe, uncomplicated feminine respectability. One notable image [Figure 11] featured Tuttle playing a piano duet with her teenage daughter in a so-called "sister act" that simultaneously reassured audiences that she was a devoted mother and implied that she remained youthful despite her long career and daughter's age.⁷⁷⁵ At the same time, however, the photo's caption characterized Effie herself as "spinsterish."⁷⁷⁶ This characterization contradicted Effie's youthful aural characterization, and marks network discomfort with the idea of a young, innocent woman working alone with a worldly man. The spinster designation appears to be an effort to remove the issue of sex.

The idea that Effie was a spinster also contradicted Wildroot's more youthful, comic portrayals of Effie. Between 1947 and 1950, Wildroot further complicated Effie's public image through a series of comic strip advertisements featuring Sam and Effie solving small cases, usually with Wildroot Cream Oil forming a crucial part of the solution. These comics featured Effie in a range of personae. In February, 1947, Effie appears as a refined and elegant young lady, with shoulder-length blonde hair and a smart office dress [Figure 12].⁷⁷⁷ In a comic run that summer, she appears in a

⁷⁷⁵ CBS, "Effie At Home," April 20, 1948, The Adventures of Sam Spade (radio); Photo Files, Billy Rose Theatre Division; The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁷⁷⁶ CBS.

⁷⁷⁷ Wildroot, "The Adventures of Sam Spade," *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 1947.

two-piece bathing suit on the beach, but by the end of the strip she is shown in profile with darkening hair and a more child-like pose that emphasizes her youth and the comics' effort to inject more whimsy into the characters [Figure 13].⁷⁷⁸ This childish trend continues in the 1948 [Figures 14 and 15] and 1949 comics, though by 1949 Effie appeared slightly spunkier – more like a girl detective than frightened child [Figures 16 and 17]. This evolution demonstrates a growing effort to appeal to a broader family audience. Wildroot's advertisements throughout the series and in the comics seem mostly directed at the young men who were the chief users of their product, but the appeals also work to attract women, and especially mothers who might use Wildroot "for training children's hair."⁷⁷⁹ A more active Effie in the comics, which appear to have been run in newspaper comics sections, might appeal to young girls who were attracted to girl reporters like Lois Lane, whether or not they listened to the series. Still, even in the comics there is nothing Effie likes more than to cuddle up next to her Sam at the end of the case [Figure 18]. At these moments, Sam and Effie appear akin to any other young working-class couple just trying to get ahead.

Effie and Sam also come across as a couple in their exchanges at the end of each episode. Like the couples described in chapter four, these final scenes serve to further cement their relationship, even as they undercut the secretary's professional status. Having finished typing her report during the final commercial break, Effie

⁷⁷⁸ Wildroot, "The Case of the Web-Footed Burglar," *Boston Globe*, June 15, 1947.

⁷⁷⁹ "The Adventures of Sam Spade (The Caper With Ten Clues)" (Radio Script, n.d.), 2,28, Folder 3, Box 2, Bill Spier and June Havoc Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

hands it off to Sam for approval. While Sam usually offers some token praise for Effie's efficiency at the typewriter, it rapidly becomes clear that this is not the approval Effie is seeking. She often expresses her insecurity over the other women Sam describes in his reports; in "The Kimberly Cross Caper," Effie wishes that she could be one of his slinkily dressed blondes.⁷⁸⁰ To his credit, Sam replies that he likes her just the way she is. However, these potential tender moments are usually cut short – in this case because he is recovering from a gunshot wound. Sam spends most of the episode with his head in her lap, with only a brief interruption while Effie is typing up his case report – off-mic and during the commercial break. He does not even wait for her to hand him the finished report before he demands her lap as a pillow again. This intimacy emphasizes their close personal connection, but it also further reduces Effie to the role of nursemaid and definitely violates any theoretical boundary between employee and employer.

Of course, Sam and Effie can never truly be together while the series continues. While Sam makes it clear that he does appreciate her, the demands of his job continually prevent him from settling down. But Effie remains undaunted. So – apparently – does her mother, who invites Sam to Thanksgiving dinner and makes him chicken à la Sam Spade – because it has capers in it – when he is thrown in jail.

⁷⁸⁰ "The Kimberly Cross Caper," *The Adventures of Sam Spade* (New York: NBC, March 23, 1951).

Mixing Competence and Jealousy with Claire “Brooksie” Brooks (radio, West Coast Don Lee Network & syndicated 1946-1954)

Despite her very obvious affection for Sam, Effie does not appear concerned over when they will actually marry. Brooksie, however, is vocal about her impatience with her non-committal beau, George Valentine. Like Sam, George has dedicated himself to a life of adventure. Also like Sam, George ends up dividing his time between helping the helpless – including young orphans – and flirting with dangerous femmes fatales. However, unlike Effie, Brooksie insists on accompanying George into the field. And while Brooksie is useful in that capacity, the value of her labor is typically obscured by her romantic feelings for her employer.

If Effie is the ingénue, Brooksie is the comforting mother figure. Like Effie’s, Brooksie’s age is never specified, but Brooksie typically sounds older, smoother, and more confident than Effie. Actresses like Virginia Gregg imbued Brooksie’s voice with a warm, protective quality that marked her as competent and emotional rather than cool and professional. In truth, George and Brooksie operate much like the radio versions of Nick and Nora Charles. While George investigates, Brooksie calms distraught victims and attempts to smooth tensions between bickering family members. Brooksie is in her element when she is engaged in these social, relationship-oriented, and stereotypically feminine tasks. Her voice is steady, comforting, and self-confident. She is rarely at a loss for something to say, and she is able to help George connect to important witnesses.

Brooksie was also adept at undercover work in cases where a feminine touch

– or feminine sexuality – was necessary. As we will see in the following chapter, undercover work was a risky proposition for women because it highlighted the performative nature of their feminine roles. In “The Unfit Mother,” Brooksie emphasizes the performative nature of her subterfuge when she poses as a naïve Southern heiress in order to gain information from a lecherous man involved in a plot to strip a mother of custody of her child. Entering a nightclub alone, she proceeds to flirt with the suspect until he produces a crucial piece of evidence – the check he was given as payment for framing the mother as irresponsible – as proof of his financial prowess and connections. At that point, she calls George in to finish the job. Brooksie’s ability to flirt so readily with a strange man might appear to indicate that she is hiding a secret promiscuous streak, but actress Virginia Gregg’s performance took steps to distance Brooksie’s act from her true persona. First, when George first tells Brooksie he needs her to go to the nightclub, she innocently assumes that George will be going with her on a date. George’s tone remains uniformly calm, deep, and authoritative, but Brooksie’s conveys a range of emotions, from calm happiness at the thought of going out with George, to somewhat high-pitched incredulity at the thought that she would go to a nightclub alone, to stammering confusion and disappointment as he begins to outline his plan for her to come on to another man.⁷⁸¹ At the nightclub, Brooksie adopts an exaggerated Southern Belle persona that mixes excessive innocence with flirtatious charm. It also reminds listeners at home that the words we are hearing do not come from Brooksie herself, but rather from a false

⁷⁸¹ “The Unfit Mother,” *Let George Do It* (syndicated, June 21, 1948).

identity that she has put on at George's direction.

It is important that Brooksie only goes undercover at George's behest. Femmes fatales were seen as dangerous because they controlled and used their own sexuality against men. In the world of radio private eyes, however, it was perfectly acceptable for a law-abiding man to use a woman's sexuality to manipulate lawbreakers and bring them to justice. In "The Unfit Mother," Brooksie's subterfuge is further justified because she is helping George defend another woman's maternal rights against false accusations of promiscuity and drunk driving. Still, the program implies that Brooksie requires George's patriarchal supervision to carry the act off, and to remain within the bounds of respectable femininity. Once she has distracted her mark, it would have been easy for her to steal the check from him without his knowledge. Instead, George swoops in to end the encounter, dismiss Brooksie, and take charge of the check himself. This arrangement ensured that Brooksie would not be shown engaging in any underhanded behavior like picking a pocket. It also ensured that she would not have to extricate herself from a sexually charged encounter with a strange man. Once George arrived, Brooksie could fade into the background and return to the safety of her home – alone. Likewise, her incessant preoccupation with marrying George may be seen as another way to excuse writers' decision to make her into a sexual being at all.

Like Effie, Brooksie rarely encountered physical danger, but the program still made it clear that – like any normal woman – she feared violence and needed George to defend her. Indeed, her fear occasionally incapacitated her, especially when she or

someone she loved was threatened. In “The Stand In,” Brooksie’s smooth tones collapse into breathless terror when she finds George beaten in an alley.⁷⁸² In this moment, Brooksie ceases to be the calm professional assistant. Desperate to help the man she loves – and without her strong protector – she has to recruit a cabbie to help her get George to a hospital, and when George disappears from the alley she cannot make a cabbie believe her story or think of what to do next. This moment of weakness reassured audiences that, despite her unusual freedoms, Brooksie has not lost any of her femininity.

Secretaries like Brooksie also proved their femininity by providing maternal care to clients in need of emotional support that a man was stereotypically less equipped to offer. Still, their moral authority was inferior to their detectives’. Near the end of “The Unfit Mother,” Brooksie disagrees with George about how to go about repairing the fractured relationship between their client and her young daughter, Penny. The child idolizes her dead father and hates her mother, but George has learned that the father was an embezzler who committed suicide. George plans to tell the girl the truth in a bid to force her to empathize with her mother. Brooksie strongly objects to this plan, fearing that it will drive the already traumatized Penny to a breaking point and cause her to reject everyone around her. George dismisses Brooksie’s soft but firm warning that Penny is a “sensitive, unpredictable child” with a brusque insistence that “Penny is young...with a whole life to get over any sort of

⁷⁸² “The Stand-In,” *Let George Do It* (syndicated, November 17, 1952).

shock.”⁷⁸³ Brooksie goes along with his plan, but for a moment, her warning appears to be warranted. After George arranges for Penny to overhear him telling her mother what he has learned about Penny’s dead father, the girl runs off screaming, “I’ll never believe that about my father!”⁷⁸⁴ But George is proven right, however. His badgering pays off in an emotional courtroom scene in which Penny chooses to return to her mother instead of going to live with her grandmother. After the two are tearfully reunited, Brooksie acknowledges his forward-thinking solution. She also hints to the judge that he might be able to marry her and George “soon,” further displaying her eagerness to join herself to George and live under his moral and physical authority.⁷⁸⁵

Brooksie overtly connects her labor to her hopes for marriage in episodes like “The Stand In.” The episode begins with Brooksie and George returning to the office after a night on the town. As they enter the one semi-domestic space that they explicitly share, Brooksie promises George a special surprise meant to cap off the evening. As George expectantly waits for her to tell him what new case they have to investigate, Brooksie proudly displays their newly balanced account books, which appear to show their business success. Brooksie attempts to use the news of their bank balance, combined with a new, slinky green dress, to lead George into a romantic interlude – and possibly even a marriage proposal. However, his already divided attention is diverted by the sight of a strange man who, he realizes, has been

⁷⁸³ “The Unfit Mother.”

⁷⁸⁴ “The Unfit Mother.”

⁷⁸⁵ “The Unfit Mother.”

following him all day. The ensuing case further frustrates Brooksie, who is forced to pose as George's social secretary while he poses as another man engaged to another woman (while the other man poses as George). At one point, the embittered Brooksie complains that if George is going to give away his name to people, she "knows who he should give it to."⁷⁸⁶ By the end of the episode, Brooksie and George have reconciled. Still, George is more cheerful than apologetic as he points out a crucial error in Brooksie's accounting: all of their savings will be gone come tax time, leaving the business broke once more. This deflates his secretary's not-so-subtle hope that she will finally be able to convince him to settle down and raise a family. Instead, the pair recommits to their work, with the vague promise of future reward.

Despite George's meager finances, Brooksie rarely worries about bills – office or personal – coming due. George may not yet be the "tycoon" she hopes he will become, but he appears to live a comfortable lifestyle, as does she.⁷⁸⁷ In "Santa Claus in Glass," Brooksie and George celebrate Christmas in Brooksie's refined apartment, right next door to the apartment of a wealthy couple the pair helps to reunite. The program never explains how Brooksie affords her apartment, or why George has such little money in his bank account. Instead, it relies on the established radio stereotype that private investigators are inevitably broke because they put helping their clients before profit. However, such a state of poverty would not have been seen as appropriate for a respectable woman. As the program's representative of middle-

⁷⁸⁶ "The Stand-In."

⁷⁸⁷ "The Stand-In."

class values, it was important that listeners imagined Brooksie living in a well-furnished apartment in a neighborhood where she would be safe from attack.

Interestingly, while Sam's office serves as Sam and Effie's home base, George and Brooksie spend much less time in George's office. We never visit Effie's mother's house in *Sam Spade*, but George has a surprising level of access to Brooksie's apartment for an employer. He refuses to take the final step of actually asking her to marry him, but he often calls her at home to join him on cases, even in the middle of the night, as when he wakes her at 4:00 in the morning with the Biblical Ruth's promise of fidelity, "whither thou goest I goest."⁷⁸⁸ Brooksie's apartment is also the scene of their most domestic, heart-warming moments. In "Santa Claus in Glass," George seems perfectly at home helping Brooksie to prepare a Christmas duck in her kitchen as they reminisce over their childhood Christmases. George even goes so far as to compare Brooksie's cooking favorably to his mother's, and to tell her that "this has been a pretty swell Christmas, the best we've ever had together," implying that this holiday is but one in a long string of holidays they have and will celebrate as a couple.⁷⁸⁹

Brooksie and George do occasionally flirt with the edge of a more conventional marital relationship. In early episodes, Brooksie's adolescent brother, Sonny, joined her and George on many of their cases.⁷⁹⁰ Sonny was ostensibly George's assistant, but he came dangerously close to serving as the detective's

⁷⁸⁸ "The Dead of Night," *Let George Do It* (syndicated, October 13, 1952).

⁷⁸⁹ "Santa Claus in Glass," *Let George Do It* (syndicated, December 25, 1950).

⁷⁹⁰ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 391.

surrogate son. This might have simply been a way to mark George as an empathetic postwar patriarch, but it also pulled him into a precariously committed relationship with Sonny's other caretaker, Brooksie. In episodes like "The Brookdale Orphanage," Brooksie and George appear to be co-parenting the irresponsible boy, who fails to show up and complete a crucial task at the proper moment despite careful coaching.⁷⁹¹ There is some evidence within the episode that producers tried to avoid this reading: Brooksie leaves it to George to direct Sonny without her help, and seems to disavow all responsibility for him, or even knowledge about his location. However, in the end, Brooksie and George both chastise Sonny for getting distracted at the movies. Instead of Brooksie and George lecturing Sonny separately in their respective capacities as parental figure and employer, the pair joins together and alternates admonishments about his irresponsibility.⁷⁹²

Of course, the other alternative – that George acts as a father figure to both of the Brooks siblings – was even less palatable given George and Brooksie's flirtations. The fact that producers abandoned this dynamic within the series' first few months implies that they did not feel that it left enough room for George to act independently, or enough suspense in his relationship with Brooksie. George's resistance to Brooksie's domestic designs does not signal an all-out rejection of the domestic sphere, but it does echo contemporary discomfort with the so-called "tender trap" of marriage: as historian Jessica Weiss (2000) put it, "in the 1950s, marriage might be

⁷⁹¹ "The Brookdale Orphanage," *Let George Do It* (syndicated, October 25, 1946).

⁷⁹² "The Brookdale Orphanage."

criticized, but it was inescapable.”⁷⁹³ And even as the institution stripped women of their public freedoms, it also ‘trapped’ men with the responsibility of providing for a family. This responsibility was too much for George and his fellow detectives, who represented a bastion of male freedom. Furthermore, a married detective would of necessity be a poor representative of legal justice because his loyalties would be divided between his family and his clients. Still, detectives like George got to have their cake and eat it too – they avoided committing to marriage and a growing family, but they could enjoy many of the by-products of their secretaries’ femininity, including comfortable office spaces and access to even more comfortable apartments.

Too Classy to be Jealous? The Della Street Story (radio, CBS 1943-1955/TV, CBS 1957-1966)

If Myrna Loy’s Nora Charles was the perfect American wife, Barbara Hale’s Della Street was the perfect postwar secretary. Her attributes, outlined in a character description memo prepared for the 1957 television series, represent the apex of office wifely perfection. Twenty-seven-year old Della was professional and unflappable, with far-seeing eyes and an assured, efficient demeanor borne of her upper-class background. Gardner justified Della’s need to work for money by invoking the stock market crash of 1929, but, as her refusal to marry Perry shows, she enjoyed her labor. On television, her relationship with her boss was “cordial in the extreme but entirely proper.”⁷⁹⁴ “Tactful, intelligent, loyal, human and affectionate,” Della “never

⁷⁹³ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 16.

⁷⁹⁴ “Della Street.”

presume[d] upon her friendship with Mason or his friendship for her,” but completed her assigned tasks with quiet efficiency.⁷⁹⁵ Despite her chaste attire and modest demeanor, Della was “sufficiently well endowed to bring out the wolf in [Paul] Drake [the private eye Perry employed for some of his investigative work] at almost any time.”⁷⁹⁶ This open appreciation meant nothing to Della, however. Rather, she focused her attention on Perry, whom she regarded “with tender solicitude” that emphasized her sweet, jealousy-free loyalty.

As I have already noted, Della’s idealized and selfless femininity was a sales tactic for Gardner, who argued that readers’ frustrated desire to see Della rewarded with marriage drove book sales.⁷⁹⁷ Whether imbued with confidence by the intertextual promise of Perry’s ultimate love or restricted by postwar television’s increasing paranoia over premarital sex, broadcast Della manifested none of the jealousy that plagued Brooksie’s working relationship with George. While Della and Perry’s warm, convivial rapport would be the envy of any contemporary sitcom couple, they could just as easily have been read as good friends and coworkers. Even more than Brooksie, Della operates as a bridge between Perry’s masculine rationality and the feminized emotional excess of many of the firm’s female clients. This was especially true in the radio soap opera, where her role was expanded from the source material to appeal to daytime radio’s presumed female audience. As Jim Cox (1999) points out, *Perry Mason* was one of the few daytime soap operas to center its action

⁷⁹⁵ “Della Street.”

⁷⁹⁶ “Della Street.”

⁷⁹⁷ “Della Street.”

on a young, active male character.⁷⁹⁸ Still, Perry was surrounded by strong women, including Della and the many women they either helped or combatted. Indeed, while Cox sees the “bright young masculine professional” Perry Mason as an aberration in a sea of “philosophizing or senile [old men], or [men] in a contrived story where the lead was flanked by an ambitious woman,” the detective arguably served the same role as the wise and gentle patriarchs Elana Levine (2020) highlights as the moral center of contemporary radio soap operas.⁷⁹⁹ Perry may have done his best to control the action around him, but more often than not, he was responding to events driven by virtuous and criminal women.

Still, even in this sea of overlapping plots and competing personal motivations, Della was one of the few women capable of putting her fears aside and thinking clearly in a crisis. And, despite her general honesty, she also had the sense and judgment to know when it might be permissible to tell small lies to serve the greater truth. As such, she helped Perry guide young women who fell victim to others’ machinations and stood as a stark contrast to duplicitous femmes fatales. Few recordings of the *Perry Mason* soap opera exist, but large portions of at least one 1954 storyline involving an auto theft ring are available. Part of the criminals’ plan involves framing Kate Beekman, a young woman *Radio-TV Mirror* called one of Perry’s “youngest, most helpless clients,” for murder.⁸⁰⁰ As a victim, Kate represents

⁷⁹⁸ Cox, *The Great Radio Soap Operas*, 178.

⁷⁹⁹ Elana Levine, *Her Stories: Daytime Soap Opera and US Television History* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming), chap. 2.

⁸⁰⁰ “Perry Mason: Can Kate Beekman Escape from a Web of Violence and Murder?,” *Radio-TV Mirror*, February 1954.

pure innocence on trial. Pictured in *Radio-TV Mirror* as a young, clean-cut blonde, Kate worked in a nightclub to earn money for her family after her father went to prison (after being framed by a member of the same gang) [Figure 19]. Despite her anger at her father, whose prison sentence ruined her promising dancing career, Kate is a dutiful daughter who is too innocent to suspect the others who are framing her. Over the course of the storyline, Della hides Kate at her own apartment, where she cooks, cleans, and generally reassures everyone that she is far too sweet to have murdered a man. Her presence also gave *Perry Mason*'s writers a good opportunity to subtly expand listeners' mental picture of Della's home life: Della typically employs a maid, she keeps garlic around because it is good for colds, and so on. These minor domestic touches humanize the secretary and reassure us that she is a normal American woman. They also give Della a chance to act maternally toward Kate. Della reassures and empowers the young woman by telling her how important her memories of working in the nightclub might be in helping Perry defend her. Della also has to instruct Kate carefully in how to use the typewriter and bolster her confidence about her own recollections.

Della's interactions with Kate provide a more complicated vision of feminine virtue and morality. Throughout, Della displays a quiet strength and flexibility that Kate cannot muster. Despite her family's misfortunes, Kate has retained an overly simplistic view of good and evil, which made her easy prey for the gang's machinations. Kate's sense of honesty is so extreme that she is surprised to hear that Della has lied to a neighbor by giving a false reason for coming home in the middle

of the day. Kate does not blame Della for telling the neighbor that she has come home to retrieve a file of letters, but she does feel guilty that Della had to lie in order to hide Kate's presence in the apartment.⁸⁰¹ It falls to Della to explain to the younger woman that sometimes it is all right to tell a small lie in the service of the greater good. Still, Kate has difficulty grasping the difference between small, harmless lies and larger, more dangerous ones. She even suggests that she could lie if the police ask her if she was in the apartment of the man she is suspected of killing. Della quickly explains that such a big lie would be wrong, and tells Kate that in such a situation she should remain silent altogether and rely on Perry Mason to speak for her. This interaction demonstrates Della's uniqueness. She – presumably like the listeners who identified with her – is mature and knowledgeable enough to balance competing notions of right and wrong, but young and immature women like Kate still need strong men and women like Perry and Della to guide them. In the end, Della sets Kate's mind at ease by finding a file of letters to bring to the office, prompting Kate to exclaim that she is “so glad [Della] didn't fib” after all!⁸⁰²

It is rarely stated so explicitly, but Della's confidence and power comes from her access to knowledge. As the announcer notes in one anxiety-provoking episode intro, “but if you could stand with Della and look over Perry's shoulder” you too would know that he had a plan to ensure that everything was going to be ok.⁸⁰³ Della may not know everything that Perry has planned for his cases, but she has more

⁸⁰¹ “Della Talks With Kate,” *Perry Mason* (CBS, 1954).

⁸⁰² “Della Talks With Kate.”

