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**Normalizing Subversion:  
The Funny Women of Post-Network Television**

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**Normalizing Subversion:  
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**by**

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## **Abstract**

### **Normalizing Subversion: The Funny Women of Post-Network Television**

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Comedy is a significant space for the expansion and subversion of existing social constructions of gender. As women stand-up comics increasingly transition from stage to television in the post-network era, a range of comedic styles has unfolded; these comics are providing deeper and more complex representations of women on television. The comedian-writers Cameron Esposito, Rhea Butcher, and Mindy Kaling demonstrate different degrees of resistance to cultural gender norms within the sitcom worlds and characters they create. Rather than resist as women and as gender nonconforming from the margins, these comedians stealthily center their identities and bodies using familiar television narrative devices. In doing so, they reposition their non-normative status as mainstream, further normalizing their subversiveness. This project explores how the comedians' television texts, *Take My Wife* and *The Mindy Project*, engage in normalizing strategies, distinct from both post-feminist and assimilationist storytelling, to frame their non-normative identities as conventional. While their sitcom texts sometimes operate in a post-feminist, post-queer, and post-racial setting, the comedians bring their critical

intersectional and feminist commentary into their respective television series. This strategy is compatible with the marketing plans of a growing number of over-the-top (OTT) platforms creating distinctive niche content that is geared toward multiple and smaller audiences. Here, in addition to exploring how notions of femininity, queerness, motherhood, race, and ethnicity are constructed in these contemporary post-network television series, I examine the cultural and television industry contexts in which they were produced.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1989, despite network pushback, executive producer and comedian Roseanne Barr's ABC comedy sitcom, *Roseanne* (1988–1997), aired an episode in which her 11-year-old daughter experiences her first menstruation cycle. This was the first time a network television show addressed the topic of menstruation. In an interview with Oprah after the show went off-air, Barr discussed the struggle to include the topic on the series as one of several battles with the network that she had faced during the 10-season run of her self-titled series. She joked to Oprah in 1997, "They were, like, really afraid, I think, that if little girls heard that they were going to start menstruating, they'd start doing it all over town or something" (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*).

In addition to portraying the struggles of the working class, the series regularly showcased Roseanne's feminist stance on the series, which included discourses on misogyny and gender inequality in the workplace, women's sexuality, menstruation and birth control for teenage girls. In the episode described above, her character on the show presents menstruation as significant not only for herself and other female characters in the show but also for the women in her audience. Lauren Rosewarne explains, "menarche was presented as bigger than the individual bleeder and as something connecting the girl to entities—a sisterhood, fertility, nature, and so on—bigger than herself" (42). At the same time, menstruation is the punchline of several jokes in the episode, *Nightmare on*

*Oak Street*, including one in which Roseanne’s son D.J. runs screaming from the room at the mention of the word “period.” Upon discovering his reason for running away, D.J.’s father, Dan (played by John Goodman) replies, “Carry on.” Perhaps in this scenario the character of D.J. is an allusion to the Federal Communications Commission and network fear in relation to addressing the topic on the series. Other characters, including Roseanne, deliver one-liners about Darlene’s period that make the physicality of the “cramps” and “blood stains” that accompany menstruation tangible.

Compare Barr’s insistent inclusion nearly thirty years ago—despite network hesitation—of these jokes on her sitcom with the contemporary television series, *Take My Wife* (2016–), which was distributed nearly three decades later on the subscription streaming service Seeso. In *Take My Wife*, comedians Cameron Esposito and Rhea Butcher mostly avoid graphic descriptions of their bodies and their functions, focusing attention on their conventional domestic and professional lives together. Rather than landing punchlines about menstruation, they are simply two comedians who happen to menstruate. Esposito certainly does not hesitate to use menstruation as material in her stand-up comedy, illustrated in a video she shared on YouTube of part of a live performance in 2015, “The Greatest Period Joke Of All Time #CHUNKS.” The stars of *Take My Wife* simply repackage their unruliness—in the case of Esposito and Butcher, their bodies and queerness—into a less attention-grabbing representation on their television sitcom.

Undoubtedly, many women on television today are assertively pushing the boundaries of gender norms through comedy, including Barr herself, whose recent reboot of the ABC series *Roseanne* was canceled after nine episodes because of a racist tweet by its star (Goldberg, “‘Roseanne’ Canceled at ABC Following Racist Tweet”). Comedian Amy Schumer perhaps carries Barr’s figurative unruly torch more than any of her contemporaries. Her variety show *Inside Amy Schumer* (2013–on hiatus) comprises segments of her live stand-up performances interspersed with interviews and fictional comedy sketches, some written with feminist writer, Jessi Klein, which notably include “Last Fuckable Day” and “Girl, You Don’t Need Makeup.” In the same way that Sarah Silverman has shocked audiences with her gross-out humor, Amy Schumer defies gender expectations with her comedic take on female sexuality, feminism, and rape culture. As a successor to Barr’s comedic tradition, Schumer was nearly included in a chapter in Anne Helen Petersen’s (2017) recent collection of essays on contemporary public media figures that challenge culture’s gendered expectations entitled *Too Fat, Too Slutty, Too Loud: The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman*. The author explained on the NPR podcast *It’s Been a Minute* that she ended up cutting the chapter on Schumer to make room for more diverse representations of unruly women in her book: “I have a lot of other white women in the book” (“The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman”). Indeed, there are quite a few straight, white unruly comics in this moment in media history.

Like Petersen, I began my own project focusing on the ways in which women are boldly pushing against the boundaries of gender norms through comedy. While watching some of my favorite stand-up comics transition to television over the past few years, I have observed a range of comedic styles unfold. These comics are providing deeper and more complex representations of women on television, and much of their material sheds light on sexism and racism in society; however, not all of these comics bring their bawdy stand-up humor from the stage to television as Barr and Schumer have.

For instance, there is a fine line between feminism and post-feminism in Esposito and Butcher's series, and these comedians cross it fluidly, at times disregarding gender disparities and at other times profoundly noting discrimination and injustice in their observations. Couched within the formulaic narratives of the sitcom genre, these comedians situate their television characters precariously within modern neoliberal multiculturalism. Their messages can be interpreted as subversive to societal norms, particularly by audiences—women and queer—that identify with the characters. For them, these stories and representations may prompt reflections on societal misogyny and bigotry, albeit without resolution. Rather than challenging social norms as women from the margins, these comedians stealthily place themselves at the center of our gaze and reposition their LGBTQ+ identities as conventional. In so doing, they further *normalize their subversiveness*.

This strategy is distinct from conventional post-feminist storytelling, which as Angela McRobbie describes, operates on the assumption that the goal of feminism, namely equality between the genders, has been achieved (“Post-feminism and Popular Culture” 255). The strategy described here does not make this assumption, nor does it portray women—or in the case of Butcher, gender nonconforming persons—in opposition to cis maleness, which de-centers their identities. Instead, it centers their existence, relationships, and experiences within the text, framing them as “the norm” in order to then introduce new content and critical commentary related to their queer identities through their television series. Normalization as I am describing it involves two processes: first, non-normative characters are portrayed as “normal” by employing traditional genre and narrative strategies to frame their identities as conventional. Once this is accomplished, critical commentary, perhaps even political activism, around their identities is introduced. In the case of *Take My Wife*, I argue that Esposito and Butcher bring to the small screen new representations of lesbians with more intimate narratives and conversations about the struggles of women and queer communities. For comparison, the story of Mindy Kaling’s character in *The Mindy Project* is told primarily through assimilationist discourses, with less emphasis on exploring the star’s race and ethnicity in the series. This is not to say that Kaling’s role as producer, writer, and star as the first Indian American lead is not subversive on its own; indeed if she were a white man, she would be held to less stringent standards of cultural awareness, much less media

activism. I make the distinction here simply to explain that Kaling's performance of Mindy on *The Mindy Project* does not fit the criteria for what I am calling normalization (with regard to race and ethnicity) in this project. I compare and contrast the representation of intersectional womanhood in both series as a part of this project, though I focus more on *Take My Wife* as an example of a series that employs normalizing strategies to represent its characters.

The appearance of a normalizing mode of representation is arguably linked to society's embrace of post-feminism, even backlash against feminism, in the decades leading up to the time of the show's production. The building tension between the prevalence of sexual assault on women and the lack of accountability resulted in the mainstream affirmation of the Me Too Movement one year after the production of season one of *Take My Wife*. The series was thus created in the historical moment between the aftermath of the last presidential election—which set a decidedly pessimistic tone about the status of women in our culture—and the resurgence and powerful incarnation of #MeToo. Would the radical women comedians of the 1980s and 1990s have achieved the same level of popularity and stardom during this moment in history? Roseanne Barr's 2018 reboot of her earlier series would have been an interesting case study that approximates this moment in history; alas, post-cancelation of the reboot, we can not know if the series would have been successful long term while aggressively pushing the social boundaries of today, though reviews of the first season imply the answer to that

question is no—the series is neither as socially transgressive nor as comedic as the original (Travers; Paskin).

Consider another modern-day comedian comparable to Barr, the comedian Melissa McCarthy. Beyond the morphological similarities between the two—they both fall outside Hollywood’s expected weight range for women performers, which in itself is deemed by Kathleen Rowe as a form of unruliness (Rowe 31)—both comedians claim producer status of a television series in which they starred, and both are known for unleashing some surprisingly raunchy humor in their performances. For a taste of McCarthy’s hilarious and vulgar wit, one can Google her outtakes for *Bridesmaids* (2011) and *This is Forty* (2012). As Petersen notes, McCarthy’s unruliness is tempered on television as well as in her public image. On the CBS sitcom *Mike & Molly* (2010–2016), McCarthy’s character is a gender-conforming, good-natured, and caring school teacher, and for all her wild comedic savvy on the big screen McCarthy does not replicate any of the turmoil and messiness of Barr’s personal life in her own. The star’s public image conforms to societal norms as a model wife and mother; even she dismisses her most shocking comedic performances as “fugue states” that she does not completely remember (Petersen, *Too Fat, Too Slutty, Too Loud: The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman* 27-49). As this example illustrates, not all contemporary women comedians are radical in their comedic portrayals on television.

Television has changed since Barr's iconic series; it is no longer the monolithic network medium or collective "cultural forum" (Newcomb and Hirsch 561) of thirty years ago. In the contemporary post-network era of niche audience targeting, a provocative or politically challenging depiction of a lesbian couple would be easy for conservative TV watching populations to simply ignore. However, television series may offer a "liberal pluralist response to the fragmented post-cultural forum environment" in order to attract a wider audience over time (see, for example, NBC's *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015; Hendershot 206). The cultural context at the time of the series' production helps to explain why the show's LGBTQ+ creators, stars and showrunners explored more modest representations of their identities on a television sitcom. Esposito and Butcher's queer identities—both comedians identify as lesbians and Butcher as genderqueer—complicate the portrayal of their characters on television in a time in which half of the country elected a Vice President with a record of opposition to gay rights. Esposito has described feeling unsafe as a queer minority performing for majority heterosexual audiences (Robinson, "The #MeToo Movement Has a Place in Comedy: Just Ask Cameron Esposito"). Their portrayals of Cameron and Rhea in *Take My Wife* evoke the charming awkwardness of their comedy predecessor, Ellen DeGeneres. DeGeneres does not conform with her most well-known peers of the 1990s era of unruly women. For example, while Barr bravely confronted issues of sexism and even homophobia in her series, DeGeneres' inoffensive and "feel good persona" (Mizejewski



194) helped make her character on *Ellen* (1994-1998) relatable and beloved by hetero- and homosexual audiences alike. The parallels between Esposito and Butcher's performances and that of DeGeneres twenty years earlier can not be ignored: both tell their stories using the traditional sitcom format, portray their characters as endearing, lovable figures, and frame their queerness as conventional. Though DeGeneres' sitcom about her life as a lesbian shares commonalities with that of Esposito and Butcher, *Ellen* is a more complicated case as the comedian was closeted for most of the series before finally coming out on the fourth and penultimate season, after which the series' new direction was not supported by the network (Dow 124).

The similarities between Esposito and Butcher's and DeGeneres' portrayal of lesbians in television programming, though, raises the question: how much has changed between DeGeneres' portrayal of a lesbian in her series and Esposito and Butcher in theirs? Further, how might we identify that change as part of larger industrial and sociocultural trends over the last two decades? To contextualize these questions, I review the literature on women in television comedies in historical context to uncover links between cultural norms and the marginalized identities of women comedians over time. I explore this question in the narratives of their series and the representations of their female characters as they are constructed within television's legacy, cable, and post-network digital marketplaces, with attention to the industrial structures that shape and limit them. The self-deprecatory humor of early stand-up and sitcom comedians in the

1950s and '60s and the more explosive, unruly women comedians on broadcast television in the 1980s and '90s contribute to our understanding and the evolution of what is here termed *normalizing* examples of women comedians in the contemporary post-network television era.

## **Literature Review**

### *Concepts and Framing of Study*

In my investigation of the performances of women comedians in contemporary television, I adopt the cultural studies approaches of Graeme Turner (2001) and James Mittell (2004) to examine the ways in which this growing category of television both reflects and interacts with society's conceptions of gender. My textual analyses of these case studies is also made richer by considering the industrial practices under which the creators of the television series produced these texts (Lotz, "Linking Industrial and Creative Change in 21st-Century U.S. Television" 14). The current range of comedic styles on television can be attributed to aspects of the post-network television industry that have provided increased opportunities for new and diverse voices and their comedies of distinction. I therefore take into account the opportunities and constraints that have emerged at this moment in the industry's history, and how they may have influenced the particular texts I have chosen to study.

The bulk of this study is devoted to textual analysis of gender representation in contemporary post-network comedy sitcoms, and my analyses are grounded in critical

feminist theory and queer studies. At a basic level, I consider a history of patriarchal cultural practices in which the construct of *gender* carries political implications. Judith Butler contends that gender is a performance or an identity created through one's actions and behaviors which can, but does not always, subvert dominant sociocultural conventions (22-46). Conceptualizing gender as a social performance and construct is a starting point for exploring how women destabilize gender norms through comedy. From queer studies, I address Adrienne Rich's (1996) concept of *compulsory heterosexuality* in which heterosexuality is socially imposed and privileged in society. A feminist scholarship that marginalizes lesbians cannot fully empower women as a group, and Rich's notion prompts further exploration of queer and lesbian representations in feminist scholarship, a call to which this project responds. I return to the notion of compulsory heterosexuality in chapter three, in which I analyze my first case study, *Take My Wife*.

While the long and complex history of feminist social movements is not within the scope of this study, I will broadly call this a *feminist* analysis in the sense that it calls for equity, which in this case refers to equity in media representation. More specifically, I adopt an *intersectional* feminist approach that recognizes a range of identity-based oppressions (Crenshaw 1991) and attempts to understand the interplay of the oppressions and privileges associated with different markers of identity including but not limited to gender, race, class, sexuality and immigration status (Collins 2000; hooks 1989). I strived to remain intersectional in my analyses, though admittedly there were times during this

project when I found myself unintentionally engaging in (white) middle-class feminism, for example, in my analysis of Mindy Kaling's character in *The Mindy Project* upholding her character's choice to be a single working mother when in reality many single mothers do not have the privilege of that choice. In addition to intersectional feminism, interrogations of post-feminism in contemporary media in Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra's (2007) anthology and in the work of Rosalind Gill (2007) inform this study, namely their collective feminist critiques of post-feminist celebrations of individual success and the rejection that gendered power dynamics continue to exist in present-day society. In particular, I use the term *post-feminism* to refer to the hypothetical state of having achieved the goals of feminism or the view that feminism has been "taken into account" (McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture" 255). I make a distinction between post-feminist representations of women as described by these authors and what I refer to as normalizing representation, and I argue that the texts in this study are neither post-feminist nor do they necessarily attempt to denaturalize post-feminism as typically advocated in feminist literature (Mohanty 1988; Butler 1990; Haraway 1991). Rather, these representations simultaneously engage with both post-feminist and feminist imagery and narratives. I frame the results of my study within the cultural politics of visibility of Herman Gray's (2015) *post-representational* approach to race, which emphasizes the resonance or emotional register of experiences in contemporary images on television. To surpass simple legibility and accuracy of representation, Gray urges

scholars to consider how representations of black identity are circulated, as well as which actions and sentiments, or in Raymond Williams' terms, "structures of feeling," they evoke (1108-1109). By engaging with this literature, I hope to better understand the meaning and value of representations of womanhood in my case studies. First, I outline a history of the scholarly treatment of gender in stand-up and television with a focus on how women have used comedy conventions to "act out" in Mary Russo's words the "dilemmas of femininity" through representations of the female form in popular culture (qtd. in Rowe 225).

#### *Gender in Early Comedy and Vaudeville*

Dating back to the ancient Greeks, comedy has been regarded as irreverent at best and a cause of irrationality and violence at worst (for example, Plato's *Republic*). Comedy has been marginalized for centuries in Western societies; during the Renaissance it was associated with foolishness, impropriety, and loss of control over the body. Simultaneously the culture of Western Europe adopted a noble class ethic that valued qualities of modesty, self-control, and prettiness in women (summarized in Kotthoff 5). These standards of feminine behavior were adopted into the mainstream and have persisted to the present day. Additionally, the long history of patriarchal gender constructions of women as passive and non-threatening has left little room for women to participate in the silly and foolish nature of comedy.

Women are not expected to behave in a silly manner, and when they do, they tend to be perceived as less funny than a man behaving the same way. Based on the social demands on women to be proper and in control of their bodies in pre-industrial Europe, this gendered social construction reflects the continued “patriarchal opposition between comedy and appropriate feminine behavior” (Bore 152). Joking and clowning have not historically been available to women, therefore women’s comedy has been confined to the private sphere and often invisible to the public eye and scholarly examination. This is not surprising in a patriarchal society in which comedy has also been associated with social protest, and as early as the 1900s, with feminist activism and protest (Hennefeld, “Comedy is Part of Feminist History—and We Need It More Than Ever”). With a few exceptions, female humorists have been most absent from literary studies of humor until the past couple of decades (Kotthoff 5). The question has even circulated in popular culture and journalism, “why aren’t women funny?” (Hitchens). Comedian Jen Kirkman’s concise answer to this question in CNN’s *The History of Comedy* (2017-) gets right to the point, “Are women not funny? It’s like, no, they’re oppressed, you dumb idiot.”

Comedy has historically provided a space to disrupt the social order. As antecedents to the modern stand-up comic, vaudeville performers were recognized by critics as having “a fire in their belly which makes you sit up and listen whether you want to or not” (Lytel qtd. in Jenkins 37). Early sound films showcased the vaudeville actor’s

“performance virtuosity”—for example, the distinctive personalities of the Marx Brothers or W.C. Fields’ juggling (Jenkins 63-72)—by emphasizing physical humor and comedic gags at the expense of traditional narrative structures. These early comedies were Hollywood’s attempt to assimilate a vaudeville aesthetic into what were then considered contemporary film practices. According to Jenkins, these films represent the tension between vaudeville performances with their emphasis on spontaneity and spectacle on the one hand and the classical Hollywood narrative that demands causal logic and narrative coherence on the other. The pleasure of the films is derived from the contrast between the Marx Brothers zany performances and the otherwise dull, conventional filmic world. While the “anarchistic moments” in this form of popular entertainment both amused and provided audiences with a vicarious escape from daily life, these early sound films were eventually replaced by mainstream Hollywood cinema’s demand for more narrative structure and order like that found in classical romantic comedies (22-25, 107, 217).

Female vaudevillians faced greater restrictions than their male counterparts in terms of what was considered acceptable clowning. While male actors played a variety of roles, white female actors could only escape traditional domestic roles by playing specific types such as the wise-cracking sidekick, matron, or a sexually charged siren. For the most part, women were restricted to melodramatic roles, reflective of a male desire for female submissiveness in response to gains in women’s power through suffrage and working outside of the home. Jenkins explains the sentiment of the time: “A laughing and

joking woman posed a potential threat to male authority and masculine dignity, intensifying the tensions masculine centered comedy sought to resolve” (Jenkins 256). Nonetheless, there were exceptions to this trend. Both Winnie Lightner and Charlotte Greenwood with their brash voices and adept physical comedy dominated their male counterparts on screen, turning their feminine roles into parodies of the construct of traditional femininity (276).

### *The Self-deprecating Comic*

Given the restrictive gendering of vaudeville and early sound comedies, it is not surprising that the stand-up comic scene in the U.S. would develop a strongly male-defined voice and community. This form of live comedy has its roots in vaudeville and began in the post-war 1950s in clubs geared toward live comedy and music audiences. Aspects of stand-up comedy include social satire, direct address of the audience, and often obscenity. Because social criticism and obscenity were not considered to be within the feminine realm, female comedians had a relatively small presence in early stand-up. The comics most strongly associated with stand-up include Lenny Bruce in the 1960s and George Carlin and Richard Pryor in the 1970s. There were also fewer female comics during this time because of the belief that men were naturally funnier than women (Kreftig 47). One of a few exceptions was Joan Rivers, who generally turned her criticism toward herself rather than outward to society. Rivers has spoken about her self-deprecation as a performance strategy to put the audience at ease. In her words, it is “the



sugar coating on the pill” because “you don’t expect a woman to be funny... nobody likes funny women. We’re a threat. I don’t like funny women” (qtd. in Martin and Segrave 351-352).

The work of Joanne Gilbert on the first women comedians performing on the margins of the stand-up scene is foundational to this project, particularly her analysis of early female stand-up comics such as Rivers, Phyllis Diller, and Moms Mabley. According to Gilbert, these comedians sometimes used their subversive self-deprecatory humor to break gender barriers in stand-up, first by taking to the stage and then by subtly poking fun of gendered cultural norms and expectations. For example, Diller’s clownish femininity worked as a punchline as well as to call attention to gendered standards of beauty (Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* 140-142). Another unthreatening posture that early female comics assumed was as “the kid,” for example, Lily Tomlin as Edith Ann, desexualized and innocent, yet willing to share her honest observations on the world (97). Gilbert describes the “topsy-turvy world of stand-up comic performance” in which sometimes “hierarchies are inverted, power relations are subverted” (xii). Like court jesters, stand-up comedians frame social critique as entertainment and avoid losing the audience’s favor. The parallels between stand-up and vaudeville and early sound comedies is not a coincidence; indeed, vaudeville is considered the origin of contemporary stand-up comedy.

Much of the subversiveness of stand-up performance is lost in the transition to early television and in particular the formulaic comedy sitcom. Where stand-up disrupts the social order, the television sitcom has tended to reinforce it; indeed, scholars have proposed that subversive or feminist humor is limited by the sitcom format (Mellencamp, 90-94; Swink 25). Though dominant gender constructs continue to be reflected in content on the small screen, there have been instances in which sitcoms have provided opportunities for women comedians to break out of traditional gender roles to a degree. For example, the character of Lucy Ricardo played by actor, comedian, and producer Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) is a mischievous but naive housewife who is frequently drawn into screwball situations. The series showcases her silliness and physical comedy skills which challenge traditional gendered constructions of feminine behavior. However, Patricia Mellencamp notes that humor also acts as a containment strategy for Lucy's oppositional voice in this medium. Episodes end with Lucy choosing to surrender her capers—usually professional aspirations—to return to the status quo of homemaker, a role that conforms to hegemonic ideals of femininity. According to Mellencamp, humor is used to minimize the conflict between the genders when Lucy is returned to her role as housewife. More recent work has emphasized Ball's legacy as an influential sitcom producer and star, though on screen at least her humor helped to convert female rage into the female pleasure of domesticity (Mellencamp 80-95).

*Unruly Women and Other Fumerists*

In the 1980s, an alternative comedy scene emerged that was heavily influenced by the absurdist comics Bruce and Carlin, both of whom were arrested for repeatedly violating obscenity laws of their time. Following the path of these two comedians, alternative stand-up comics began to develop their own venues and shows in which they could perform their unusual, introspective, and frequently confrontational material—made easier by the loosening of the country’s obscenity standards by that time. Comic troupes associated with alternative comedy included the Upright Citizen’s Brigade in New York and Second City in Chicago. Well-known stand-up comics included Jim Norton, Todd Barry, and Dave Chappelle. Around this time, critics began to explicitly acknowledge the male-dominated genre of stand-up as “the quintessential old-boy network” (qtd. in Gilbert, *Performing Marginality* 68). Because of the relatively inexpensive production costs of stand-up comedy specials and the proliferation of subscription cable television channels, more stand-up performances began to appear on the small screen. This development provided women and minority comics with exposure to more audiences. Successful women comics in the alternative comedy scene in the 1980s and ‘90s included Sarah Silverman, Margaret Cho, and Roseanne Barr, the latter two securing their own sitcoms on broadcast networks.

In a textual analysis of the performative techniques of comedian Roseanne Barr on *Roseanne* (1988-1997), Kathleen Rowe examines how the comedian uses humor to

undermine patriarchal norms and authority from within the sitcom format. Rowe's "unruly woman," either "unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place," expresses her anger and resistance to patriarchal constructions of gender through laughter. (31). Barr's unruliness manifests in her excessive and uncontrolled voice, feminist humor as well as in her appearance—she does not conform to the glamorous physical standards typical of female Hollywood stars (50-65). Writer Kate Clinton coined the term "fumerist" or feminist humorist to refer to this type of humor that both intends to bring down the house and "burn the house down" (in Barreca 178). The fumerist's comedy criticizes social conventions and morality by revealing and laughing at the "micropractices of every day life... that make up the normal and normalizing codes of gender and other sites of oppression" (Willet et al. 230), practices I will argue here some contemporary comedians are using to surreptitiously introduce new content and critical commentary into their television series. Furthermore, Barr's character in *Roseanne* remains "uncontained" by the sitcom formula; she is not neatly returned to her peaceful domestic life at the end of each episode or in her lively star image either. Social issues raised within an episode are not always resolved within an episode (see, for example, Senzani 2010), and race, gender, and class discrimination are running themes throughout many of the seasons.

The irrepressible unruliness of Barr's character in the original *Roseanne* series—from her nonconforming appearance and presentation to her working-class roots—has not

been widely replicated, arguably not even in the reboot which centers on Darlene's experiences as a single parent more so than on Roseanne herself (Petersen, "Here's What Makes the 'Roseanne' Reboot Work.>"). Women actors in contemporary sitcoms on the legacy broadcast networks generally appear to be chosen based on looks as much as comedic talent, and male actors continue to be given more and funnier lines, as seen in CBS's immensely popular *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014) and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present). There are exceptions, of course, typically in programming found on OTT media services like Netflix and Hulu and some niche cable networks, the market and industrial context of which I discuss in more detail in the following chapter. Joanne Gilbert lists some of the oppositional identities that women comics have historically and continue to assume in their comedy, including the kid, the bawd, the bitch, the whiner, and the reporter (*Performing Marginality* 97-128). Abbi Jacobsen and Ilana Glazer of *Broad City* (2014-present) unleash unruly childlike performances of the goofy, the gross, and their blind devotion to women friends above all else (Petersen, *Too Fat, Too Slutty, Too Loud: The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman* 51-72), and Samantha Bee's bitchy refusal to accept and live by the status quo is on display in her news satire television show *Full Frontal with Sam Bee* (2016-present). Amy Schumer and Sarah Silverman are heralded by Gilbert as the new bawds who "simultaneously reject and reinvent notions of female power through their unique performance of marginality, critiquing hegemonic structures through strategies of confrontation and celebration" ("My Mom's a Cunt":

New Bawds Ride the Fourth Wave” 204). The edgy and explicit humor of these comedians—angry, obscene, or otherwise incompatible with a patriarchal feminine ideal—breaks the mold of traditional gender norms and can also be seen as threatening or intimidating by some audiences (206).

Mizejewski (2014) asserts in *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* that women comedians in popular culture are obliged to address their female form and that, regardless of appearance, this dynamic allows them to locate their bodies in opposition to the default gender construction of pretty (12-15). Those most different from the status quo are particularly able to exploit audience expectations of gender norms using their nonconforming bodies—non-white, lesbian, overweight—to fuel their comedic performances. Mizejewski deconstructs the image choices, performances, and writing of comedians Tina Fey, Margaret Cho, Wanda Sykes, and others to identify the ways in which these performers expand on the feminist humor of earlier comedians such as 1990s Roseanne Barr. Another early progenitor included in Mizejewski’s study is Ellen DeGeneres, who more subtly challenges feminine ideals in her comedy.

Compared to her peers, DeGeneres’ comedy is much less tied to her identity. The charged humor that arises from identity politics can be appealing because the comedian understands the issues related to a particular community, for example, in the way that Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor successfully delivered racially charged humor to both black and white audiences (Kreftig 63). However, the discomfort that charged comedy

causes for audiences can also limit the commercial potential of the comic. Kreftig discusses several comics who avoid this sort of comedy, among them DeGeneres, who instead performs a more universal comedy that “unifies listeners” (65). This is an important distinction between DeGeneres and comics who perform charged comedy, for example Robin Tyler, the first openly lesbian comic and “one of the only early female comics to be as committed to charged humor as Dick Gregory” (48-49). Tyler’s legacy is hardly known today, while DeGeneres continues to receive attention in both popular media and scholarship.

Relevant to my investigation of *Take My Wife*, DeGeneres’ sitcom *Ellen* was also about a lesbian character, though the series was mainly geared toward the comfort of heterosexuals; there were occasional one-time guest appearances of queer cultural figures in lieu of regular representations of gay and lesbian characters on the series, and queer sex and desire was notably absent (Dow 129-130). In the episode in which Ellen came out, for example, there is a fantasy scene depicting Ellen kissing her male friend, Richard, though there are no such scenes of Ellen kissing Susan, her lesbian love interest in the same episode. These choices in the scripting of the series, as well as in the portrayal of DeGeneres’ public image during her coming out, contributed to making her the “ultimate user-friendly lesbian for television purposes” at the time (Dow 137). One of the gags on her long-running talk show, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (2003-present), is the androgynous comedian’s playful attempts to mimic the femininity and glamour of famous

heterosexual stars. This act gently calls attention to her nonconforming sexuality. One could argue that her down-to-earth yet inelegant trademark dancing performs a similar function. I return to DeGeneres' "feel good persona" and the "blond whiteness that enables this versatility" (Mizejewski 194) when I analyze the personae and series of two of her recent contemporaries, Cameron Esposito and Rhea Butcher.

## **Methodology**

### *Case Studies*

Actor-comedians Cameron Esposito and Rhea Butcher's sitcom *Take My Wife* (2016–) is a comedy series inspired by the comedians' lives together as romantic partners and stand-up comedians. The series was produced and distributed by Seeso, an OTT comedy subscription streaming service owned by Comcast through NBCUniversal. Selective material from their individual stand-up routines is incorporated into the sitcom, which includes intimate post-episode interviews in which the two stars of the series reflect on their portrayal of the characters they play on the series, Cameron and Rhea. The television series and the star texts of Esposito and Butcher provide an opportunity to consider how notions of femininity and queerness are constructed in contemporary post-network television and media.

Mindy Kaling's *The Mindy Project* (2012-2017) is a romantic/workplace comedy chronicling the capers of a successful doctor performed by Kaling as she navigates her romantic and professional lives. The series was produced by Universal Television,



distributed by the Fox Broadcasting Company for three seasons and then on the video on-demand service Hulu for an additional three seasons. Kaling's body of work is closely tied to her public image, perhaps more so than for the comedians in *Take My Wife* because of her level of fame and media exposure. The star's text and the popular series also make a compelling case study in which to explore how notions of womanhood, namely femininity, motherhood, and the intersectionality of gender and race, are constructed in contemporary television.

### *Methods*

My interpretative textual readings of the writing and performances in both *Take My Wife* and *The Mindy Project* explore the portrayal of the lead characters in these two series. Specifically, my ideological, generic, and narrative analyses of these television series explores some of the ways in which genre and narrative devices are used to center and reimagine the sitcoms' non-normative characters as "normal" within the series. These depictions and the comedians' performances are examined in relation to their identities, especially their queerness, race, ethnicity, and the choices their characters make in the series that otherwise mark them as other.

As comedian celebrities, these women's bodies of work are closely tied to their star texts (Dyer 1998), so this analysis is interspersed with discussion of the construction of their public images through online interviews with the stars, their appearances on podcasts and other media projects, as well as the stars' own social media presence.

Discourse analysis of these extratextual and paratextual materials (Gray 2010) reveals how the comedians present themselves as comedians, women, feminists, and as marketable commodities.

My cultural studies approach focuses on these comedy performances as a product of social and cultural forces, though the impact of market and industry forces cannot be neglected. As such I contextualize the textual analysis of my two case studies within post-network television studies. I examine trade sources to better understand the conditions of the industry circumstances that led to the development of each series and how these circumstances may have influenced the way that gender, sexuality and race are represented in them. Replicating the inclusive methodological approaches taken by television and media scholars such as Holt and Perren (2009) and Gray and Lotz (2012), I examined the contemporary practices of production and distribution that may have influenced the creative outcomes in these particular cases; for example, I explore the connection between the structural organization of networks, their distribution by streaming platforms, and the level of creative freedom afforded to the producers of these texts. Scholarly work that focuses solely on individual agents in the television industry runs the risk of overlooking other levels of media production, though a case can be made for the prominent role of these comedians in the creation of the texts which they co-produced, wrote, and performed. I remain attentive to the ways in which the comedians are positioned as key creative forces driving their respective series, acknowledging the

difficulty in distinguishing between public relations messaging and what occurs in practice.

### *Research Questions and Chapter Summaries*

Using the television texts *Take My Wife* and *The Mindy Project* to consider emerging constructions of intersectional womanhood in the post-network television landscape, I explore the ways in which gender, queerness, race, and ethnicity are constructed in the writing and performativity of the creators and comedians of these television series. In the next chapter I address contemporary socio-cultural attitudes toward women and feminisms and the role that different television platforms and the accompanying industrial cultures play in shaping the content of these series. In particular, this chapter is devoted to investigating the corporate and creative development of each of my case studies with attention to the specific industrial conditions within which each series was produced. I explore the development of *Take My Wife* within the context of the semi-independent and short-lived Seeso network. *The Mindy Project*, meanwhile, is an excellent case study in which to examine both the organizational and textual changes that result from the transition of a series from a Big Four broadcast network to a streaming service. In the same chapter, I explore the concept and rationale behind what I refer to as normalization in this project and address how this concept differs both from post-feminist narratives and the assimilationist storytelling common in the history of television programming.

In the next two chapters, I delve into textual and discourse analyses of my two case studies. Specifically, I explore which genre and narrative devices are used to center and reimagine the sitcoms' non-normative characters as "normal." In the third chapter, I examine instances in the first season (2016) of *Take My Wife* in which Esposito and Butcher attempt to normalize their ostensible subversion through the strategic use of the sitcom comedy format, carefully curated content, and conventional representations of the main characters of these series. I also demonstrate how the comedians use their status as central characters in the series to then critique of some of the intolerant cultural assumptions and practices toward the queer community.

In the fourth chapter, I analyze six seasons (2012-2016) of *The Mindy Project*, in which the assimilation of Kaling's character is achieved through the use of romantic comedy formula and stereotypes, the character's conformity with (white) mainstream culture, and post-racial setting of the series. This case study provides a contrast with the previous one in that the main character's non-normative identities are assimilated into the romantic comedy context without much exploration of racial and ethnic otherness. The series focuses on Kaling's unique contributions, her humor and wit, in lieu of contributing to social commentary about her otherness or that of women of color in general. Yet there is at least one instance in which the series normalizes an aspect of womanhood—single working motherhood—by replacing romantic with motherly love within the romantic comedy structure that I address in this chapter.

## Chapter 2: Contemporary Cultural and Television Industry Contexts

Comedy is a significant space for the expansion and subversion of existing social constructions of gender, and comedian-writers Cameron Esposito, Rhea Butcher, and Mindy Kaling all demonstrate resistance to cultural gender norms to different degrees within the sitcom worlds and characters they have created. Their resistance is neither outrageous nor unruly like that of many of their on-screen contemporaries, including, for example, Amy Schumer of *Inside Amy Schumer* (2013–on hiatus), Abbi Jacobsen and Ilana Glazer of *Broad City* (2014–), Maria Bamford in *Lady Dynamite* (2016-2017), or Samantha Bee in *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* (2016–). All of these unruly comedians are straight, white women. While heterosexuality, whiteness, and middle-class status are not intrinsically “normal” attributes, dominant cultural practices privilege these identities as default norms. According to these practices, Esposito, Butcher, and Kaling’s intersectional identities are considered more subversive to the contemporary cultural status quo, and these three comedians do not have the same sexual and racial privilege as their contemporaries.

In an interview in *Broadly*, Esposito discusses her experience as a performing for mainly heterosexual audiences for most of her career: “It’s hard for a queer person—there’s going to be many situations where you’re just naturally outnumbered” (Kravitz). These comedians in this project build on society’s rules about what is normal or average

to center their non-normative queer and racial/ethnic identities on their series by using familiar and conventional television storytelling devices, thereby attempting to normalize their existence and experiences. Sometimes their sitcom texts operate in a post-feminist, post-queer, and post-racial world, while in other cases they function as obvious feminist critiques of patriarchal standards. Yet all three of these comedians bring their critical feminist commentary into their respective television series.

In this chapter, I provide some industrial and cultural context to my two case studies, *Take My Wife* and *The Mindy Project*. A review of the industrial history and development of *Take My Wife* provides context and rationale for the normalizing strategies that appear in the series nearly twenty years after DeGeneres first came out on *Ellen*. I address the social and economic incentives for the use of normalizing strategies for the two lesbian main characters; in doing so, I also elaborate on what I mean by normalization in this project, drawing from a specific example from this series. Following this, I discuss the development of *The Mindy Project* that contextualizes the assimilation of the main character's otherness in the series, and places representational practices in relation to industrial shifts. More specifically, I address the changes in storytelling that occurred in the distribution of the series—namely its move from one of the broadcast networks, Fox, to an OTT service, Hulu.

### ***Take My Wife: From Seeso to Starz***

*Take My Wife* was produced in a very different industrial and socio-political context than *Ellen* and *Roseanne*. At the time of the latter programs' appearance, only a handful of networks existed, all of which operated with relatively similar business models, and provided a limited range of programming oriented toward a more generalized "mass" audience. Due to a number of technological, industrial, cultural, and regulatory factors, television networks began to target increasingly narrow niche audiences over the years. To attract these niche audiences, in the late 1990s, media companies began to pursue more decentralized approaches, employing more flexible production and distribution practices. These shifting conditions, which included a variety of new financing models, as well as a more diverse set of creative practices, led to an expansion in textual possibilities (Lotz, *The Television will be Revolutionized* 9-15, 31-4; "Linking Industrial and Creative Change in 21st-Century U.S. Television" 11-16). Television corporations now supported wider variety of niche programming that appealed to many distinct subsets of viewers; this niche-oriented approach employed in the television industry in recent decades has often involved courting "narrowly defined and underserved markets" including those marked by racial and gender difference, for example (Curtin 189-190). What was once considered outside or even oppositional to the mainstream has now become commercially viable for media conglomerates; these companies either "leverage niche artists into major mass phenomenon" (Curtin 197) or

else produce and market them through distinctive niche targeted channels and platforms such as Seeso. In terms of content, the former strategy tends toward supporting programming with fairly apolitical content while the latter strategy focuses on cultivating more intense and specific forms of cultural expression. Thus, as Curtin argues, “the mass audience no longer refers to one simultaneous experience so much as a shared, asynchronous cultural milieu” (197).