⁸⁰³ “The Squeaking Witness,” *Perry Mason* (CBS, March 11, 1952).

access to the inner workings of her boss's mind than most secretaries. This access to knowledge allowed Della to bridge the artificial division that radio and television broadcasters maintained between male and female worlds and psyches. Unlike Kate, she knows the difference between a good and bad lie because she has extensive experience making such judgments. Della mixed rationality with emotion across both radio and television, taking on the time-consuming task of explaining Perry's plans to wary and/or frightened clients. In cases where the plan needed to remain a secret, she usually managed to convince clients to give her boss the benefit of the doubt by referencing his long record of past successes. Della's close working relationship with Perry was highlighted in at least one 1951 CBS promotional still [Figure 20]. Suggestively titled "Clever Combine," the photo shows Perry and "his secretary-confidante Della" consulting in an office setting.⁸⁰⁴ Perry sits higher than Della and holds an open law book in his hands, but Della's suspicious, pensive expression conveys the impression that she is not afraid to bring her own experience to bear on the case before them. Her raised eyebrows imply that she might even disagree with her employer's opinion. The caption subtly asserts Della's right to have and advocate for her own views by naming Perry and Della co-champions of "the cause of justice" who both spend "endless hours outwitting would-be law-breakers."⁸⁰⁵

On television, Della remains omnipresent, but she is far less vocal. This shift was partly a natural result of the format change. Once she could be seen in televised

⁸⁰⁴ "Clever Combine" (CBS, March 20, 1951), Perry Mason (radio); Photo Files, Billy Rose Theatre Division; The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁸⁰⁵ "Clever Combine."

images, Della no longer had to speak in order for audiences to know that she was there. However, this transition did change the quality of her presence. While she continued to play an important role in Perry's televised investigations, Della became more of a background figure, somewhat in line with the housewives with whom she shared the late-1950s primetime landscape. Indeed, *Variety*'s review of the program's first episode noted that actress "Barbara Hale gets billing as the Girl Friday but on the premiere stanza was virtually limited to a walk-on role."⁸⁰⁶ Her role expanded in later episodes, but not by much. Della was there, and clearly very busy, but the primetime, family-audience drama did not center her to the extent that the daytime, female-audience soap opera had. This was partly because there was less space for Della's particular skills on primetime television. Where radio Della engaged in extended conversations with clients, television producers favored scenes involving physical action or conversational conflict. As the office peacekeeper, Della's radio conversations were almost always directed at calming a client or giving them instructions on Perry's behalf. While these sorts of conversations were effective ways to recapitulate the plot in an ongoing serialized radio series, they were rare on a weekly episodic television program. More often than not, Perry was shown briefly instructing Della to attend to some secret task that she would then take care of off-screen. This tactic increased the episode's suspense by cuing the audience to expect one of Perry's famous courtroom revelations, but it also forced Della further into the

⁸⁰⁶ Rose, "Television Reviews: Perry Mason (The Case of the Restless Redhead)," *Variety*, September 25, 1957.

background and obscured the active role she continued to play in her boss's cases. And, because we rarely see her instructing a client on Perry's behalf, we lose access to her opinions on cases.

This is not to say that Della did not express her opinions on television. She just did so more subtly. Furthermore, those opinions were typically more focused on interpersonal relationships and gender relations. In *The Case of the Empty Tin*, she rolls her eyes in expressive annoyance when their frequent collaborator, Paul Drake jokes, "what some women will do for a man is just plain murder."⁸⁰⁷ This subtle approach does bear fruit. Paul never changes his behavior, which the show seems to characterize as loveable and ultimately harmless flirtation, but Perry does join Della in quietly condemning Paul's excessively misogynist joke. However, Della is much less likely to question Perry's judgment. Paul may question Perry's objectivity in some cases, including one involving an old friend accused of murder, but Della stands firmly by Perry's side because she – along with the audience – knows that Perry is always right to believe in his client's innocence.⁸⁰⁸ Indeed, while the Perry of Gardner's early novels asserted that he would defend and exonerate any client, whether guilty or innocent, Gardner insisted that all of the attorney's television clients must "have reasonable intelligence and unquestioned honesty" because "we cannot afford to have Mason's legal knowledge and integrity used as a shield to protect a

⁸⁰⁷ Andrew McLaglen, Raymond Burr, and Barbara Hale, "The Case of the Empty Tin," *Perry Mason* (CBS, March 8, 1958), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0673252/>.

⁸⁰⁸ "The Case of the Half-Wakened Wife," *Perry Mason* (CBS, March 15, 1958).

wrongdoer.”⁸⁰⁹ Having Della question his objectivity would have either undermined the solid image of integrity conveyed by Perry’s solemn demeanor and actor Raymond Burr’s substantial shoulders, or made viewers question Della’s own loyalty and intelligence.

Because she had fewer opportunities to speak, the television version of Della conveyed her loyalty through presence. She was almost always there with Perry, or at least easy for him to reach. When it came to client meetings, both Perry and Della typically insisted on Della being present. When clients requested that she leave the office during meetings with the lawyer, he refused with a simple explanation that Della is “my *confidential* secretary.”⁸¹⁰ This was usually related in a tone that implied Della was an extension of himself. In most cases he told clients that they could leave if they did not want her there, and in at least one, he and Della began to walk out the door before the potential client stopped them.⁸¹¹ This posturing was not just an instance of solidarity with his secretary, however. Perry relied heavily on Della’s detailed memory and notes to keep track of case details. Without Della to act as an extension of his own memory, it would have been impossible for him to connect crucial but seemingly irrelevant facts within a sea of detail. Della also insists on accompanying Perry to meetings with clients whenever she can. However, unlike a wife like Jean Abbott, or even a secretary like Brooksie, it is clear that Della’s

⁸⁰⁹ Erle Stanley Gardner, “Notes on ‘The Case of the Tormented Tramp,’” July 15, 1961, Box 21; Robert Leslie Bellem Papers (Collection 1008), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA; Erle Stanley Gardner, *The Case of the Velvet Claws* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1933).

⁸¹⁰ McLaglen, Burr, and Hale, “The Case of the Empty Tin.” Original emphasis.

⁸¹¹ McLaglen, Burr, and Hale.

devotion to her job is borne of her conscientious efficiency. In *The Case of the Half-Wakened Wife*, Perry and Della are working late at the office when he receives a desperate telegram from one of his old army friends asking for help. In the resolutely heterosexual world of *Perry Mason*, there is no reason for Della to worry about this man turning Perry's head, but when he tries to tell her to go home and get some rest and says he will go see the man alone, she responds with a half laughing "Wanna bet?" and follows him out the door.⁸¹²

On television, Della oversees a large office with multiple secretaries and assistants. This arrangement simultaneously established her as a powerful businesswoman and reasserted her inherent domesticity. Indeed, the office suite partially replicates a more conventional domestic space, encompassing a public receiving room, law library, the inner office that Della typically shares with Perry, and other rooms that are mentioned as needed. The conference table in Perry's office is easily converted to a dining room table – complete with tablecloth and silverware – when the need arises.⁸¹³ Within this space, Della functions as mother and Perry as father. Ever the efficient and dedicated office wife, she works almost as many hours as he does, often losing track of time on late nights of work. Most episodes begin with Della and Perry in the office. As with other detective/secretary pairs, this is the only domestic space that the pair can legally – or at least morally – share on television, and they take full advantage of it. Episodes occasionally depict Della and

⁸¹² "The Case of the Half-Wakened Wife."

⁸¹³ "The Case of the Sleepwalker's Niece," *Perry Mason* (CBS, September 28, 1957).

Perry dining together in formal clothing, but their most intimate moments happen within the office. Della is always quick with a pot of coffee whenever she sees her boss flagging, and in rare moments when Della falls asleep on the couch, Perry covers her with a blanket or coat. These moments are further tagged as affectionate by the receiver's response – Perry's grateful nods and Della's sleepy smile as she snuggles deeper into her boss's jacket make it clear to viewers that each appreciates and values the other's attention and care.⁸¹⁴

It is hard to know how audiences received Della's diminished role, or why she did not inspire more imitators. Certainly, *Variety* reviewers continued to discount Della's role in the series, referring to her looks and position but rarely commenting on her actions. A representative review from the show's final season premier simply noted that Perry's "week-in, week-out secretary, was decorative and charming" as ever.⁸¹⁵ As the program progressed, it also further centered Perry as the lone purveyor of detective heroism, at the expense of the rest of the cast. In season one, *Perry Mason's* opening theme featured Della, Paul, District Attorney Hamilton Burger and Police Lt. Arthur Tragg. By the end of season three, however, the supporting players had stopped appearing when their names were listed on screen. They continued to work with (or against) Perry, but the network appears to have seen the title character as the program's central draw and relegated Della to supporting player status.

⁸¹⁴ "The Case of the Half-Wakened Wife."

⁸¹⁵ Horo., "Television Reviews: Perry Mason (The Case of the Cheating Chancellor)," *Variety*, October 6, 1965.

Managing Miscegenation with Peggy Fair (TV, CBS 1967-1975)

If it had not been for the violent civil unrest of the late-1960s, Della Street might well have been the last television office wife. Even as Della was fading into the background, young, single women were becoming more prominent on television. In the years after *Perry Mason* was cancelled in 1966, they made significant inroads into primetime programs in their own right. As I discuss in chapter six, *Honey West* failed to find a lasting place on ABC in 1965, but the very next year, *That Girl* (ABC, 1966-1971) did prove that a show about a young, single woman having fun in the big city could find popularity. As Katherine Lehman (2011) reminds us, *That Girl* was not the first sitcom to center on a single woman. However, it was the first to show a single woman focusing on – and finding success in – her own career and romantic priorities instead of simply supporting those of her male boss or boyfriend.⁸¹⁶ Della's all-consuming focus on Perry may have made it harder for young female audiences to relate to Della in the same way their mothers might have done in the 1950s, but Marlo had ambitions of her own.

But then came the “long, hot summer of 1967.”⁸¹⁷ After over 150 race riots broke out across the United States, President Lyndon B. Johnson established the Kerner Commission to investigate the causes of urban violence and inequality. While the resulting Kerner Report cited federal and state governments' failure to provide adequate housing, education, and social services, it reserved special criticism for

⁸¹⁶ Katherine J. Lehman, *Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 83.

⁸¹⁷ Kelly Gonsalves, “The ‘Long, Hot Summer of 1967,’” *The Week*, August 2, 2017, <https://theweek.com/captured/712838/long-hot-summer-1967>.

American mass media. The report's authors concluded their section of press coverage of the riots by noting that "along with the country as a whole, the press has too long basked in a white world, looking out of it, if at all, with white men's eyes and a white perspective."⁸¹⁸ Torn between their fear of federal regulation and their fear of alienating white Southern audiences, the national networks responded with a short-lived wave of programs featuring prominent Black supporting characters, and an even smaller number of programs revolving around Black stars. And so it was that, in 1968, two years after Della disappeared from the airwaves, Peggy Fair took up the torch of the office wife, with a few significant variations on the standard model. For one, she was a widow with a young son. For another, she was Black.

The networks may have committed themselves to depicting more Black faces on their airwaves in the late 1960s, but, as Aniko Bodroghkozy (1992) reminds us, they were loath to actually support programs aimed at a Black audience. Instead, they mostly turned to colorblind initiatives like NBC's earlier Integration Without Identification (IWI) effort. At best, this assimilationist impulse meant that minority actors were slotted into supposedly neutral, but inherently white, middle-class roles. The networks' few token programs starring Black performers were generally expected to fail; NBC was shocked when *Julia* (1968-1971) did not "die a noble, dignified death" after they scheduled it against CBS's popular *Red Skelton Show*

⁸¹⁸ Otto Kerner et al., *Report of The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 213, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000339500>.

(NBC TV 1951-1953 & 1970-1971, CBS TV 1953-1970).⁸¹⁹ The sitcom, featuring Black widowed mother and nurse, Julia, and her son, Corey, lasted for three contentious seasons. During that time, it frustrated many Black viewers with its limited and white-washed depictions of Black family life. *Julia* also angered a vocal group of white women who felt that, because Julia was more glamorous and accomplished than her white housewife neighbor, the program uplifted Black women at white women's expense.⁸²⁰ Debates about racial identity continued to follow Peggy throughout her time on *Mannix*; one 1970 *Variety* reviewer expressed his discomfort with Peggy's middle-class lifestyle by describing actress Gail Fisher as Mannix's "tan girl Friday" and noting that she "is from the upper-middleclass (sic) of ethnic pretending."⁸²¹ Given that the same reviewer had previously referred to Peggy as Mannix's "Negro assistant," it is unlikely that he was taking issue with the lack of racial complexity on the program.⁸²² Rather, his comment points to white discomfort with Black people being represented as inherently the same as whites.

Despite the moderate success of Black-starring programs like *Julia* and *I Spy* (1965-1968), the networks were far more likely to add Black characters to existing programs.⁸²³ Peggy herself was a second-season addition to *Mannix*. After quitting Intertect, the high-tech detective agency with which he clashed for most of his first

⁸¹⁹ Aniko Bodroghkozy, "'Is This What You Mean by Color TV?' Race, Gender, and Contested Meanings in NBC's 'Julia,'" in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 143.

⁸²⁰ Bodroghkozy, 153.

⁸²¹ Bill, "Television Reviews: Mannix," *Variety*, September 23, 1970.

⁸²² Bill, "Television Reviews: Mannix," *Variety*, October 1, 1969.

⁸²³ David Kaufman, "Blacks as Regulars in 17 TV Series Next Fall; Some Topliners or Costars," *Variety*, March 18, 1970.

season, Mannix set out his own shingle and opened an office on the ground floor of his Los Angeles home. *Variety* was unenthusiastic when Peggy joined Mannix as secretary. One season two review noted that “from her very brief appearances on the [premiere] it’s hard to tell whether her support will be substantial” in comparison to the white male agency executive she replaced.⁸²⁴ Black-focused publications like *Jet*, on the other hand, hailed Fisher’s role as an example of a Black woman “making good.”⁸²⁵ Fisher went on to win an Emmy and two Golden Globes for the role.

It is true that Peggy did help to change *Mannix*’s tone, though it might be more accurate to argue that her race changed the nature of the secretary’s role. As secretary, she helped to both obscure and highlight the program’s inherent nostalgia for a time when men were unquestionably in charge of law enforcement and justice. This conflict was most apparent in the series’ first season, when rough-and-tumble PI Joe Mannix battled with executives at his high-tech agency. More often than not, Mannix refused their computer-driven orders, arguing – and proving – that the personal, emotional, intuitive approach was better, even if it might result in more violence. Mannix’s investigative approach did not change after he left the agency, but there was no one left to question his methods. Like Effie, Brooksie, and Della, Peggy stood steadfastly by her boss. Indeed, she was less likely to disagree with her boss than many earlier white secretaries had been. Throughout the series, Peggy embodied the idealized persona of “pert, efficient secretary,” which had become

⁸²⁴ Syd., “Television Reviews: Mannix,” *Variety*, October 2, 1968.

⁸²⁵ “Former ‘Mis Black N.J.’ Gail Fisher Making Good,” *Jet*, January 6, 1972.

outdated for white women on network television.⁸²⁶ In holding her up as a role model to young Black women, CBS executives either did not realize or did not care that they were perpetuating stereotypes about Black women as selfless caretakers who would always put their white employers' needs before their own. Still, like the white secretaries who came before her, Peggy worked within these stereotypes to chart her own course as an independent, self-sufficient woman who enjoyed her labor and – even more than Effie or Brooksie – was respected for her skills.

It is important to remember that either CBS or the program's producers could have given Mannix a white secretary. Throughout season one, he regularly flirted with an array of attractive blondes and brunettes who worked in Intertect's offices, any of which might have plausibly come to work for him. Moreover, making Peggy Black also destabilized the established romantic connection between secretary and detective. Despite Mannix actor Mike Connors' vocal embrace of his Armenian heritage both on and off the show, he still presented as white enough that the networks would have been worried about offending Southern and racist white audiences with any hint of miscegenation.

Peggy's race simultaneously constrained and freed her narrative options. While her racial identity foreclosed romance with her boss – Peggy's first appearance came just one year after the United States Supreme Court overturned state miscegenation laws in *Loving v. Virginia* – it opened a whole host of other

⁸²⁶ "Jencks Says 'Contracts With Minority Groups Peril TV As Mass Medium,'" *Variety*, January 27, 1971, 43.

opportunities for her to transgress restrictions on traditionally white femininity. For one, unlike contemporary film and television representations of Black women, Peggy was not hypersexualized. Indeed, in some ways Peggy's Blackness, aided by her motherhood, served as a protective chastity belt for her reputation. At the very least, these two character traits put an implicit wall between secretary and boss. By the late 1960s, few viewers would have believed that a secretary and detective who kissed in one scene would not go upstairs to have sex in the detective's apartment during the commercial break. However, despite increasing public awareness of female sexuality through the 1960s, women – and especially white women – were still condemned for having premarital sex.⁸²⁷ Broadcasters were especially slow to acknowledge the 1960s sexual revolution in their programming, and they remained wedded to a conservative framework that emphasized heterosexual monogamy even after they began to embrace a new sexual culture in 1968.⁸²⁸ Within such a context, it would have been hard to justify an ongoing sexual relationship between two recurring characters who were not married to each other.

Instead of trying to navigate a sexual relationship between secretary and boss, *Mannix's* producers tried to separate sex from companionship altogether. This was partly possible because *Mannix's* episodes were twice as long as earlier radio crime dramas, giving writers more room to introduce short-term flirtations without distracting from the core plot. *Mannix* frequently flirted, and even slept with, white

⁸²⁷ Lehman, *Those Girls*, 22.

⁸²⁸ Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 6,11.

clients or witnesses, but his relationship with Peggy remained virtuous and respectful. Peggy had fewer flirtations, but – perhaps in an effort to discourage potential rumors that she and Mannix were secretly an item – she did date a series of Black men throughout the series. In one season four episode, Peggy even falls in love with an African politician she meets while recovering from a gunshot wound in the hospital.⁸²⁹ The relationship is brief and chaste, but serious enough that she introduces him to her aunts and considers moving to his country to be with him.

Still, viewers who wished to imagine an interracial relationship between Peggy and Mannix had plenty of room to do so. Despite Peggy’s nonchalant attitude towards her boss’s flirtations, she guards her role as his secretary with a jealous fervor. She becomes irrationally indignant when she hears another woman “with a sexy voice” claiming to be Mannix’s secretary answer his phone while she is in the hospital.⁸³⁰ Another episode begins with Mannix returning to his empty office to find a note from Peggy asking if he means to replace her with the new coffee maker that arrived that afternoon.⁸³¹ Moreover, Mannix plays an active role in Peggy’s life and acts as a surrogate father figure to her son, Toby. At various points, Mannix takes Toby to movies, the zoo, and on other excursions. He also joins mother and son for vacations at his cabin. Still, the network could readily point to Peggy and Mannix’s lack of physical contact, as well as the fact that her dead husband was Mannix’s close friend, to refute any complaints from racist viewers, as well as those who objected to

⁸²⁹ Paul Krasny, “The World Between,” *Mannix* (Los Angeles: CBS, November 7, 1970).

⁸³⁰ Krasny.

⁸³¹ Bill Bixby, “The Empty Tower,” *Mannix* (Los Angeles: CBS, February 16, 1975).

premarital sex.

Peggy was also allowed to do more than previous secretaries. For one, she was allowed to admit that she worked for money, even occasionally commenting that she was happy to stay late because that meant that Mannix had to pay her overtime. More freedom of action was not always a good thing, however. While she was not a full partner, and did not seek out danger, Peggy encountered more threats than most white secretaries. In addition to her bullet wound, which she received after throwing hot coffee at an irate criminal who threatened her boss with a gun, Peggy was also kidnapped more than once. In “A Choice of Evils,” a crime boss takes her hostage to force Mannix to uncover a police spy within his organization.⁸³² Despite her fear, Peggy does not collapse like Brooksie. Instead, she maintains a close watch on her surroundings and, when her first escape attempt fails, finds a way to relay the address of the house where she is being held to her boss through the daily proof of life pictures her captors send. All the while, she works to build rapport with one of her captors by learning about his life and listening to his hopes and dreams. Peggy’s ability to take care of herself is admirable, but it is also a harsh reminder of the significant physical and sexual threats that Black women faced in the postwar United States. Mannix might be ready to rush to her aid, but he was not her husband, and so was not always around to protect her. Instead, she had to fend for herself, and for her young son.

Beyond physical protection, Peggy also lacked economic stability. After her

⁸³² Paul Krasny, “A Choice of Evils,” *Mannix* (Los Angeles: CBS, October 11, 1971).

husband, who ostensibly acted as provider, died in the line of duty, Peggy had no recourse other than a return to work. Despite the fact that she had a child at home, Peggy was not exempted from the expectation that she would happily put her detective's needs before her own, working long hours for little pay and leaving Toby at home with a babysitter. Some mothers might enjoy freedom from the expectation that they should always be at their children's beck and call, but Peggy had no choice. Christine Acham (2004) argues that both Peggy and Julia's relatively middle-class lifestyles represent part of an effort to recuperate the image of the Black family after another federal report – the 1965 Moynihan Report on Black poverty – blamed single motherhood and a “ghetto mindset” for Black poverty.⁸³³ However, they also obscured the very real struggles that Black women faced living in a society that discriminated against them on the basis of their gender and race.

Conclusion

It is worth wondering how Peggy would have been characterized differently if she were white. Would audiences who were gradually adjusting to more active, independent, ornery single white women have accepted another deferential white secretary? Peggy may have enjoyed an occasional chuckle at her boss's minor missteps, but she almost never directly contradicted his opinions. Moreover, would a white Peggy have had to be elevated to the level of junior partner in the wake of British imports like *The Avengers*, as well as short-lived but American popular

⁸³³ Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 112.

programs like *The Girl From U.N.C.L.E.* (NBC 1966-1967)? As we will see in the next chapter, the 1960s marked the tentative but definite beginnings of a resurgence of female investigators on American television. Such characters may have been too threatening to the postwar order in the late-1950s, but the major television networks' ongoing desire for youthful audiences made it difficult to deny female agency as the baby boomer generation aged into consumer relevance. Still, as Peggy demonstrates, this growing feminine agency, as well as the enduring backlash over such freedom, was still very much reserved for white women. With the fleeting exception of Teresa Graves's year-long tenure in *Get Christie Love!* (ABC 1974-1975), Black women were shut out of the detecting game and the power they might have found therein.

Figures

ADVERTISEMENT

Private Eye



Sam Spade is tough, clever, and hard as a ten-penny nail. His creed can be summed up in a hard-boiled "What's in it for me?", but he manages to get results for his many clients. And what private investigator can do more? Follow the adventures of Sam Spade and Effie Perrine, his secretary, every Sunday for real excitement.

 **WCBS • 880 on your dial
8:00 PM • CBS Network**


Figure 10: Advertisement for *The Adventures of Sam Spade* (*New York Times*, November 2, 1947)



from Columbia Broadcasting System, 485 Madison Avenue, New York 22, N. Y.

PRESS INFORMATION, Photo Division

This Program is On The Air at: 8:00-8:30 PM, EDST
Reb. 12:00 Mid.
Sundays



EFFIE AT HOME

Contrasting sharply with her radio life as Effie Perrine, spinsterish secretary to a hardboiled private detective on CBS' "Adventures of Sam Spade," is her home life "sister act" with teen-age daughter Barbara.

CBS credit will be appreciated

Figure 11: Promotional Photo of Tuttle for *The Adventures of Sam Spade*



Figure 12: The Adventures of Sam Spade (*Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 1947)



Figure 13: The Case of The Web-Footed Burglar (*Boston Globe*, June 15, 1947)



Figure 14: Sabotage, Sweet Sabotage (*Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 1948)



Figure 15: Death on the Speedway (*Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1948)



Figure 16: Bandits Bombed By Bottles (*Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 1949)



Figure 17: The Unhappy Hockey Hero (*Boston Globe*, January 23, 1949)



Figure 18: Fake Fiddler Foiled (*Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 1949)



Young Kate Beckman, Gordy Webber and sultry Tony Fascina made up a triangle which pointed straight toward danger!