The audience that he refers to here is an industry-produced construction of television audiences. These theoretical audiences, sometimes made empirical by the codification of ratings systems, capture the commercial imperatives of network executives. Such constructs are not to be confused with the audiences that creative workers in the industry imagine while producing their work nor with actual viewers and their practices. I address creators’ imagined audiences in the following chapters, when I delve into their discourse about their series and my textual analysis of the two shows. For now, though, audience refers to consumers.

*Take My Wife* was produced and distributed by Seeso, an OTT comedy subscription streaming service owned by Comcast through NBCUniversal. One of the goals of Seeso was to exploit already owned library content held by NBCUniversal; as such formerly broadcast owned legacy content was repackaged under the comedy brand of SeeSo. The service was launched in January 2016 under the direction of Evan Shapiro, who was the executive vice president of NBCU at the time. He promoted Seeso as “a



neighborhood restaurant” alternative to Netflix’s “supermarket programmed by algorithms” to win over comedy fans from other larger online content providers (Landau 48; Grant). A subscription to Seeso included both NBC’s exclusive content and licensed material and original productions, and the cost of a subscription was minimal primarily to attract both millennial men and women viewers between 18 to 35 years of age. For \$3.99 a month, viewers could watch next-day streaming of well-known (though not always exclusive) comedy shows, such as *Saturday Night Live* (1975–) and the *Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* (2014–), as well as programs that NBC had acquired, including the classic BBC sketch comedy series *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (1969–1974; Jarvey; Otterson).

*Take My Wife* was one of Seeso’s early original series and was the platform’s first critical hit among its new programming, which included approximately thirty original series and specials, such as Kulap Vilaysack’s docu-comedy *Bajillion Dollar Propertie\$* (2016–) and Dan Harmon’s inventive part animated/part live fantasy role-playing series *HarmonQuest* (2016–; Fox, “The Future of Seeso, NBC’s Comedy Streaming Service, Is in Question”). As part of the branding effort to distinguish the platform from Netflix and Amazon, new content was launched during primetime hours, one episode per week to encourage communal viewing (Landau 50). As such, the distribution strategy employed here most closely adhered to Hulu’s model.

Prior to its launch, Shapiro discussed his intention for Seeso to compete with dominant streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon by providing “hand curated” content specifically for comedy fans (Jarvey). Leading up to the service’s launch, he idealistically told *The Wrap* that “to a certain extent, [Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon] have become the very issue that they meant to solve. Those that have been disrupting are perhaps [prime] to be disrupted” (Maglio). Shapiro acknowledged the difficulty in making a standalone, independent service in this highly competitive landscape, but he hoped that targeting the comedy niche market would help set Seeso apart from more established services (Bishop). Seeso had the opportunity to provide off-beat, experimental comedy originals designed to support the services’ branding. Shapiro left NBCU (and Seeso) in May 2017 to work as an independent producer on other new comedy series, but his remarks about his time at NBCU are indicative of his aspirations for the network. He has said that he is grateful to have been able to open doors with the comedy platform and reflected on today’s greater “openness to different stories and different points of view than at any time in media history” (Littleton).

*Take My Wife* was green-lit under Shapiro’s supervision at Seeso. He had originally sought out the two comedians to make a comedy special. Seeso’s Head of Programming, Kelsey Balance, a self-described “comedy nerd,” was a fan of Esposito and Butcher’s comedy. The comedians came up in the Chicago stand-up scene separately and had been performing weekly shows together at the Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB) Theatre in Los

Angeles by that time. Along with her LGBTQ+ friendly and feminist stand-up material, Esposito had been making a name for herself in a couple of web series, for example, *Ask a Lesbian* (2014–2016) with BuzzFeed, as well as with a podcast called *Put Your Hands Together* (2013–2018), hosted with Butcher. When given the opportunity to create a stand-up series with Seeso, Esposito and Butcher asked instead to tell their personal story in narrative form as fictionalized versions of themselves, a move that the network supported (Brandman). Before developing the series, the comedians toyed with other ideas, such as a podcast they considered naming *Relatable Lesbians*. On why the comedians went with Seeso, Esposito jokes, “one advantage is that Seeso bought the show...” implying that other networks were not making offers. She elaborates with more seriousness on the decision to go with Seeso, expressing her preference for the comedy network, and providing clues as to how she as a creator imagined the series’ audience:

We are women. We are queer women. We are being honest about our lives, and I believe there is a huge audience for this show. I also believe there is a really specific audience for this show. Who knows how it will turn out? It might be 27 lesbians’ favorite show or a bunch of dudes might watch it, too...I don’t want to be on NBC and getting cancelled with this show. This is my life. I don’t want to be in a space where hateful people are confused about what this is. I want this to be a place where people know what they’re getting, want to be there and are excited about it (Ziemba).

The opportunities for the kind of original programming seen in *Take My Wife* that the Seeso platform provided came to an end when the service shut down at the end of 2017 as part of its parent corporation’s move toward pursuing fewer and larger audience segments via other, already established channels (*Variety* staff). At the time of Shapiro’s

departure, NBCU insisted that programming would proceed as planned despite eliminating some of their organization's smaller cable network channels, such as Esquire and CLOO; however, Maggie Suniewick's promotion to president of NBCU Digital Enterprises months earlier had given her oversight of Seeso, and concurrent with her arrival, the service was no longer operating semi-independently as a start-up within the NBCU conglomerate structure (Fox, "The Future of Seeso, NBC's Comedy Streaming Service, Is in Question"). Shortly after Shapiro left, Seeso announced its plan to shut down its services which may explain his departure from the network. Some trade reports indicated that the streaming service had not gained a large enough subscriber base to sustain the service (Otterson), though it was also noted that the small start-up was doing well with a subscriber base in the low six figures for its first year (Fox). The closure of the platform was likely related to the "ongoing change in the... platform's business plan" under Suniewick's business model (Variety Staff). This case of Seeso exemplifies a more general trend in which new platforms offer more financing opportunities, but the support for original programming is precarious due to the industrial volatility in the post-network era as companies determine which content acquisition and distribution strategies will be most economically viable.

These events left the second season of *Take My Wife*, which had already been filmed and edited, without a distributor. As NBC shopped the series around to other networks and distributors, Esposito encouraged Twitter followers to retweet about the

series after Seeso shut down. This move kicked off a fan-driven social media campaign on Twitter to save the series (*#TakeMyWife* trended that week). She later tweeted that attention from the enthusiastic fan response on Twitter helped the network secure meetings with buyers. The series was subsequently picked up by Starz, a pay cable network that also created a stand-alone app as HBO did. Both seasons are available to subscribers via the app and also can be purchased on iTunes (Wong). In a tweet to fans, Esposito shared her gratitude for the opportunity to have made *Take My Wife* with Seeso and the show's production company Comedy Bang Bang and outlined the diversity of the cast and production crew. She outlined stunning figures of the diversity of gender representation in the series' second season—including an all-female writers' room. In a recent interview, she expressed the hope that iTunes and Starz would continue the push for diversity on the series that began at Seeso (Bendix).

More broadly, corporate imperatives and perceptions of audience acceptance of woman- and queer-directed programming will ultimately determine series content and the ongoing viability of a show such as *Take My Wife*. Though marketed as an edgy comedy series, the show's creators must have been aware that representing its queer characters as conventional would help gain viewers across multiple markets. This strategy may have contributed both to the popularity of the series among multiple audiences (discussed in more detail below) and ultimately to its ability to procure a new distributor. Notably, not

all Seeso programs found a new network home, for example, *Bajillion Dollar Properties* (2016–2017) and *Shrink* (2017; Wright) both remain in search of new distribution outlets.

In discussing the industrial context within which *Take My Wife* emerged, it is worth noting the staffing of the show. Perhaps the most subversive part of this sitcom is not the representation of a woman and a person with a nonconforming gender identity in a loving relationship on screen, but rather the level of diversity of those involved in its creation. IMDb reveals that approximately half of the executive producers and directors on the series have been women. That said, without interviews or observations of the writers' room, it is difficult to track how much each woman contributed to the development of the series.

This number provided here is higher than the percentage of women in key roles like executive producer, director, writer across most broadcast, cable and streaming programs in season 2016–2017, according to the *Boxed In* report by the San Diego State University's Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film. Twenty-six percent of show creators in cable and streaming networks were women, and 21% on the broadcast networks. I include a discussion of the gender diversity in this production not as an example of normalizing, but rather to highlight some of the underlying industrial factors contributing to the development of the text. Programs with at least one woman executive producer typically featured higher numbers of women directors, writers, and cast more major women characters—numbers equivalent to the percentage of women in

the U.S. population. The report also showed more gender diversity in streaming programs, with 47% of major characters being women, relative to 43% in broadcast and 34% in cable programs. Sixty-nine percent of women characters were white, above the estimated 61.7% of women who are white in the larger U.S. population; representation of sexual orientation and gender identities were not reported (Ryan; “Quick Take: Women of Color in the United States”).

In the case of *Take My Wife*, it appears that representation in key decision-making roles in the series was correlated with the number of women in other production roles, making it one of the most inclusive series to date. The series has been promoted as such; for example, Esposito tweeted some of the series statistics in August 2017, including an all-female writers’ room in both seasons (IMDb suggests there was one male writer in one episode), nearly half women of color in the second season. Women were represented in all aspects of production from director of photography to the musicians who contributed to the series soundtrack. Also, in the second season, 83% of the cast was female, 25% women of color, and 54% LGBTQ+ (Nguyen). Esposito tweeted that she and Butcher as showrunners mandated this diversity in order to “claim our space and make room for others.” The striking details regarding representation in the production of the series demonstrate an intention on the part of the series showrunners to be inclusive in their hiring, something that is also reflected in their casting of the characters on screen.

The diversity of the production of *Take My Wife* may also account for the progressive use of normalizing narratives in the program.

### **Normalization: Concept and Application**

Although Seeso courted comedy and queer viewers in their programming of series like *Take My Wife*, the financial incentive to target a wider variety of viewers is ever present in TV and something that the show's creators undoubtedly considered in their production of the show. There are obvious commercial reasons for toning down overtly queer aspects of the series. Alexander Doty's (2010) analysis of Fox's *Glee* (2009–2015) and ABC's *Modern Family* (2009–), for example, uncovers some of the effects of industry constraints on the programming of queer characters; as he states it, these series “put the normative back into their homo(s)” with their emphasis on the homonormative domesticity and monogamy of their characters.

The emphasis on domesticity and monogamy in broadcast series tends to co-occur with representations of queer characters that are desexualized. For example, this can be seen in scenes in the single-camera sitcoms ABC's *Modern Family*, NBC's *The New Normal* (2010–2013), and ABC's *Happy Endings* (2011–2013), in which queer kissing is mitigated with camera angles and editing to avoid direct and prolonged shots of the act (Martin). Though many of the queer narratives in cable-produced dramas such as Showtime's *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005) and *The L Word* (2004–2009) expanded on representations of LGBTQ+ romance and sexuality, these series none-the-less focus on



domestic themes such as marriage and parenthood resolutions, sometimes at the expense of depoliticizing queerness (see, for example, Sweeney 41-61; Ciamparella 77-92). The historical moment of these series—as recent as it is—is already distinct from the present-day moment in terms of programming and distribution strategies. It is not yet known whether television comedies on contemporary streaming platforms will continue with such trends and limitations with regard to queer representation, though there are at least opportunities for more distinctive storytelling inherent in the targeting of niche audiences.

There does appear to be more variation in the present-day post-network portrayals of queer characters and storylines. The majority of queer characters depicted in the examples above, with the exception of *The L Word*, are primarily of white, gay, male characters. This trend has changed with the (relative) increase in the portrayal of lesbian characters and relationships in the present moment, particularly in series on streaming platforms. Some of these shows such as the Netflix Original comedy-drama *Orange is the New Black (OITNB)* (2013–) and Amazon’s *Transparent* (2014–2018) explore, if not sensationalize, lesbian sexuality on screen. The creators of *Take My Wife* chose the comedy sitcom instead of the comedy-drama format of *OITNB* and *Transparent*—and the sometimes more provocative portrayals included in this form. The half-hour single-camera situation comedy is in the vein of other comics’ comedies about comedians, such as Amazon’s *One Mississippi* (2015–2017) and Netflix’ *Lady Dynamite* (2016–2017) and includes vignettes of the characters lives punctuated by the characters performing stand-

up. I explore the impact of this choice in more detail in the next chapter in my analysis of the portrayal of Cameron and Rhea within the sitcom format.

The approach of *One Mississippi* to the portrayal of its queer characters is similar in some ways to that in *Take My Wife*. In the series, created by and starring stand-up comic, Tig Notaro, the two lead characters are played by Notaro and her real-life wife, Stephanie Allynne. These characters are performed as authentic and relatable to a general audience; indeed, the show has been described as “not just for lesbians” (Hall). Similar to my case study, the series’ narrative focuses on the humanity and development of the characters rather than their gender and sexual identities. The series was canceled in 2018 by Amazon, which is reportedly abandoning its niche programming in favor of a more “mainstream” content strategy (see *Game of Thrones*) after the departure of the studio’s head of media development, Roy Price (Desta; Perez).

Such volatility in the television industry is more incentive to portray queer television characters in a way that appeals to a multiple audiences—in the case of *Take My Wife*, both queer and straight audiences. The script of *Take My Wife* includes several comments on Twitter from supposed comedy fans to Cameron that reveal the writers’ understanding of how the character is perceived by some of the show’s potential viewers. The following tweets read by Cameron on screen capture some of the less inclusive norms and values of the comic’s stand-up audience: “@clausof2000: Dear @cameronesposito: Women aren’t funny but especially you. Please quit comedy.

Thanks!” and “@someonesdad46: I’m grateful @cameronesposito doesn’t want my dick.” It is not difficult to imagine that Esposito has received these or similar responses to her performances in real life. By including these insults in the series, the comedian is able to turn these identity-based attacks into comedy fodder, thereby minimizing their effect.

For Esposito, framing her identity and her critique of mainstream culture as lighthearted joking has been a necessary strategy from early in her stand-up career. Her sister, Allyson, remembers some of Cameron’s early queer-unfriendly stand-up audiences in which the comedian was already “figuring out how to make everyone comfortable.” Expanding on her motivations behind this “charm offensive” (Borrelli), Esposito explains that this mode of performance is a product of both her queer identity and being a survivor of sexual assault:

I think that’s one of my strengths as a comic. I’m tiny and smiley. I think a lot of it comes from creating safety for myself because as a queer person, I was just very unsafe. Then as a survivor, I feel really unsafe all the time. I think something that I did without knowing it was about introducing myself to people, to be like, ‘Please don’t kill me’ (Robinson, ““The #MeToo Movement Has a Place in Comedy: Just Ask Cameron Esposito”).

Possibly as a result of the comedians’ awareness of how the series would be perceived by different audiences, certain aspects of their queer identities are de-emphasized in the program. For example, there is no explicit address of the characters’ coming out, and the sexuality of the two lesbian characters is downplayed throughout the first season, two factors which I discuss in more detail in the following chapter. Of course, Esposito and Butcher would also have taken into account how their LGBTQ+

audience would view the content of their series, in particular the downplaying of their sexual relationship in the series. The second episode opens on the two lovers in bed (post-coital) as they muse about what a television show of their lives might look like. In discussing the possibility of sex scenes in such a show, Butcher asks, “So, on our TV show, will it show us having sex?” and Esposito responds, “Oh yeah, like, a lot.” This conversation serves as a humorous stand-in, however, for the real thing; there are no sex scenes in the entire season. Compare this representation of lesbian sexuality on screen with the sensationalization of Roseanne Barr’s same-sex kiss episode, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (1994) in which the narrative is a build-up to the public spectacle of the straight Roseanne kissing a lesbian character in a gay bar. Incidentally, this is one of many lesbian kiss episodes in the late 1990s and early 2000s between straight stars and lesbian characters that never return to the series, including *Sex in the City* (1998–2004) and *Friends* (1994–2004).

The text of *Take My Wife* provides clues about how the writers may have accommodated the perception of this desexualization of the main characters by queer audiences: the two characters agree by the end of this scripted conversation that it is more important to portray casual intimacy over the more heterosexual-mainstream hypersexualized stereotyping of lesbian relationships. This revealing message acts as one potential explanation to queer audiences for the lack of sex scenes.

The strategies of portraying the intimate over the sexual, of showing the sitcom characters as understated, and of depicting their relationship between Cameron and Rhea as ordinary are something discussed on the series in its dialogue as well as in post-episode interviews (“we’re like, real people...”). It is understandable that they prefer to avoid the personal act of portraying themselves engaged in sexual activities with their real-life wife (Thurm). It is also commendable how they contribute to expanding the range of lesbian representations to include lesbians engaged in casual intimacy and to show the rarely seen happy ending in television narratives. The downplaying of sexuality in the series is also perhaps less of what Adrienne Rich calls the “breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory [heterosexual] way of life” (Rich 136), which may increase the likelihood that the series will appeal to heterosexual audiences.

In desexualizing the characters then, the creators are able to accommodate multiple audiences in their portrayal of womanhood and queerness. On the one hand, they offer new representations of real and intimate queer characters on screen to their LGBTQ + viewers; on the other, they offer two inconspicuous and desexualized lesbian characters, unthreatening to the heteronormative status quo. Gilbert has noted that female comics’ use of self-deprecatory humor can be interpreted as either subverting the status quo or affirming oppressive gender norms; likewise, in the case of *Take My Wife*, “it is up to the audience to interpret any form of cultural representation” (*Performing Marginality* 139). In the case of *Take My Wife*, the toning down of sexuality is similarly open to

interpretation by audiences. The comedians' performance of authenticity appeals to often-overlooked queer audiences while simultaneously stealth marketing their gayness to straight audiences. Esposito frames her womanhood and Butcher her non-binary gender as a part of, rather than a challenge to, the natural state; and in doing so, the comedians normalize their subversion. This strategy is distinct from post-feminist storytelling, which Angela Angela McRobbie describes as operating on the assumption that the goal of feminism, namely equality between the two binary genders, has been achieved ("Post-feminism and Popular Culture" 255). The strategy described in this thesis does not make this assumption, nor does it portray women or gender nonconforming identities in opposition to maleness, which would de-center them. Instead, it centers their lesbian existence, relationships, and experiences within the text, framing them as the norm in order to then introduce new content and critical commentary related to their queer identities.

I have noted some of the industry context that may have led to the production of this unique series, including the opportunities for more experimental programming provided by the short-lived semi-independent Seeso. However, corporations inclined to turn niche hits into mass phenomenon for profit may be at odds with truly unique long-running television programming. As Curran Nault (work-in-progress) has noted, corporate entities and even the queer media scholarship devoted to their study tend to advance mainstream popular programming such as Showtime's *The L Word* (2004–2009)

and Logo's *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009–) in lieu of “scrappier grassroots production cultures that proliferate outside the immediate reach of these corporate entities” (3). *Take My Wife* was produced during a window of time in which Seeso was providing streaming content that catered to a more narrow audience while simultaneously promoting the authenticity of this and other series at the network (Brandman) that would appeal to many. More extensive analysis of the marketing materials for the program, the industry discourse about it, and ideally engaging in interviews and observing the production process would provide opportunities to further examine how programming was influenced.

Lynne Joyrich (2009) has pointed out that Ellen DeGeneres came out both publicly and on her series in the 1990s when there was a shift in the media context and a commercial imperative to do so, despite the fact that Ellen—the actor-comedian and the character—had been gay throughout the series. The show benefitted from the media attention and build-up to the episode with the spectacle of Ellen announcing “I’m gay” into the PA system of a public airport gate. However, ABC cancelled the series a year later, with DeGeneres citing that the network had not been supportive after the episode aired (Dow 124). DeGeneres has spoken openly about not being able to find work for several years afterward. In this context, *Take My Wife* should be celebrated for taking on the everyday aspect of lesbian existence—the part that happens after the coming out event—while acknowledging that it has also been done in a marketable way. Esposito and

Butcher's series is a product of this moment in history, a time that came after DeGeneres publicly came out and one in which television targets several niche audiences with queer programming. Esposito admits that she has intuitively attempted to make herself "palatable" to multiple audiences and recognizes how others like DeGeneres with similar strategies paved the way for her, "Ellen has to exist in people's house during the daytime so that people aren't so scared, and then I can get married. That has to happen" (Kravitz).

The palatable aspect of what I am calling normalization is not without potential disadvantages where the queer community is concerned. The strategy is a double-edged sword that involves elements of progressivism and conservatism. In order to center non-normative identities, the series' creators necessarily engage with structures recognized by the majority of audiences as the norm (read: conservative and post-feminist). Thus, this sort of on-screen representation risks moving the center, so to speak, of what constitutes "normal" in contemporary television. Eve Ng explains how gaystreaming, the strategy used by Logo to court multiple audiences beyond the LGBTQ+ community such as heterosexual women, may be economically profitable, though at the cost of serving a diverse LGBTQ+ viewership. Programming that is produced to appeal to white, affluent, heterosexual, and urban viewers tends toward homonormativity (Duggan 2002) in its representation of LGBTQ+ characters on screen, with emphasis placed on representing white, upper-class, gay men. *Take My Wife* is a standout for the homodiversity in the show's characters, and the authenticity of its queer characters has been preserved to some



extent through normalizing strategies such as the use of the familiar sitcom formula which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

### ***The Mindy Project: From Fox to Hulu***

*The Mindy Project* represents another compelling case study through which to examine industrial effects on programming. In this half-hour, single-camera comedy series, writer and actor Mindy Kaling portrays the lead of a romantic comedy. Kaling performs the “Bridget Jones-type” character, Dr. Mindy Lahiri, a “lovable buffoon” who “works her way toward both romantic and professional success” (Goldberg “‘The Office’s’ Mindy Kaling Comedy Gets Pilot Order at Fox”; Murray). Universal Television produced the series, which for its first three seasons aired on the Fox broadcast network. In a corporate story parallel to that of *Take My Wife at Seeso/NBC*, the series was originally green-lit under the so-called “niche comedy brand” of former Fox President Kevin Reilly. However, executive turnover led it to be canceled in 2015. Upon arrival of Chief Executive Officers Dana Walden and Gary Newman, Fox’s mandate changed, and the company began to program what they perceived to be more “broad appeal” sitcoms (Goldberg “‘Mindy Project’ Moving to Hulu After Fox Opts Out”). This explanation given by the corporation, in addition to the fact that Fox did not own the show, worked against its viability. After struggling in its ratings for three seasons at Fox, the network canceled *The Mindy Project*. Shortly after, it was picked up by the Fox co-owned streaming service, Hulu, which was already streaming previous seasons. Hulu ordered an

additional three seasons, extending the program's run for a total of six seasons, which would run through 2017.

As with *Take My Wife*, the social and industrial context of the series must be acknowledged when addressing the show's representational practices. Unlike *Take My Wife*, *The Mindy Project* was distributed initially on Fox. In contrast to the youth-oriented Seeso, the Fox network's audience skews older and broader, which would have shaped the initial seasons of the series distributed by Fox. Kaling had a strong built-in appeal through her exposure as Kelly Kapoor on the U.S. television series, NBC's *The Office* (2005–2013), a syndication success with youth appeal. Even so, a non-normative lead in a series may not be as appealing to the Fox core audience and is therefore potentially a risky choice. As such, writing her as relatable to this audience would increase the show's distribution prospects. In the case of the lead character, Mindy Lahiri, "relatability" is accomplished through the adoption of familiar post-feminist romantic comedy tropes and through the character's (white) mainstream conformity. There are some notable instances in which normalizing strategies are adopted and frame the character's otherness as conventional in order to introduce new content to the sitcom. Worth special attention is the focus on Mindy's single motherhood, though this only becomes part of the program from the fourth season on. More often than not, the main character is portrayed through assimilationist narratives in the series without addressing her otherness.

*The Mindy Project* presents an interesting contrast with *Take My Wife*, which as discussed above, used normalizing strategies to put forward original identity-based content. The comedians in *Take My Wife* use the situation comedy and their comedic performances to frame their alternative identities as conventional in order to assume a critical position on the social and cultural norms that impact the larger queer community. The setting of *Take My Wife* as well as Esposito and Butcher's understated joking is less confrontational than that of their "unruly" peers such as Amy Schumer. Nonetheless, the first season of *Take My Wife* explicitly tackles social issues related to queerness and womanhood, including addressing the experience of gender non-conforming persons such as Rhea in public bathrooms, where they are often told they do not belong, and featuring a depiction of the treatment of victims of sexual assault. The period joke is still there too, it is just more subtle than it was in *Roseanne*.

Despite its focus on an Indian-American woman—a rare emphasis for a television series past or present—*The Mindy Project* does not address race and ethnicity to the same degree that *Take My Wife* does the queer identities of its stars. This lack of discussion around race and ethnicity within *The Mindy Project* has been noted by critics and popular reviews of the series (e.g. Mukhopadhyay; Braxton). The series focuses more on the achievement of Kaling's character than on the impact of her experience as a South Asian American in the U.S. In what appears to be a parallel propensity, a recent interview by

Hoda Kotb on *Today* in which Kaling's humble pre-*Mindy Project* days are discussed, the comedian tearfully states, "If you dream big, you can get whatever you want" (Schnurr).

Racial and ethnic identity are not topics that many white people address without discomfort. It is even less common for mainstream (white) popular entertainment to explicitly address the politics of race and ethnicity. The majority of television series still center their narratives on white characters. One race scholar, Naomi Zack, succinctly sums up how race is treated in much of contemporary television: "The U.S. media either dumbs down race for those [white] progressives in denial, or it presents uninformed reactionary views as valid opinions" (Ostrow).

Tensions between racial and ethnic otherness and cultural assimilation have existed since the early years of the television industry, with the tendency for programs to either associate otherness with highly negative stereotypes (for examples, see Ramirez Berg, 2002) or to assimilate non-normative characters. Characters who conform with the "majority culture common sense" in lieu of articulating their non-normative identity are seen as less threatening and assumed to more easily assimilate into mainstream (white) culture (Campbell 140; Childs 50). The latter can be seen in the portrayal of Ricky in *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957), in which the race-privileged Lucy regularly gets away with her socially unacceptable escapades, while her husband, played by Desi Arnaz must always remain respectable and behaved—a financially and socially assimilated Latino man. In fact, common strategies of assimilation include interracial or interethnic relationships

such as the marriage of Ricky to Lucy (Avila-Saavedra 271-276), as well as avoidance of addressing a character's otherness as seen in the portrayal of Meschach Taylor's Anthony Bouvier in *Designing Women* (1986–1993). As in the case of Anthony, racial assimilation involves themes of racial exceptionalism in which characters are seen as having the ability to fit within the boundaries of what was considered culturally normative at the time by network audiences. Though *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992) expanded representation of black American experience during this time, the series also incorporated elements of assimilationist programming. In particular, its black characters operated in a world based on principles of mobility and individualism that paralleled that of whites, most likely a result of Cosby's attempt in his own words to avoid "deal[ing] with the foolishness of racial overtones" (Gray 291-298; qtd. in Gray 291). In contrast, series such as *A Different World* (1987–1993) and *In Living Color* (1990–1994) often explicitly addressed racism, discrimination, and other race-related aspects of the American black experience (Gray 300). According to Herman Gray, assimilationist television worlds are distinguished by the "elimination or, at best, marginalization of social and cultural difference in the interest of shared and universal similarity" (295). This is not dissimilar to the post-racial world of *The Mindy Project*, which I discuss more in depth in my textual analysis of this series.

Historically, South Asians on television have been represented with negative stereotypes such as that seen in the animated character, Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, on the

long running Fox animated sitcom, *The Simpson's* (1989–). In the series, Apu is voiced by white actor-comedian, Hank Azaria, using an accent identified by Shilpa S. Davé (2013) in *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* as a racialized and classed “brown voice.” Davé describes this performance as a descendant of the ethnic vaudeville practice of blackface minstrelsy that reinforced racial hierarchies of the early 20th century (48). It is not until more recently that South Asian American performers have been cast to play roles that are not racial or ethnic stereotypes in comedy sitcoms. Bhoomi K. Thakore describes the changing representation over time from “forever foreigner” to “model minority” and finally to “average American” (10). Most of the latter types of character are portrayed within the assimilationist and sometimes pluralist narratives of the series in which they are cast. One example of such a representation in a television sitcom is Mindy Kaling’s talkative and celebrity-obsessed, Kelly Kapoor, on NBC’s *The Office* (2005–2013). Aziz Ansari’s southern and sarcastic materialist, Tom Haverford, on *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015) is another example. Characters represented as average Americans acknowledge and demonstrate little knowledge of their ethnic culture. Thakore finds that while this kind of representation is an improvement over previous more negative stereotypes—for example, these characters represent a greater range and more positive portrayal of South Asian Americans—the characters’ ethnicity is often de-emphasized, and the characters themselves are tokenized or secondary to the main narratives (55-63, 94). Ultimately, “these representations

perpetuate the notion that white values and white identity are the normative culture in the United States” (60-61).

Kaling most likely had the opportunity to play the role of Kelly, normally the kind of role reserved for white actors, because of her executive role on the series (Thakore 106). In her acquisition of the role and in her performance, Kaling certainly paved the way for the casting of South Asian actors on subsequent television sitcoms including the multiracial and -ethnic actors, Hanna Simone, in Fox’s *New Girl* (2011–2018) and Jameela Jamil, in NBC’s fantasy-comedy television series, *The Good Place* (2016–). The assimilation of the characters above into their respective on-screen worlds contrasts with those in the even more recent comedy-drama, *Brown Nation* (2016–) on Netflix. The narrative of this series, created and directed by Abi Varghese, focuses on the lives of a first-generation Indian American couple (played by Shenaz Treasury and Rajeev Varma), their family, and business in Queens, New York. The series reflects specifically on the South Asian immigrant American experience while avoiding ethnic caricatures. As Varghese describes the series, “It’s not American, it’s not Indian. It’s kind of stuck in between” (Luhar).

With a few exceptions, broadcast networks specifically—and television outlets more generally—have only recently begun to create programming that explores how the racial and ethnic identities of characters are socially constructed; see, for example, ABC’s *Black-ish* (2014–) and *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015–), and the CW’s *Jane the Virgin* (2014–).

In terms of South Asian representation, *The Mindy Project* falls somewhere in between the assimilationist and pluralist narratives of *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation* and the multicultural representations in *Brown Nation*. The series does not generally acknowledge race and ethnicity as a factor in the experience of South Asians in America, though it should be noted that the character occasionally appeals to her racial and ethnic difference. For example, Amita Nijhawan describes how Mindy invokes aspects of her Asian background in the series, specifically when she references her ethnicity with respect to her body size, at times problematically as in the following line from an episode in the first season, “All Black guys love Indian girls, especially because we have big booties.” However, the character does so in a way that does not center her Indian identity in the narrative; for example, the character does not speak with an accent or exist within a South Asian diaspora like many of the characters on *Brown Nation*. In doing so, Mindy constructs an identity for *herself* in which her race and ethnicity are unproblematic for her “melting pot” American identity. This example demonstrates how the character creates “a possible or potential reality, in which neither size nor being a racial minority are causes for shame,” though this portrayal of a racial minority is not representative of all women ethnic minorities (Nijhawan).

The series’ perspective reflects much of the colorblindness of assimilationist narratives, particularly in its unwillingness to confront ethnic and racial hierarchies. The series does not focus attention on Kaling’s race and ethnicity or otherwise normalize her



otherness, except of course to place Kaling as first Indian-American lead of a romantic comedy, which in itself is admittedly a feat in the industry. In Chapter Four, I argue that the lead character in *The Mindy Project* is assimilated into the series specifically through conformity with familiar and gendered aspects of the romantic comedy and her performance of middle-class whiteness.

*The Mindy Project* also presents an opportunity to explore how the “multiplicity of structuring industrial conditions produces a corresponding expansion of the textual and cultural practices encompassed by television” (Turnbull, McCutcheon and Lotz 7). In this case, such conditions involve the transition of the sitcom from Fox to Hulu, and the subsequent textual changes in *The Mindy Project*. Specifically, the series expanded both its character development and narratives after this transition.

Both the Fox Broadcasting Company and Hulu LLC operate as subsidiaries under the joint venture of The Walt Disney Company, 21st Century Fox, Comcast, and Time Warner, though Disney is in the process of obtaining majority ownership of Hulu through its attempt to acquire Fox (Mayes and Smith). Fox is among the top broadcast networks with globally distributed programming that now reaches over 130 million viewers; Hulu is one of the smaller of the large-scale streaming services, with 17 million subscribers (Disis). Media conglomerates such as Disney and NewsCorp court somewhat distinctive markets with each of their network holdings. Though Fox originally became a major network by providing alternative programming and pulling in younger audiences with

offbeat series such as *Married With Children* in the 1990s, the network has recently relied more heavily on tune-in from its older and more politically conservative viewers. In fact, under the direction of Co-Chairpersons and Chief Executive Officers Dana Walden and Gary Newman, the Fox Television Group's current plan is to focus on sports and news, as well as some comedy and drama programming with "bigger and broader" appeal to U.S. audiences (Lynch) with fewer in-house production (Holloway). This strategy contrasts with Hulu's model to court a greater number of small, niche audiences with its Hulu Original content and the rights to older well-known series. Perhaps this, in combination with Hulu's dual revenue model benefitting from both advertising and subscriptions, will leave the growing OTT service to take up the slack in entertainment production within this media conglomerate in the future.

After multiple outlets expressed interest in the series, Hulu acquired *The Mindy Project* as part of its plan to build up its library of original content (Goldberg "'Mindy Project' Moving to Hulu After Fox Opts Out"). The series was a good fit for Hulu's audience which currently skews female (as high as 86% in a recent report released by the digital marketing company, Hitwise) relative to other streaming services including Netflix (54%) and Amazon (38%), likely due to the well-appreciated female leads of its popular series including *The Mindy Project* and the recent *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–2018; Lopez). Though the series continues to operate in the same romantic comedy setting as the first few seasons, the writers began taking greater risks with storylines after

the transition from Fox to Hulu. Kaling credits the change in the creative direction of the series to the transition:

The move to Hulu was pivotal, I think, because as I've grown as a writer... I put in 13 years on network sitcoms, where there is a real structure and the demands are very clear from the network as to what the show should be. When Hulu happened, it presented an opportunity to say, if what I've been wanting to do is write movies, write characters who are doing things that can't be done on a network sitcom—this is the opportunity to do it on my very own show.

According to the *IndieWire* write-up with Kaling's comment above, "the show began confronting the real issues underlying the show's primary romance in a way that brought its writing to a whole new level" (Miller). Hulu's business model at the time of the launch of *The Mindy Project* prioritized quality over quantity in original programming. Kaling's comment above implies that she was given greater creative latitude as the series producer at Hulu than she had at Fox. According to Amanda Lotz, assigning producers more power in the creation of the series is one of the ways in which different types of corporate structures can contribute to enabling creative developments in production ("Linking Industrial and Creative Change in 21st-Century U.S. Television" 15-18).

Specifically, transformations in the series writing included more depth and complexity to the characters' relationships, new social discourse on Mindy's single motherhood, and, in one episode, an exploration of the professional ramifications of being both Asian American and a woman. Under Fox, the series tended to more closely follow romantic comedy and sitcom genre traditions, including, for example, sustaining

the fated happily-ever-after return to equilibrium between the protagonist, Mindy Lahiri, and her on-again-off-again love interest, Danny Castellano (played by Chris Messina). After the transition to Hulu, the show was praised for its evolution “in an impressive way, deepening from a rom-com into a thoughtful, bittersweet exploration of the push-pull nature of relationships,” an exploration that particularly fits Kaling’s brand of humor (Pai).

Prior to the transition to Hulu, Kaling also performs the girlishness of her on-screen character, including presenting an ambivalence about politics in general and about feminism in particular. The show also maintains a stronger focus on her love life during its Fox years. After the shift to Hulu, Mindy leaves Danny, the controlling love interest she acquired during in the first few seasons at Fox; in doing so, the program breaks with genre conventions and upholds Mindy’s choice to be a single working parent. I explore this storyline in a more detailed analysis in Chapter 4; specifically, I focus on how the series’ creators capitalized on the earlier assimilation of Kaling as the lead of a romantic comedy to normalize this alternative parenting choice.

Not everyone appreciated the disappearance of Danny in the later seasons, and with him the disappearance of elements of a *Bridget Jones’ Diary* storyline (Roots). The dissonance in reviews of the later seasons is further evidence for the extent of the changes in the text. As a final point of pre-and-post Hulu comparison, though the series included relatively little acknowledgement of the lead star’s Indian-American heritage prior to its

move, afterward, the writing began to tackle more race-related issues, most notably in a fantasy alternate-universe episode in which Mindy experiences life as a white man and benefits from the privileges that come with her new identity. Though noted for its awkwardness (apparently addressing race is not Kaling's strong suit; Mohdin), this episode introduced some critical commentary on race and gender where previous episodes had not.

Now that I have provided some industrial and cultural context for these two television series and elaborated on the notion of normalization, I devote the next two chapters to analyzing the texts themselves. In particular, I engage more in more detail in terms of addressing how normalization manifests in each program. In the case of *Take My Wife*, I believe this is accomplished through several aspects of the series, including conformity to elements of the sitcom genre, “palatable” content, and the understated representation of the two lesbian lead characters. *The Mindy Project* is a more complicated case, in which the assimilation of Kaling's character into mainstream white culture is sometimes—though not always—used to incorporate new social discourse. What follows is a discussion of normalizing strategies as related to genre, narrative, and character portrayal, with special attention paid to the success of the strategies employed in each of these series.

### Chapter 3: Queer Representation in *Take My Wife*

The television series and star texts of actor-comedians Cameron Esposito and Rhea Butcher provide an opportunity to consider how notions of femininity and queerness are constructed in contemporary post-network television and media. The half-hour single-camera situation comedy is in the vein of other comedies about comedians, such as Amazon's *One Mississippi* (2015–2017) and Netflix' *Lady Dynamite* (2016–2017). The show features programming about the characters daily lives and includes some scenes with the characters performing stand-up. The seasons were relatively short; one was six and the other was eight episodes long. Through textual analysis of the first season of *Take My Wife* and discourse analysis of the comedians' extratextual and paratextual materials, I demonstrate how the comedians normalize their subversion in their uncommon portrayal of the two lesbians on screen through use of the comedy sitcom form and conventional representation of the two main characters. By framing the non-normative identities of the two main characters as relatable to multiple audiences, they are able to simultaneously present two endearing lesbian characters, unthreatening to the heteronormative status quo; at the same time they provide new representations of intimate and authentic queer characters for LGBTQ+ viewers. For comparison, I present the comedians' other media texts—texts in which Esposito and Butcher are less prone to using these strategies.

### **“Set-up”: Use of Sitcom Conventions**

“Charming” was a word frequently used in critical reviews of *Take My Wife* shortly after the airing of its first season in August 2016. Neil Genzlinger reviewed the season for the *New York Times*, praising both its “D.I.Y. charm” and lighthearted “perspective that have [both] long been underrepresented on the small screen.” On the geek girl culture site *The Mary Sue*, Molly Booth described the series as “feel-good, even as it tackles tougher issues.” The lightness of the series described by critics imbues almost every aspect of the show, down to the tongue-in-cheek title, *Take My Wife*, presumably drawn from the signature funny one-liner of comedian Henny Youngman. This title evokes the familiar banter of a 1950s sitcom man/woman comedy duo in which “take my wife, please” might have been a punchline.