Figure 19: Innocence on Trial (*Radio-TV Mirror* February 1954)

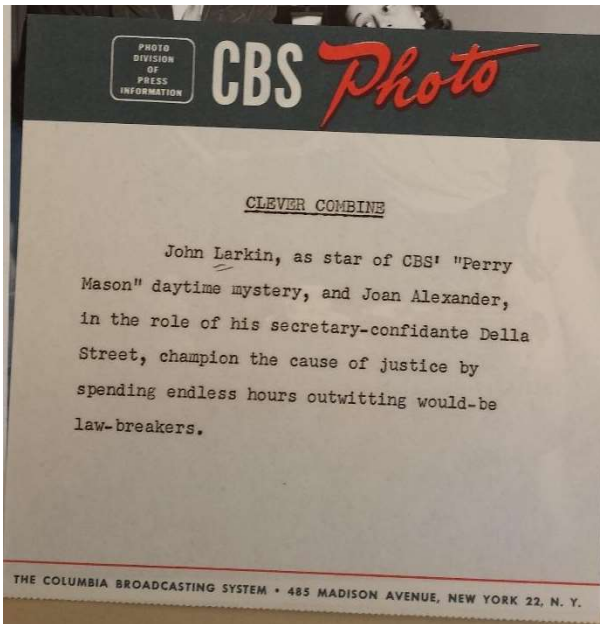


Figure 20: Clever Combine

CHAPTER 6: SUBTLE REBELS

Texts Under Analysis:

Meet Miss Sherlock (radio,) *Candy Matson, YUkon 2-8209* (radio, NBC West Coast 1949-1951), *Defense Attorney* (radio, NBC & ABC 1951-1952), *Decoy* (TV, syndicated 1957-1958), *Honey West* (TV, ABC 1965-1966)

“Did you ever know a girl private detective? Perhaps not. They’re pretty rare. Well, we’ve got one. Candy Matson is the name. And she’s both pretty---and rare.”⁸³⁴ This statement of singularity served as an introduction to an early episode of *Candy Matson, YUkon 2-8209* (NBC West Coast 1949-1951), one of the few postwar radio series about a female detective. As her announcer makes clear, Candy and her cohort were rather an historical anomaly. In a period when even women who worked as secretaries in male-headed offices had to continually assert their passive, domestic feminine bona fides in order to maintain their respectability, female detectives like Candy, *Meet Miss Sherlock’s* (CBS 1946-1947) Jane Sherlock, and *Defense Attorney’s* (NBC/ABC 1951-1952) Martha “Marty” Ellis Bryant carved out a limited space on US radio networks within which they directly challenged conservative gender norms by openly working – and enjoying their work – in the dangerous field of crime-solving. In a move that would not be replicated on national network television until *Honey West’s* brief run on ABC in 1965, these female detectives broke forcefully out of the home and into the public sphere by embracing a role filled with danger and intrigue. Throughout their respective

⁸³⁴ “October 3rd, 1949” (radio script, October 3, 1949), Folder 57; Box 1; Monty Masters Papers, 1931-1963, American Radio Archives, Thousand Oaks Library, Thousand Oaks, CA.

weekly series, they evaded familial obligations and male characters' efforts to restrict their authority in order to continue working in the decidedly masculine, working-class crime-fighting profession. And even though female detectives could never fully escape the gendered expectations and restrictions of postwar womanhood, they still sought to enjoy adventure in a male-dominated field that placed them outside the bounds of respectable femininity without being labeled fallen women, or *femmes fatales*.

Female detectives could not help but be transgressive. In staking a claim to the authority and respect that was accorded to male private eyes, they disrupted patriarchal gender norms with a tenacity that rivaled, or even surpassed, that of *femmes fatales*. Even policewomen enmeshed within a patriarchal and paramilitary control structure, like Casey Jones of the syndicated *Decoy* (1957), regularly defied the rules of conventional feminine respectability. Indeed, I argue that the *femme fatale* label has been applied to an overly broad range of postwar female characters because scholars do not have a fitting descriptor for the women who are not evil, but also not wholly innocent. As Julie Grossman (2013) argues, “*femme fatale*” is “a term that is less critical than hysterical,” and it has helped to reinforce a strict dichotomy between innocent, Madonna-like good girls and evil, whore-like rule-breakers.⁸³⁵ Scholarly emphasis on overt acts of defiance against postwar gender restrictions, committed by women who are punished for their transgressions within

⁸³⁵ Julie Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-Up* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 6.

their texts, has led us to overlook the real, if understated challenges posed by subtler rebels. Like fatales, female radio detectives engaged directly and critically in post-WWII debates over gender, agency, and power. However, unlike their better-studied sisters, detectives did so with significantly more success. This is not to say that female radio detectives achieved, or even sought, the unquestioned freedom of action and opportunity that femmes fatales demanded. Female detectives' freedom to work and live their single lives was predicated upon their accepting significant restrictions that ultimately reaffirmed the overriding patriarchal organization of postwar society. Still, by agreeing to play within the rules of the patriarchal game, they established a model of negotiated independence that provided an important potential point of identification for female listeners in an era when an increasing number of women worked, despite intense social pressure to stay at home.

Female detectives also set the stage for future media representations of working women. Indeed, they came closer to breaking free of the patriarch-headed workplace family than most 1970s working girls, a group that included numerous sexy female investigators. This freedom certainly assisted their decline in the early-1950s. Female detectives' complicated gender identity was another casualty of the transition to television and postwar America's hardening gender norms. Female investigators had maintained a small but steady presence on the national radio networks through the postwar period, but they were almost completely absent from 1950s television. The notable exception of Anna May Wong's brief DuMont series, *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong* (1951), appears to prove the rule that detection

and white femininity were mutually exclusive for many broadcast decision makers and the conservative critics to whom they were most likely to listen in the postwar period. The specter of women working at all, much less at the margins of respectability, remained threatening throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. The industry's implicit prohibition on female investigators loosened in the 1970s, but detectives like Angie Dickinson's *Police Woman* (NBC 1974-1978) and Teresa Graves' *Get Christie Love!* (ABC 1974-1975) remained under the control of white male superiors. Moreover, their bodies remained under male control. Instead of having to suppress their sexuality in order to prove their respectability, post-sexual revolution female detectives had to demonstrate their availability. They balanced their increased but still limited independence with their status as sexual objects intended to titillate male viewers.

(Not) Ahead of their Time

It has become a commonplace notion that postwar audiences were not "ready" for female detectives. This truism has been repeated ad nauseam and applied to a range of media depictions of purportedly unconventional gender roles and behaviors, including divorced, single-parent, interracial, and/or homosexual families, as well as female superheroes. However, while vocal audience members certainly did disapprove of active women placing themselves or being placed in dangerous public spaces, audience research and ratings paint a more complicated picture of the postwar broadcast audience's interests. The series studied in this chapter were relatively short-lived, but most were popular in their time and

remained active in audience memories long after they left the air. These radio series in particular resonated with listeners during a period when radio networks were rapidly losing audiences to television. *Candy Matson* never found a commercial sponsor, but the series was so popular that its home station of KNBC reportedly received at least 800 calls from panicked listeners after one cliffhanger episode implied that Candy died in a plane crash.⁸³⁶ Despite its limited platform in syndication, *Decoy* remained a moderate success throughout the 1950s because of its female cop lead. Likewise, critics who argued *Honey West* was cancelled because viewers were uncomfortable with her assertive character overstated the expensive series' low ratings and repeated unsourced statements about audience disapprobation as more widely representative than they actually were.

At the same time, all of these series were produced at moments of cultural and industrial transition, which likely hurt their commercial chances. *Defense Attorney* and *Candy Matson* both debuted as the major radio networks began cutting costs to compensate for falling advertising revenues. *Decoy* was released in 1957, as independent producers were losing power within the solidifying television industry. *Honey West* premiered at a point when the television networks were trying to develop programs that would speak to the growing baby boomer audience, but executives still resisted offending boomer parents by pushing changing gender norms too far. Put another way, all emerged at various points when the networks were looking for a new audience hook, implying that broadcasters were aware that

⁸³⁶ "Candy's Okeh," *The Times*, May 19, 1950.

audience interest in series featuring strong, assertive women might outweigh the more obvious risk of critical or audience disapprobation. Still, because each of these moments was also one in which network executives felt threatened by regulatory and/or commercial pressures, they produced such transgressive representations with extreme – even excessive – caution. Writers and producers carefully shaped their heroines to satisfy the competing demands of listeners looking for new and exciting stories about women and postwar gender norms that rejected such representations. Programs were further restricted by the production requirements of networks and advertisers eager to reach female listeners but unwilling to challenge the conventional gender roles on which so much of their advertising was based. Networks and advertisers were particularly worried that female-driven shows might alienate the prime-time audience that they defined as masculine.

Broadcasters' concerns over how to represent female detectives as sympathetic postwar women manifested in three narrative strategies that simultaneously empowered and restrained female radio detectives. First, female detectives depended on their male sidekicks, usually boyfriends. While these men gave female detectives the permission and protection they required to move freely in public spaces, they differed from more typical detectives' sidekicks by acting as figures of patriarchal authority and surveillance. The absence of female sidekicks or friends also emphasized female detectives' uniqueness; female detectives were typically isolated from other women and their victories were presented as the

exceptional experiences of unique individuals rather than successes that any smart, talented woman could achieve. Second, while female detectives won the right to investigate and judge their fellow humans, they were typically forced to rely on stereotypically feminine traits like maternal authority and feminine intuition to validate that right and justify their conclusions to doubting men. Finally, even as female detectives asserted their right to work in the public sphere, producers strove to domesticate them by emphasizing their ties to family and home, even in cases where those ties were more theoretical than actual. Despite these efforts to restrain them, all three female detectives remained strong and assertive investigators, regularly resisting their gendered restraints and proving their skill and intelligence by catching the bad guy. These strategies were shaped on radio, but they continued to remain in play, with only slight variations, on television.

Like their male counterparts, female detectives live their lives on the edge of criminality. Unmoored from the protective frames of home, family, and passive victimhood, they could easily be mistaken for their dark reflection: the femme fatale. Popular writers and scholars have noted the parallels between femmes fatales and detectives. Asked how he conceived a non-sexualized femme fatale to counter the boy detective in his *Who Could That Be at This Hour?* series of children's detective novels, author Daniel Handler argued that the femme fatale and the detective are actually the same person, "both confined by their circumstances and...both making their own moral path through a world that is sinister and secretive...and who are unapologetic about making their way in a world that seems

to have no place for them.”⁸³⁷ Media scholar Lori Landay (1998) further categorizes the femme fatale in the genus of female tricksters, whose actions simultaneously resist and call attention to the constructed nature of cultural gender systems. Fatales and other tricksters threaten to undermine dominant social orders by demonstrating “what tactics are necessary to escape the system as well as what factors prevent that escape.”⁸³⁸

Male detectives are also tricksters, but, because of their gender, their potential for trickery is perceived as less threatening than women’s. Indeed, male investigators often wear their potential criminality as a badge of honor. Hardboiled PIs like Hammett’s Sam Spade, reformed thieves like Jack Boyle’s Boston Blackie, and their cohort succeed partly because they understand criminals well enough to use criminals’ own tools and tactics against them. And, despite their avowed commitment to law and order, detectives often find themselves accused of malfeasance by police, or even by their clients. This was especially true for men like Boston Blackie, who gave up his literary safecracking ways to become a detective on film (Columbia, 1941-1949), radio (NBC 1944, syndicated 1945-1950), and television (syndicated, Ziv 1951-1953), but could never escape the taint of his criminal past and associations. But however charming audiences might find a male PI’s roguish disregard for convention, or however amusing it might be to watch police officers eat crow after a male detective was proven right by the result

⁸³⁷ “Lemony Snicket Dons A Trenchcoat,” *Fresh Air*, December 10, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/12/10/166657020/lemony-snicket-dons-a-trenchcoat>.

⁸³⁸ Lori Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 26.

in a case, such pleasures were largely denied in the case of female investigators. Indeed, producers did their best to obscure, underplay, and/or deny female detectives' inherent similarities to the femme fatale, who threatened the gender norms that underpinned a postwar social order that many already felt was far too precarious.⁸³⁹ The idea that the postwar feminine domestic ideal might be an act that could end at any moment was a threatening reminder that women's domestic containment was porous at best. Women who were able to match wits with male detectives could also denaturalize the postwar emphasis on men's intellectual and physical superiority. Broadcasters attempted to neutralize this threat by identifying such skills with bad women throughout the next few decades of broadcast crime dramas.

Scholars have alternately characterized the overtly rebellious femme fatale as hypersexualized manifestations of men's postwar anxieties regarding women's increasing independence, and manifestations of the potential for – and limits on – postwar feminine agency.⁸⁴⁰ While female detectives and girl reporters enjoyed varied and even progressive film representation in the 1930s, Philippa Gates (2011) argues that they became figures “of parody, passivity, or...questionable sanity” in a postwar containment culture that idealized feminine domesticity.⁸⁴¹ Still, “femme

⁸³⁹ Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the “American Way”: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁸⁴⁰ See Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir*; James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, Updated and Expanded Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁸⁴¹ Philippa Gates, *Detecting Women: Gender and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany: State

fatale” was not the only position available to women interested in crime, nor were all postwar femmes fatales treated unsympathetically. Popular culture provided further conflicting messages to female audiences, simultaneously voicing and dismissing their non-domestic desires. Allison McCracken (2002) argues that some postwar radio series, especially those broadcast immediately after the war, presented a more complex image of feminine containment. Postwar radio thrillers like CBS’s *Suspense* (1942-1962) often depicted characters who would not or could not conform to postwar gender norms. While such series ultimately restrained socially aberrant voices – particularly those of women resisting confining domestic roles – within conventional narrative resolutions, series like *Suspense* frequently treated their concerns with sympathy and respect.⁸⁴² Such series echoed the feelings of the significant number of postwar women who were reluctant to give up their wartime employment and return to the home. They also further confused gender expectations for their baby boomer daughters, who struggled to reconcile the promises of freedom and equality advanced through their college textbooks with the restricted gender roles they saw on television and at home.⁸⁴³

As Jeanine Basinger (1993) argues, the very act of giving voice to rebellious and ambitious women gives “the Other substance” and credibility; even if women’s protests against conservative postwar gender norms were ultimately shown to be

University of New York Press, 2011), 15.

⁸⁴² Allison McCracken, “Scary Women and Scarred Men: Suspense, Gender Trouble, and Postwar Change, 1942-1950,” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 197.

⁸⁴³ Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

futile, they were still validated.⁸⁴⁴ Female detectives followed in this tradition to a more limited extent. While they actively contested postwar patriarchal gender norms by taking up the mantle of crime-solver themselves, they partially mitigated their rebellion, and thereby avoided punishment and containment, by accepting some masculine supervision and embracing stereotypically feminine emotional outlooks. These women certainly did experience moments of self-parody and hyper-feminine passivity, and the male characters around them frequently questioned their sanity. However, they were also clever, determined, and competent investigators who resisted the demands of domesticity in an era when most popular culture represented the home as women's highest calling. Female radio PIs navigated the supposedly mutually exclusive positions of respectable woman and detective in a socially conservative medium, in a conservative era.

Can a Girl Even Be a Detective?

The number of crime programs rose precipitously during and after WWII, with an estimated “average of ninety minutes of crime programs broadcast daily” by 1945.⁸⁴⁵ However, relatively few of those series featured female detectives. This may seem unsurprising given the era's conservative gender norms, but it is still notable when we recall the well-established and sizeable female audience for crime programming. Indeed, women dominated the commercial radio audience during the war, when mobilization depleted the male audience and increased women's

⁸⁴⁴ Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930–1960* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 6.

⁸⁴⁵ J. Fred MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial!: Radio Programming in American Life, 1920–1960* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), 155.

spending power. However, Jack French's *Private Eyelashes* (2004), the most extensive list of female radio detective series to date, lists only eight programs about female detectives that aired between 1941 and 1952.⁸⁴⁶ This was an increase over the prewar period. French was only able to trace five programs about women who acted as detectives in their own right between 1927 and 1941. Others acted as part of an investigative couple, a girl reporter, or a male detective's assistant/secretary. Still, most of the programs centering on independent female detectives had relatively short runs, and few episode recordings or archival scripts have survived to the present day. It is unclear how much of this disparity can be attributed to the relative value placed on them by producers and fan collectors. Many male PIs appear to have been preserved as transcriptions for soldiers serving abroad through the AFRTS, but *Candy Matson* survived largely because her producers hoped to syndicate the series after its initial NBC run.⁸⁴⁷

Meet Miss Sherlock is the earliest of the postwar female detective series I study, and it featured the youngest and most amateur of the detectives. It tracked the adventures of Jane Sherlock, a department store buyer with a knack for stumbling on murders, which she solved with begrudging assistance from her fiancé, lawyer Peter Blossom, and over the vociferous objections of Police Captain Dingle. Jane was received as a comic character in the mold of popular radio performers like Gracie Allen, of *The Burns and Allen Show* (NBC and CBS, 1937-

⁸⁴⁶ Jack French, *Private Eyelashes: Radio's Lady Detectives* (Boalsburg, PA: BearManor Media, 2004).

⁸⁴⁷ French, 213.

1950) and the crime-fighting Pam North. Like these fellow “dizzy dames,” Jane created comic chaos and rebelled against patriarchal authority by “derailing the laws and syntax of language and logic” with her apparently confused and yet internally consistent trains of thought.⁸⁴⁸ The series aired on CBS in the summers of 1946 and 1947, where it served as a replacement for regular season programs. The summer months, when ratings were generally lower, appear to have been a popular time for networks to run female detective series. Other summer programs include *Sara’s Private Caper* (NBC, 1950), another comedy about a stenographer who aspired to become a detective, and *Top Secret* (NBC, 1950), a “Mata Hari-style” WWII spy series starring Ilona Massey.⁸⁴⁹

Candy Matson appeared on NBC’s West Coast regional network, which covered California, Oregon, and Washington, between 1949 and 1951. The series’ eponymous female private eye was more direct and confrontational than Jane. Candy’s assertive approach fit well within a series that drew heavily on its hardboiled antecedents. Candy occasionally asserted this connection directly through references to her friend and fellow San Francisco PI, Sam Spade. Candy’s hardboiled origins are unusual for a female PI series, but they are more understandable considering that the character was originally conceived as a man; writer/producer Monty Masters made very few changes after his mother-in-law

⁸⁴⁸ Patricia Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy,” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 82.

⁸⁴⁹ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 597, 679.

convinced him to cast his wife, Natalie Masters, in the role instead of himself.⁸⁵⁰ One significant shift from other detectives – male, and especially female – was Candy’s relationship to money. Unlike Sam, who was perennially underpaid on the radio if not in Hammett’s novel, or Jane and Marty, who never mentioned money, Candy demanded hefty fees for her labor up front. As she told her audience, she used to be a model, but “I like money. Lots of it. That’s why I became a private eye...I knew [the case] was full of dynamite, but a girl has to eat now and then, maintain a penthouse on Telegraph Hill, and keep the moths out of a few mink coats, doesn’t she? Sure. And a shot fired into your room from across the street at three in the morning is just one of those occupational hazards.”⁸⁵¹

Candy operated in San Francisco with assistance from her close male friend, photographer Rembrandt Watson, and alternating help and disapproval from Lt. Ray Mallard. *Candy* never attracted lasting commercial sponsorship, which may explain why the series was never picked up by the national network. Nevertheless, she was popular enough to persist on a sustaining basis for over a year, even as network executives strove to shore up their falling revenues by eliminating unprofitable radio programs and consolidating production centers around New York and Hollywood.⁸⁵² Local popularity was not enough to sustain her, however. In 1952, Candy’s home station of KNBC San Francisco stopped originating non-news

⁸⁵⁰ French, *Private Eyelashes*, 212.

⁸⁵¹ Monty Masters, “April 4, 1949 Audition Show,” *Candy Matson* (NBC, April 4, 1949).

⁸⁵² “Analysis Program Package Sales & Cost,” April 1952, Folder 18; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

programming, eliminating any chance that she might experience a local revival.⁸⁵³

Mercedes McCambridge's Martha "Marty" Ellis Bryant was likely the longest running and widest circulating of the postwar female investigators. Her *Defense Attorney* originally auditioned on NBC, but the series eventually aired on ABC's national network. The series lasted from 1950 to 1952, during which time it was sponsored by major grocery items Kix cereal and Clorets chewing gum. A female Perry Mason-type figure, Marty was a calm, empathic attorney devoted to "defending the defenseless."⁸⁵⁴ She was regularly pulled into murder cases and other legal messes by hapless but firmly sympathetic clients, much to the consternation of her boyfriend, reporter Jud Barnes, and their friends in the police department. By the time she starred in *Defense Attorney*, Mercedes McCambridge was a popular radio actress, well known for her work in a wide range of soap operas. At the end of one 1952 *Defense Attorney* episode, she was presented with an award by the fan magazine *Radio Mirror* as its readers' favorite dramatic radio actress.⁸⁵⁵ Despite this popularity, however, a proposal for a television adaptation of the series went nowhere. The radio series was cancelled in 1952. By then, however, radio's female detectives had established an archetype that continues to influence female detectives to the present day.

⁸⁵³ "Analysis Program Package Sales & Cost."

⁸⁵⁴ Dwight Hauser, "Joshua Masters," *Defense Attorney* (ABC, April 10, 1952).

⁸⁵⁵ Hauser.

Defining Feminine Authority or, When Sidekicks Try to Run the Show

Sidekicks are a crucial element of most detectives' stories, regardless of their gender or the medium in which they appear. Beyond assisting with investigations, sidekicks serve a number of narrative and character functions. John Watson, perhaps the most famous detective's sidekick, acts as narrator of Holmes's adventures, allowing the story to be told without revealing the inner workings of the detective's mind and spoiling the final reveal. Most also serve as stand-ins for the audience, questioning the great detective in our stead. This function became even more important on radio, where the lack of visual cues made dialogue the only way of presenting clues and delivering exposition without the detective resorting to boring and unnatural monologues. Finally, sidekicks help to establish their detectives' position as a respected legal and intellectual authority, both through their often-effusive praise of the detectives' mental powers and through the comparisons that audiences are encouraged to make between detectives and their sidekicks.

In addition to sidekicks' more gender-neutral functions, Julie O'Reilly (2009) argues that female sidekicks normalize or moderate atypical female detective protagonists, minimizing conflicts between female detectives' character traits and cultural expectations of "acceptable femininity."⁸⁵⁶ Teenage girl detective Nancy Drew's "near-singular obsession with mysteries" is framed as moderate

⁸⁵⁶ Julie D. O'Reilly, "The Legacy of George and Bess: Sidekicks as Normalizing Agents for the Girl Sleuth," *Clues* 27, no. 1 (2009): 69.

when contrasted with her friend George's boastful, tomboyish proclivities and Bess's overt feminine excess. Despite the fact that crime solving was a very unusual avocation for a teenage girl in the 1930s, when Nancy's adventures began to be published, she is presented as a happy, "average" between two friends who embody opposing gender extremes.⁸⁵⁷ As an accidental detective who had little power within her narratives, Nancy did not threaten men's control over the propagation of knowledge. Instead, she was firmly situated within a male-led family, and the novels made it clear that she looked to her lawyer-father and boyfriend for masculine guidance and support. Furthermore, her friends spent almost as much time trying to keep her out of trouble as they did helping her investigate. In sharp contrast, Cleve Adams's more explicitly transgressive detective Violet McDade was a large and muscular female investigator who dominated her femme partner, Nevada Alvarado, in a series of stories appearing in *Clues Detective Stories* magazine between 1935 and 1936. While Drew and her friends were safely distanced from homosexuality by their youth and boyfriends, McDade and Alvarado flirted with queer interpretations by living and working together.

Jane, Candy, and Marty had no female sidekicks against whom they could be characterized as "ordinarily extraordinary" – they were always already aberrations.⁸⁵⁸ This lack of other female characters was partly a product of the

⁸⁵⁷ O'Reilly, 65.

⁸⁵⁸ O'Reilly, 66.

hidden bias inherent in supposedly neutral broadcasting technology; women's voices continue to be criticized as "naturally" weaker and more annoying than men's because recording devices have historically recorded men's lower tones with better fidelity.⁸⁵⁹ Still, female detectives' sidekicks' gender mattered for more than simply vocal tones. While they served many standard sidekick functions, their roles were complicated by patriarchal postwar gender norms. Contemporary male detectives, and even female detectives like Nancy Drew, whose most consistent sidekicks were female, enjoyed deference from their companions. Female radio detectives, however, had to fight with their male sidekicks for authority.