Esposito and Butcher are late to the trend of stand-up comics bringing their comedy material to television. Along with the general increase in programming, comics have increasingly starred in televised stand-up specials, daytime and late night talk shows, variety and sketch comedies, and sitcoms. As referenced in the previous chapter, stand-up comics are known for their transgressive, often offensive, antics on stage; stand-up humor performs the pleasures and anxieties surrounding contemporary cultural concerns such as race, religion, gender, and sexuality. As Jenkins describes, vaudeville-inspired early comedy films represent “the triumph of a creative disorder over a repressive order” (Jenkins 217). This subversive performance is preserved in television

stand-up comedy specials as well as variety and sketch comedies, though somewhat less so in the talk show format and least of all in the sitcom. Where stand-up disrupts the social order, the sitcom tends to reinforce it—so much so that scholars have proposed that the sitcom format may limit the potential subversiveness of feminist humor (Mellencamp, 90-94; Swink 25).

Therefore, the sitcom format does not at first glance appear to be an obvious choice for two feminist and nonconforming stand-up comics like Cameron Esposito and Rhea Butcher. Both comics began stand-up in the Chicago scene, with Esposito first performing in 2007 at nineteen years of age at the Lincoln Lodge and Butcher at the Second City. Esposito's personal and professional life has been deeply entrenched in the stand-up comedy world, which she credits in *She Said, "Coming Out!"* as the outlet for expressing her authentic self and queer identity. She has prioritized the cultivation of the alternative stand-up scene through her weekly stand-up show at the Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB) Theatre and in her podcast with Butcher, *Put Your Hands Together* (2013–), in which they share live stand-up shows of a range of comics as well as backstage interviews. Incidentally, it was one of Esposito's early stand-up performances in Chicago that inspired Rhea Butcher's own "honest, personal" stand-up style (Jung). Esposito performs her unabashedly feminist perceptive on topics related to being a woman and lesbian in a culture that is male- and straight-dominant. Her "friendly yelling" (Robinson, "The #MeToo Movement Has a Place in Comedy: Just Ask Cameron



Esposito”) style of comedy can be seen in guest appearances on several late-night talk shows, her stand-up specials, and other media projects such as the BuzzFeed series, *Ask a Lesbian* (2014-2016), in which she answers questions about being a lesbian received by the BuzzFeed staff. Her work is intertwined with her social activism, particularly in her stand-up routines in which she addresses queer life and struggles, bigotry, and sexual assault. Esposito herself is a survivor. Proceeds from her recent stand-up special *Rape Jokes* (2018), described on her website as the “special about sexual assault from a survivor’s perspective,” will be donated to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), the anti-sexual violence non-profit organization.

Butcher is from the Midwest and began improv and stand-up in Chicago as well. Though their material is less overtly political and includes more universally relatable with topics such as Midwest culture, vegetarianism and love of baseball, Butcher’s performance is very much from the perspective of a feminist and queer person. They address their gender and sexuality in several of their media projects with partner, Esposito, including the *She Said* (2015) web series, as well as in their own social media and online journal writing. Butcher wrote in *Bustle* in 2017, “gender is an exploration and I’m still trying to understand myself as a person on the non-binary spectrum.” In 2018, they tweeted that they officially use they/them/their pronouns, but continue to identify with women culturally and politically, as well as a with the labels “wife” and “lesbian.” Butcher originally opened for Esposito on tour, though now the two perform together, as

they have in the couple's most recent comedy tour, *Back to Back* (2017). Butcher has made several late night appearances on their own and released a solo comedy album, *Butcher*, in 2016, though the two comedians have spent the last several years working together at the UCB Theatre and on their joint podcast.

Despite the mismatch between their subversive and feminist comedy and the generally conservative nature of sitcoms, Esposito and Butcher chose the sitcom genre to convey their personal narrative to television audiences. The sitcom format, easily one of the most recognizable forms of television comedy, is identified by its “cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored” (Mintz 114) or the widely familiar equilibrium-disequilibrium-equilibrium narrative arrangement. Though similar to television dramas in this way, the sitcom “can be most usefully defined as a form of programming which foregrounds its comic intent” (Mills, *The Sitcom* 49). This comedy genre has a serial and mainly episodic format with a formulaic resolution—typically a happy ending—at the end of each episode. In addition, sitcoms are conservative genres that tend to reflect a culture's norms rather than introduce experimental themes and subject matter (Mills, “Sitcoms” 695-696). This makes the genre a valuable tool for reading contemporary cultural norms and values. It can also be a convenient form to situate non-normative identities, for example, two queer women, as relatable and normal to new audiences. Joanna Robinson succinctly summarizes the feel of the series in *Vanity Fair*: “Butcher and Esposito have tapped into

the cozy workplace and domestic comedies of the 80s and 90s to bring you a snapshot of their lives in Los Angeles. It's a familiar setup...the only difference is that the couple at the center of the series is played by two women.”

Brett Mills explains that the sitcom evolved during the transition from stage to screen comedy performance in part as a strategy to reflect the audience's day-to-day experiences in parallel with the recurring daily broadcast in the home. The sitcom is a popular genre despite its associations with low-culture television. More recently, the genre has evolved to accommodate the growing costs and risks associated with sitcom production by creatively assimilating other industrial practices and textual forms. Taking into account Harris' suggestion that “niche is the new normal” (qtd. in Mills, *The Sitcom* 134), Mills describes the post-network era in broadcast history as one in which sitcom producers are under economic pressure to regain the sitcom's cultural cache. One strategy has been to move away from the low-quality associations with traditional sitcoms to what Mills calls “comedies of distinction,” which are marketed to audiences specifically as less traditional texts (132-136). These texts are associated with “perceived minority status” (142) that may involve smaller-than-usual budgets and the hiring of emerging or lower profile actors. The form itself is also evolving, increasing single camera versus the multi-camera proscenium setup with a studio audience. This is the context in which the sitcom *Take My Wife* has been produced.

The sitcom formula has also expanded in recent years with additions such as the documentary camera and reaction shots in *The Office* (2001–2003) and *Arrested Development* (2003–2006, 2013) and in what Mills calls hybrid sitcoms. For example, Nick Lacey coined the term “docu-sitcom” to describe the BBC1 sitcom-reality-television-documentary blended comedy series, *Driving School* (1997; Lacey in Mills, *The Sitcom* 41); however, traditional elements of the genre’s formula, namely the recurring characters and settings, the simple and entertaining stories, and tidy resolutions continue to dominate contemporary sitcoms. Television audiences have come to expect these features, and their inclusion invites investment in and attachment to the sitcom’s characters. The repetitiveness and familiarity of the sitcom, despite its conservative format, potentially creates space for moments of intimacy where other forms of television comedy may not. This is particularly salient in *Take My Wife*, in which the two stars’ experiences as queer women and stand-up comics are portrayed as authentic and conventional. Caroline Framke reviews the series as “refreshing as hell in the way it depicts a lesbian couple without a social justice agenda or an eye for fetishization. They’re just living their lives, as humans.” As I discuss below, this appears to be deliberate as “it was important to Esposito and Butcher that *Take My Wife* portray a lesbian couple in a low-key, realistic way” (Framke “Exclusive: Watch the premiere of *Take My Wife*, Starring Comedians (and Wives) Cameron Esposito and Rhea Butcher”).

This last statement raises the question, to whom are the comedians portraying a lesbian couple? Though series creators and performers in the industry are savvy to network conceptions of audiences, there is another notion of audience driving performances that is illustrated in Esposito and Butcher's priority to portray their relationship in a "low-key, realistic way." As mentioned in the previous chapter, Esposito imagines queer audiences' reception of the series as part of a much larger, yet-to-be defined audience for the series (*Ziembra*), and it is this concept of audience that I explore in my textual analysis of *Take My Wife*.

The series generally conforms to the sitcom formula, its aesthetic and narrative trappings, beginning with the opening scene in the pilot, "Set-up," which highlights the couple's home life together. After a playful non-diegetic introduction in which Cameron proclaims, "Welcome to the rest of our lives!" and proceeds to carry and then drop Rhea across a metaphorical marriage threshold, the episode opens with a series of scenes from the couple's home: photographs of the couple, two toothbrushes in a cup, two pairs of boots, and dirty dishes in the kitchen sink. Esposito pours coffee into two mugs, one with "Sausage City" printed on the side (presumably acquired during one of their comedy tours). "Is it weird that we have these mugs?" she asks Rhea. "You mean, because we're lesbians or because we're vegetarians?" These casual jokes about sexual identity are in the context of their morning routine of drinking coffee. As they sip from mugs, sleepily chat, and yawn at each other, the audience is given the impression of sweet, if perhaps

even a little monotonous, domestic bliss. Compare this with the similar stylistic traits in the opening sequences of the original run of the *Roseanne* (1988–1997) series. Kathleen Rowe notes of one episode that “the show opens outside a suburban stucco house at night with its windows invitingly lit up, and then it cuts to a woman's hands in a sink washing dishes” (71); this is one of many opening scenes with *Roseanne* in the kitchen. These opening scenes in both the original *Roseanne* and the more recent *Take My Wife* set the tone for the episodes, with their emphasis on family and domestic routines.

The disequilibrium arrives when it becomes clear that despite this domestic bliss, the characters Cameron and Rhea are each experiencing a crisis in their lives. Rhea is increasingly dissatisfied with their day job as a graphic designer and yearns to be a comedian like their partner. Cameron feels lonely in the relationship because Rhea is routinely on call in their day job. In the end, the two resolve their problems by performing stand-up together. On stage Rhea decides to quit their day job and to pursue stand-up full time as their partner’s co-host at the UCB Theatre, thus alleviating Rhea’s career frustration and allowing Cameron to spend more time with them. Equilibrium is reestablished with Rhea neatly closing the episode the way it began, as they declare, “Welcome to the rest of our lives!”

The familiarity of the sitcom form and its tropes calls attention to how the characters conform rather than how they differ from the status quo, thus reinforcing the audience’s perception of the pair as “normal” despite their non-normative identities. One

way in which the sitcom formula is not observed in the series is in the inclusion of the post-episode interview with the two comedians which continues throughout the season. Ironically, this divergence from the familiar functions to further normalize the two characters by blurring the sitcom narrative with real life. During these one- to two-minute vignettes, the actor-comedians address the audience to “talk to you a little bit about our real lives and how we got here.” This parallel between fictional and non-fictional authenticity is reminiscent of the “authenticity narrative” established between DeGeneres’ coming out performance both publicly and on her series (Dow 127). Esposito and Butcher attempt to convey a similar sense of authenticity in their introductions in the first post-episode interview:

“I’m real Cameron Esposito.”

“And I’m *real* Rhea Butcher.”

“And we’re at the UCB, which is the real theater that we host the real stand-up show that you just saw depicted in *Take My Wife*.”

Interspersed with black-and-white shots of the Upright Citizens Brigade and closeups of the two women’s hands (with intimate reveals including one in which Esposito is playing with her wedding ring), the two comedians break the fourth wall to talk to viewers about making the episode. These scenes, filmed with a handheld camera, are somewhat less formal than in the rest of the show. They include bloopers, the partners complimenting each other, a casual nod to their personal styles, and some playful riffing on a baseball metaphor. The interview effectively accomplishes what Esposito hopes can “kind of erase the boundary between us and the show.” In doing so, the comedians yet

again highlight their authenticity and further desensitize the audience to what would normally be considered an uncommon representation of two lesbian entrepreneurs, comedians, and lovers on screen. From the domestic tone of the opening scene to the restoration of equilibrium reinforced by the intimacy in these post-episode interviews, the use of the sitcom contributes to portraying the typical love story sitcom caper; "...the only difference is that the couple at the center of the series is played by two women" (Robinson "It's Not Too Late to Save One of TV's Most Urgently Important Shows: Season 2 of *Take My Wife* is in Need of a New Home").

**"Punchline": Queerness and Sexuality in *Take My Wife***

Sitcom storytelling tends to revolve around the day-to-day routines of its characters in domestic and/or workplace settings. In keeping with this tradition, the content of the show revolves around the comedians' domestic life and some of the decisions they face together as a couple, such as whether or not to have children and which career each should pursue (spoiler: it is stand-up comedy for both of them). In addition to family planning, topics covered in *Take My Wife* range from homemaking—in one episode Rhea decides to buy a sofa—and the choice made by Rhea to quit their day job to focus on their comedy. These topics are approached with humor and lightheartedness; more somber issues are also addressed with subtlety. In the second episode, the comedians address the topic of sexual assault, of which several of the characters on the series have been victims. As a topic, rape is addressed at first indirectly



as the comedians take to the stage to interrogate whether rape jokes are funny given the likelihood of sexual assault victims present in the audience. The subsequent sequence, in which characters in the show say “me too” to the camera, is powerful—though much less daring and explicit than Esposito’s recent #MeToo stand-up set in *Rape Jokes* (2108), “a blistering, masterful, tragic, hilarious hour of comedy about sexual assault and the culture that supports it” in which the comedian tells her story on stage (Fox “Cameron Esposito Is Taking Rape Jokes Back for Survivors”).

Also noteworthy are the topics that have been excluded in the first season of *Take My Wife*, including aspects of the characters’ queer identities such as their coming out and sexual relationship. Though the comedians’ previous media projects and current performances frequently address both topics—Esposito’s stand-up material in particular—this content is left out of the sitcom. In the first chapter, I alluded to Esposito’s graphic stand-up bit on menstruation. For the most part, this and other references to their female bodies are left out of the series. The three minute #CHUNKS bit in the comedian’s stand-up routine is reduced to one line spoken by Butcher about how the couple cannot have a white sofa because “we’re two women. Periods.” A few references to the comedians’ female forms (and in Butcher’s case, androgynous form) are included, but there is no explicit reference in the show to any part of their bodies. There is mild objectification of one female character, Hollywood celebrity Melina Marquez (played by Janet Varney), who shadows Cameron to study the comedian’s mannerisms and quirks for a role. In a

couple of scenes in which Melina tries on Cameron's clothes, Cameron briefly ogles the actor's semi-exposed breasts. This focus on the body and the objectifying gaze avoid the two lesbians, even though they have several loving kisses and embraces throughout the season. In scenes in which Cameron and Rhea change clothes as part of the plot of an episode such as in the aforementioned scene with Cameron and Melina or the time Rhea demands Cameron return their White Snake t-shirt on the spot, the two main characters change clothes off screen or the camera is strategically moved to avoid showing their unclothed bodies.

In general, dialogue around the two main characters' lesbian existence is simple, usually limited to the occasional joke, as in the following on-stage exchange between the characters Rhea and Cameron on parenthood:

"I'm great dad material. I just don't have dad *materials*... you know."

"You mean sperm?"

"Yeah."

"'Cause we got baseball hats..."

Their identities are addressed differently in the comedians' stand-up performances and in other media texts, in particular in Esposito's stand-up content, which is strongly focused on her experience as a lesbian. This opening sequence can be heard on her digital album, *Same Sex Symbol* (2014), and on several late-night shows in which she has made guest appearances. After joking that her hairstyle means she is a "Thundercat" and "a *giant* lesbian," she proceeds to elaborate on the ways she makes herself visible as a lesbian regardless of heterosexual men's appreciation. Esposito's stage performance

unquestionably reflects Adrienne Rich's characterization of the lesbian as an "attack on male right of access to women... a naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance" (136). Esposito started a podcast called *Queery* last August through which she "dig[s] deeper into her community and bring the LGBTQ+ fight for equality to the forefront through intellectual discussions and compelling stories" (Krauser). The sitcom makes a reference to the fact that Esposito's stand-up and celebrity persona center around her identity as a lesbian; one of the tweets she reads in the first episode is "@cameronesposito on @thefunnypod today. We get it. You're gay." Otherwise, Cameron and Rhea's LGBTQ+ identities tend to be de-politicized on the series. The naturalization of their identities is accomplished through the show's emphasis on the couple's domestic and career exploits.

Another topic that is not included in the series is Cameron and Rhea's coming out. A friend recently shared his annoyance with me that in many contemporary media, the happiness of LGBTQ+ characters depends on revealing their identity to—and earning acceptance from—the straight characters in the story. In *Take My Wife*, the sitcom bypasses this scenario by beginning after the two comedians are already out of the closet. There is no coming out performance for either character, as the show begins with them in an established long-term relationship. Outside of the series, the comedians have been frank about their coming out and personal experiences as a lesbian and genderqueer lesbian. Over the past few years, the two have become unofficial spokeslesbians, hosting online series aimed at educating the public and answering frequently asked questions

about lesbian existence and the female body. In a candid BuzzFeed series called *Ask a Lesbian* (2014–2016), Esposito addresses awkward questions about her coming out and sexuality such as “Is scissoring actually a thing?” and “What were your parents’ reactions when you told them?” with humor and sincerity. Esposito and Butcher also co-hosted an Amy Poehler’s Smart Girls web series called *She Said* (2015), a “space where women talk about stuff.” In two of these short episodes, entitled “Coming out!” and “The Female Body is Awesome!,” the comics discuss how they first knew they were gay and how they came to terms with their queer identities through stand-up, as well as their first visit to the gynecologist and how often they change their tampons. “I think it’s valuable for women to know, explore, and research our bodies,” Esposito says on the series.

Despite earnestly addressing these topics in other projects, this content is strikingly absent in their sitcom. Beginning the series after the characters are in a relationship, the show’s creators avoid the dissection and sensationalizing typical of queer characters in media; this move helps to normalize their relationship. *Take My Wife* attempts to simultaneously entertain and educate post-network audiences about non-normative identities in the same way that *Ellen* did decades earlier. Butcher expresses their desire for viewers to see Cameron and Rhea as real people regardless of perceptions of gender and sexuality in the second episode: “also like it’s us, and we’re like, real people; we’re a couple...” Esposito follows up, “I just want us to live,” referring to the

trend in television programming to kill off lesbian characters, and perhaps more figuratively to the welfare of the queer community in general.

Judith Butler contends that gender is a performance or identity created through one's actions and behaviors that can subvert dominant sociocultural conventions (22-46). In the case of *Take My Wife*, the performance of the two main characters refreshingly eludes common lesbian stereotypes. Though coded as lesbian, neither of the two characters personifies the “feminine, deferential role required of ‘real’ [heterosexual] women” (Rich 133), the ubiquitous femme stereotype found in iterations of the lesbian archetype on television since Ellen came out on *Ellen* (1994–1998). Ellen's love interest and inspiration for her coming out in *The Puppy Episode* (1997), played by Laura Dern, exemplifies the chic, white, middle-class femme representative of lesbians in the media during the 1990s. This representation appeared in other television series at the time, including *Friends* and *Mad About You*, and illustrates Ann Ciasullo's claim that lesbians in media have frequently been straightened out for media consumption (578). Perhaps no one manifested this more than DeGeneres' real-life partner at the time, the “one who can ‘unbecome’ a lesbian,” Anne Heche (Ciasullo 592). DeGeneres and Heche's sanitized, white, upper-class image, coordinating blond hair and neat runway costumes, affectionate yet desexualized, was consumed without reservation by hetero- and homosexual audiences alike. Straightened out lesbians such as DeGeneres and Heche were, as Ciasullo describes, visible because they were attractive femmes, though simultaneously

less visible as lesbians and less able to challenge patriarchal and dominant cultural fantasies about lesbianism (602-605).

The straightened out femme has persisted in contemporary media as well. The public image of DeGeneres and her wife today, Portia de Rossi, is remarkably similar to that of DeGeneres and Heche two decades earlier. The emphasis on femme lesbians remains on screen as well, for example, in the first couple of seasons of the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black* (2013–) and recent seasons in ABC’s *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005–), both of which focus on the relationships of white, femme characters while sidelining others. Fortunately, there is more range in the representation in some television series, including the most recent seasons of *Orange is the New Black*, and significantly, lesbians portraying lesbians on screen, as in Cherry Jones in Amazon’s *Transparent* (2014–), Lena Waithe in Netflix’s *Master of None* (2015–), and of course the subjects of the current case study.

Esposito and Butcher are not stereotypically femme, nor are they entirely butch either. Eve Ng came across this corresponding opposing stereotype to the femme while interviewing Logo executives about their gaystreaming strategy that focuses more on gay men than lesbians: “[Lesbians] are rough; we’re angry; we only like flannel...” (Ng 275). Butcher is the more butch of the two; they have the flannel-wearing part down and joke in their stand-up, “I’m 100% ‘butcher’ than all of you.” They are gender nonconforming, whereas Esposito identifies as a woman. Four years before Butcher started using gender

neutral pronouns, they identified with some conventionally male-associated activities in their household such as appliance repair, and simultaneously as “a beautiful woman,” blurring the lines between gender constructs in BuzzFeed’s *Ask a Lesbian*, “11 Questions You Want to Ask a Lesbian” (2014). Esposito’s make-up, coiffed hair, and fitted clothing read soft butch at best. In the series, Cameron and Rhea often share their boyish clothing without Rhea’s consent, an adorable domestic quibble between the two. Neither comedian performs the traditional stereotype of butch, though, instead adopting their own unique mix of conventional features associated with both genders.

While Esposito and Butcher do not make use of either the traditional femme or butch stereotypes in their series, the characters conform in at least one way seen as less threatening to patriarchal cultural expectations: Cameron and Rhea are noticeably desexualized. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there are no sex scenes in the first season, which have been replaced by Cameron and Rhea’s dialogue about how they prefer not to portray themselves as sexual on their television show. The two characters agree by the end of this scripted conversation that it is more important to portray their casual intimacy over the more dominant hyper-sexualized version of lesbian relationships. As discussed, this revealing message is an explanation and selling point to their queer audiences.

The individual styles of the two comedians and the lack of sex scenes avoid the “mirror-image” depictions of sexually explicit representations of lesbians (Creed 86)

recently seen in the films *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013) and *The Handmaiden* (2016). Indeed, the comedians have gone to the opposite extreme. Sex is a punchline throughout the first season. The first episode sets the tone for how they will divert attention from their sexuality using comedy throughout the season. As part of an appearance on a podcast in one episode of *Take My Wife*, Cameron and her interviewer have the following conversation:

“[Being a comic] must make it pretty hard for dating, unless you’re dating, god forbid, a comic.”

“Actually that’s weird you would bring that up, I *am* dating someone who’s trying to be a comic.”

“... and succeeding?”

“Yeah. The sex is hilarious.”

In the pilot, there are several scenes in which the couple are in bed together; in each of them, the characters are portrayed cuddling in sweats and flannel pajamas, half asleep, sometimes fully asleep with mouths agape, and limbs sprawling. It is more endearing than provocative. The closest the characters get to approaching sexual behavior is when Cameron becomes infatuated with celebrity, Melina Marquez. In the fifth episode, Rhea walks into the bedroom to find Cameron and Melina changing clothes together as part of a character study.

“What the hell? I left for fifteen minutes, and you guys are taking your clothes off?”

“I know, awesome right?”

“No, it’s not awesome. It makes me feel weird.”

“Weird like your pussy is tingling?”

“Ugh, gross, stop it.”



Rhea further refuses to acknowledge Melina's breasts because, as they explain to Cameron, "we're feminists." This scene is particularly relevant because it illustrates another example in which the series' writers avert a potentially subversive scene with two non-femme lesbians and a straight woman, a scene that is potentially too provocative for older more traditional audiences. Younger and queer audiences may be disappointed with the desexualization of Cameron and Rhea, but that disappointment in this case is mitigated with Rhea's feminist card. Additionally, the many romantic scenes between Cameron and Rhea in which they show physical affection for one another are truncated to avoid the build-up of sexual tension. The second episode, entitled "Punchline," opens on the satisfied couple after they have done the deed ("good job" one of them says). There are several scenes during the season in which the couple kiss; the connection between the two characters appears authentic, but their kissing is cut short with interjections of, "I can't kiss you when your whole mullet is in my mouth!" and "Did you just have sushi?" The act of kissing functions to demonstrate the normal day-to-day ennui of the couple's long-term relationship, while their passion for each other is channeled into their enthusiasm for working together at the theater and making their relationship official with a marriage proposal in the final episode of the first season. This desexualization of the lead characters and emphasis on casual intimacy over fetishization, while commendable for expanding the range of lesbian representation on screen, also conveniently normalizes

the characters to straight viewers and increases the likelihood that the series will appeal to multiple audiences.

One last significant difference between the portrayal of Cameron and Rhea on the sitcom and in their other media projects is the emotive language and mannerisms of Esposito, which are toned down in the television series. Esposito has been referred to as “yelly”; her stand-up persona and her performances in the *She Said* and *Ask a Lesbian* videos is louder and more expressive than the character she portrays on the series. In her stand-up, Esposito is often angry about bigotry as well as about the jerks from her childhood and college years, and it is not uncommon for that anger to be directed toward straight men in keeping with the “we’re angry” lesbian stereotype referenced above. Yet, in the sitcom, her frustration manifests more as insecurity—anger directed inward reminiscent of the self-deprecatory funny women of early stand-up such Joan Rivers, for example. Perhaps Esposito’s in-your-face unruliness is tempered by Butcher’s steady, deadpan reactions. Butcher’s comedic style is generally more low-key; the same trade source that describes Esposito as a “gesticulating imp” also refers to Butcher’s “self-deprecatory cool” (Mason). Butcher’s material is potentially relatable to a larger audience because it addresses topics such as being a child of divorce and board games with word play and puns. Butcher’s straight-laced, easy charm is familiar, replicating that of comic predecessor, Ellen DeGeneres. Even Rhea’s stiff, awkward dance moves on *Take My Wife* channel the popular dance performance of DeGeneres on her talk show. Esposito tones

down her performance in the series, either to match this steadiness of Butcher or to appear less offensive, perhaps even less threatening, to a wider comedy audience.

*Take My Wife* is a compelling representation of what it is like to be a woman and to be queer in our current cultural landscape, as well as how these identities manifest in post-network television. Throughout this chapter, I examined several of the strategies that the show's creators used to center the characters' non-normative LGBTQ+ identities, including conformity with the traditional comedy sitcom structure, emphasis on nonqueer content and narratives, and the endearing albeit desexualized portrayal of Cameron and Rhea. I have argued that by portraying the characters in this way, Esposito and Butcher bring to the small screen original queer narratives, a sense of authenticity beyond femme and butch stereotypes, and new conversations around the struggles of women and queer communities. This strategy, while socially conscious, also fits within the marketing plans of the current television industry; it is especially well suited for the niche-oriented content featured on a growing number of OTT platforms geared toward pursuing multiple audiences as I discussed in Chapter Two.

In the next chapter, I turn to another contemporary text, *The Mindy Project*, focusing in particular on its portrayal of women. I look most explicitly at its depiction of the main character, who is a woman of color and a single mother. This series approaches the portrayal of its character's non-normative identities differently than

*Take My Wife*. Whereas *Take My Wife* portrays its characters as “normal” in order to assume a critical position on social and cultural norms surrounding LGBTQ+ topics, *The Mindy Project* comparatively explores Kaling’s racial and ethnic identities to a lesser degree.

## **Chapter 4: Representation of Race and Ethnicity in *The Mindy Project***

*The Mindy Project* is a fascinating and complex text with regard to notions of femininity, motherhood, and the intersectionality of gender and race in contemporary post-network television. In this half-hour, single-camera series, writer and actor Mindy Kaling portrays the lead character of a romantic comedy. The series lasted six seasons; the seasons started out longer, between twenty-one and twenty-six episodes each, though the penultimate and last seasons had only fourteen and ten, respectively. Through an interpretive textual analysis of particular segments of this series and discourse analysis of Kaling's star text, I illustrate the ways in which the racial and ethnic identity of the character portrayed by producer, writer, and series star, Mindy Kaling, is often assimilated into the series' fictional world through the use of the romantic comedy conventions as well as the series' predominantly post-feminist and post-racial setting. In comparison with the previous case study, this series includes less critical commentary of society's treatment of its lead's non-normative status, particularly her non-whiteness and Indian American heritage.

Perhaps more than for the comedians in the previous chapter, Kaling's body of work is closely tied to her public image due to her greater level of fame and media exposure. Therefore, a discourse analysis of her star text is also included here. In particular, I look at interviews with Kaling, her two memoirs, and her social media

activity. The examination of these materials serves to contrast Kaling's image as a talented writer and feminist with the portrayal of the character Mindy as the simple and carefree lead of a romantic comedy television series. Finally, I examine some post-racial aspects of the show, Kaling's performance of a particular kind of female stereotype associated with whiteness on the series, and look especially closely at one episode from the fifth season, which attempts to uniquely address a female Asian American character's experience in the series.

### **“When Mindy Met Danny”: Use of Romantic Comedy Conventions**

In her book *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, Mizejewski (2014) discusses the ways in which women's comedy capitalizes on contemporary American audiences' expectations of gender norms, in particular ideals of femininity and prettiness. Her case studies of the writer-comedians Wanda Sykes, Ellen DeGeneres, and Margaret Cho, among others, reveal how comedians use their nonconforming bodies to fuel their comedy in both stand-up and television series. Similar to Mizejewski's funny women, Kaling started her television career as a comedy writer and eventually added producer and actor to her list of roles. The cultural work of feminism is considered to occur mostly in the performances of these writer-comedians, whereas funny women that conform to cultural ideals of the feminine tend to be routed into the gender-typical roles of romantic comedies. In romantic comedies, Mizejewski explains, “funny women are

pretty, heterosexual, and eventually positioned in stable, conventional relationships” (23).

She notes that these funny women are also usually white.

Hollywood romantic comedies are identified by the dramatic tension built around the protagonists finding love in a will-they-won't-they storyline. In addition to this love-centered narrative, Celestine Deleyto argues that an essential component in romantic comedy is the opportunity for the characters to freely explore their affection and desires. Humor in this case functions to help insulate or protect a space for characters from the usual social rules; “this comic, protective, erotically-charged space is the space of romantic comedy” (Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* 18). The conventions of genre have varied throughout history, though common storytelling devices in this genre include the “meet cute,” “wrong partner,” a masquerade of identity, the overwhelming power of love, and of course, the anticipation of a happy ending (reviewed in Grindon 8-18).

The overwhelmingly heterosexual pairings in this genre evoke dominant cultural notions of gender. According to Grindon’s history, romantic comedies in the 1980s and 1990s in particular tend to reaffirm the traditional genre conventions of the form. In particular, the work of Steve Neale (1992) and Tamar Jeffers McDonald (2007) demonstrates how romantic values and ideologies related to gender roles, courtship, and love sometimes include a more regressive view of the place of women in society (58-60). These neo-traditional romantic comedies often revive the plots of earlier classical

romantic comedies in a contemporary context, as seen in the Nora Ephron films *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *You've Got Mail* (1998). Other scholars such as Maria Battista (2001) have focused on the ways in which female characters in early classical Hollywood romantic and screwball comedies were able to lampoon patriarchal ideas of femininity by refusing traditional gender roles (9-11); some female leads such as Katherine Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* (1940) played characters that were intellectual, verbal, and sexual equals to their male counterparts. Deleyto finds a greater range of political and ideological expression manifesting over time in romantic comedy, a genre he claims adapts to evolving social practices. Some of the newer features he has noted in the genre include the increased flexibility in gender roles, a trend noted by Battista in early romantic comedies, and emerging alternative sexualities (Deleyto, "They Lived Happily Ever After: Ending Contemporary Romantic Comedy" 42-54 in Grindon 79) such as the queer narrative in *Take My Wife*.

In the 2011 *The New Yorker* article entitled "Flick Chicks: A Guide to Women in the Movies," Mindy Kaling demonstrates her awareness of the protected space for play that Deleyto describes in this genre:

I regard romantic comedies as a subgenre of sci-fi, in which the world operates according to different rules than my regular human world. For me, there is no difference between Ripley from *Alien* and any Katherine Heigl character. They are equally implausible. They're all participating in a similar level of fakey razzle-dazzle, and I enjoy every second of it (Kaling).



Kaling's character in *The Mindy Project*, Dr. Mindy Lahiri, is assimilated into this familiar space via conformity with the conventions associated with romantic comedy characters. I begin this analysis with a comparison between Kaling's star text as the talented and hardworking writer and the post-feminist girlishness of the character Mindy Lahiri on the sitcom in order to highlight, in her words, the "fakey razzle-dazzle" construction of her television rom-com character.

Contemporary stardom and celebrity are closely tied to social context and histories, and as Joshua Gamson (1994) asserts, celebrities can be symbolic of important discursive structures in popular culture. As an Indian-American woman in the media industry and public eye, Mindy Kaling's work reveals ways in which our society negotiates changing gender and racial norms. Distinguishing between Kaling as person and Kaling as star image is helpful. In particular, Richard Dyer (1998) describes a star's image as a construction of a range of materials, including her filmography and roles, unique qualities (a particular look, voice, or certain skill), and the social and political context in which her image is constructed. This is facilitated through the extra textual and paratextual materials that accompany entertainment media, including television and print interviews with stars, articles in trade journals, trailers, merchandising, and increasingly social media presence (Gray 2010). Kaling's image, like that of any celebrity, is a carefully curated commodity.

Kaling promotes the view of herself as having been an overachiever long before her fame as a writer on *The Office*, explaining “not to sound braggy or anything, but I kind of killed it in college” (Kaling, *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns* 47). In her 2011 memoir, she details her achievements as a playwright, actor, singer, and cartoonist for a student newspaper during her college years at Dartmouth. However, Kaling fashions herself primarily as a writer. She describes how, after interning at *Late Night with Conan O’Brien* (1993–2009), her first big success came with the satiric play *Matt & Ben* (2003) about Matt Damon and Ben Affleck’s early friendship and careers. Kaling co-wrote, directed, and starred in *Matt & Ben* with her then roommate, Brenda Withers. The witty writing and comical performances in the play caught the attention of television comedy producer Greg Daniels (*The Simpsons*, *King of the Hill*), who hired Kaling in 2004 as a writer on *The Office* (year-year), a series for which she went on to produce, direct, and perform in the memorable role of Kelly Kapoor (Sittenfeld). Interviews with Kaling typically focus on her writing success, for example, detailing which episodes of *The Office* she penned, her friendship and competitiveness with fellow writers Michael Schur and B.J. Novak, and her amusing and writer-ly tweets (Phipps; Sittenfeld; Sepinwall). Her colleagues rave about her as well, including producer and mentor, Greg Daniels (Sittenfeld). In response to a question about her own desired legacy, she responds, “truthfully, I guess I would like to be remembered as a great writer and a kind person” (Dunham).

Kaling's star text as a writer wunderkind contrasts greatly with her portrayal as the flighty Mindy Lahiri on *The Mindy Project*. In typical fantasy rom-com fashion, she is a lovable and accomplished doctor who can't seem to find Mr. Right. Despite having encountered little discrimination due to her gender in her professional life, the character embraces the stereotype of helpless femininity, including excessive materiality, naive gullibility, full-blown woe-is-me meltdowns on the floor of her office, and general mismanagement of her life. This girlish protagonist is equivalent to the post-feminist appeal of Bridget Jones described in Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism*. According to McRobbie, post-feminist consumers want to enjoy female success, individualization, and traditional feminine pleasures including hyper-femininity and the tendency toward girlishness, with little desire for this narrative to contribute to or acknowledge the effects of the feminist movement (14-22). Coincidentally, Kaling tweeted a list of her favorite romantic comedies in 2016, with *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001) at the top of that list, followed by Nora Ephron's *You've Got Mail* (1998). The influence of late-1990s romantic comedies can be seen in both the pilot of *The Mindy Project*, which depicts a young Mindy Lahiri obsessed with these rom-coms, as well as in the storyline throughout the first two seasons, which follows another Ephron-inspired storyline, that of *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993). In a cheeky reference, the series writers include a line in which Kaling's character is admonished, "your life is not a romantic comedy;" however, viewers would not know this from the show's storytelling.

Mindy's adoption of feminine dress and performance is also part of the distinctly gendered post-feminist rom-com aesthetic. In the same way that action cinema articulates the male identity (Tasker 74), romantic comedies indicate mainstream conventions of how women are expected to speak, behave, and dress. Kaling herself identifies many of "specimens of women" that appear in contemporary romantic comedies but "do not exist in real life," including the klutz, the "ethereal weirdo" (aka manic pixie girl), the career-obsessed woman, the forty-two-year-old mother of a thirty-year-old male lead, the skinny but gluttonous woman, and the woman who works at an art gallery (Kaling). Yet all of these specimens embrace femininity and prettiness in one way or another.

In "Mindy Calling: Size, Beauty, Race in The Mindy Project," Amita Nijhawan discusses the interplay of Mindy's body size, her attractiveness, and her ethnicity, specifically how Kaling's playful invoking of her Indian-ness disrupts associations between thinness and "civilization" (Nijhawan). While this thesis does not specifically address body morphology, it does explore beauty. Throughout American history, beauty has been associated with lighter skin, and this preference is reflected in our media, in which white is the default aesthetic standard. In the process of commodification, non-white bodies are sometimes made "docile" or less of a threat to the Anglo norm for consumption through the process of homogenization and pan-ethnic representation (Molina-Guzmán). In an interview on *Morning Edition* on NPR, Kaling flatly states, "I sort of refuse to be an outsider, even though I know that I very much look like one to a lot

of people, and I refuse to view myself in such terms” (“Mindy Kaling On Refusing To Be An Outsider And Sexism On Set”). Her character’s embrace of sequins, jewelry, and hair extensions demonstrates one of the ways in which the character conforms to the conventional femininity of the romantic comedy genre despite the fact that her racialized body does not. One could even approach Kaling’s exuberant performance of femininity as drag, a performance of a certain cultural construction of gender in the vein of Butler (175). This polysemic portrayal also helps the character assimilate into the mainstream rom-com setting of the series.

Though it is true that the two Mindys—Kaling and Lahiri—share a love of material possessions and fashion, Kaling’s performance as the lackadaisical Mindy Lahiri on the series is curious given the contrast with her real life, in which the writer-performer struggled to build career in Hollywood. In an interview with *EW*, she said that as a woman of color in the industry, “my career has only become what it has out of sheer need, not because I wanted it that way. I knew if I wanted to perform I was going to have to write it myself” (Zeilinger). She indicates the seriousness with which she has approached her career: “I work so hard and so many hours, and I've done that for years and years and years. You know, I write a little bit about what it's like to be a female boss in my book and the things I've noticed about that, but by and large, it's just a tough job...” (*Morning Edition*). She also characterizes the sexism that she has encountered:

I think that the sort of sexism that I see has been one that's a little bit like a gentler form of sexism, but still a little bit debilitating, which is that when, as a producer

and a writer, whether it was at *The Office* or [at *The Mindy Project*], if I make a decision, it'll still seem like it's up for debate. And I notice that a little bit at *The Office*, with, like, an actor: If I decided there'd be a certain way in the script, it would still seem open-ended, whereas... if I was a man I would not have seen that.