With the exception of Pam North, all of the wives and secretaries described in the previous two chapters can be categorized as sidekicks to male PIs. This status might have put women in dangerous, potentially suspicious circumstances, but it did not fundamentally disrupt prevailing gendered power dynamics. As Julie D'Acci (1994) points out, legal and criminal authority has historically been associated with men.⁸⁶⁰ This was especially true in the postwar period, when men's legal and criminal authority was conflated with their position as head of the patriarchal family. The expectation that men would lead and women would follow made it difficult for women to control their official and unofficial assistants. After all, as many postwar critics argued when it came to working women series like *The*

⁸⁵⁹ Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 29.

⁸⁶⁰ Julie D'Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 110.

Ann Sothern Show, “The simple psychological truth is, people don’t want to see [a woman] dominating a man.”⁸⁶¹ Whether the truth was actually as simple as the networks, advertisers, and prominent social critics presumed, it was certainly unusual to see a woman in charge of a man in any business setting, let alone the hyper-masculine world of crime.

However, it would have been equally, if not more, suspicious to put a woman in charge of another woman. The idea that a woman could master the rules of detection and law enforcement herself, much less pass them on to another woman, was inherently threatening to patriarchal control structures. Such an arrangement would have allowed women to interpret ideas about law, order, and justice through their own experiences and values. Without a man to intervene, who could guarantee that women would not allow their empathy to get in the way of their social duty to punish criminals? Furthermore, the idea of a close mentor-mentee relationship between two single women raised the specter of lesbianism in an era when women’s homosocial relationships were viewed with particular suspicion. Gender non-conforming women – a category that included social reformers, career women, “mannish women,” and those who chose not to marry – had been categorized as a threat to the national character and perpetuation of the white race since at least the 1920s.⁸⁶² As Cold War paranoia solidified its sway

⁸⁶¹ Christine Becker, *It’s the Pictures That Got Small: Hollywood Film Stars on 1950s Television* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 165.

⁸⁶² Donna Penn, “The Sexualized Woman: The Lesbian, the Prostitute, and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Postwar America,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 359.

over federal government hiring procedures, homosexual men and women were expelled from government jobs in greater numbers than actual communists partly because they were easier to identify than actual communist moles. State Department officials justified the purges by arguing that lesbians and gay men were more susceptible to blackmail because of their socially disparaged sexuality.⁸⁶³ Popular culture sources continued to disparage homosexuality throughout the postwar decades. Lesbians were particularly depicted as dangerous seductresses and/or prostitutes who undermined the heterosexual family life that was extolled as the moral core of postwar American social and political life.⁸⁶⁴ Any woman who resisted compulsory heterosexual bliss risked being seen as a provocateur or even a traitor.

In the postwar female detective series I examine, female detectives were shown submitting – at least partially – to patriarchal authority as it was manifested chiefly through two male characters: the detective’s boyfriend, who also acted as her sidekick, and one or more male police officers who reluctantly accepted her “interference” on cases. These men occasionally contributed to investigations with their unique connections and skills, but most were more concerned with reining in their girlfriends by exerting the superiority of their masculine knowledge and authority. With the notable exception of Candy’s sidekick, her platonic friend Rembrandt Watson, all did their utmost to restrain the female detectives in their

⁸⁶³ David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 27.

⁸⁶⁴ Johnson, 36; Penn, “The Sexualized Woman,” 359.

lives from conducting investigations and to dispute their investigative authority. Significantly, Rembrandt was heavily coded as homosexual, and therefore existed outside of the patriarchal power structure. Like other contemporary “lavender gentlemen,” including Jack Benny, Rembrandt was played as a comic character who spoke in flamboyant accents.⁸⁶⁵ Unlike Peter and Jud, he appeared neither interested in nor capable of exerting any sort of masculine control over Candy. None of these men succeeded in fully restraining their detectives, but the arguments they employed vocalized the gendered norms that female detectives violated. Candy, Jane, and Marty all responded to their sidekicks’ strictures in different ways. While they rejected some limits on their behavior out of hand, they accepted others in whole or part. These reactions helped to establish the socially permissible conditions under which they – and audiences at home – could transgress masculine authority and assert their own feminine agency.

Of course, male sidekicks were more than just annoying impediments. They did provide female detectives with the masculine protection and supervision they needed to conduct investigations without compromising their reputations as respectable, feminine women. This status was rendered precarious by the detectives’ status as young, attractive, single women. Single women had gained some social acceptance in Depression-era popular culture, and especially during WWII, when most women were effectively single, but they were re-marginalized

⁸⁶⁵ Matthew Murray, “‘The Tendency to Deprave and Corrupt Morals’: Regulation and Irregular Sexuality in Golden Age Radio Comedy,” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 183–207.

and viewed as sexually suspect in the postwar decades.⁸⁶⁶ As I describe in chapter three, the major radio networks' in-house censorship bodies actively monitored their programs for signs of moral turpitude that might offend vocally conservative religious and cultural groups. Women bore the brunt of this oversight; NBC's Continuity Acceptance Department's readers ordered program revisions for everything from suggestive jokes about pencil skirts on prime-time variety shows to references to women's love affairs, even as they continued to allow oblique references to men's affairs.⁸⁶⁷ Producers and writers internalized these restrictions and perpetuated them as cultural common sense through their writing.

Each of the female-detective-led radio series I study coped with their male sidekicks' interference in different ways. While Candy, the most overtly independent of the three detectives, often rejected male supervision altogether, Jane and Marty were more likely to accept that a man's presence granted them more freedom to explore crime scenes and interview suspects. Still, all three women pushed back against the additional restrictions that the men in their lives tried to place on their actions. Episode narratives partially validated this resistance through conclusions that affirmed the women's investigative instincts. However, the female detectives routinely needed men to rescue them from physically dangerous

⁸⁶⁶ Betsy Israel, *Bachelor Girl: 100 Years of Breaking the Rules--a Social History of Living Single* (New York: William Morrow, 2002), 165; Katherine J. Lehman, *Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 3.

⁸⁶⁷ "Continuity Acceptance Department: The Big Show," January 12, 1951, Folder 9; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; "Continuity Acceptance Department: Molle Mystery Theater," January 3, 1947, Folder 74; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

situations; in this way producers continued to maintain that women ultimately required male supervision.

Eager to protect their detectives from charges of moral corruption, female detective series' producers steered clear of the sexual innuendo prevalent in male-headed detective series. *Candy Matson*, the most hardboiled-influenced and provocative of the postwar radio series, did use its heroine's sex appeal to lure listeners. However, similar to later 1970s jiggle TV series like *Police Woman*, *Candy Matson* had to cope with the tension between using mentions of sex to empower women and to titillate men. Episodes always made it clear that Candy herself respected and adhered to patriarchal standards of sexual purity. Candy's writers managed the contradiction between promoting Candy's sex appeal and protecting her chastity by having men, including the series' announcer, express vocal appreciation for her physique. Candy responded to unsavory men's advances with a mixture of firm rejection and mockery. This attitude reassured listeners that she could be trusted to protect her own chastity, but it also allowed her to critique and rebel against her own objectification.

Candy Matson was very self-conscious about the way its heroine might be viewed as a sexual threat. In one early episode's introduction, the announcer jokes that Candy is "a working girl, too. Whenever she gets a case. Oh don't misunderstand me -- what I mean is, she's a private detective."⁸⁶⁸ This might be

⁸⁶⁸ Monty Masters, "July 21st, 1949" (radio script, July 21, 1949), Folder 52; Box 1; Monty Masters Papers, 1931-1963, American Radio Archives, Thousand Oaks Library, Thousand Oaks, CA.

read as a subtle dig at dirty-minded audience members – the surviving script, like other scripts in the series, does not indicate how the announcer should deliver the lines – but the announcer’s genial, conversational tone could just as easily be interpreted as relating a joke that the (implicitly male) audience shared at Candy’s expense. This impression is strengthened by the rest of the introduction, in which the announcer comments that Candy might serve as a model for “the more dangerous curves” when they “re-fashion the scenic railway at the beach.”⁸⁶⁹

Despite this sort of framing, listeners were invited to rebel against Candy’s objectification with her. Within the first five minutes of her first episode, Candy rages futilely at a “low-minded creep” of a San Francisco bartender who refuses to serve her because she does not have a male escort.⁸⁷⁰ Instead of accepting this limit on her right to engage in legal commercial activity, Candy forces the bartender to make it clear that this restriction is based on the bar management’s assumption that any unaccompanied woman in their establishment must be a prostitute trawling for clients. The program continues to critique men’s assumptions about women’s sexual availability through the central mystery of the murder of Donna Dunham, an ambitious young female performer. The man who ostentatiously comes to Candy’s “rescue” in the bar by buying her a drink turns out to have been Donna’s jealous sugar daddy, who killed her after she refused his romantic advances. This solution is prefigured in the way the wealthy murderer treats Candy after buying her drink.

⁸⁶⁹ Masters.

⁸⁷⁰ Masters, “April 4, 1949 Audition Show.”

Throughout the episode, he makes it clear that he expects women to prostitute themselves to him in exchange for his financial support.

Of course, this resolution could be read as undercutting Candy's assertion of women's right to independence. A conservative listener could easily ascribe Donna's fate to the unchecked ambition that led Donna to alienate her proper protector – a poor but loving boyfriend – and flirt with danger by agreeing to work with a well-connected but possessive man in whom she had no romantic interest. Incidents like Candy's exchange with the bartender allowed the series to ridicule the inherent social biases that restricted single women like Candy, but they also left room for listeners to agree with the man that young, attractive women were asking for trouble by going to seedy waterfront bars alone.

Aware of the limitations placed upon her, Candy accepted the need for a chaperone in many instances, but she insisted on choosing her own. Candy protected her own respectability by bringing Rembrandt along as chaperone on most of the long-distance journeys she occasionally made for cases, as well as many of her shorter investigative trips. Occasionally, she also brought along Lt. Mallard of the San Francisco Police Department, with whom she engaged in an extended flirtation that eventually ended in their engagement in the series' final episode. Of course, in cases where they spent the night in the same hotel she was always careful to note in her voice-over narration that she slept on a separate floor, or even a separate hotel, from her male companions.⁸⁷¹ Mallard did not play as central a

⁸⁷¹ Monty Masters, "December 27, 1949," *Candy Matson* (NBC, December 27, 1949); Monty

narrative role as Jane or Marty's boyfriends, but his presence does signal the importance of romance for female detectives. When Candy was rewritten as a woman, one of the few changes producers made was to transform Mallard from an avuncular older mentor figure into a potential love interest and stumbling block.⁸⁷² This proved a significant alteration. As a mentor, Mallard would have justified Candy's presence. His judgment that she was worth training in law enforcement methods might have reduced her independence by placing her within the official police hierarchy – even if she did remain an independent investigator – but it would have served as official recognition of her ability and right to engage in the act of detecting. As a romantic interest, Mallard still provides Candy with valuable information: instead of spending her nights searching newspaper morgues, Candy often starts cases by visiting Mallard and asking him for a rundown on potential clients or suspects. However, Mallard actively warns Candy away from most cases. He rarely disputes her skill as a detective – indeed, he occasionally warns her that his chief is angry with her for showing the department up in some high-profile case – but he frequently attempts to impress her with a sense of the danger she will face.⁸⁷³ This might be a way to emphasize Candy's bravery, but by making Mallard her source of information, *Candy Matson* reifies patriarchal control over information.

Masters, "September 12th, 1949" (radio script, September 12, 1949), Folder 55; Box 1; Monty Masters Papers, 1931-1963, American Radio Archives, Thousand Oaks Library, Thousand Oaks, CA.

⁸⁷² French, *Private Eyelashes*, 213.

⁸⁷³ Masters, "April 4, 1949 Audition Show."

Mallard's warnings are often shown to be justified when he is forced to rescue her from mortal peril, but Candy is never so distressed that she considers changing professions. In one case, Mallard arrives just in time to prevent Candy and Rembrandt from meeting a macabre end by shooting a cult leader before the man can finish sealing them behind a brick wall. In cases like these, Mallard is quick to press his advantage, castigating the resentful Candy for getting in the way of an official police investigation. After a lengthy lecture in which his tones alternate between suppressed laughter at her situation and harsher annoyance as he outlines the case, he threatens to leave her in the wall to teach her a lesson because "if there's one thing I can't stand, it's an interfering woman."⁸⁷⁴ However, Candy still gets the last laugh. After Mallard tells her that he will only free her from the wall if she agrees to attend a Roy Acuff cowboy movie with him, the episode concludes with her acerbic response:

CANDY: Roy Acuff movie! What do you think Rembrandt?

REMBRANDT: A fate worse than death!

CANDY: That's what I thought too. So long, Mallard! On your way out just seal in that last brick, will you?⁸⁷⁵

Even mortal peril and Mallard's reproofs are insufficient to dampen Candy's sense of humor, enthusiasm for crime solving, or her ability to mock an authority figure's absurd obsession with a movie cowboy. Her authority is further bolstered by the fact that Rembrandt takes her side, despite the fact that she placed him in danger.

Even though the pair maintains a flirtatious friendship for most of the series,

⁸⁷⁴ Monty Masters, "October 23, 1950," *Candy Matson* (NBC, October 23, 1950).

⁸⁷⁵ Masters.

Mallard has no effective hold over Candy. However, she is more likely to listen to his warnings when delivered in affectionate terms, and she even hints that he might enjoy more influence over her if he were her boyfriend or fiancé. Female investigators commonly operated under the watchful eyes of their boyfriends or other men to whom they were romantically linked. These official romantic ties gave the boyfriends a stronger moral, if not legal, authority to guide their actions. Jane Sherlock's steps were dogged by her fiancé Peter Blossom, and Marty's by her boyfriend, reporter Jud Barnes. Still, while Peter and Jud were certainly more tenacious about asserting their right to stop their girlfriends from pursuing new investigations, and Jane and Marty appeared to pay more heed to their strictures, neither man proved much more proficient at the task than Mallard. As we will see later, Marty uses her obligation to her clients to silence Jud's objections to her investigations. As an amateur detective, however, Jane has to resort to more roundabout methods to overcome Peter's opposition without directly antagonizing him.

Peter typically strove to control and protect Jane by appealing to his status as her fiancé: "Jane and I are engaged," bristles Peter in one exchange with a tough guy who is threatening Jane, "and I don't like the way you're talking to her."⁸⁷⁶ At other points, he forcibly intrudes on her conversations with criminals and witnesses alike, refusing to let her speak for or defend herself. Jane rarely challenged Peter's interference directly, but she never let him obstruct her investigations. Instead, Jane

⁸⁷⁶ E. Jack Neuman, "The Case of the Deadman's Chest," *Meet Miss Sherlock*, July 7, 1946.

adopts the disarmingly comic strategy most used by comediennes like Gracie Allen, whose chaotic, apparently unpredictable actions and language “unmade decorum [and] unraveled patriarchal laws” without directly challenging either of them.⁸⁷⁷ Peter effectively acted as a George Burns-esque straight man in the face of Jane’s comedic chaos. He repeatedly protested but could do nothing to stop her, and could only tag along, irritated but determined to make sure she stayed safe.

Within this comic framework, the series challenged Peter’s actual authority, even occasionally suggesting that he was less capable of protecting Jane than she was of protecting herself. Instead of taking Peter’s blustering challenge as a threat, the aforementioned tough guy knocks Peter unconscious and places a bag over his head. Jane’s quick thinking helps her to escape and revive Peter. She also manages to think and trick her way out of altercations with other potentially violent criminals, implying that she might not need Peter’s protection after all. In another case, Peter manages to knock out a gun-toting criminal, but immediately faints.⁸⁷⁸ *Meet Miss Sherlock*’s comic framing may have blunted the force of such commentary on Peter’s patriarchal aspirations, but network concern over similar depictions of hapless father figures indicates that postwar broadcasters did see them as a threat to patriarchal authority.⁸⁷⁹ And despite her rebellious tendencies, Jane appeared to recognize Peter’s right to supervise her actions. Indeed, she often

⁸⁷⁷ Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud,” 83. Gracie was best known for her work on *The Burns and Allen Show* (NBC & CBS radio, 1932-1950) and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (CBS TV, 1950-1958).

⁸⁷⁸ “The Case of Wilmer and the Widow,” *Meet Miss Sherlock* (CBS, September 12, 1946).

⁸⁷⁹ “Memo from John Cleary to Ken MacGregor,” February 13, 1952, Folder 29; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

insisted that he accompany her, particularly when she broke into new and dangerous locations, indicating that she appreciated his assistance and protection.⁸⁸⁰ When she did break away from Peter to pursue an investigation on her own, she took a page from Pam North's playbook. Instead of directly challenging Peter's authority, Jane employed subterfuge to evade it; in one case, she buys time for an innocent suspect to escape by sending the suspicious Peter to another room to retrieve the scarf she claims she needs to fight a chill.⁸⁸¹

Balancing "Feminine" Emotion and "Masculine" Rationality

Once they had reached the field of play, female detectives still had to establish their investigative authority. Sometimes, male sidekicks helped in this effort. Jane and Marty occasionally appealed to their boyfriends for help in forcing official authorities to accept their evidence against criminals. However, Peter and Jud were just as likely as the police to try to silence their girlfriends, either by questioning their ability to consider evidence objectively or simply by ignoring them. In so doing, these men invoked postwar gender archetypes that elevated so-called masculine rationality over stereotypically feminine emotionality. Unlike male detectives, female detectives struggled to prove that, despite their gender, they were capable of rational deduction, and especially that they would not be biased or led astray by excessive feminine emotionality. This struggle between so-called

⁸⁸⁰ E. Jack Neuman, "Meet Miss Sherlock 1.10: The Case of Napoleon's Pal" (radio script, September 5, 1946), Broadcasting Collection, American Radio Archives, Thousand Oaks Library, Thousand Oaks, CA.

⁸⁸¹ E. Jack Neuman, "Meet Miss Sherlock 1.12: The Case of The Pink Elephant" (radio script, September 19, 1946), Broadcasting Collection, American Radio Archives, Thousand Oaks Library, Thousand Oaks, CA.

women's intuition and masculine rationality, women's empathy and men's stricter legal principles, was routinely figured as aural chaos for which the women were blamed. Detectives' boyfriends especially struggled to make sense of this chaos – or, more accurately, to impose their own idea of order onto their girlfriends – but mostly succeeded in confusing issues further. Each woman approached the challenge of making herself heard in a different way. Candy mostly attempted to ignore the restrictions that others sought to place on her. As a professional private eye, she could better justify her involvement in criminal matters because she was hired directly by clients, and she used her femininity to disarm suspicious suspects. But Jane and Marty sought to prove that their apparent feminine weakness was actually a strength.

To this day, female detectives have to fight the perception that they are not intelligent or experienced enough to make sense of the facts that their investigations uncover. Modern female detectives may not face the same direct attacks on their abilities that postwar radio detectives combated, but most continue to fight subtle, pernicious hints that they let their emotions override their reason. Unlike male detectives, who are generally lauded for drawing on their education, rational deductive powers, keen intuition, or even simply their own perseverance, postwar female detectives often saw their correct conclusions dismissed as “women's intuition.” Somehow, the qualifier “woman's” deprived “intuition” of the artistry and skill associated with male detectives from Vidoq to Sherlock Holmes. Such a view ignores that women's intuitive leaps draw upon bodies of knowledge every bit

as massive and complex as those amassed by male investigators. In the same way that Holmes accelerates his inductions through his studies of arcane minutiae like cigarette ash, Jane Marple's long study of her neighbors enables her to effortlessly organize strangers into distinct and knowable types.⁸⁸² Christie uses Marple to celebrate this feminine source of knowledge, but it is also important to note that Marple's options are limited. As a woman, Holmes' more abstract pursuits would have been closed to her.

Jane and Marty's investigative approaches were also shaped by their restricted status as women, and particularly by Peter and Jud's efforts to impede them. Like other female investigators, Jane deals more in emotional truths and impressionistic reasoning while Peter and Dingle fill in cold hard facts and context, but she is also typically proven right. The series was commonly received as a comedy, but creator E. Jack Neuman later claimed that he envisioned Jane as a serious character, modeled on actress and director Ida Lupino, who had a "trick" of "always appear[ing] as though she did not know what she was doing, that she was totally helpless and hopeless" on a movie set despite the fact that "she was totally in charge of everyone instantly."⁸⁸³ This type of apparently passive control helps to disguise logic by creating an impression of emotional chaos. In *Meet Miss Sherlock*, this impression is heightened by the nervous energy that comes across in the two surviving episode recordings. In these performances, Jane's voice is high

⁸⁸² Charles J. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2005), 159.

⁸⁸³ French, *Private Eyelashes*, 177.

and clear when she is calm but quickly descends into flustered hysterics during times of stress or danger. Interestingly, Jane was played by three different actresses over the course of her brief series, though none are credited in the surviving recordings. Betty Moran, the second, claimed that she was replaced for not sounding “dithery” enough to portray Jane’s deceptive confusion.⁸⁸⁴

This tactic of softening the female investigator by disguising her as a flighty child weakens Jane’s authority when she cannot make herself understood, but it also grants her the juvenile freedom to simply ignore the restrictions that the men around her attempt to impose. In some ways, this method is reminiscent of the tactics employed by Jane’s namesake, Sherlock Holmes, whose apparently nonsensical actions eventually make sense once the larger outline of his investigation is revealed to the befuddled Watson and contemptuous police investigators. Likewise, Jane’s seemingly unconnected questions to suspects and sudden, unexplained disappearances leave Peter confused. However, despite the fact that she always captures the criminal, Jane is rarely given credit for having detailed foresight, like Holmes. Her deductive powers echo those of the great detective, but her investigations unfold more accidentally; of course, this is partly because she has to evade Peter’s efforts to pull her away from crime scenes. Likewise, Peter and Dingle treat her explanations as rambling and confusing rather than as clear and rational, with frequent pleas of “For heaven’s sake will you make sense?”⁸⁸⁵

⁸⁸⁴ French, 179.

⁸⁸⁵ E. Jack Neuman, “Meet Miss Sherlock 1.09: The Case of Millie the Mermaid” (radio script, August 29, 1946), Broadcasting Collection, American Radio Archives, Thousand Oaks Library, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Indeed, her final summaries of cases often do come across as a confused jumble, partly because of Peter's and Dingle's frequent interruptions; where Watson listens in stunned and appreciative silence while Holmes outlines his reasoning, the men in Jane's life second guess every link in her chain of evidence, forcing her to beg, "But I am making sense – if you'll just listen to me."⁸⁸⁶

Many listeners, especially women and young people who felt similarly disenfranchised, might have sympathized with Jane's efforts to make herself heard. After all, it is patently ridiculous that Peter and Dingle would refuse to listen after all of the times when she has been proven right. However, producers' insistence that Jane sound "dithery" risked undercutting her authority. Jane's flighty exterior made her a more formidable investigator because criminals did not perceive her as a threat until it was too late. However, her "dithery" voice and propensity to lose her train of thought when Peter and Dingle put too much pressure on her undercut her authority. Regardless of Neuman's intention that Jane be received as an unlikely authority figure, Jane's persona also risked coming across as flighty, especially in comparison to the steady straight man personas adopted by Peter and Dingle. As Mellencamp argues in the case of Gracie Allen, it is not always clear whether the audience is laughing with or at comically out-of-control women, whose lives their husbands frame as "nonsense."⁸⁸⁷ Gracie's verbal excesses may challenge George's mastery of logic, but his point of view is still centralized by the television camera

⁸⁸⁶ Neuman.

⁸⁸⁷ Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud," 87,86.

and, to a lesser extent, the narrative logic of the earlier radio series. Peter, a young and inexperienced lawyer, may not have the patriarchal authority to contain Jane's excesses, but he has help from a more robust source in Dingle.⁸⁸⁸ The police captain frequently asks Peter to forcibly remove Jane from crime scenes. Listeners – and even Dingle – come to appreciate her talents once they learn to track her language correctly. Dingle eventually admits that Jane's explanations are worth the effort it takes to follow them, with a resigned, somewhat resentful sigh: "I've gone through this so many times. It always comes out sooner or later."⁸⁸⁹ However, she still needs his help and permission to get them out.