Thus, Kaling acknowledges the gendered power dynamics in her field with a feminist perspective that is at odds with the character she portrays on screen, suggesting that her performance on *The Mindy Project* is calibrated to fit the post-feminist expectations of a traditional rom-com. Media scholars have treated the show as satire, a repurposing of rom-com conventions to comment on, for example, the idealization of romance and the incongruent expectations that “real life will mirror romantic comedy” (Schweitzer 64). While these delightfully self-reflexive gestures to romantic comedy tropes and clichés are present in the series, particularly in the earlier seasons, such traits are less evident as the series progresses. For this thesis, I acknowledge the ways in which the writers embrace the romantic comedy formula more straightforwardly in the series narrative and characters. As an example, the doctors in Mindy's practice conform to traditional gender roles, comprising seven men and only one woman, played by Rebecca Rittenhouse, who was added in the last two seasons, while the nurses in the office are mainly women, including Beth Grant as Beverly, Xosha Roquemore as Tamra, and Fortune Feimster as Colette. There is also one male nurse, Morgan, played by Ike Barinholtz (who also has more lines than most, if not all, of the female nurses). The female characters often serve only to move the plot forward or develop storylines for Mindy and the male characters. Mindy's female best friend in the beginning of the series

does not return after the first season, and the lack of explanation is indicative of the superfluous role of female characters on the show more generally. This treatment of gender on the series is an example of how the writers reiterate the traditional romantic comedy setting and its gendering of characters and their roles in the narrative.

One way that romantic comedy genre conventions were used to introduce new content into the sitcom is through the portrayal of Mindy as a working single mother. As previously mentioned, this depiction occurs after the series moved from the Fox network to the online Hulu platform in the fourth season. The character of Mindy originally began as a romance-obsessed single woman, but after the change of distribution outlets, the character evolved into a more confident and successful single mother. The single-mother narrative on a sitcom is not new; see *The Partridge Family* (1970–1974), *What’s Happening!!* (1976–1979), *One Day at a Time* (1975–1984 and its 2017 Netflix reboot) and *Murphy Brown* (1988–1998). In all of these examples, however, single parenthood is the only option for the main character, who is either widowed, divorced, or otherwise abandoned to raise children alone. In the fourth season of *The Mindy Project*, Mindy makes the unconventional choice to decline marrying her child’s willing father. Her decision is framed as a choice of career over marriage to her on-and-off-again partner. Kaling’s portrayal of single motherhood, particularly in light of Danny’s insistence that she give up her career to better parent their son, is a relatively new sitcom narrative. The storyline was deemed “refreshing” (Pai) in the way that the character seamlessly handles

the balance between work and motherhood instead of with cartoonish struggle (e.g. Miranda Hobbes in *Sex and the City*). Furthermore, Kaling's depiction of Mindy on screen is layered and complex; she is a mother, but also an adulterer; a capable and caring doctor, but not always a great friend. The character is not confined to a simple motherly stereotype.

The series includes this novel storyline in the midseason finale of the fourth season, after the transition from Fox to Hulu discussed in chapter two and after the romance between Mindy and Danny had begun to run its course. If this had been a rom-com film, it likely would have ended when the two characters became a couple. Emily Nussbaum writes in a review of this episode (titled "When Mindy Met Danny," a reference to the famous romantic comedy *When Harry Met Sally*) that the series had "slammed up against" the audience's expectation of the happy ending "with its daring and divisive midseason finale." I would argue, however, that the rom-com tradition of a happy ending is still honored, albeit in a new form—that of the overpowering love between a mother and her child. Further, this adherence to traditional rom-com conventions normalizes her single motherhood. The episode Nussbaum alludes to above is bookended with flashbacks of how Mindy and Danny's relationship began and with Mindy taking measurements for a crib in her own apartment. The episode avoids a break-up or fight scene, which helps to transfer the love narrative fluidly from the adult relationship to that between Mindy and her unborn son. While it is a rejection of



mainstream and patriarchal expectations for Mindy to have given up marriage for her career, having the event occur as an extension of the romance and keeping it in line with the romantic comedy structure contributes to making her decision seem more normal.

In keeping with the rom-com's focus on fantasy over reality, however, little attention is given to her life as a parent in subsequent seasons, unlike the more recent "mom-com cluster" including BBC 2's *Motherland* (2016–) and Showtime's *SMILF* (2017–) which focus on the ups and downs of the maternal romance (Soloski). Mindy's child appears infrequently on the show, and the series instead focuses on rom-com storylines about Mindy's (mis)adventures with new partners. However, when her son Leo is featured on the series, the overwhelming-power-of-love tradition of romantic comedies remains present in its new form between mother and child. The inclusion of the narrative illustrates what Deleyto describes as the evolving romantic comedy genre, one that embraces new versions of the love story. It is also one of the most significant ways in which Kaling's series normalizes an unconventional female identity on the series; the narrative goes beyond mere assimilation of the character to introduce critical commentary, in this case progressive (white middle-class) feminist commentary in the working single mother storyline.

There is some evidence that the distinctive normalizing of the character's choice of single motherhood reflects Kaling's personal beliefs. The star shared her experience of being a single mother in her 2018 Dartmouth Commencement address. Despite

Hollywood's messages that the birth of a child "is traditionally the time when my mother and spouse are supposed to be here," she concludes about her status as single mother, "I wouldn't change a thing." The announcement of her pregnancy occurred during the last season of *The Mindy Project*, well after the fourth season had wrapped, though this sentiment may have been something Kaling reflected on the time shortly before her pregnancy. Kaling has not shared the identity of the father of her newborn daughter. This public support of single parenting in her commencement speech contrasts with her public refusal to address race and ethnicity to the media's satisfaction.

The series finale takes an unexpected turn when it reunites Mindy with the controlling Danny at the end of the episode, somewhat derailing the seasons-long attempt at an original and complex portrayal of single motherhood. Ultimately, the "history and chemistry" between the two characters dominate the narrative. Everyone in the series is neatly coupled, including the goofball nurse Morgan, who finds his happily ever after in Tamra, a fellow nurse in Lahiri's practice. Kaling reveals, "I really wanted [Morgan] to look really handsome in a suit and be able to do a dance and get the girl" (cite! Stanhope?). Leo, Mindy's son, on the other hand, is notably absent in the season finale. Motherhood and Mindy's singleness are swept under the rug as the finale focuses on reunions and the rehabilitation of the male lead, which is a common theme in romantic comedies. As Kaling describes the character development of Danny, "He kind of went through a much bigger metamorphosis than Mindy did, frankly" (Stanhope). The

comment section of one *A.V. Club* article about the finale captures some of the responses of fans and viewers of the storyline and their disappointment in the resolution between Mindy and Danny:

“I honestly would have preferred Mindy ending up alone rather than it be Danny, and that would have been a perfectly fine ending too! I guess it doesn’t really fit with the whole series-as-a-rom-com concept, but then neither did Mindy leaving Danny in the first place to raise Leo (mostly) alone, and I admired the show for doing that at the time.”

"Bringing Danny and Mindy back together is almost passable because damn, do they have some fine chemistry—but... it still mostly just elicited a reluctant eye-roll from me."

“...In its series finale, *The Mindy Project* leans into rom-com tropes without any real subversion or commentary” (Upadhyaya).

I agree with the last comment insofar as the subversion in the series is not explicit.

Rather, as I have claimed in this chapter, Kaling’s playing into the rom-com formula helped to assimilate her otherness into this formerly prime-time broadcast network series. As the series transitioned to its new streaming platform, the formula provided a space to introduce novel content and critical commentary related to Mindy’s choice of career and single motherhood leading up to the more conventional series finale.

### **“Mindy Lahiri is a White Man”: Racial and Ethnic Otherness in *The Mindy Project***

I have described the ways in which elements of the popular romantic comedy contribute to the assimilation of Kaling as the lead in *The Mindy Project*, as well as the use of normalizing strategies with at least one of her unconventional female identities, that of single working mother. Race is challenging to address in sitcoms produced by and

marketed to predominantly white middle-class audiences, and Kaling's ethno-racial status further complicates mainstream notions of dominant racial identities. Molina-Guzmán describes Latina/os in popular culture as “not white and not black but ambiguously and unsettlingly brown” (7). Similarly, as Davé has noted, South Asian Americans do not fit neatly into our culture's binary racial molds (7). I explore here in more detail the downplaying of race and ethnicity in *The Mindy Project* through an analysis of some of the post-racial aspects of the show, the lack of attention to Mindy's ethnicity, and the character's conformity with white mainstream cultures.

*The Mindy Project* takes place, for the most part, in a post-racial story world. For starters, the show's cast is not very diverse (Braxton). Compare casting on the series with the casting on Aziz Ansari's *Master of None*, which despite its sometimes problematic representation of women, includes a cast with several actors of color including multiple Indian-American actors. Ansari even jokes on Twitter in 2015, “Eric Wareheim stars as Arnold, my token white friend.” The majority of Mindy's love interests are white, played by Chris Messina, Anders Holm, Mark Duplass, Timothy Olyphant, Bill Hader, and Seth Meyers, among others. As mentioned earlier, interracial and interethnic relationships are a common and effective assimilation strategy in television settings (Avila-Saavedra 271-276). Kaling deflects criticism about the lack of diversity in her co-leads by claiming that she is unfairly held to a higher standard because of her ethnic background. On a Reddit AMA in 2015 she posted this response to a fan who asked about the lack of

diversity in her male counterparts on the series: “I always think it’s funny that I’m the only [one] asked about this when sitcoms I love with female leads rarely date men of color. I guess white women are expected to date white men. I’m expected to ‘stick to my own’.” While it is unfair to hold Kaling to a different standard because of her race, her argument does not address the underlying cultural biases that influence her and others’ casting decisions. Nor does it account for the extreme lack of diversity in this case; out of twenty-one love interests for Mindy, nineteen were cast with white actors (Armstrong).

In addition to the general lack of diversity on the series, Kaling’s own racial and ethnic otherness are downplayed, which contributes to the assimilationist narratives in the series. The show rarely addresses the character’s Indian roots or incorporates Indian American culture into the character’s identity. Her Hindu upbringing is presented as merely a foil to Danny’s strongly represented Catholic identity. During the first several seasons, the audience is introduced to Danny’s devout Catholic mother (played by Rhea Perlman, who becomes a regular on the series), as well his church community and even his priest (played by Stephen Colbert in a guest appearance). However, we only meet Mindy’s parents a handful of times, and there are few ties to ethnicity in the characters’ personalities. As a result, Kaling’s ethnicity is largely erased from the series.

We may find answers about Kaling’s treatment of ethnic difference on the series yet again from her star text. She identifies as “culturally Indian,” and has spoken about her experiences as a child attending Diwali festivals, going to temple, and celebrating

Indian holidays (“In New Memoir, Mindy Kaling Has More To Say On Life, Love And Showbiz”). However, this identity is in conflict with the biases of the entertainment industry, in which there are fewer multidimensional roles for non-white performers, and there is pressure to cast pan-ethnic looks at least in cases where global appeal is important (Beltrán 56-64). Further, actors of color operate as “bankable commodities” in which associations between their race and ethnicity are used to promote certain ideologies and consumer products (Cashmore 116). Born Vera Mindy Chokalingam, Kaling changed her name at the beginning of her career to the more Americanized Mindy Kaling. She may have minimized her ethnicity in order to promote herself as a writer and celebrity, labels that would be inconveniently obscured in the public sphere by the burden of a strong ethnic identity. In a rare personal interview with Kaling before her work on *The Office*, Kaling responded to the question of whether she would take a credit with her surname, Chokalingam, “If they hire me to be the singing heroine of a Bollywood movie, sure” (*LiveJournal* Blog). Her response is indicative of her awareness of Indian stereotypes in Hollywood and her desire to avoid calling attention to her ethnicity, something she may have brought to her television character as well.

The post-racial setting of the series is reflected in the writing and performance of Mindy Lahiri, particularly in the fact that racism has little impact on her character. From this position, Kaling can occasionally deliver a cheeky joke about race, “poking fun” of how whites view people of color, for example, without threatening their status (Cashmore

124). Interestingly, in the same essay, Cashmore cites a study showing that crossover stars are often not seen as minorities, but rather as different kinds of white people. Perhaps Kaling prefers not to always be identified with her race, a privilege normally associated with whiteness. Asked in a SXSW panel in 2014 about being the only doctor of color on her show, Kaling replied defensively, “I’m a fucking Indian woman who has her own fucking network television show, OK?” (Guliani) as if to suggest “Isn’t that enough?”

This seems to be less of a concern for Ansari who, following the success of Kaling’s career, incorporates discourses about race and ethnicity liberally into his television series. Ansari describes on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* that he cast his real-life parents in the roles of his mother and father on his Netflix series, *Master of None* (2015–2017) in order to depict more authentic representations and avoid the stereotype of Indians as the butt of “hacky ethnic jokes.” Kaling was the first Indian American lead in a network television series, and has had to work harder to avoid the pitfalls of Indian stereotypes in Hollywood. Both Mindy, and her brother Rishi (played by Utkarsh Ambudkar) steer clear of these stereotypes by distancing themselves from their ethnicity. Rishi is a wanna-be D.J. and rapper, appropriating black culture in his ambition to be a famous D.J.; Mindy’s parents are written to be somewhat superficial characters. It is possible that this non-Indian author is unaware of the references to cultural and ethnic

identity in the series, though it appears at least on the surface as though race and ethnicity are not explored in depth in any of the Indian American characters on the show.

Kaling's performance of the ultra-conforming white "basic" stereotype in her role as Mindy Lahiri also allows her character to assimilate. By *basic*, I am referring to the term which originated in the African American R&B scene, has been co-opted by mainstream culture, and in Hollywood has come to be associated with white middle-class women who have either conventional or boring tastes (Brown; Petersen "What We're Really Afraid Of When We Call Someone 'Basic'"). Though the show is not autobiographical, Kaling's other comedic work is an inspiration for the Mindy character based on overlap between her other projects and the series. Many of the bits in her memoirs and her tweets fit the stereotype, such as how women often dress for women (and men hate it), her unconventional exercise and snacking routines, and her taste in accessories and men. The character is out of touch with and sometimes ambivalent toward politics; she does not vote, for example. Though Kaling's performance of the basic stereotype makes excellent fodder for her comedy, it also aligns with the contemporary "Americanized" representations of South Asians that Bhoomi K. Thakore argues, "continue to maintain a white normative identity in this increasingly diverse society" (161).

There are exceptions in the series in which the writers focus on issues of race and ethnicity, notably in one episode titled "Mindy Lahiri is a White Man" in the fifth season.



In this episode, Mindy wakes up in an alternate universe as a white male doctor played by comedian Ryan Hansen. Here the series' creators introduce some of experiences of Asian-American women on the series. For example, Mindy becomes aware of the many advantages that come with being one of the "bros" including professional (differential treatment by her white colleagues and blind promotions at the hospital where she works) and personal (her upper-class whiteness is a big attraction for the opposite sex, perhaps reflexively calling out Kaling for having cast her multiple white male love interests). In an amusing twist, she experiences all of these revelations as a white man. Although not what I call a normalizing strategy in this project, this exceptional instance in the series is nonetheless a compelling way of introducing progressive commentary into the series for those viewers who may take their gender- and race-privilege for granted. The messages are somewhat diluted by the presence of racial stereotypes portrayed by Hansen and Mindy's fellow surgeon (played by Ellen D. Williams). Still, the episode does mock sexism in its satiric depictions of Mindy attempting to teach Dr. Lee how to appear more acceptable to the scrutiny of her white supervisors. The episode concludes with Mindy finally accepting her difference, preferring it over the "boring" status quo which is empowering for her character as an individual, but falls short in failing to focus on the obstacles that women of color face in our society in general.

In interviews, Kaling has regularly communicated her refusal to define herself by either race or gender labels, stating "I never want to be called the funniest Indian female

comedian that exists. I feel like I can go head-to-head with the best white, male comedy writers that are out there. Why would I want to self-categorize myself into a smaller group than I'm able to compete in?" (Zeilinger). In another interview, Kaling responds to critics who would prefer her to be more engaged with issues of race and ethnicity, responding, "I think that it's insidious to be spending more of your time reflecting and talking about panels, and talking more and more in smart ways about your otherness rather than doing the hard work of your job" (Guliani). The latter quote, in particular, implies that the series' creator does not necessarily view diverse representation, even her own, as a social or political statement.

As the first and so far only leading South Asian American woman on an American sitcom, Kaling carries a tremendous burden of responsibility. As indicated in a *Quartz* piece by Aamna Mohdin entitled "It's Not Mindy Kaling's Job to Explain Racism and Sexism to You," there are many who feel that her accomplishments should not have to include lessons on race and ethnicity for her audience. The controversy that sometimes arises with the overdue representation of minorities in media—including what representation achieves and what counts as social activism—has been explored elsewhere (e.g., Lori Lopez specifically investigates this question with regard to Asian American representation). The goal of the current analysis is not to impose the onus on Kaling to address her otherness, but to ask how she has written and performed race and ethnicity in a way that allows her to take center stage in a subtle, non-threatening way to the wider

audience sought by a broadcast network such as Fox. In particular, her conformity to the rom-com feminine caricature serves to downplay Kaling's race and its significance in the series' sitcom world. The comedian captures and maintains her audience's attention in spite of her otherness. Not until she is in the center of our gaze do we realize what she has accomplished as the first Indian American creator and star of her own network television series.

*The Mindy Project* is a useful text to explore the complexity inherent in the constructions of femininity, motherhood, and intersectional female identities in post-network television. The series also provides a contrast to the previous case study in that the main character is portrayed primarily through assimilationist narratives in the romantic comedy setting without as much consideration of Kaling's racial and ethnic otherness. The series focuses on the comedian's unique contributions, her humor and wit, in lieu of overtly contributing to critical commentary about the experiences of women of color generally in society. The Indian American heritage of Kaling's character was downplayed in the series through the show's emphasis on romantic comedy stereotypes, the character's conformity and (white) mainstream tastes, and post-racial aspects of the series. As noted above, there were some instances in the series in which progressive content was introduced, namely in an episode in which race and gender are explored from Mindy's perspective as a white male character in the series. Further, the depiction of Mindy's decision to be a single working mother halfway through the series was the most

prominent use of normalizing strategies; her decision is framed as normal or ordinary by adhering to the familiar romantic comedy structure and aesthetics, replacing romantic with motherly love.

In the conclusion, I consider the potential social impact of the images of women in my two cases studies, some of the ways that they resonate within our culture, and the potentially slippery slope of normalizing characters on television. I also reflect in more detail on how these two television shows are a product of this particular moment in television history and assess why we might want to study the normalizing strategies in the work of other contemporary women comedians.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions and Future Directions

### Summary of Findings

This project explores some of the specific ways in which contemporary comedians are providing more diverse and complex representations of women in the post-network era of television. Three voices of the current comedy generation, comedian-writers Cameron Esposito, Rhea Butcher, and Mindy Kaling, have created sitcom worlds and characters that demonstrate varying degrees of resistance to societal norms around gender, sexuality and race. Their resistance is not outrageous, like that of their bawdy, bitchy, and fumerist predecessors such as Roseanne Barr. Nor is it unruly, like that of many of their heterosexual, cis, white contemporaries such as Amy Schumer, Ilana Glazer, Abbi Jacobson and Samantha Bee, whose sexual and racial identities are considered the default “norm” within dominant cultural practices.

This project has examined how these particular comedians’ television texts, *Take My Wife* and *The Mindy Project*, engage in normalizing strategies, distinct from both post-feminist and assimilationist storytelling, in order to frame the comedians’ non-normative intersectional identities as conventional. In doing so, they subsequently have introduced new content around the lives of underrepresented groups to this medium. At times, these sitcoms sometimes operate in the post-feminist, post-queer, and post-racial settings typical of traditional sitcoms and romantic comedies, yet these comedians’

television series call attention to their intersectional identities and feminist perspectives. Rather than challenging gender norms as women from the margins, these women stealthily center themselves on screen. In doing so, they reposition their non-normative status as conventional, further normalizing their subversiveness. This comedy operates more within a Fiskean producerly mode than serving as a radical critique of the status quo; yet this approach is subversive in that it places the comedians in the spotlight and expands the representations of intersectional womanhood.