Defense Attorney addressed the tension between objective reason and emotion more directly. Each episode opens with Marty addressing the audience in a staid, even voice: "Ladies and Gentlemen, to depend upon your judgment – and to fulfill my own obligations – I submit the facts, fully aware of my responsibility to my client and to you as – Defense Attorney."⁸⁹⁰ This promise to present the audience with the objective facts subtly evokes the "Just the facts, ma'am" emphasis of contemporary radio crime series like *Dragnet* (NBC radio 1949-1957, NBC TV 1951-1959). Marty's promise is underscored by the opening strains of the program's theme music, which begins with a strong martial organ sting, a rolling kettle drum and the swelling strains of a stately, march-like tune, all of which invoke official state authority. However, the announcer subsequently places her

⁸⁸⁸ Mellencamp, 86.

⁸⁸⁹ "The Case of Wilmer and the Widow."

⁸⁹⁰ Hauser, "Joshua Masters."

mission within a more stereotypically feminine realm by asserting that “When Martha Ellis Bryant chose law as a career, she accepted the challenge of defending the defenseless.”⁸⁹¹ In contrast, Marty’s closest male analogue, the crime fighting male star of *Mr. District Attorney*, was introduced as “champion of the people, defender of the truth, guardian of our fundamental rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”⁸⁹² Where Mr. District Attorney defends people and principles, Marty defends only people, following a long tradition of middle-class women who invoked their moral duty to uplift humanity to justify their intrusions into the public sphere.⁸⁹³

Marty’s directive to defend “the defenseless” also primes listeners to expect that she – like any proper woman – will display a level of empathy that was not expected from most contemporary male detectives. Indeed, as I note in chapter five, male detectives often outsourced this empathy to their female secretaries. Marty, however, embraces her feminine responsibility, appealing to her moral duty to her clients to defend her investigations into criminal matters. This expectation justified her investigative efforts by positioning her as a feeling woman who has no choice but to act on behalf of those less fortunate than herself. However, it also undermined her ability to justify her conclusions to others, including Jud and their friends in the police force. Counterintuitively, Marty bolstered her authority with

⁸⁹¹ Hauser.

⁸⁹² Ed Byron, “Case of the Barnyard Bandit,” *Mr. District Attorney* (NBC & ABC, March 17, 1943).

⁸⁹³ For a longer history of women’s social reform efforts, see Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

these doubting men by appealing to their personal knowledge of her as a good judge of character rather than by citing her legal expertise and experience. Nevertheless, despite their long term knowledge of her, the men in her life continually question her ability to judge character, seeking to preserve as a masculine prerogative the right to make ultimate determinations on such matters. While Marty quickly overcomes her initial suspicions of a newsboy suspected of a hit and run and agrees to take his case purely on Jud's faith in the boy, Jud almost invariably sides with the police over Marty when her faith in other clients' innocence is questioned.⁸⁹⁴ Furthermore, Marty's empathetic motives contrast with Jud's professional drive, reinforcing her feminine motivations. Marty's career may be more prestigious and require more education, but Jud is the one who displays ambition. Notably, Jud is significantly more willing to help Marty with a case when he is able to draw on her insider knowledge to gain access to the first scoop on a high-profile story for his newspaper; while he generally disapproves of Marty becoming too involved in police investigations, he appears to think it only right that she, as his girlfriend, should help to support and further his own career.

Unlike male detectives like Sam Spade and George Valentine, female detectives like Marty had no Effie or Brooksie to provide them with emotional support. Instead, female detectives like Marty were forced to spend significant time and energy reaffirming their authority and skill to everyone in their lives, including their sidekicks, on a weekly basis. In one particularly telling case, a frustrated

⁸⁹⁴ Dwight Hauser, "Jim Leonard," *Defense Attorney* (ABC, September 14, 1951).

Marty directly asks Lt. Liebes, an officer who knows her well, “Will you at least grant that I’m at least a fair judge of character?”⁸⁹⁵ Her usually soft and steady voice rises in pitch and volume as she tries to control her exasperation at Liebes and Jud, who persist in talking over her to expound their pat theory of her client’s guilt. Liebes’s tone alternates between dismissive firmness and annoyance as Marty challenges each of his arguments. Jud adopts a decisive tone as he agrees with Liebes’s line of reasoning. After Marty’s exasperated “Oy!” finally succeeds in halting the flow of the men’s conversation, Liebes allows that “well, you always have been” a good judge of character. However, he makes this admission in the same dismissive, annoyed tone he previously used to reject her calm, patient arguments in favor of her client’s innocence. After a brief pause, Liebes adds a warning “so far” that further reiterates his doubt and emphasizes that male authority figures will never grant Marty the implicit trust that was accorded to contemporary male detectives, no matter how often she is proven right.⁸⁹⁶ Liebes’s doubting voice implies that he still believes Marty’s objective judgment could be clouded by feminine empathy at any moment.

As Jud and Liebes question Marty’s judgment by implying that she is too swayed by stereotypically feminine emotionality, Jud justifies his conclusions by appealing to his own apparently objective sense of reality. In the case of John Doe, Marty defends a client who claims to be insane. After Jud publishes a front-page

⁸⁹⁵ Hauser, “Joshua Masters.”

⁸⁹⁶ Hauser.

story asserting the man's guilt, Marty chastises her boyfriend for undercutting her efforts to save the man's life. In the original script, she charges that "you've already convicted him in print."⁸⁹⁷ In the final script, the writers soften Marty's vehement challenge to Jud's judgment by employing passive voice. The revised line, "he's already been convicted in print," signals that the writers shied away from having Marty criticize her boyfriend so pointedly.⁸⁹⁸ Still, Jud defends himself by implying that the facts are in his favor: "When I wrote those stories," he argues, "I wrote them the way they had to be written. Because of what I knew ... what I saw."⁸⁹⁹ Jud's meaning is clear: he cannot be blamed for trusting the cold, hard facts, which he, as a man, feels he can judge objectively. In marked contrast to fellow lawyer Perry Mason, who emphatically refuses to allow any fact to stand before it has been proven to a jury, Marty seems to accept Jud's prerogative in issues like this; she rarely disputes his assertions that he is better informed on such issues, even after he is proven wrong. He does not extend the same favor to her, however: in one case, Marty unwittingly helps a wealthy man to manipulate the legal system to force a poor old man to sell his land at a depressed price.⁹⁰⁰ After realizing what she's done, she meekly accepts Jud's self-righteous admonishment. This is a sign of her superior moral compass; unlike Jud, Marty does not believe

⁸⁹⁷ Joel Murcott, "Defense Attorney 1.04: John Doe" (radio script, July 27, 1951), Broadcasting Collection, American Radio Archives, Thousand Oaks Library, Thousand Oaks, CA.

⁸⁹⁸ Murcott.

⁸⁹⁹ Murcott. (Original emphasis.)

⁹⁰⁰ Dwight Hauser, "Thomas Kennedy and Jethro Lester," *Defense Attorney* (ABC, September 18, 1952).

that it is enough to respond that she was acting within the law. However, the fact remains that she accepts his moral authority, while he rejects hers.

Still, Marty was typically proven right in the end. This weekly re-affirmation of her abilities encouraged listeners to side with Marty against her skeptics. And, like *Candy Matson, Defense Attorney* put listeners in the frustrating position of hearing a woman being ignored by less knowledgeable men. This frustration was heightened by the fact that an innocent person's fate relied on Marty's ability to make herself heard. Like Candy, Marty gets the last laugh, though she pushes her point less directly. Despite the annoyance she expresses with her doubting male friends, Marty is adept at playing the gendered games that are forced on her each week. Unlike Candy, who rails against patriarchal rules, or Jane, who simply ignores them, Marty forces Jud to recognize her intelligence through the power of her arguments. At the end of one case, she overcomes his objections to her risk-taking through an impressive feat of reverse psychology. Simply by agreeing with him, she brings him from the point of lamenting his need to protect her to ruefully acknowledging that "if you didn't do things like that, (chuckle) you wouldn't be my Marty." She drives her point home by asking:

MARTY: Now which side are you on, Darling?

JUD: (jokingly despairing) I've been trapped again, so help me.

MARTY: (smooth and laughing) Judson, don't you know you can't win an argument with a woman? And when the woman is a defense attorney, hoo-ha.⁹⁰¹

⁹⁰¹ Hauser, "Joshua Masters."

Marty's aggressively un-argumentative approach makes it clear that she knows exactly what she is doing when she adopts such a complacent attitude; instead of openly rebelling against Jud's patriarchal expectations, she adopts elements of gendered performance whenever they suit her needs. Another episode ends with Jud admitting that he feels threatened by the idea of marrying a woman who is smarter than him, to which Marty tells him not to worry "because if I'm really smarter than you I'll be smart enough to never let you know."⁹⁰² While it is apparent to listeners and Jud alike that Marty *is* smarter than him, she agrees to play the game in order to hold on to both Jud and her career. In the end, Marty's ability to use attributes of respectable femininity to get what she wants is more threatening than all of Candy's direct rebellion or a femme fatale's seduction because it shows that even those supposedly natural traits could be controlled and used to manipulate men.

Resisting Domesticity

In an era where the average age at first marriage fell for the first time in decades, Jane, Marty, and Candy were unusual in their apparent ability to resist the siren song of husband and home, thereby preserving at least some of their freedom of movement.⁹⁰³ Linda Mizejewski (2004) argues that romance has historically been the chief framework for stories about women. However, where "the romance story in all its forms works hard to gloss over the bumps and pitfalls of

⁹⁰² Hauser, "Jim Leonard."

⁹⁰³ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 23.

heterosexuality...the female-detective genre actually depends on these tensions to sustain the story.”⁹⁰⁴ While none of these women is exactly averse to marriage – indeed, *Candy Matson* ends with Candy accepting Mallard’s marriage proposal and resolving to quit detecting and focus on being a good wife – *Meet Miss Sherlock* provides the most direct commentary on its heroine’s conflicted feelings about marriage. Each episode opens with the same exchange between Jane and Peter:

PETER: (hopeful but tentative) Uh – Jane.

JANE: (cheerily) Yes, Peter.

PETER: (hopefully) Now?

JANE: (curiously) Now what, Peter?

PETER: Will you marry me now -- tonight?

JANE: (in a warm but distracted and hurried tone) Oh, Peter, I’m SO sorry – I can’t tonight. Tonight I have to solve --- “The Case Of...”⁹⁰⁵

This introduction is underscored by the rising strains of the series’ theme song, an instrumental version of “A Little Bit Independent.” The jazz standard, first recorded by Jimmy Carr and Fats Waller in the 1930s and then revived by Nat King Cole and Eddie Fisher in 1950, featured lyrics praising the magical allure of an independent woman.⁹⁰⁶

Jane’s perpetual refusal to set a date – and Peter’s ensuing frustration – are typically played as a joke, but the series occasionally drops hints as to why the independent-minded Jane is so hesitant to take the plunge with a man she ostensibly loves. In “The Case of the Vagabond Poet,” Peter finally convinces her to

⁹⁰⁴ Linda Mizejewski, *Hardboiled & High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 12.

⁹⁰⁵ “The Case of Wilmer and the Widow.”

⁹⁰⁶ “A Little Bit Independent,” *Second Hand Songs* (blog), accessed July 30, 2017, <https://secondhandsongs.com/work/137981/all>.

accompany him to Connecticut, where they plan to marry at his aunt's house. The marriage is initially delayed when the pair are called to provide an alibi for a couple accused of murder. Once this is accomplished, they are about to set out again, but Jane cannot stop musing on some peculiarity she noticed about the body. In the script, Peter "soothingly" muses on her hair and tells her:

PETER: Besides, we're going to be married -- and you can forget all about playing detective then.

JANE: Why, Peter?

PETER: You'll have other things to do...I'll keep you busy.⁹⁰⁷

Despite her previously stated readiness to leave, Jane suddenly realizes that "It's only polite" to say goodbye to the pair of suspects.⁹⁰⁸ Jane uses this as an excuse to run off and solve the case, and the episode concludes with her telling Peter that they cannot possibly get married that night because Police Captain Dingle needs them to give evidence at the station. While the script includes few tonal directions, Jane's horror at the thought of giving up detecting is emphasized by her repeated questioning surprise at his declaration. What Peter sees as a romantic declaration is actually a sentence of doom for Jane. While she seems to welcome his presence – and the license to explore the city that their relationship brings – at the end of the day, she clearly finds solving crime much more compelling than whatever Peter has in mind to keep her busy.

Jane's explicit refusal to get married aligns her with contemporary male

⁹⁰⁷ E. Jack Neuman, "Meet Miss Sherlock 2.08: The Case of The Vagabond Poet" (radio script, September 28, 1947), Broadcasting Collection, American Radio Archives, Thousand Oaks Library, Thousand Oaks, CA.

⁹⁰⁸ Neuman.

detectives, who also resisted the limits that marriage would place on their freedom. However, freedom for male detectives also included the ability to engage in flirtations with a different woman every week. Moreover, marriage was less viable for a male detective like George Valentine, who put off committing to his loyal secretary, Brooksie, by pointing out that he did not make enough money to support a family.⁹⁰⁹ Knowing he could rely on Brooksie to wait for him, George could securely put marriage off for as long as he liked. Deferring marriage was a riskier move for postwar female detectives, even for a young woman like Jane. By their early twenties, many would have considered them old maids.⁹¹⁰ Peter occasionally tried to convince Jane of her danger by flirting with other women, but nothing he did could convince her to settle down and build a home for him.

Female detectives had a complicated relationship with the idea of home. None of the existing episode recordings depict Marty or Jane at home, but Candy's penthouse apartment on Telegraph Hill is practically a character unto itself – perhaps to make up for the fact that she is under less direct masculine supervision through most of the series. Candy's penthouse is a real home, unlike most PI's run down apartments, which are usually presented as little more than a place to sleep and be taken unawares. As she makes clear in her paeans to money, Candy works to maintain her glamorous upper-middle-class lifestyle. In various episodes, we hear Candy carry out a range of domestic activities, including housework,

⁹⁰⁹ Catherine Martin, "Adventure's Fun, but Wouldn't You Rather Get Married?: Gender Roles and the Office Wife in Radio Detective Dramas," *The Velvet Light Trap* 74, no. 1 (2014): 16–26.

⁹¹⁰ Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 23.

entertaining, and, especially important for embattled investigators, relaxing after a hard day on the job. Unlike fellow San Francisco PI Sam Spade, with whom the series' writers strove to link her, Candy finds solace in her apartment. In one episode from January 1950, listeners can hear Candy's voice soften and relax from harsh, rapid-fire rage at a demanding client to still contentment as she tells us that she "drove home to my penthouse on Telegraph Hill, dished up a warm tub, some warm soup and then some warm blankets and blacked out for the night."⁹¹¹ At other points, we hear her listening to football games on the radio and sunning herself on her balcony. Sam is more likely to meet a gun-toting criminal at his place. Even when he does seek rest in his apartment, as in "The Insomnia Caper," he is assaulted from all sides by an urban cacophony of cars, cats, and criminals that eventually pulls him into another case.⁹¹²

Of course, Candy's home is not always a private paradise. Because she lacks an office, Candy's apartment is also a place of work, no matter how she tries to keep the two separate. When clients call she typically arranges to meet them in their own homes, offices, or local bars. She's perfectly happy for Mallard to drop by on a social call, but gets annoyed when he comes by on business.⁹¹³ Still, miscreants do occasionally break in and ransack the place searching for incriminating evidence, and the building is even set on fire once. And while Candy does her best to shrug off these violations like any good hardboiled PI would, she is

⁹¹¹ Monty Masters, "January 2, 1950," *Candy Matson* (NBC, January 2, 1950).

⁹¹² Howard Duff, *The Adventures of Sam Spade*, "The Insomnia Caper", October 24, 1948.

⁹¹³ Masters, "January 2, 1950."

not nearly so blasé about it as detectives like Sam are. Where he uses his apartment as a meeting place to entrap criminals, she actively resists potentially disruptive and dangerous incursions from the outside world by carefully controlling who she invites in and the terms under which she permits them to enter. In one episode, she allows a clearly lecherous movie producer to come over after making it clear to him that “it won’t be THAT kind of meeting,” but she becomes enraged when his jealous starlet barges in after him without permission.⁹¹⁴ This violation of her domestic boundaries would hardly disturb a male detective, but it is enough to get both producer and starlet booted from Candy’s premises. She is also careful to police the boundaries of her personal space away from home.

Candy’s active defense of her personal space helps to moderate the potentially threatening aspects of her status as a single woman living alone, away from the family home. Producers’ efforts to emphasize Candy’s efforts to beautify and maintain a comfortable, feminine-coded domestic space moderated the fact that she lived alone, as well as her more overtly masculine, hardboiled investigatory style. Beyond simply identifying women with the home and linking virtue to a heterosexual framework, postwar ideas about women’s spaces were bound up with concerns about safety and women’s ability to defend themselves. These concerns reached an apex in the well-publicized panics over the New York Career Girl Murders of the 1960s, when conservative cultural critics used a string of murders of

⁹¹⁴ Natalie Masters, *Candy Matson*, “September 11, 1950”.

young career girls living alone to argue against increasing female independence.⁹¹⁵ Most postwar radio crime series connected their virtuous female characters to some sort of familial domestic space, and many narratives explicitly linked women's downfalls to their decision to leave the family home. In one 1949 episode of *The Adventures of Philip Marlowe* (NBC/CBS, 1947, 1948-1950), Philip helps a virtuous woman from a small town track down the man who killed her sister, who became a gangster's moll after coming to the big city in search of excitement, only to be murdered by her lover.⁹¹⁶ Network publicists further assuaged any audience concerns about performers' morality by emphasizing female stars' domestic ties. One particularly domestic spread promoting actress Joan Blondell's 1934 turn as female detective Miss Pinkerton – a role she reprised on radio in 1941 – detailed her extensive efforts to kidnap-proof her children's nursery.⁹¹⁷ Clearly, feminine domesticity was on radio producers' minds. However, radio networks' efforts to protect their female detectives from criticism does not appear to have been enough to preserve them for television.

Television's Disappearing Female Detectives

No one explicitly made the decision to keep female detectives off of American network television, at least not in a way that can be substantiated by the existing archival record. Independent program producers continued to propose

⁹¹⁵ Marilyn Johnson, "The Career Girl Murders: Gender, Race and Crime in 1960s New York," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 39 (2011): 244–61.

⁹¹⁶ Gerald Mohr, *The Adventures of Philip Marlowe*, "The Smokeout", October 22, 1949.

⁹¹⁷ "Joan Blondell's 'Kidnap-Proof' Nursery" (Associated Press, November 24, 1934), Blondell, Joan T-Pho (B); Photo Files, Billy Rose Theatre Division; The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

series focusing on female detectives through the late 1940s and early 1950s. Some drew on the star power of major or minor Hollywood personalities, including Jayne Meadows, Joan Blondell, and Marlene Dietrich's daughter, Maria Riva.⁹¹⁸ The networks also developed their own pilots, including the well-received *The Amazing Miss Withers*, starring Agnes Moorehead. None of these made it to the air, however. Aside from DuMont's *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong*, the networks appear to have passed over all other contenders. The reasons given for these rejections were often vague and unsatisfying. In 1954, Michael Dann, NBC's director of program sales and manager of television network programs, rejected producer Wilbur Stark's script for *The Sergeant and the Lady* with a brief note informing him that "most of our boys" found the story "Good, but not good enough."⁹¹⁹ *The Amazing Miss Withers* simply ceased to be mentioned in program reports, despite months of planning, cast debates, and positive feedback on its potential success. In 1953, NBC Program Manager Jack Rayel opted not to pursue a television adaptation of Mary Roberts Reinhart's popular female detective, Tish, because it was better to "digest a little of what we have rather than become involved with propertys [sic] of doubtful value."⁹²⁰

⁹¹⁸ Wilbur Stark, "Letter from Wilbur Stark to Mike Dann," March 24, 1954, Folder 8; Box 378; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; John Rayel, "Letter from John Rayel to Wilbur Stark," June 24, 1953, Folder 60; Box 385; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society; Montgomery Ford, "Letter from Montgomery Ford to Charles Barry," February 10, 1953, Folder 46; Box 385; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁹¹⁹ Michael Dann, "Letter from Mike Dann to Wilbur Stark," April 21, 1954, Folder 8; Box 378; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁹²⁰ Pete Barnum, "Memo from Pete Barnum to Jack Rayel," March 31, 1953, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Individually, these decisions could be taken as comments on the individual programs' quality and fitness for the network. However, taken as a whole, they indicate a bias against female detectives on NBC and other networks. This is especially true given evidence that male-lead properties were given more opportunities to succeed: in 1952, NBC had enough confidence in a series based on real-life detective Raymond Schindler's years working at a PI agency that they attempted to sell it to advertisers before the script was completed.⁹²¹ Even in 1955, as the primetime lineup filled up and the network was less worried about program scarcity, producers of a series based on Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer were given multiple opportunities to prove that they could tone down their source material's decidedly un-television-friendly level of violence.⁹²² Of course, representations of violence were an even bigger issue when it came to female investigators. Television's emphasis on visual action left women few viable options. Talking was seen as boring, but, unlike male PIs, women could not resort to more direct action. As we will see in popular discussions of *Honey West*, the idea of a woman encountering, or, even worse, participating in violence, remained contentious through the 1960s.

It is even more difficult to tell what went wrong in the case of Mercedes McCambridge's *Defense Attorney*. Little evidence of the proposed television spin-

⁹²¹ Rud Lawrence, "Memo from Rud Lawrence to TV Network Sales Staff," April 25, 1952, Folder 73; Box 385; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁹²² "TV Program Development Report #4," January 20, 1955, Folder 8; Box 567C; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

off remains. Industry trades reported producer Don Sharpe negotiating terms for a half hour ABC TV series version of the program in October of 1951, beginning to film the series for a fall release in July 1952, completing a pilot film at Desilu Productions in October 1952, and pitching the series to all networks in March of 1953.⁹²³ As of that July, the series remained unsold, but trades like *The Billboard* did not speculate as to the reason.⁹²⁴ Beyond the networks' growing reluctance to program series that they did not own, Christine Becker (2008) points out that many more prominent movie stars were reluctant to transition to television, even if they had established and successful radio presences. Whether because the stars themselves were concerned that television overexposure might hurt their film earning potential, or the networks were uncertain that they could contain a star's more complicated persona within a single television series, Becker notes that a large number of television pilots featuring A-list celebrities never made it to series in the early 1950s.⁹²⁵ McCambridge's stardom was rising in the early 1950s. The TV pilot was filmed just two years after she won the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her role in *All the King's Men* (1949), and McCambridge remained busy with film and television roles throughout the decade. Still, McCambridge does not appear to have shied away from television roles. In 1956, she appeared as one of three

⁹²³ "Dickers for Several New Video Deals," *The Billboard*, October 13, 1951; "Norm and Irv Pincus to Form TV-Film Unit," *The Billboard*, July 5, 1952; "Film Report," *Broadcasting/Telecasting*, October 6, 1952; "Sharpe to Boost 'Defense Attorney,'" *The Billboard*, March 28, 1953.

⁹²⁴ "Official Offers Full Basic Film Library," *The Billboard*, July 25, 1953.

⁹²⁵ Becker, *It's the Pictures That Got Small*, 155.

alternating investigative reporters in the continuing TV series *Wire Service* (1956-1957).