I began this study by laying out the industrial and cultural context of my case studies in Chapter Two. This included addressing how each series was developed and identifying the key decision-makers involved in their production and distribution. Such context helped shed light on the commercial incentives supporting the programs' normalizing strategies. In addition to exploring how notions of femininity, queerness, and race are constructed in these two contemporary post-network series, Chapter Two also examined the larger television industry environment within which each series was produced. I explained how such a normalizing strategy was consistent with the marketing plans of a growing number of niche-oriented cable channels and streaming platforms that pursued more precise demographic groups. For example, in the case of *Take My Wife*, the series presents two charming, domestic lesbian characters, unthreatening to the heterosexual status quo. At the same time, new representations of an intimate queer relationship are provided to their LGBTQ+ viewers. *The Mindy Project*, meanwhile,

provided a compelling example of how changing distribution strategies can impact representational and narrative practices. After Hulu acquired the series as part of its plan to augment its library of original content, the series' writers became more likely to deviate from conventional romantic-comedy storylines and character development—changes that Kaling credited to the increased creative freedom provided at Hulu relative to Fox (Miller).

Subsequently, Chapters 3 and 4 analyzed the programs themselves in order to demonstrate how normalization manifests in each series. Despite the subversive nature of their stand-up material, Esposito and Butcher chose the sitcom formula to convey their stories on the television series *Take My Wife*. The two queer characters, Cameron and Rhea, are portrayed as conventional through conformity with familiar aspects of the sitcom narrative, an emphasis on the couple's domesticity, and the downplaying of their gender and sexual identities, a conspicuous contrast with the more candid approach of their other media projects. This strategy positioned the comedians as the non-normative leads of the television series, which allowed the writers to then introduce discourse from the point-of-view of two queer characters. From within the sitcom, the comedians are able to address a variety of issues including the struggles of gender nonconforming persons in our gender binary culture, as well as assault and rape culture. In the process, they present novel, intimate, and authentic storylines for the show's queer characters.

In Chapter 4, the ideological, generic, and narrative analyses of *The Mindy Project* reveals that the series' creators portrayed the main character differently than the characters in *Take My Wife* were portrayed, primarily overlooking her non-normative status as a woman of color. Mindy is integrated through the adoption of several aspects of the romantic comedy genre, including her character's conformity with post-feminist and white mainstream culture, as well as the post-racial setting of the series. Kaling's star text presents the comedian as a sharp-witted, hardworking writer, quite different from the portrayal of her simpleminded and romance-obsessed character, Mindy Lahiri. The show does attempt to normalize one aspect of Mindy's identity, her single working motherhood, after the transition to its new network, Hulu. Specifically, her decision to parent solo and maintain her career is framed within conventional romantic-comedy structure and aesthetics, replacing the narrative of romantic love with that of motherly love.

## **Discussion**

### *Post-Network and Contemporary Comedy Contexts*

My summary of these analyses should be situated within larger changes in the television industry during the post-network era, as well as recent developments in the comedy scene. For starters, though the television medium has persisted, the means of delivery of television content has been steadily transitioning over the last decade from broadcast to internet and cable distribution. It is too early to predict the entirety of the



impact of this transition, but it is increasingly clear this is an era of multiplicity: there is an abundance of content and numerous options for finding and streaming television content. The strategy by which internet-distributed content providers produce and amass hours of streaming content to target taste communities has afforded creatives more opportunities for novel programming (Turnbull, McCutcheon and Lotz 7). Despite this multiplicity, streaming services like Netflix, with their desire to aggregate niches, still need to reach a certain threshold in terms of viewership of specific programs—a threshold typically attained by assembling a coalition of audiences. Although there has been an expansion in the number and kinds of stories told in the post-network era, there are still limits. What’s more, subscription video-on-demand services (SVOD) such as Seeso have continued to struggle to remain economically viable. In Chapter 2, I discussed some of the ways in which streaming services are constrained by a variety of factors including shifting corporate imperatives and changing metrics of “success” (Curtin 196-198). In many cases, such channels, such as Fox, have simply forgone highly targeted niche marketing strategies altogether, instead opting to pursue more sizable demographic groups (Lynch). The limits in terms of programming possibilities are visible in the case of Logo’s gaystreaming practice, in which the network courts heterosexual viewers, mainly women, in addition to its queer audience, with content that includes “a shift toward lighter fare, versus narratives about coming out” and other queer storylines (Ng 259-262). These shifting industrial conditions help to explain this project’s approach

to investigating normalizing strategies of women comedians in post-network television series.

In addition to these larger industry changes, in recent years, there has been a increase in the number of women writers and performers in mediated comedy. Though still a minority, funny women are making significant and defining contributions in stand-up and alternative comedy venues. The appearance of (relatively) more women in comedy is likely the result of the rise of identity politics and the demand for diversification of voices and points of view, as well as a consequence of the aforementioned niche marketing strategies in which “the alternative is the norm” (Kohen). Feminist media studies are expanding and diversifying in number and in depth to examine these oft-neglected issues and topics related to gender in television. The topic of women in comedy is no longer merely a question imposed on women comics in interviews; gender in comedy is receiving more scholarly attention now than ever before. Even during the year in which this project was completed, several books and anthologies on the reception and cultural significance of women comedians have been published, including Anne Helen Petersen’s *Too Fat, Too Slutty, Too Loud: The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman*, Rebecca Kreftig and Linda Mizejewski’s anthology *Hysterical! Women in American Comedy*, Sabrina Fuchs Abrams’ *Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers*, and Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore’s investigation of *Screen Comedy and Online Audiences*. In addition, a special issue of *Feminist Media Studies* was devoted to

gender and comedy in 2017. Our collective interest and understanding of the role of gender in contemporary media, and in comedy in particular, is expanding as a result of the contributions of scholars across multiple disciplines. In this context, further exploration of the variation in comedic styles and approaches as they relate to feminist discourse is timely. Through two key case studies, this project aimed to examine the significance of normalization, along with the possibilities and limitations of intersectional representation in this mode of comedy.

*Representation: Race, Tokenism and Homonormativity*

As discussed throughout, the creators of *Take My Wife* have used sitcom conventions to reimagine the decades-old genre with new queer narratives and authenticity, expanding on-screen representations of a certain type of intersectional womanhood. In comparison, the creators of *The Mindy Project* tended toward assimilationist narratives for Kaling's character, with less exploration of the non-normative aspects of her identity. This contrast between the two series helps to clarify the difference between normalizing and assimilationist storytelling, the former providing new and more complex representations of alternative identities, the latter tending to erase them. For example, Kaling's comedic performances on the series showcase her personal humor and talent over critical discourse about the experiences of women of color in general. Certainly race is more difficult to normalize than sexuality in the television medium. There remains a persistent discomfort and fragility of white audiences around

topics related to race (DiAngelo 54), despite the increased embrace of gender and sexual fluidity by millennial and urban populations. Whether the avoidance of race and ethnicity in the series is due to these constraints or Kaling's personal politics, however, cannot be known for sure. As previously noted, Kaling appears to value individual qualities, such as her own work ethic, over the cultural significance of her ethnic identity, going so far as to frame the reflection upon and discussion of one's otherness as "insidious" (Guliani). Further, interviews with the star indicate that Kaling does not view the representation of her Indian American character on mainstream television as a political statement (for example, Giuliani; Zeilinger).

Indeed, media visibility does not inherently contribute to awareness or political progress. As Bonnie Dow notes regarding DeGeneres' lesbian identity in the 1990s, the public praise of her coming out by then-contemporary political figures did not lead to similar political action on behalf of the LGBTQ+ community. For example, President Clinton included DeGeneres at the White House Correspondents' Dinner after she came out, but he failed to lift the ban against gays in the military. DeGeneres was essentially tokenized, and as Dow concludes, "Ellen is a likable lesbian, but her popularity doesn't mean that America suddenly likes lesbians" (136-137). Normalizing strategies run the risk of tokenizing individuals, and the likability of Cameron and Rhea in *Take My Wife* or spokeslesbians Esposito and Butcher in the media does not mean that America suddenly likes lesbians, either.

Normalization may contribute to homonormativity on screen as well. The framing of the two white, Midwestern queer characters within the heteronormative values of domesticity and middle-class tastes, for example, leaves other queer persons and practices underrepresented. As Alexander Doty explains with regard to the limits of television liberalism, the “‘good’ gays . . . keep their ‘place at the table’ by striving to be just like their straight middle class counterparts”—except for being able to show physical affection. Similarly, Eve Ng maintains that Logo’s strategy of gaystreaming—of marketing to queer audiences as well as to a larger general audience (i.e. heterosexual women who are thought to have shared affinities with gay men)—increases representation for some in the queer community, namely white gay men, while marginalizing others (258-259). Seeso marketed *Take My Wife* to comedy audiences, and the content happened to be queer; thus, the target audience and marketing strategies for the series are not the same as those of Logo, though normalization of the two lead characters for a more general (heterosexual) audience may have limitations similar to those of gaystreaming. Normalization can provide space for more complex and intimate characterizations of some queer identities, as I believe has been the case with *Take My Wife*, but this strategy is effective mainly for those who more easily conform to mainstream heterosexual values on screen as well as those whom nonqueer audiences deem acceptable in the traditional setting of the sitcom or romantic comedy. I see this series’ progressive attempt to introduce new and diverse portrayals of women on

television as exploratory, and the presence and stories of these comedians are as valuable, culturally speaking, as those of unruly women. I assert that we need both unruly and normalizing storytelling because a multiplicity of audiences is best reached with multiple means of communication, via critical discourse and negotiation.

It is unclear whether what I call normalizing comedy will ultimately lead to more progressivism, either on- or off-screen, or even whether the strategies I have described are sustainable in the current cultural moment. Esposito's revealing comments about how DeGeneres "has to exist in people's house during the daytime so that people aren't so scared, and then I can get married" (Kravitz) illustrate the progress, if slow, in portrayals of queer women since DeGeneres' 1990s ABC series. The strides made between the two series are reflected, for example, in the inclusion of Rhea's gender nonconforming identity and the fact that the queer characters in *Take My Wife* are engaged to be married at the end of the first season. Yet many identities continue to be underrepresented in contemporary television, including queer persons of color as well as trans, single, and working-class persons. Perhaps just as *Ellen* opened doors for new narratives in *Take My Wife*, perhaps the latter will do so for future series featuring queer characters. Given our contemporary television context, it is likely that a range of industrial and cultural factors—beyond the impact of one television series—will figure into future depictions. In the meantime, it is valuable to investigate the different attempts made during the post-

network and women comedian-writers to expand representation through television comedy.

### **Future Directions for Research**

#### *Beyond Representation: Resonances*

As a scholar motivated by social justice, I am invested in the study of representation of difference and identity on screen. Herman Gray (2015) suggests in “The Feel of Life: Resonance, Race, and Representation” that everyday media imagery has meaning—in particular in the feelings that the images evoke—beyond simply increasing visibility of underrepresented groups. Specifically, Gray interrogates the public affect associated with the popular interview of Antoine Dodson in 2010 by an NBC affiliate after an intruder attacked his sister in a Lincoln Park housing project in Huntsville, Alabama. The ubiquity of poor Black crime statistics on local news may make it “easy for viewers to dismiss neighborhoods such as Dodson’s and the people who live there as ‘other’ . . . racially and economically separated and spatially contained, still nonetheless threaten[ing] the normative middle-class attachment to spaces of security and comfort” (Gray 1112). The YouTube reimaginings of Dodson's impassioned response, however, evoke emotional registers other than the usual responses of fear and withdrawal—registers that perhaps allow for vulnerability and empathy (1112-1114).

By performing their “authentic” selves in the sitcom space, the comedians in *Take My Wife* also evoke emotions in response to their character portrayals; such emotions can

be especially potent when paired with the feelings of safety and comfort associated with the traditional television format. In addition, the nuances of the series—from the corny jokes about sexuality and the seemingly insignificant throwaway lines about domestic chores to the sentimental proposal at the end of the first season—can be interpreted as resistance between-the-lines, ways of constructing new structures of feeling and expanding the collective representation of womanhood. Although my study does not address the resonances of womanhood or queerness in the way that Gray does for Blackness, I continue to grapple with how to do this as I move forward in my scholarship on media images of women. These resonances deserve consideration alongside scholarly work on representation and identity in television and other media. Kara Keeling's (2007) argument that the repetition of a media image can habituate audiences to the image and the emotions paired with it is also relevant to this study. Whether explicit or not, the normalizing strategies adopted in *Take My Wife* reflect an understanding of habituation and pairings of media imagery and emotion, and this notion deserves further investigation in future work on this series.

*Beyond Representation: Production Culture and Network Influences*

The study of on-screen representation is important, but such an approach alone does not examine the impact of the cultures in which texts are produced nor does it shed light on the experiences of those creating and consuming them. In order for scholarly work on media industries to move beyond isolated “debates of representation and



interpretation” as Ramon Lobato suggests (Lobato qtd. in Perren 168), textual analyses need to be balanced with examination of the production systems and cultures. In particular, in discussing agency and access in *Take My Wife*, it is worth noting the industrial context of the show. Perhaps the most subversive element of this series is not the representation of two lesbians in a loving relationship on screen but rather the level of diversity of those working off-screen. The record-high levels of diversity among the production crew and cast, particularly with regard to the number of women working on the series, demonstrate the showrunners’ feminist values, which are also reflected in their casting of the characters on screen. Given the correlation between gender diversity in executive roles and the diversity in creative and production roles (according to the 2016–2017 *Boxed In* report), it is critical to examine the values and motivations that make the representation of diverse identities on screen possible. Additionally, this project has examined television texts produced for distribution on broadcast and streaming services; investigating additional series produced and distributed by additional (cable) outlets would further illuminate how differences in institutional mandates and production structures between broadcast, streaming, and cable channels impact the range of storytelling and representational possibilities. Although Starz is a cable outlet, neither season of *Take My Wife* was produced for or by the service. Is the appearance of normalizing comedy more common on certain types of platforms, relative to others? To what extent does the comedian’s vision for a series shape the program relative to the

tastes and biases of programming executives? With future work, I would also like to explore media texts that are less controlled by conglomerate interests, including independently produced web series and YouTube series as well as live comedy stand-up, in order to compare the strategies used by comedians in these venues with those used in more established, corporate-owned networks.

*Take My Wife and Me Too*

This project has provided an analysis of two shows through which contemporary comedians employ traditional narrative conventions in order to center their non-normative identities and normalize their existence and experiences. The final season of *The Mindy Project* was released in 2017, and I was able to note the changes in the series over its six seasons. However, only one season of my first case study, *Take My Wife*, was available at the time of this analysis. Though the pre-produced second season of *Take My Wife* recently found a home at Starz, it remains unclear whether the series will have a third season (O’Keeffe). After the release of the first season, the rise of the Me Too Movement in the media industries (as well as many other industry sectors) led to the identification of a staggering number of prominent male figures as perpetrators of sexual assault, debunking the myth that such incidents are individual and isolated. The collective voice of Me Too has erased unspoken taboos against the public acknowledgment of rape, persistent labor inequities, and other sexist injustices, eschewing long-standing whisper networks for open accusations and legal action. However, the backlash against this

movement also has been widespread and swift; public figures on both the left and right of the political spectrum have responded with everything from denial, as exemplified by President Donald Trump, to calculated doubt, like that expressed in the “witch hunt” narrative of director Michael Haneke, to the avoidance evident in the oversimplification of consent in Bari Weiss’ *New York Times* piece defending Aziz Ansari as merely guilty of “not being a mind reader” (Landler; THR Staff; Weiss).

The long-term impact and cultural significance of the Me Too Movement and its backlash are yet unknown, though it is clear that the movement has not been as revolutionary as it was intended to be. Although our society is currently willing to place some high-profile individuals on trial for their actions, it remains frustratingly resistant to confronting and dismantling the structures and systems of patriarchy in our domestic, state, and commercial institutions. With regard to the current project, I would like to examine the second season of *Take My Wife* (and third if one is produced for distribution on Starz) for any potential impact of the Me Too Movement on its comedy style and content. This movement, along with the desire of a female audience to see new and diverse representations, could impact the representations of the two lesbian characters. Perhaps with a critically acclaimed season under their belt, and a core audience established after the first season, the show runners have begun to create more unruly and even more queer content. More extensive analysis of the marketing materials for the program, the industry discourse about it, and ideally engaging in interviews and

observing the production process would provide opportunities to further examine how programming was influenced.

### *Application of Normalization to Other Series*

For my two case studies, the concept of normalization has facilitated my understanding of the range of strategies used to represent intersectional womanhood and their potential cultural resonance. This concept may be productive in studying the possibilities and limitations of representation in the work of other women comedians at this moment in television history. For example, comedian Issa Rae's *Insecure* (2016–) provides an opportunity to assess the generalizability of the notion of normalization to a third television series. In particular, this series may provide a chance to examine how normalizing strategies apply to issues of gender and race in ways that *The Mindy Project* did not. The HBO comedy-drama series is based on the semi-autobiographical web series *Awkward Black Girl* (2011–2013), which Rae first premiered on YouTube. Several of the storylines from the web series have been included in the cable television show, in which Rae stars as the lead character, Issa Dae. Like Esposito, Butcher, and Kaling, Rae serves in multiple roles on her series, including creator, producer, and star; IMDb lists her as the series' executive producer. The fact that the series is an HBO Original provides the additional opportunity to investigate how the industry structures and production culture specific to a particular cable network influence the production of the series—a phenomenon left largely unexplored in this project. In particular, how much leeway do

the producers and writers have in the creation of the text itself, and how diverse is the production crew and cast?

*Insecure* explores the everyday life of an African American woman in her late twenties as she navigates her career and relationships in the city of Los Angeles. The series is now in its second season, with the release of a third season scheduled for August 2018. The Home Box Office, Inc. is the longest continually operating pay television service in the United States and currently has over 49 million subscribers. The network produces dramatic and comedic television series known for the adult themes and grittiness—for examples, see *The Wire* (2002–2008) and this year’s *The Deuce* (2017)—that broadcast channels tend to avoid. Rae had hopes that *Insecure* would bring some of the themes of *Awkward Black Girl* to television while aligning with this HBO branding (Burton). This influence might be explored in the series in conjunction with Rae’s desire to showcase depictions of African American characters on screen as multidimensional yet “regular black people living life” (Framke, “‘I Just Wanted It to Be a Regular Story About Black People’: Issa Rae on Creating and Starring in HBO’s ‘Insecure’”). In contrast to the common television portrayal of black women as “strong, confident and flawless,” Issa and Molly, the two lead characters of *Insecure*, “are definitely *not* ‘killing it’” according to the HBO website for the series. Rae’s performance as the awkward and vulnerable Dae on *Insecure* could be investigated for its depiction of race as it intersects with gender and class. In particular, an analysis of the series may reveal underlying

normalizing strategies used in Rae's depiction of the African American characters in this series. This approach would seem to align with Rae's intentions for the series, one of which she describes as follows: "The second [important thing about making *Insecure*] was just the core of it: making sure that the title character was this flawed, regular, *human* black person. I didn't want to have high stakes; I didn't want it to be high concept. I just wanted it to be a regular story about black people" (author's italics; Framke "I Just Wanted It to Be a Regular Story About Black People").

An analysis of the series would need to explore what comprises Rae's view of a "regular story" and which narrative and aesthetic devices are used to tell such a story. Perhaps the series normalizes race, centering its African American leads and perspectives through familiar, mainstream television storytelling in the same way as *Take My Wife* with its queer characters. Further, such an analysis should address the kinds of representations that have been included on the series. Rae conforms to mainstream and white norms comparatively more so than actor-comedian Tiffany Haddish, for example. Specifically, Rae's multicultural background (her parents are Nigerian born) and middle-class, millennial aesthetic is distinct from Haddish's more "unruly" comedy performances, which emphasize a different African American experience. It would be necessary to contextualize the series in the long history of assimilation in American television and to examine the role of respectability politics and liberalism in its characters

and narrative. My hope is that this approach would result in a generative study of *Insecure*, as well as other series that seek to expand intersectional representation through comedy.

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