Female detectives also fell on hard times on radio. However, while it would be easy to assume that they suffered from the same sexism that appears to have barred them from early television, the story is more complicated than that. If female PIs were truly unwelcome on radio because of their gender, they would not have experienced such a concentrated, albeit brief, resurgence during the same years when the television networks were politely declining producers' pitches for female investigators. Indeed, I argue that the radio networks were friendlier to female detectives in the late 1940s and early 1950s precisely because they were women. Much as they might resist their dependence on female audiences, network executives understood that women were their prime and most loyal audiences. The same incentives did not apply to television, however. Network executives were more comfortable with programming for women, and especially older women, on radio because that medium was already critically derided. When it came to the emerging medium of television, they were more concerned with promoting programming that regulators and critics would see as elevating the public's taste.⁹²⁶ That did not include crime series, especially series featuring women.

Even on radio, female investigators were more likely to appear in summer replacement series. Before the television networks discovered that audiences would

⁹²⁶ Jennifer Hyland Wang, "'The Case of the Radio-Active Housewife': Relocating Radio in the Age of Television," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 343–66.

accept syndicated reruns during the summer months, summer replacement series took the place of regular season programs that went on hiatus during the summer months.⁹²⁷ Network executives and sponsors used them to cut costs when ratings declined and ad-rates fell. As such, they were a safer space in which to try out new ways to attract and retain listeners. Mystery programs were an especially good way for networks to maintain summer ratings and sponsored hours. In one 1948 memo addressing NBC's lackluster September ratings, Research and Planning Director Hugh M. Beville noted that "lingering summer weather" continued to depress ratings nationwide.⁹²⁸ However, he attributed NBC's particular troubles to its relative lack of mystery and audience participation programs compared to CBS and ABC. Average ratings for most of the top-rated regular season genres fell by more than half: variety programs (66%), situation comedies (60%), and plays (58%).⁹²⁹ Crime and mystery series ratings fell by a mere 39%.⁹³⁰ Moreover, the networks had reason to believe that working women were more likely to tune in during the summer, when teachers were out of school. Female-targeting sponsors like Rexall favored crime narratives for their own summer replacement drama series, and after 1949, NBC did more to follow its competitors' lead in scheduling crime series.⁹³¹

⁹²⁷ Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 80.

⁹²⁸ H.M. Beville, Jr., "Memo from H.M. Beville, Jr. to Charles P. Hammond," September 23, 1948, Folder 32; Box 157; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁹²⁹ Beville, Jr.

⁹³⁰ Beville, Jr.

⁹³¹ Stockton Helffrich, "Memo from Stockton Helffrich to Don Honrath," June 29, 1948, Folder 70; Box 151; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

These included comedies and dramas starring well-known comic and dramatic actresses, including glamorous Hungarian star Ilona Massey's *Top Secret* spy series and prolific radio comedian Sara Berner's *Sara's Private Caper*, both of which aired in 1950.⁹³² *Defense Attorney* itself began as a summer series in July of 1951.⁹³³ CBS brought *Meet Miss Sherlock* back for two successive summers in 1946 and 1947 to take the place of regular season programs on hiatus. Finally, *Candy Matson* was popular enough to replace Jack Benny for one summer on NBC's West Coast network.⁹³⁴

Radio crime series also had better staying power than most other regular-season genres in the years when radio was losing its audience to television. Outlets like *Sponsor* continued to promote radio crime series into the early 1950s. Nielsen's measure of the number of homes reached per advertising dollar may have fallen as television viewing began to rise in 1948, but well-written crime series remained one of the best investments an advertiser could make.⁹³⁵ Notably, *Sponsor* attributed part of the staying power of radio mysteries like *Mr. & Mrs. North* and *The Thin Man* to their quieter, more sophisticated approach, which emphasized "character, cleverness, and authenticity" over noisy violence.⁹³⁶ Because these qualities relied so much on listeners' imaginations, *Sponsor* worried

⁹³² Walter Scott, "Memo from Walter Scott to Walter Craig," June 6, 1950, Folder 8; Box 364; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁹³³ Bron., "Radio Reviews: Defense Attorney," *Variety*, July 18, 1951.

⁹³⁴ Henry Leff, "Letter from Henry Leff to Jack French," February 17, 2003, Shared by Recipient.

⁹³⁵ "Are Mysteries Still the Best Buy?," *Sponsor*, October 9, 1950, 23-24.

⁹³⁶ "Are Mysteries Still the Best Buy?," 78.

that they would be more difficult to recreate within “the limits of TV today.”⁹³⁷

Sadly, the same economic forces that initially supported the rise of radio crime programs also led to their downfall. NBC certainly promoted them as a way for cost-conscious sponsors to reach a broad audience well into the 1950s.⁹³⁸ However, while NBC may have been willing to sustain *Candy Matson* for well over a year on its West Coast network, by 1951 the radio network was doubling down on cost-cutting and bolstering profitability. In this environment, Candy was more than just an unprofitable expense – she was also taking up valuable time across an even more valuable set of growing consumer markets, including Seattle, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Los Angeles. In April of 1951, *Variety* reported that the network was cutting production out of KNBC, which had once been lauded as a vital production center.⁹³⁹ Candy survived this round of cuts, which focused on live music and talk shows with “excessive costs, chiefly engineering, and low ratings which made them unattractive to local advertisers.”⁹⁴⁰ The writing was likely on the wall, however, as the station proceeded to reappraise all “sustaining programs to determine their commercial possibilities under 1951 competitive conditions.”⁹⁴¹ For its part, ABC cancelled *Defense Attorney*, along with Marlene Dietrich’s foreign spy series, *Café Istanbul* (1952), and replaced it with lighter – and likely

⁹³⁷ “Are Mysteries Still the Best Buy?,” 78.

⁹³⁸ “Research and Planning Bulletin #68 - Radio Turnover,” December 1, 1953, Folder 84; Box 349; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁹³⁹ “KNBC’s Drastic Program Lopoffs Cue Frisco Beefs,” *Variety*, April 4, 1951.

⁹⁴⁰ “KNBC’s Drastic Program Lopoffs Cue Frisco Beefs.”

⁹⁴¹ “KNBC’s Drastic Program Lopoffs Cue Frisco Beefs.”

cheaper – comic and musical fare.⁹⁴²

These cost-cutting measures may have also been reinforced by the networks' efforts to position television as a new and modern family medium. As Jennifer Hyland Wang (2002) points out, the networks did this partly by playing on stereotypes of radio as an excessively commercialized, hyper-feminine space dominated by older, neurotic, lower-middle-class soap opera fans.⁹⁴³ By contrast, network television salesmen, and especially those working for NBC, painted television viewers as younger, wealthier, and more discerning. This emphasis on radio as a medium for housewives – and housewives only – might have helped retain soap opera sponsors, but it also made it more difficult to retain advertisers for primetime series. Additionally, conservative pushback over women's expanding public roles, which I describe in chapter two, likely rendered female detectives an easy target for network cost-cutters. Why persist in broadcasting female investigators who cost more (especially if the networks paid stars like McCambridge or Dietrich what they were worth) and were more likely to draw criticism when one could simply rely on women to tune in to male investigators instead? Indeed, male insurance investigator Johnny Dollar, of *Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar* (CBS radio, 1949-1962), was the last primetime drama series of any genre to leave network radio in 1962.

Conservative gender norms continued to restrict female investigators more

⁹⁴² "ABC Revising Pyramid Plan to Get Variety," *Variety*, December 10, 1952.

⁹⁴³ Wang, "The Case of the Radio-Active Housewife," 349.

than a decade after they disappeared from radio. In May of 1967, *Los Angeles Times* television critic Hal Humphrey hailed Yvonne Craig's introduction as Batgirl with the following reassurance: "Don't panic. Batgirl is joining Batman. She won't have her own series."⁹⁴⁴ This veiled reference to Anne Francis's lead role in *Honey West*, which had been cancelled just the year before, became explicit in an extended quotation from Craig: "'Did I tell you, too, that Batgirl won't be chopping people up with karate?' Yvonne asks. 'She'll be adroit but not violent. I think the reason Honey West didn't stay on TV was because she was always going around clobbering somebody, and you can't look feminine when you're doing that.'"⁹⁴⁵ Honey had been the first independent female detective on network television, and her cancellation was widely presented as proof that Americans simply weren't ready to see a woman take up the reins of investigation and justice. As played by Francis, Honey may have been beautiful, stylish, and flirtatious, but that was not enough to ensure that audiences would receive her as feminine enough. Or at least that was the story that postwar critics and network PR efforts constructed through catty soundbites and appeals to conservative gender values like grace, gentility, and dependence.

Craig, by contrast, promised to imbue her role with the grace she had internalized in her years training for and touring with the Ballet Russe. Craig cemented the contrast between herself and the well-paid Anne Francis by admitting

⁹⁴⁴ Hal Humphrey, "Batgirl Swings Onto TV Scene," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1967.

⁹⁴⁵ Humphrey.

that she was incensed over how high her (relatively modest) film pay was compared to the poor, hard-working “girls in the ballet.”⁹⁴⁶ This contrasted with the 20% stake Francis reportedly controlled in her own short-lived series. It is impossible to know how much Craig’s stated opinions correlated with her own thoughts and how much they were dictated by network publicists. It is clear, however, that ABC was interested in framing *Honey West*’s gender transgressions as a mistake from which broadcasters had learned a valuable lesson: it was not enough for women to be attractive – they must also be gracefully, gently feminine. That meant no judo. Along with this method of self-defense, women lost much of the independence that Honey had temporarily gained for them. When female detectives finally did achieve wider circulation in the 1970s, their femininity remained an important part of their characterization. While the Blaxploitation-inspired *Get Christie Love* would have welcomed a more active lead than Teresa Graves proved to be after her religious conversion, programs like *Police Woman* did their best to assign true violence to Angie Dickinson’s three male compatriots.

Craig was not the first actress to criticize Francis’s energetic performance in *Honey West*. One year prior, Humphrey had quoted *Peyton Place* actress Barbara Parkins consoling herself for losing the Best Actress Emmy for which Francis was also nominated. According to Humphrey, Parkins said she did not mind losing to winner Barbara Stanwyck, but “I would have hated to lose to Anne Francis...I don’t care much for her work. A woman should be feminine, and not go around hitting

⁹⁴⁶ Humphrey.

people with judo chops the way she does in that Honey West show.”⁹⁴⁷ Parkins’s statement remained in circulation through the rest of the decade, along with the idea that *Honey West* was cancelled because audiences disapproved of Honey’s assertive detecting style. *LA Times* gossip columnist Joyce Haber revived it in a 1969 profile praising Parkins’s willingness to speak controversial truths, claiming that even Honey’s fans would have to agree with Parkins’s statement.⁹⁴⁸ Critics and network executives blamed Honey’s suspect femininity for her series’ cancellation well into the 1980s, though not everyone agreed. Francis herself vociferously defended her series, and character co-creator Gloria Fickling argued that ABC cancelled the slickly produced, expensive series because the network could import episodes of *The Avengers* for a fraction of the cost. Indeed, she claimed that ABC had originally intended to see if *Honey West*’s ratings could be boosted by transforming the series from a half-hour in black and white to a full hour in color: “It was on the books, it was a last-minute decision” to cancel the series instead.⁹⁴⁹ Still, popular misogyny remained the dominant explanation. *LA Times* critic Howard Rosenberg concluded his review of 1982’s new crop of female detective series with the comment that Honey West only lasted one season “because, it was said, America could not tolerate Honey’s dominance over her male assistant.”⁹⁵⁰ But was Honey really too much for the viewing public in the mid-1960s? And what of her

⁹⁴⁷ Hal Humphrey, “Good Loser With Winning Ways,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1966.

⁹⁴⁸ Joyce Haber, “Barbara Parkins: Accused and Unexcused,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 1969.

⁹⁴⁹ John C. Fredriksen, *Honey West: A Biography of the TV Series* (Albany, Ga: BearManor Media, 2009), 12–23.

⁹⁵⁰ Howard Rosenberg, “The New Season,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1982.

predecessors?

Pushing Gendered Limits in Syndication: Decoy (1957)

Female detectives were few and far between on American broadcast networks by the late 1950s, but one syndicated program about a female detective did manage to circumvent those self-appointed television gatekeepers and make it to the air in television's first decade. Beginning in 1957, *Decoy* found a limited but notable home on a number of independent stations across the country. Indeed, *The Billboard* hailed *Decoy*'s sale for \$600,000 to "the biggest buying combine of [independent] stations" currently looking for new programs as "a contractual blockbuster."⁹⁵¹ The program's 39 episodes went on to air through Westinghouse-owned TV stations in major cities like Boston, San Francisco, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore, as well as other major independent stations in municipalities across the country. This success may have been aided by broadcaster's increasing awareness that women were working during the day. By 1957, trade magazines like *The Billboard* were running articles with titles like "Busy Dames: Daytime May Lose as Work Level Rises." Such pieces noted that, even if women and teenage girls simply worked part-time, that meant that there were fewer women watching television during the daytime.⁹⁵² It is unclear whether Official Films, *Decoy*'s independent production company, ever shopped their series to the major networks. However, the networks' track record with female

⁹⁵¹ "'Decoy' Goes Syndie - For \$600,000 Lure," *The Billboard*, June 29, 1957.

⁹⁵² "Busy Dames: Daytime May Lose as Work Level Rises," *The Billboard*, April 13, 1957.

investigators, and their growing emphasis on network-owned productions, makes it unlikely that *Decoy* could have found a home there in the late 1950s.

Decoy followed the adventures of policewoman Casey Jones, played by Beverly Garland, as she went undercover in a range of cases around New York City. Casey was a brave and empathetic investigator, but her position within the police hierarchy mitigated her independence. Instead of choosing and pursuing her own cases, Casey usually worked under close supervision from male superiors, who stepped in whenever they felt she needed assistance. This was not entirely because of Casey's gender. *Decoy* was modeled closely on NBC's popular police procedural, *Dragnet*, which was famous for its matter-of-fact approach to "underplaying crime."⁹⁵³ Like *Dragnet*, *Decoy* emphasized Casey's role as one of many officers within the smoothly operating machine that was the police department. Within that department, however, Casey provided a unique and valuable feminine presence. As Kathleen Murray (2014) points out, Casey herself was portrayed as direct, professional, and collected under fire – all traits associated with male policemen. Still, she could adopt any of a wide range of feminine roles depending on the needs of her current assignment. Moreover, suspects and witnesses alike were more likely to talk to her because she was a woman.⁹⁵⁴

Decoy was a fast-paced program with compact episodes and efficient storytelling. Most episodes began with Casey describing her latest undercover

⁹⁵³ Sam Kaufman, "Memo from Sam Kaufman to Syd Eiges," December 7, 1949, Folder 14; Box 118; National Broadcasting Company Records, 1921-1976, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁹⁵⁴ Kathleen Murray, "Overlooking the Evidence: Gender, Genre and the Woman Detective in Hollywood Film and Television" (Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2014), 259.

assignment in voice-over, over a brief set of shots establishing the case to which she has been assigned and the persona she has adopted. Typically, Casey was assigned to cases where a male officer would appear out of place. Those cases ranged from domestic harassment to drugs to gun smuggling, but they were more likely than not to involve women who had been victimized by men in some way.⁹⁵⁵ While undercover, Casey worked as part of an investigative team headed by male detectives. In this capacity, she enjoyed relative freedom of action, but only within the confines of a larger strategy set by her male superiors. Throughout her assignments, Casey regularly called in to headquarters to report on progress and receive directions on how best to proceed. She and her superiors often consulted on strategy, and she believed in and followed through on her own intuitions about cases. Still, her male superiors were ultimately in control. Casey was no renegade cop; she had her own opinions on cases, but, like Sgt. Friday – and unlike later male police officers – she still followed orders.

“An Eye for an Eye” opens with Casey’s usual voice-over, informing us that she is posing as a drug addict in an effort to trace local suppliers: “A cheap hotel room in the 50s off 8th Avenue. My home for the past three days and nights. I was on assignment to Narcotics Bureau... a junkie looking for a fix. Needle punctures...the mark of a junkie who’s hooked...but good. Mine came the easy way...by twisting a ballpoint pen against a vein.”⁹⁵⁶ As in other cases, this voice-

⁹⁵⁵ Murray, 244.

⁹⁵⁶ Teddy Sills, “An Eye For An Eye,” *Decoy* (New York: syndicated: Pyramid Productions, February 10, 1958).

over establishes Casey's investigative competence and moral authority over the personal aspects of police work. Casey's opening narration reflects the style Jack Webb adopted for *Dragnet*. Both speak in short, clipped sentences that convey clarity and efficiency. However, where Webb's cool, deep voice creates the impression of a hard shell that repels emotional entanglements, actress Beverly Garland imbued Casey with softer, more expressively empathetic intonations. Instead of coming to a full stop at the end of each short sentence, as Webb did, Garland's sentences trail off into brief but pregnant pauses that create room for viewers to absorb the full emotional impact of her statements and the accompanying visuals. Casey moves around her cramped hotel room, restlessly waiting for movement in her case. As she files her nails in bed and checks her fake needle marks, we have time to note the dinginess of her surroundings and feel for the junkies who are "hooked" into such a comfortless existence. Despite the program's emphasis on police power, which fed into the same law-and-order ethos promoted in the TV Code, Casey's voice conveys sympathy for the addicts she is investigating. She makes it clear that, despite individual drug users' failings, the real criminals are the ones who sell the drugs that destroy junkies' potential. This sympathetic framing is reinforced by the week's central investigation into the death of Maria, a junkie Casey had hoped would lead her to a larger ring of drug suppliers. After finding Maria sprawled on her bed with a knife in her back, Casey works with male detectives to uncover Maria's link to a shadowy supplier. The investigation leads her to befriend Maria's mother and brother, both of whom are

struggling to make sense of their loved one's death.

This investigation also foregrounds the gendered divisions of labor that persisted even in an investigation where everyone involved is a member of the police force. Like Candy, Casey relies on men to provide many of the official pieces of information that help her tie cases together. Casey does the legwork of tracking down and befriending Maria's mother and brother, and she quickly – and correctly – becomes suspicious that the brother was involved in Maria's death. Still, she needs the male detectives at headquarters to inform her that the brother's mentor is a suspected criminal on whom the police have been trying to gather evidence for years. This division between feminine knowledge and masculine power over information made room for feminine access to investigation but maintained men's ultimate control over the legal power. Women like Casey could work within the system. They could be investigators, and even particularly good ones, but they were never allowed to rise through the ranks and gain authority over the system itself, even in the imaginative world of television. Instead, they remained subservient contributors to a larger, centralized, male-controlled body of power. Headquarters monitors her actions, ensures her safety, and aggregates the evidence that she collects into an intelligible whole. Casey is an active part of this process, but we know that she will never have an opportunity to control it. Still, she does get the last word. Each episode closes with her breaking the fourth wall to directly address viewers at home. Again, these final speeches deal more with morality than minute points of the law; in this case, Casey laments the brother's

misplaced trust in his drug-dealing benefactor.

This official oversight, and her willingness to follow orders, obviated the need for a male sidekick to try to keep her from engaging in unfeminine shenanigans, but it did not protect her from danger. Like other contemporary television series, *Decoy* was reticent about depicting graphic violence visually. That does not mean that the program shied away from it, however. Despite her departmental support system, Casey encountered dangers aplenty as she operated alone in the city. Indeed, producers occasionally seem to take the program's police context as an excuse to hint at greater violence than the National Association of Broadcasters' Television Code would have permitted subscribing stations to show. And while contemporary male-centric crime series also flirted with the edge of permissible televisual violence, *Decoy* occasionally pushed the bounds of decency standards even further by showing violence committed against a woman, and a virtuous, blonde woman at that. Most episodes hinted at the danger Casey faced in her investigations by depicting her in a situation that initially appears threatening, but which she is able to diffuse quickly.⁹⁵⁷ This was especially true of sexual threats: Casey's sexuality was a powerful tool, but she was never depicted directly seducing or being violated by any of the criminal men she encounters.

However, despite police department precautions, Casey is not immune to violence. In one episode, a gang of gun smugglers tracks Casey down and beats her unconscious after they catch her leaving their warehouse. The treatment managed

⁹⁵⁷ Murray, "Overlooking the Evidence," 255.

to stay within the TV Code's restrictions on depictions of crime, especially bans on presenting criminal techniques and using horror "for its own sake."⁹⁵⁸ The beating itself takes up less than 20 seconds of screen time, and involves one man landing two punches before Casey falls to the ground. We do see her visceral reaction: Casey briefly screams in pain and clutches her stomach before losing consciousness [see Figure 21].⁹⁵⁹ Still, her clothing remains undisturbed and the camera quickly fades to black, likely in an effort to avoid being accused of using "visual or aural effects which would shock or alarm the viewer."⁹⁶⁰ The beating's aural elements were even more muted. Casey lets out one sharp, shrill scream as the first gangster grabs her and prepares for his first punch, but her own pained vocalization is intermixed with and quickly drowned out by the rising chords of a dramatic, extradiegetic orchestra. This music, which evokes a cinematic chase scene, is the only sound we hear for the rest of Casey's oddly silent beating. We hear neither punches, nor subsequent cries, despite the fact that her open, screaming mouth remains visible until she loses consciousness and her head slumps down in an intimation of death. At that point, the scene quickly cuts to a pair of male police officers discussing her condition in another location. Their conversation informs us that she has regained consciousness, but is still awaiting x-rays and a final prognosis.

Casey's beating certainly borders on the sensational, but its brevity and

⁹⁵⁸ "The Television Code" (National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters, 1952).

⁹⁵⁹ Teddy Sills, "Across the World," *Decoy* (New York: syndicated: Pyramid Productions, February 24, 1958).

⁹⁶⁰ "The Television Code," 3.

relative silence show the impact of audience protests over the sounds of violence on radio. Instead of the extended screams to which FCC letter writers objected in late 1940s and early 1950s, we hear music. The male officers who inform us of Casey's prognosis remain calm despite their concern for their colleague. The men's calm encourages viewers to accept Casey's injury with collected composure rather than sensational emotion. This attitude is aided by the fact that Casey is a cop. Along with her uniform, she has accepted the risks that come with investigating criminals of all kinds – after all, she knew that the gang of gun runners she was infiltrating had already killed one woman. In other words, Casey's beating is not something that could happen to just anyone. Casey might be careful, but she has also placed herself in the path of danger. It is also significant that Casey does not fight back. As *Honey West's* detractors lamented, there was nothing more spectacular, or spectacularly unfeminine, than a woman trading blows with a man. As part of the police force, Casey has more and less permission to be vulnerable. She has to be able to defend herself against the increased threats she encounters, and she usually does so by carrying a gun that is characterized as a tool rather than a sexual object. However, she also has the full might of the police force behind her to protect her from danger – and to avenge her when necessary. She does not have to “sacrifice” her femininity by learning to judo chop her assailants.

Casey may not be a nameless cog in the police machine, but she is a relative cipher. Much as we see her in action, we never see her in her personal life. Ads for the program emphasized Garland's glamour and adaptability, but they also

reinforced an idea planted at the beginning of each episode – that Casey was a stand-in for all of the other anonymous women working for the NYC police. Even before Casey’s introductory voice-over, episodes opened with a title card dedicating the program as a tribute to New York City’s Bureau of Policewomen [Figure 22].⁹⁶¹ This card served the joint purpose of burnishing *Decoy*’s public service credentials – and hopefully discouraging criticism – and universalizing Casey’s experience across a larger group of women. Likewise, distributor ads promoting the program’s success in syndication described *Decoy* as revealing “for the first time, the thrilling adventures of New York’s women police...in uniform and in fascinating disguise – from rags to rubies.”⁹⁶² [Figure 23]. Garland’s image is prominent in these ads, swathed in luxurious furs, but Casey’s name is not. She could be any glamorous female cop.

Reviewers did not seem too bothered by Casey’s feminine presence. *Variety* dismissed the program as weakly written, but praised Garland’s performance.⁹⁶³ *The Billboard*’s Charles Sinclair was more generous, if more prurient in his enthusiasm for the “pint-sized gal” invading a field that had been “Hitherto as masculine a province as Stillman’s Gym.”⁹⁶⁴ While he took the time to compliment the program’s performances and “Kazan-like feeling of authenticity,” he was more eager to note his masculine appreciation of Garland’s legs: “Not since

⁹⁶¹ Sills, “Across the World.”

⁹⁶² Official Films, “Decoy (Print Advertisement),” *Broadcasting/Telecasting*, August 26, 1957.

⁹⁶³ Daku, “Syndication Reviews: Decoy,” *Variety*, October 23, 1957.

⁹⁶⁴ Charles Sinclair, “Saga of Lady Cop: ‘Decoy’ and Beverly Garland Solid Hits,” *The Billboard*, August 5, 1957.

Marilyn's famed walkaway in 'Seven Year Itch' has the camera ogled such a distracting New York pedestrian."⁹⁶⁵ These attributes, he was sure, would monopolize most male viewers' attention. This focus presages the 1970s focus on sexy female sleuths. Within the series itself, Casey is shown inhabiting every type of femininity except for her own. When not on assignment, she is neat, proficient, and professional, her hair in a sleek, helmet-like bob that compliments her uniform. However, we never see her at home at the end of a long shift. Casey's lack of personal specificity could be either empowering or restrictive to female viewers. Because her personal life was a blank slate, individual viewers could project any qualities they wished onto Casey. This would have made it easy for young women to imagine themselves in her place. Still, Casey's lack of personal life denied audiences a valuable model for how a female cop might balance their professional and private lives. There are no hints as to how she deals with the stress of her job, or even what it was in her life that drew her to policing to begin with. And, while we do occasionally see other female officers, they receive even less attention. Criminals' personalities are unique and well-explored, but Casey's and her fellow officers' are not. The same could not be said for the next female detective on primetime television: Honey West.

Femininity and Judo: Honey West (ABC 1965-1966)

By the 1960s, the networks had begun to re-think their apparent opposition to female detectives. In January of 1965, the *Los Angeles Times* announced that "it

⁹⁶⁵ Sinclair.

may be the year for girl detectives,” with both CBS and ABC developing female-led crime series.⁹⁶⁶ CBS cancelled Jack Webb’s adaptation of Patricia McGerr’s spy character, Selena Mead, before the season began, but *Honey West* made it to series for a single, contentious season.⁹⁶⁷ Where *Decoy* managed to avoid attracting any significant backlash – or at least a record of such backlash – *Honey West* drew both censure and praise from the beginning. Even before Honey’s premier, the critics fretted about her prospects, both as a female detective and as yet another spy-style series weighted down with high-tech spy gadgets in a crowded field of James Bond copycats. *Honey West* also came at an awkward time for its home network, ABC. ABC was the first of the national networks to aggressively target its programs toward a youth audience. Lacking the resources of its more established competitors – NBC and CBS – ABC worked to build rapport with the expanding Baby Boomer generation through sensational and often exploitative teen soap operas like *Peyton Place* (1964-1969), and glamorous, male-led detective series like *Burke’s Law* (1963-1969). *Honey West* was one of several programs produced for ABC by Four Star Productions, under the supervision of Aaron Spelling, who remained a major supplier of ABC’s sexy, youth-oriented programming through the 1990s. However, despite their desire for young audiences, ABC was also wary of public objections to representations of sex and violence, especially after earlier

⁹⁶⁶ Cecil Smith, “The TV Scene: Polly a Distaff James Bond,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 1965.

⁹⁶⁷ Robert Jay, “The Mysterious Case of Selena Mead,” *Television Obscurities* (blog), January 28, 2009, http://www.tvobscurities.com/articles/selena_mead/.

risqué programming attracted negative attention from the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency.⁹⁶⁸

Honey West's producers struggled to situate their heroine's more assertive brand of femininity in terms that would simultaneously attract young viewers and avoid offending their parents. This was easier said than done. As the containment policies that had marked the 1950s – in theory if not in fact – gradually broke down under pressure from the civil rights movement and other social dissident groups, television producers were torn between targeting the growing youth population with more liberated female images and continuing to target their parents with more conservative representations. Katherine Lehman (2011) reminds us that single women were viewed with suspicion in the 1960s, and tensions over women's labor only increased as Baby Boomers began to reach working age.⁹⁶⁹ Even as "single girls," as they were patronizingly termed, became increasingly common in movies and television series, Lehman argues that producers sought to rein in their freedom and agency by framing them within "conservative plotlines [that] undermined [their] knowledge, revealed [their] inexperience," ultimately "humbling the single woman and restoring her to a proper feminine role," namely, marriage.⁹⁷⁰ *Honey West*'s producers solved the problem of a young single girl living alone by giving Honey a live-in maiden aunt to supervise her at home, while her partner, Sam Bolt, did his best to supervise her in the field. Production memos from early in *Honey*

⁹⁶⁸ Hal Humphrey, "A Female Private Eye-Ful," *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 1965.

⁹⁶⁹ Lehman, *Those Girls*.

⁹⁷⁰ Lehman, 16.

West's development show how screenwriters Gwen Bagni and Paul Dubov, tasked with adapting the novel for television, struggled to address these concerns as they shepherded the series through its backdoor pilot on *Burke's Law* and into production. The Dubovs – as they referred to themselves in production memos – had previously written for *Burke's Law*, and the married pair went on to write 13 of *Honey West*'s eventual 30 episodes.

Memos show the importance that Four Star placed on Honey's relationships, particularly Honey's relationship with Sam. In early iterations of the series bible, the Dubovs positioned Honey as "a swinging gal, with a wry sense of humor about herself and some of the situations she finds herself in, [who] works as a loner" but is often glad to know that Sam is around, "however reluctant she might be to admit it."⁹⁷¹ After a production meeting with Spelling, however, "works as a loner" was changed to "likes to think of herself as a loner, but this is only female illusion."⁹⁷² At the same meeting, Sam was elevated from employee to full partner, supposedly "retaining the power of final decision" in the detective agency that was left to the pair by Honey's father.⁹⁷³ Honey's dependence on Sam was further emphasized by a requirement that she find herself in mortal peril in each episode, either through her own actions or simple plot progression, and that "from time to time," Sam would be

⁹⁷¹ Gwen Bagni and Paul Dubov, "Honey West," n.d., Folder 8; Box 39; Gwen Bagni Papers (Collection 1999), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

⁹⁷² "'Honey West' (half-hour television series)," March 23, 1965. Gwen Bagni papers, Box 39, Folder 8.

⁹⁷³ Bud Kay, "'Honey West' Additional Format," March 23, 1965, Folder 8; Box 39; Gwen Bagni Papers (Collection 1999), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

the one to rescue her “at the crucial moment.”⁹⁷⁴

Producers were also concerned about striking the right balance of sex appeal, assertiveness, and conservative femininity. From the start, production memos and newspaper reviews emphasized that Honey was a “luscious” bombshell.⁹⁷⁵ Popular Hollywood columnist Hedda Hopper emphasized Francis’ costly, fashionable wardrobe and “shapely leg[s]” as evidence of her potential success.⁹⁷⁶ One of the producers’ chief concerns was that Honey always appear feminine, despite the demands of her occupation. Her wardrobe was designed to emphasize femininity, even in action sequences, and production memos stipulated that she would never appear in “predominantly masculine garb,” including trench coats and jack boots.⁹⁷⁷ However, producers also worried that such feminine clothing would lead to problematic visuals during fight scenes, inspiring them to insist that Honey’s physical contact with criminals be reduced wherever possible.⁹⁷⁸ While Honey could take most men who came her way, her producers preferred that she do it with a discrete, low contact judo chop rather than a rough-and-tumble sparring match.

Honey’s sex appeal was further restrained by the presence of her maiden aunt, who alternately acted as chaperone and voice of conventional femininity. Aunt Meg was originally conceived as a maid named Aggie, a “domestic jewel with

⁹⁷⁴ Kay.

⁹⁷⁵ “TV Reviews,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 1965.

⁹⁷⁶ Hedda Hopper, “1965 All New Year for Anne Francis,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1965.

⁹⁷⁷ Kay, “‘Honey West’ Additional Format,” March 23, 1965.

⁹⁷⁸ Kay.

a talent for putting her finger right on the exposed nerve. -- of seeing through Honey's facade of invincibility" and verbalizing Honey's fears and feminine instincts.⁹⁷⁹ Her chief role was to facilitate "an obligatory scene in every picture in which Honey takes a specifically feminine attitude, and is not in direct competition with men."⁹⁸⁰ There is no record of why Meg was elevated from maid to aunt, but as a family member, she was presumably harder for Honey to dismiss. Furthermore, a maid might have been too close to a secretary with whom Honey might have enjoyed a closer homosocial relationship that would have risked further destabilizing Honey's precarious heterosexuality. While Meg did not appear in every episode, her chief function was to act as intermediary between Honey and Sam when they engaged in their ongoing "battle of the sexes." She is loyal to Honey and cynical about the very patriarchy that she wryly supports, but she frequently supports Sam's moral authority by taking his side. She also frequently encourages Honey to marry Sam.

Promotional coverage emphasized the series' youth appeal. Shortly after the backdoor pilot aired on *Burke's Law* in the spring of 1965, executive producer Aaron Spelling described Honey as "a wild show. 'She's a female private eye, a karate expert [who] wears crazy clothes, travels in a Jaguar and has an ocelot for a pet.'"⁹⁸¹ Bruce the ocelot was added to appeal to younger viewers by signaling that

⁹⁷⁹ Gwen Bagni and Paul Dubov, "Honey West," March 23, 1965, Folder 8; Box 39; Gwen Bagni Papers (Collection 1999), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

⁹⁸⁰ Kay, "'Honey West' Additional Format," March 23, 1965.

⁹⁸¹ Hedda Hopper, "Everybody on Video Spy Kick," *Los Angeles Times*, May 18, 1965.

“Honey is no ordinary girl.”⁹⁸² While star Anne Francis reportedly disliked the more sensational additions – like Bruce – she praised the role for allowing her to escape from parts as housewives or “any of the kooky characters that pass for comedy.”⁹⁸³ Nevertheless, Francis was also careful to emphasize Honey’s ultimate feminine appeal, saying that “I think women like to watch a swinging career gal who is still feminine and uses a woman's wiles far more often than karate chops. Actually, she uses these only when pushed into a dangerous corner. Her handcuffs are jeweled; so are her derringers.”⁹⁸⁴

Midway through the production process, the series was cut from an hour-long drama to faster-paced half hour. However, the series maintained the emphasis on sensational action that characterized *Burke’s Law* and the Ficklings’ novels. This change did not guarantee that the series would become a comedy, but it did confuse the matter of genre. By 1965 most crime series were hour-long dramas. This allowed characters more time to attend to the particulars of a case and explore crime’s emotional and physical impact. Half-hour programs were more likely to be comedic. This impression was heightened by the program’s rapid pace, which made it difficult to trace the plot’s development and contributed an almost zany air to the action. Honey might reject the screwball antics Jane Sherlock and Pam North used to shield themselves from criticism of their detecting activities, but she could never fully escape the comic framing that followed most female detectives.

⁹⁸² Humphrey, “A Female Private Eye-Ful.”

⁹⁸³ Hopper, “1965 All New Year for Anne Francis.”

⁹⁸⁴ Hopper.

As I have already noted, Honey's independence was further undercut by her reliance on her male partner, whom memos repeatedly characterize as "her strong arm" and a "man virile enough to work for a woman and not disrupt the balance of nature."⁹⁸⁵ While Honey's acumen as an investigator is never truly questioned, her femininity is played up alternately "as counterpoint to the toughness, the danger, the intrigue, the suspense that is inherent in her job," and as the basis of her intuitive power.⁹⁸⁶ "Honey's feminine logic ('don't confuse me with the facts, I've made up my mind') is a definite asset in her profession," reads one outline, which also emphasized that the show would always have strong detective story aspect, perhaps an attempt to counter the danger that the series would be stripped of its driving force.⁹⁸⁷ In practice, however, *Honey West* violated at least one of these restrictions on a weekly basis. While stereotypically feminine viewpoints were expressed in each episode, they were more likely to come from Aunt Meg than Honey, and Honey regularly flouts Sam's authority. Indeed, Sam frequently comes across as an outdated stick in the mud, a member of the paternalistic old guard futilely struggling to restrain the young, dynamic Honey and her feminine power. Julie D'Acci notes that many adult women who remembered being inspired by the series in their youth did not even recall Sam's presence.⁹⁸⁸ If, as Erin Lee Mock (2011)

⁹⁸⁵ Gwen Bagni and Paul Dubov, "Notes on 'Honey,'" July 6, 1964, Folder 8; Box 39; Gwen Bagni Papers (Collection 1999), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

⁹⁸⁶ Bagni and Dubov.

⁹⁸⁷ Bagni and Dubov, "Honey West," March 23, 1965.

⁹⁸⁸ Julie D'Acci, "Nobody's Woman? 'Honey West' and the New Sexuality," in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997), 86.

has contended, the postwar sitcom portrayed a world where the potential for masculine violence was an ever-present threat lurking just beneath the surface of the happy family façade, *Honey West* shows how that threat is neutered by a strong, assertive woman.⁹⁸⁹ Sam frequently screams until he is blue in the face, but he never manages to stop Honey from doing anything she has set her mind to, much less shake her confidence in her investigative skills and choices, or her love of adventure.

Despite her freedoms, however, Honey was denied a well-rounded personal life. This is most visible in her relationship to her home, which was strained at best. In some ways, the absolute expectation that postwar women would eventually marry and embrace domesticity freed earlier investigators like Candy to enjoy their single lives for a brief period. By 1965, however, concern over the increasing number of single working women had reached a fever pitch, manifesting in a marked paranoia regarding the urban hazards for young working women living alone in big cities.⁹⁹⁰ *Honey West*'s insecure urban apartment exemplified this peril: while the secret door connecting her office and living space let her escape dangerous walks home, it also allowed criminals to invade her private space. At the same time, Honey's home lacked the freedom that made independent living appealing: where male contemporaries' homes were often private retreats for rest, relaxation, and sexual exploits, Honey's domestic space was supervised by her

⁹⁸⁹ Erin Lee Mock, "The Horror of 'Honey, I'm Home!': The Perils of Postwar Family Love in the Domestic Sitcom," *Film & History* 41, no. 2 (2011): 29–50.

⁹⁹⁰ Johnson, "The Career Girl Murders."

watchful widowed aunt and male business partner. This addition of the aunt as live-in chaperone indicates that producers were more concerned with the potential ramifications of depicting a woman living alone in the 1960s than the 1950s, especially on a visual medium like television. It also demonstrates the enduring power of the postwar conservative backlash against working women's freedoms.

Unlike Candy, who goes to her clients, Honey does not appear to have made much effort to separate her home from her place of business. She does not invite clients into her home, but she, Sam, and Aunt Meg are often shown working on cases in her living room. In effect, Honey's home became an extension of her office. This move reinforced the idea – established most prominently on contemporary sitcoms – that home was the proper site of feminine labor by re-contextualizing Honey's professional labor as domestic. However, while Honey is shown working or having her relaxation interrupted by work in every room of her apartment, she is never shown working in the kitchen. Aunt Meg handles all of the domestic labor, and the closest Honey comes to working in a kitchen is washing cocaine out of her purse in a kitchen sink.⁹⁹¹ Throughout the series' single season, we repeatedly see Honey trying to relax, only to have work interrupt her. Even when she is shown engaging in what appear to be pleasurable activities at home, as when she takes Sam down with a well-executed judo move, the fact remains that she is still working. Not that she seems to want more of a home. Unlike Candy, Honey never seems to desire a settled family life. She flirts with men, but routinely

⁹⁹¹ Paul Wendkos, "The Abominable Snowman," *Honey West* (ABC, October 1, 1965).

rejects Sam's romantic overtures along with his efforts to contain her investigations. Still, in rejecting conventional feminine domesticity, Honey is also shown to have lost something.

Conclusion

Most female detectives who appeared on radio and television in the decades after WWII, as Philippa Gates argues, "struggled to be both a successful detective and a successful woman." In the end, Honey was simultaneously contained within the home and rejected by it: patriarchal supervision reinforced her lack of domestic authority, while constant work incursions denied her the opportunity for rest. Indeed, in rejecting conventional femininity, Honey was treated as having rejected the protections and comforts that sitcom housewives were shown enjoying in their suburban homes. Honey served as warning to female viewers that her exciting life came at a significant cost. Even as they appeared to gain public power, women could not expect to have it all. Candy Matson turned her back on detecting and embraced domesticity. The series' final episode concluded with her enthusiastically accepting Mallard's proposal of marriage and envisioning a blissful life in a vine-covered cottage where she would take on her largest case yet: trying "to be an awfully good wife to" him.⁹⁹² Other female detectives simply faded away.

Throughout the postwar decades, popular media representations of female detectives emphasized the precarious position they place themselves in by adopting a stereotypically masculine profession. Typically single, female detectives eschew

⁹⁹² Monty Masters, "May 21, 1951," *Candy Matson* (NBC, May 21, 1951).

marriage's financial, legal, and physical protections. They court even more danger by intervening in criminal enterprises. This vulnerability, and their sexual and economic freedom, were especially threatening to prevailing containment ideologies in post-World War II American broadcast depictions. Unlike male PIs, postwar female detectives are denied many of the trappings of professionalism. Beyond their lack of discrete offices, they have to spend much more time proving themselves to their clients, law enforcement, and even their friends.

As scholars like D'Acci have pointed out, broadcasters' conventional wisdom encouraged network executives to regard female-led action and adventure programs as unprofitable programming risks to be avoided.⁹⁹³ This was doubly true as the networks were establishing their television business and working to recruit advertisers to the new medium. However, it is also true that the type of femininity that these women represented was perceived as more threatening in the postwar era. As Haralovich notes, active sitcom housewives like Lucy Ricardo and Gracie Allen gave way to more passive women like June Cleaver, of *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS TV, 1957-1963) by the late 1950s. By that point, "the women's movement was [already] seeking to release homemakers from" the postwar domestic model.⁹⁹⁴ However, that nostalgic ideal still held political and economic power in a Cold War context that celebrated family cohesion and suburban consumerism. As I note in chapter four, by the time *The Thin Man* (NBC/CBS/ABC radio, 1941-1950, NBC

⁹⁹³ D'Acci, "Nobody's Woman?"

⁹⁹⁴ Mary Beth Haralovich, "Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11, no. 1 (1989): 62.

TV, 1957-1959) made it to television in 1957, Nora Charles had been transformed from an inquisitive investigative partner to a socialite whose highest ambition was keeping her husband, Nick, from detecting.

Still, we can see the cracks in the façade of idealized feminine respectability. Despite pressure to remain in the home, women did venture outside. And despite threats of censure, some even managed to do so with their reputations intact. Early detectives did this by manipulating conservative gender norms to fit their needs. Some did so by accepting the fact that society would ridicule their actions and embracing that comedy to justify their actions. Others emphasized their moral duty to right social wrongs and help their fellow humans. By the late 1950s, however, female investigators had diverged from this path. Perhaps they felt that they did not need such justifications, or producers worried that looking too closely at women's reasons for working would only encourage more women to work. Regardless, by the time *Decoy* aired, Casey relied on her connection to the official police force to shield her from criticism. Honey scarcely mentioned the father who had left her his agency on the air. Instead, she boldly asserted her right to be in the field. Still, as Honey and Casey's meager personal lives attest, broadcasters had difficulty imagining investigative women as fully formed human beings. Effectively these later detectives had to answer a different question from the earlier cohort: Candy had to prove that she was domestic enough to be feminine, *Decoy* ignored domesticity altogether, and *Honey West* questioned whether Honey was feminine enough to be domestic.

Female investigators were a rarity on television before 1970, but the women who investigated in the decades immediately after WWII helped to establish the pattern for later female detectives, including similarly empowered – and problematic – 1970s and 1980s television heroines like *Police Woman*'s (NBC, 1974-1978) LAPD Sergeant Pepper Anderson, *Get Christie Love!*'s (ABC, 1974-1975) Christie Love, and *Remington Steele*'s (1982-1987) Laura Holt. Like these later crime fighting women, Candy and her fellow female sleuths walked a fine line between femininity and empowerment, guided by a wide range of conflicting social pressures and production requirements. Many of the strategies that helped program producers to contain the existential threat that liberated women posed to the Cold War domestic ideal have persisted in modern day depictions of female detectives, where they continue to restrain cultural ideas about what constitutes a strong, independent woman.

Figures



Figure 21: Police Woman Casey Jones falls to the ground in silent pain after two visible punches.

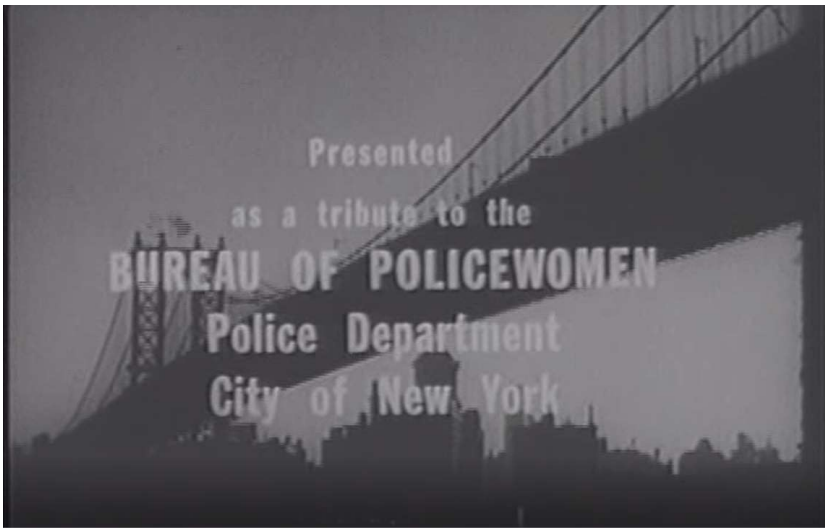


Figure 22: *Decoy*'s producers presented the program as a tribute to New York City's Bureau of Policewomen ("Across the World")

DECOY

Television's top formula—crime detection—
gets a powerful new twist in

"DECOY"

the all new, action-packed series
that reveals, for the first time, the thrilling
adventures of New York's women police . . .
in uniform and in fascinating disguise
—from rags to rubies . . . as they fight the vice
and crime that threaten America's biggest city.
Based on actual cases . . . filmed on the
streets of New York for authentic realism!

starring

BEVERLY GARLAND

Hollywood and television's fast rising star,
soon to be seen opposite Frank Sinatra in
"The Joker is Wild"!

produced by the makers of
The Big Story
T-Men in Action
The Man Behind
the Badge

famous for top sponsor results . . .
highest production standards.

call the man from:

 **OFFICIAL FILMS INC.**
25 West 45th Street • New York 26, New York
PLaza 7-0100

REPRESENTATIVES IN: Beverly Hills,
Chicago, Dallas, San Francisco,
St. Louis, Boston, Atlanta, Philadelphia





Figure 23: Decoy print advertisement run in major trade magazines

CONCLUSION: CAN WE MOVE ON FROM PATRIARCHAL JUSTICE?

The archetype of the happy sitcom housewife has loomed large in American political discourse, where she and her supposedly traditional family have been evoked as the quintessence of American family values with increasing frequency since the 1980s. President George H. W. Bush began a memorable feud with *The Simpsons* (Fox TV, 1989-present) during his 1992 bid for re-election when he promised that he would strengthen American families by encouraging them to be “a lot more like the Waltons and a lot less like the Simpsons.”⁹⁹⁵ The same year, Vice President Dan Quayle rebuked *Murphy Brown* (CBS TV, 1988-1998) for “mocking the importance of fathers by [depicting a working woman] bearing a child alone and calling it ‘just another lifestyle choice.’” Such representations, he reasoned, would only encourage the growing number of unwed mothers and speed a trajectory of social decay. More recently, the archetype of the suburban family sitcom has been evoked to bolster conservative political and cultural causes in everything from political stump speeches to proposed legislation discriminating against single and homosexual foster parents.⁹⁹⁶

Like Bush, most who call for this return have a highly specific referent in mind: the white, middle-class American family that appeared in suburban family sitcoms, predominantly in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This supposedly traditional family, headed by a breadwinning patriarchal father, and maintained by a homemaker mother

⁹⁹⁵ John Ortved, “Simpson Family Values,” *Vanity Fair*, August 2007, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2007/08/simpsons200708>.

⁹⁹⁶ Dave Ranney, “Kansas State Senator Walks Back Controversial Foster Care Proposal,” *KCUR*, February 13, 2015, <http://kcur.org/post/kansas-state-senator-walks-back-controversial-foster-care-proposal>.

dedicated to raising 2.5 cheerful, intelligent children, has been relayed to successive generations through countless reruns of classic 1950s television comedies and dramas. It appeared in perennial favorites like *Father Knows Best* (CBS & NBC TV, 1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS TV, 1957-1963), and was revived throughout the 20th century in programs like *The Brady Bunch* (CBS TV, 1969-1974) and, of course, *The Waltons* (CBS TV, 1971-1981). However, as Mary Beth Haralovich (1989) points out, this sitcom family was a nostalgic construction, even at the suburban family sitcom's popularity in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁹⁹⁷

At the same time, when we think of female detectives, we generally remember the sexy, brash female investigators who seem to have burst onto the airwaves – and out of their clothes – in the 1970s. These “relevant” female crime-fighters certainly did make an impression on the audiences of Baby Boomer youths for whom they were intended.⁹⁹⁸ Indeed, Angie Dickinson's *Policewoman* (1974-1978) reportedly inspired a precipitous increase in women applying to police academies nationwide. However, as Linda Mizejewski (2004) points out, post-relevance female crime fighters had to balance their transgressive potential by appealing to male fantasies.⁹⁹⁹ In order to be accepted as a liberated woman, 1970s female detectives had to conform to the post-sexual revolution expectation that free women were sexy women. Moreover, free women were expected to make themselves freely available to the men in their lives.

⁹⁹⁷ Mary Beth Haralovich, “Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11, no. 1 (1989): 62.

⁹⁹⁸ Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, Revised Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 203.

⁹⁹⁹ Linda Mizejewski, *Hardboiled & High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 59.

The only female crime fighter to dispute this in the 1970s was also the only Black woman who held the title of investigator at the time: Teresa Graves's Christie Love. Between filming the series' *Movie of the Week* pilot and the beginning of the regular season, Graves became a Jehovah's Witness. She used her religious conversion to exercise a level of control over the way her body was presented that would have been almost unheard of for contemporary television actresses: despite producer David Wolper's clear desire to put her character in "sexy" situations, including having her go undercover as a nurse, model, stewardess, or roller derby girl, Graves insisted that her character must always be fully clothed.¹⁰⁰⁰ She also refused to tell a direct lie. This was a marked shift from the Blaxploitation-style pilot, in which Graves had worn midriff-bearing blouses and flirted heavily with her boss. Production correspondence indicates that, while producers were happy to evade controversies around miscegenation between Christie and her white boss, they had trouble figuring out how to characterize and promote a non-sexualized female detective.¹⁰⁰¹ Given this context, it is less than surprising that ABC cancelled *Get Christie Love!* after only one season.

Like their more chaste progenitors, sexy female investigators like Pepper Anderson, Christie Love, and even Honey West, struggled to find a space in which they

¹⁰⁰⁰ David Wolper, "Memo from David Wolper to Paul Mason," October 21, 1974, Folder 15, Box 63, David L. Wolper Collection, USC Warner Bros. Archives; David Wolper, "Memo from David Wolper to Paul Mason," October 25, 1974, Folder 15, Box 63, David L. Wolper Collection, USC Warner Bros. Archives; Paul Mason, Personal Communication between Catherine Martin and Paul Mason, email, February 8, 2017.

¹⁰⁰¹ Carol Rubin, "Memo from Carol Rubin to Barry Diller: GET CHRISTIE LOVE ASI Test Results," January 30, 1974, Folder 3, Box 264, David L. Wolper Collection, USC Warner Bros. Archives; David Wolper, "Memo from David Wolper to Peter Saphier," October 21, 1974, Folder 15, Box 63, David L. Wolper Collection, USC Warner Bros. Archives.

could do what they did best – uncovering crime – within a system controlled and dominated by men. However, where earlier female detectives fought for the right to control their own sexuality – or at least to be perceived as normal, healthy, non-threatening women, 1970s female investigators did so by embracing the patriarchal fear that women could use their sexuality to control men. This solution could certainly be liberating for women watching at home, but it continued to perpetuate the idea that women were inherently dangerous. Notably, all of the successful female investigators on 1970s television took their orders from strong male authority figures. This arrangement reassured viewers that women’s sexual agency was still safely under patriarchal – and therefore trustworthy – control.

Partly because they were so sexualized, 1970s female detectives did less to contest patriarchal control over foundational American institutions like the criminal justice system. They might have had more range of movement, but they were also easier to reduce to sexualized objects for the male gaze. The same could not be said of the women who found a precarious, but often enduring, place on American radio and television in the preceding decades. Investigative wives like Pam North, secretaries like *Perry Mason*’s Della Street, and female detectives like Honey West demanded that men respect their abilities and authority, regardless of their physical appearance. True, they were all attractive women, but they refuse to let men harness their attractive qualities for their own purposes. Even worse, they insisted – either vocally or through their silent but persistent actions – that the men in their lives treat them as equals. This posed a real threat to postwar patriarchal power structures. Indeed, well into the 1970s,

parents' groups petitioned local stations like KTTV-LA to stop airing syndicated reruns of a number of series, including *Mr. & Mrs. North* and *Honey West*, because those series contradicted the values they wanted to instill in their children.¹⁰⁰²

As repeated contemporary controversies show, television crime dramas remain one of the most direct ways in which we interrogate ideas about law and order in American society. And, beyond their token efforts to diversify, they tend to remain a bastion of conservative political thinking. Despite the fact that crime writers ranging from Chester Himes to Sue Grafton to Sara Paretsky have used the literary crime genre to explore a range of racial and gender-related inequalities, national network crime dramas still tend to adhere to the dictates of the now-defunct NAB Television Code. Even more progressive series like *Brooklyn 99* (2013-present) argue that most cops are good people, and most criminals forfeit their rights once they commit their crimes. Other, more widely watched series, like *COPS* (1989-present), position suspects as guilty until – or even if – they are ultimately proven innocent.¹⁰⁰³ Women have certainly made great strides within such representations, but only by abandoning the more feminine-identified viewpoints outlined in the preceding chapters and adopting more male-identified, binary views of law, order, and criminal justice. In this way, crime dramas continue to advocate for the postwar patriarchal order to the present day.

Moreover, representations of women have only recently begun to break free of the strictures that bound crime-curious women in the postwar period. Women are still

¹⁰⁰² "Blacklist," *Broadcasting*, October 8, 1973.

¹⁰⁰³ Dan Taberski, "Running From Cops," n.d.

largely absent from the prestige dramas that explore and valorize male anti-heroes' criminal proclivities. Female detectives' colleagues may show more respect for their investigative skills, but women are still expected to prioritize more feminine-identified skills, like empathy. When they do not, as in series like *Bones* (Fox 2005-2017), it is presented as a character flaw that needs to be fixed. Women have been able to exert more direct control over their sexuality, but they are still expected to appear as attractive sexual objects for the male gaze. Finally, women are rarely allowed into the field alone. Shows about male detectives frequently feature a solo investigator or pair of male partners, but women are still most likely to be paired with a man with whom they will eventually develop a romantic relationship. Modern producers may complicate such depictions, but they have yet to fully dislodge the idea that women's legal judgments should still subservient to men's.

APPENDIX: FINDING CRIME CURIOUS WOMEN IN THE ARCHIVE

The female detectives who originated on postwar radio inspire a range of reactions for modern listeners. Students and scholars alike can find them to be a mix of forward-thinking freedom and sexual objectification. At times, the same episode can be used to support the conflicting arguments that postwar women were respected and competent members of the legal professions, and that women were sidelined and rendered powerless by misogynistic gender roles. Most of all, however, they are singular. Female detectives – as well as other types of crime-curious women – are often understood in terms of their isolation, both within their individual programs and across the male-dominated primetime broadcast spectrum. They are also, as I found while researching this dissertation, isolated from each other within known the archival record.

It was no small undertaking to assemble the sources explored in this dissertation. Radio academics owe a deep debt to amateur radio historians, who have devoted an unknown hours and funds to compile extensive records of past radio programs, and to improve access to recordings. I supplemented my own knowledge of radio crime dramas with Jack French's excellent *Private Eyelashes*, the most extensive chronicle of radio's female investigators to date. French's work lists forty-four crime curious women who appeared on radio in different capacities between 1932 and 1956 (see Table A1). This count includes six secretaries/assistants, twelve detectives, four gal Fridays, six partners, five girl reporters, and seven wives. I searched for existing recordings and archival material connected to every woman mentioned in French's book. I listened to every recording I was able to find, but focused the bulk of my analysis on programs that aired

after 1945, and for which I was able to locate and analyze at least eight scripts and/or recordings (see Table A2).

Archives Referenced

Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA (AMPAS)

American Heritage Center, Laramie, WY (AHA)

American Radio Archive, Thousand Oaks, CA (ARA)

Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY (BC)

Internet Archive, www.archive.org (IA)

Library of American Broadcasting, College Park, MD (LAB)

New York Public Library's Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York, NY (NYPL)

UCLA Library's Special Collections, Los Angeles, CA (UCLA)

UNC Chapel Hill's Wilson Library's Rare Book Literary and Historical Papers, Chapel Hill, NC (UNC)

United States National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (NARA)

USC's Warner Brother's Archive, Los Angeles, CA (USC)

Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI (WHS)

Table A1: Radio Programs with Crime-Curious Women

Program	Detective	Capacity	Start	End	Network	Sponsors	Comments
<i>Manhunt</i>	Patsy Bowen	assistant	1945	1946	syndicated	General Mills, Lever Brothers	break between 1948 and 1953
<i>Crime Files of Flamond</i>	Sandra Lake	assistant	1946	2/27/1957	Mutual		
<i>Stand By For Crime</i>	Carol Curtis	assistant	1953		syndicated		
<i>McGarry and his Mouse</i>	Kitty Archer	assistant	6/26/1946	3/31/1947	NBC, Mutual	General Foods	started as Eddie Cantor summer sub, revived 1/6/1947
<i>Danger, Mr Danfield</i>	Rusty Fairfax	assistant	8/18/1946	4/13/1947	ABC, Mutual-Don		
<i>Let George Do It</i>	Claire Brooks	assistant	10/18/1946	9/27/1954	Coast	Standard Oil	
<i>Transcontinental Murder Mystery</i>	Irene Delroy	detective	1932		syndicated		dates uncertain
<i>Carolyn Day, Detective</i>	Carolyn Day	detective	1935		syndicated		dates uncertain
<i>Nemesis, Inc</i>	Marie Revell	detective	1935		syndicated		dates uncertain
<i>Phyl Coe Mysteries</i>	Phyl Coe	detective	1936		syndicated	Philco	dates uncertain continuing segment on <i>The Philip Morris Playhouse</i>
<i>Susan Bright, Detective</i>	Susan Bright	detective	1942		CBS	Philip Morris	

<i>Kitty Keene, Inc</i>	Kitty Keene	detective	12/13/1937	4/25/1941	NBC, CBS, Mutual	Procter & Gamble	soap opera
<i>Helen Holden, Government Girl</i>	Helen Holden	detective	3/3/1941	3/20/1942	Mutual		soap opera
<i>Miss Pinkerton, Inc</i>	Mary Vance	detective	7/12/1941	1941	NBC		Powell & Blondell, based on films
<i>Policewoman</i>	Mary Sullivan	detective	5/6/1946	6/29/1947	ABC	Carter's Pills	summers only, confirm dates against scripts I have
<i>Meet Miss Sherlock</i>	Jane Sherlock	detective	7/3/1946	10/26/1947	CBS		
<i>The Affairs of Ann Scotland</i>	Ann Scotland	detective	10/30/1946	10/22/1947	ABC	Hudnut	
<i>Candy Matson, Yu 2-8209</i>	Candy Matson	detective	6/29/1949	5/20/1951	NBC West Coast	sustaining	police stenographer, NBC
<i>Sara's Private Caper</i>	Sara Berner	detective	6/15/1950	8/24/1950	NBC	Wheaties	considered for TV
<i>Lady in Blue</i>	Lady in Blue	detective	5/5/1951	12/8/1951	NBC		comic-inspired juvenile adventure (Lady Luck), female companion
<i>Defense Attorney</i>	Marty Ellis Bryant	detective	8/31/1951	12/30/1952	ABC	Clorets, Kix, Goodyear	TV pilot filmed

									Marlene Dietrich, postwar European intrigue successor to <i>Café Istanbul</i> soap opera
<i>Time For Love</i>	Dianne LaVolta	detective	1/15/1953	5/27/1954	CBS	Jergens			
<i>The Black Hood</i>	Barbara Sutton	gal Friday	7/5/1943	1/14/1944	Mutual				
<i>Perry Mason</i>	Della Street	gal Friday	10/18/1943	12/30/1955	CBS	Procter & Gamble (Tied, soap opera, became <i>Edge</i> Camay), General Foods of <i>Night</i>			
<i>The Adventures of Leonidas Witherall</i>	Mrs. Mullet	gal Friday	6/1/1944	5/1/1945	Mutual	sustaining		housekeeper/m other hen, more prominent in show than novels may never have aired	
<i>Crime on the Waterfront</i>	June Sherman	gal Friday	2/24/1949	3/1/1949	NBC			comic adaptation, female federal investigator	
<i>Dan Dunn, Secret Operative # 48</i>	Kay Fields	partners	1937	1937	syndicated				

<i>The Shadow</i>	Margot Lane	partners	9/26/1937	12/26/1954	Mutual	Blue Coal, Grove Laboratories, US Air Force, Margot added Wildroot for radio
<i>Nick Carter, Master Detective</i>	Patsy Bowen	partners	4/11/1943	9/25/1955	Mutual	sustaining, Acme Paints, Lin-X, Old Dutch Cleanser, Cudahy Packing, Libby Packing
<i>Casey, Crime Photographer</i>	Ann Williams	partners	7/7/1943	4/22/1955	CBS	Anchor Hocking Glass, Toni Home Permanents, Philip Morris, break between sustaining 1950 and 1954 National Safety Council
<i>It's Murder</i>	Joan Adams	partners	6/8/1944	7/6/1944	NBC Blue	
<i>Results, Inc</i>	Terry Travers	partners	10/7/1944	12/30/1944	Mutual	comedy-drama
<i>City Desk</i>	Linda Webster	reporter	1/2/1941	9/27/1941	CBS	Colgate-Palmolive

<i>Hot Copy</i>	Anne Rogers	reporter	10/4/1941	11/19/1944	NBC, NBC Blue	O Cedar Polish	
<i>Lady of the Press</i>	Sandra Martin	reporter	5/1/1944	4/27/1945	CBS (West Coast?)	Miles Laboratories (Alka-Selzer, ended Bactine, One- A-Day vitamins)	soap opera, renamed <i>The Story of Sandra</i> <i>Martin</i> , ended with her rejecting both suits
<i>Calamity Jane</i>	Calamity Jane	reporter	3/30/1946	4/14/1946	CBS		created to replace Beulah after white actor died, Agnes Moorehead
<i>Wendy Warren and the News</i>	Wendy Warren	reporter	6/23/1947	11/12/1958	CBS	General Foods (Maxwell House Coffee, Jell-O), Procter & Gamble	soap opera with real CBS newscast
<i>Front Page Farrell</i>	Sally Farrell	wives	6/23/1941	3/26/1954	Mutual, NBC	Anacin, Whitehall Pharmaco Company (Kolynos)	soap opera

<i>The Adventures of the Thin Man</i>	Nora Charles	wives	7/2/1941	NBC, CBS, 9/1/1950 ABC	Woodbury, General Foods (Post Toasties, Maxwell House Coffee, Sanka), Pabst Beer, Kaiser- Fraser, Heinz
					renamed <i>Michael Piper</i> , <i>Private</i> <i>Investigator</i> by end
<i>Michael and Kitty</i>	Kitty Piper	wives	10/10/1941	2/6/1942 NBC Blue	Canada Dry Jergens, Woodbury, Colgate- Palmolive
<i>Mr & Mrs North</i>	Pam North	wives	12/30/1942	7/20/1954 NBC, CBS	
<i>Two on a Clue</i>	Debby Spencer	wives	10/2/1944	1/4/1946 CBS	General Foods soap opera
<i>Abbott Mysteries</i>	Jean Abbott	wives	6/10/1945	6/12/1955 Mutual, NBC	summers only, break between 1947 and 1954
<i>It's a Crime, Mr Collins</i>	Gail Collins	wives	8/9/1956	2/28/1957 Mutual	Gail narrates, Abbotts rip-off

Table A2: Programs Referenced

Type	Program	Air Dates	Radio Episodes Reviewed	Radio Scripts	Television Episodes Reviewed	Television Scripts
detective	<i>Candy Matson, Yukon 2-8209</i>	radio, NBC West Coast 1949-1951	14 (https://archive.org/details/OTRR_Candy_Mats on_Singles)	120 (Monty Masters Papers, ARA)		
detective	<i>Carolyn Day, Detective</i>	radio, syndicated 1935	6 (https://archive.org/details/CarolynDay-Detective)			
detective	<i>Decoy</i>	TV, syndicated 1957-1958			20 (IA)	
detective	<i>Defense Attorney</i>	radio, NBC & ABC 1951-1952	12 (https://www.oldtimera diodownloads.com/crim e/defense-attorney , https://archive.org/details/DefenseAttorney)	7 (ARA Scripts Collection)		
detective	<i>Get Christie Love</i>	TV, ABC 1974			1 (Paley Center), 1 (DVD), 2 (YouTube)	2 (Walter Doniger Papers, AHC), 10 (David Wolper Papers, USC)
detective	<i>Honey West</i>	TV, ABC 1965-1966			30 (DVD)	14 (Gwen Bagni Papers, UCLA)
detective	<i>Kitty Keene, Inc</i>	radio, NBC/CBS/MB S 1937-1941	4 (https://www.oldtimera diodownloads.com/crim e/kitty-keene)			

detective	<i>Meet Miss Sherlock</i>	radio, CBS summers 1946-1947	2 (https://www.oldtimeradiodownloads.com/crime/meet-miss-sherlock)	11 (ARA Scripts Collection)		
detective	<i>Miss Pinkerton, Inc</i>	radio, NBC 1941	1 (http://www.otr.com/blug/?p=71)			
detective	<i>Miss Private Eyes</i>	never aired				1 (Gene Wang Papers, AHC)
detective	<i>Phyl Coe Mysteries</i>	radio, syndicated 1936	10 (https://archive.org/details/PhylCoe)			
detective	<i>Police Woman</i>	TV, NBC 1974-1978)			40 (DVD)	2 (Irving Elman Papers, AHC), 4 (Douglas Benton Papers, UCLA), 4 (Frank Telford Papers, UCLA)
detective	<i>Sara's Private Caper</i>	radio, NBC 1950	1 (https://www.oldtimeradiodownloads.com/comedy/saras-private-caper)			
gal Friday	<i>Casey, Crime Photographer</i>	radio, CBS 1943-1955	80 (https://archive.org/details/OTRR_Casey_Crime_Photographer_Singles)			
gal Friday	<i>The Shadow</i>	radio, MBS 1937-1954	32 (https://archive.org/details/RkoOrsonWelles-TheShadow-RadioRecordings)			

partners	<i>Results, Inc</i>	radio, MBS 1944	3 (https://archive.org/details/Results_Incorporated_OTR)				
secretary	<i>Box 13</i>	radio, ABC/CBS/NBC 1946-1951	52 (https://archive.org/details/OTRR_Box_13_Singles)	1 (ARA Scripts Collection)			
secretary	<i>Let George Do It</i>	radio, West Coast Don Lee Network & syndicated 1946- 1954	186 (https://archive.org/details/OTRR_Let_George_Do_It_Singles)	156 (David Victor Papers, WHS)	n/a		1 (David Victor Papers, WHS)
secretary	<i>Mannix</i>	TV, CBS 1967- 1975			194 (DVD)		7 (ARA Scripts Collection), 4 (Frank Telford Papers, UCLA)
secretary	<i>Perry Mason</i>	radio, CBS 1943-1955/TV, CBS 1957-1966	75 (https://archive.org/details/Perry_Mason_Radio_Show)		271 (DVD)		12 (Ernest Frankel Papers, UNC), 7 (Robert Leslie Bellem Papers, UCLA), 4 (Donald Sanford Papers, WHS)
secretary	<i>Private Secretary</i>	TV, CBS 1953- 1957			5 (DVD)		
secretary	<i>The Adventures of Sam Spade</i>	radio, ABC/CBS/NBC 1946-1951	84 (http://www.ldradioworld.com/shows/Adventures_of_Sam_Spade.php)	200 (William Spier Papers, WHS)			
secretary	<i>The Ann Sothern Show</i>	TV, CBS 1958- 1961			5 (YouTube)		

wife	<i>Adventures of the Abbotts</i>	radio, MBS 1945-1947, NBC 1955	8 (https://archive.org/details/Adventures_Of_The_Abbotts)	1 (Gene Wang Papers, AHC)		
wife	<i>It's a Crime, Mr Collins</i>	radio, MBS 1956-1957	15 (https://archive.org/details/Its_A_Crime_Mr_Collins)			
wife	<i>McMillan and Wife</i>	TV, NBC 1971-1977	1 (https://www.oldtimeraodidownloads.com/crimemichael-piper-private-detective/)		40 (DVD)	2 (Sy Salkowitz Papers, WHS)
wife	<i>Michael and Kitty</i>	radio, NBC 1941-1942	80 (https://archive.org/details/OTRR_Mr_and_Mrs_North_Singles)	45 (ARA Scripts Collection)	50 (LA, DVD)	1 (Mortimer Braus Papers, AHC)
wife	<i>Mr and Mrs Trubble</i>	never aired				1 (Lawrence Klee Papers, AHC)
wife	<i>The Adventures of the Thin Man</i>	radio, NBC/CBS/ABC 1941-1951/TV, NBC 1957-1959	9 (https://archive.org/details/ThinManOtr)	13 (ARA Scripts Collection), 1 (Gene Wang Papers, AHC)	19 (Devery Freeman Papers, BC)	20 (Devery Freeman Papers, BC)
other	<i>Boston Blackie</i>	radio, syndicated 1945-1950, TV syndicated 1951-1953	40 (https://archive.org/details/OTRR_Boston_Blackie_Singles)	1 (Al Ward Papers, AHC)	1 (DVD)	
other	<i>Burke's Law</i>	TV, ABC 1963-1966			5 (DVD)	1 (Gwen Bagni Papers, UCLA)

other	<i>Ellery Queen</i>	radio, CBS/NBC/ABC 1939-1948	40 (https://archive.org/details/ils/ElleryQueen)	4 (Al Ward Papers, AHC)		
other	<i>Michael Shayne</i>	radio, MBS 1944-1953, TV NBC 1960-	40 (https://www.otreat.com/p/michael-shayne)			1 (Sy Salkowitz Papers, WHS)
other	<i>Mr. District Attorney</i>	radio, NBC/ABC, 1939-1952	5 (https://archive.org/details/ils/OTRR_Mr_District_Attorney_Singles)			
other	<i>The Adventures of Philip Marlowe</i>	radio, NBC/CBS 1947- 1958)	100 (https://archive.org/details/ils/OTRR_Philip_Marlowe_Singles)			

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VITA

